



## Defence of Empathy

It was autumn 2007, the second year of my Level 5 Diploma in Therapeutic Counselling. In an attempt to deepen my empathic qualities and listening skills, I took up the role of a helpline operator for a UK mental health organisation. I felt, the exposure to difficult and challenging situations as a helpline operator, would complement my endeavour to become a more empathic counsellor. I was not wrong in my assumptions.

For four hours a week I took calls from a wide range of people, from health professionals, from those struggling with various psychological/psychiatric problems, and from carers/family members, unable to cope from the 'fall out', their loved ones were locked in. I had access to an extensive database which was used to signpost service users and offer health care professionals clarification on mental health acts. During the helpline training I learnt that 90% of the face-to-face communication is lost on the phone. It seemed that the 10% available to me, would serve to develop better my listening style. In the land of the blind, the empathic ear is king.

Armed with a good grounding in psychiatric definitions of mental health disorders and call management skills, before I knew it, I clocked up over 110 hours of helpline exposure. During that time I became very familiar with a number of 'purple portfolio' callers. Each helpline operator's desk was furnished with a purple-coloured portfolio, containing a brief history of frequent callers' psychiatric diagnoses, medications, support network and tips how to contain callers during their daily calls (fifteen minutes maximum).

One particular caller, Eleanor, from the daily support category of frequent callers, fascinated me. Eleanor was university educated, middle aged, with an assortment of psychiatric diagnoses, starting from 1980's, when she was first stamped with a personality disorder label. Not forgetting the consumption of various medications that were aligned with each diagnosis, Eleanor was no stranger to raging outbursts, psychotic episodes, self-harming and suicidal attempts. Other professional accounts of Eleanor's evolving state of mind through the decades have her living in the lonely world of the freighting schizophrenia, experiencing frantic surges and plunges of a bipolar sufferer and being stalked by the gloom of clinical depression.

My first contact with Eleanor left me feeling spooked, confused and very intrigued. I had to agree with Eleanor, when she declared: *'Everything is connected in the dark'*. The next two calls revolved around similar expressions. By the time I had taken these two calls, it was spring 2008 and I had amassed over 200 contact-hours with service users. For some reason, I felt the next call from Eleanor would be particularly significant. I was not mistaken. Months later, on a sunny Friday afternoon, I heard a high-pitched voice screaming: *'Bush and Blare are after me! Bush and Blair are trying to kill me!'*

I could feel the hairs on my back rise up. A shudder had run through me. I was scared. It was Eleanor and she was in the grip of something bizarre. Her breathing was racing away. I needed to respond. Grippled by Eleanor's keenly distressing voice, I simply repeated: *'Bush and Blair are after you'*. Eleanor screamed in a menacing way: *'Yes!!!'* Her breathing engulfed me. Then she howled: *'They are trying to kill me'*.

*'Sounds to me'*, I said, *'that you need camouflage'*.

*'Yes, yes camouflage'*, she repeated.

I picked up a tremor of calmness in the pulse between us. Then she galloped off again: *'They're out to kill me'*.  
*'But they can't find you in camouflage'*, I said.  
*'Yes'*, was the answer.

For a moment, I detected stillness in me before it was shattered by Eleanor's whaling screams: *'I'm on my own!!!'*  
*'Sounds to me'*, I said, *'that you need an ally'*.  
*'Yes, an ally'*, said Eleanor.

As the calm waters of our encounter began to flow around us, I dropped a bombshell right on target: *'I'll be your ally'*. The silence was all consuming. Eleanor's energy lowered and she asked: *'You'll be my ally?'*  
*'Yes, I will'*.

More silence poured out. Then Eleanor slipped once again into an attacking style. I felt offended, wounded. I responded: *'I'm your ally. You don't have to fight me'*.  
*'I don't. But you don't know what its like'*, said Eleanor.  
*'You're right, Eleanor, I don't know what it's like for you'*.

The tension between dissolved. When Eleanor spoke next, she did so with an eerier, eight-year old voice. Deep sadness and shame washed all over me. I got a glimpse of her bedroom. *'Mum and dad were angry and disgusted with Eleanor for wetting her bed again'*, she said. Dad used to cover the soiled sheet over Eleanor, mum shouting Eleanor was a dirty girl. She was left in that state every time she wet the bed.  
*'The beatings from dad were nothing compared to how ugly I felt about myself. That's what it's like being me'*, Eleanor said.

I updated the database accordingly and spoke with the shift co-ordinator about my discovery. The co-ordinator and I failed to find any mention of bed wetting in Eleanor's purple portfolio life history. I was proud that it was me Eleanor chose to reveal the deeply buried story of her childhood as it takes enormous trust and courage to allow yourself to remember.<sup>1</sup> My ability to listen and respond empathically, created an environment safe enough for Eleanor to visit those traumatic chambers of her memory, she never dared to share before. I had created a neural platform<sup>2</sup> of safety. I had trusted in my intuition, sensitivity, courage and metaphors, to engage empathically with a haunted person, without hiding from any feature of our unfolding encounter. It had paid off.

Not only had I located possible hidden roots of *their* unique suffering beneath a glacier of clinical judgements, but had also tapped into and released my healing empathy. *'We see empathy as the counsellor's own intellectual and emotional sensitivity focused on the client. The effect of training should be to help the counsellor to release her sensitivity more often, more fully, and with more variety, as she requires. We regard this gradual release of sensitivity as a developmental process in the counsellor – a process that can be facilitated by trainers, supervisors and counselling experience, but one that is essentially under the control of the counsellor'*.<sup>3</sup>

From that day on, I took with a pinch of salt psychiatric notions of mental health disorders. Besides, has it not been proved empirically that our entire mental health education and treatment system is virtually founded on a sham and pretence of scientific support for the effectiveness of treatment by techniques and methods and expertise (which I label, the specificity myth)<sup>4</sup>?

I sat face-to-face with a very distraught client. Jasmine had endured nearly twenty years of physical and emotional abuse. On one occasion she left her tormentor but soon returned and endured the abuse for another three years. It was our assessment/introduction session. Jasmine had spoken for quite a while and I felt I needed to make a summary of how I had experienced her. I offered my take on things. *'The way I see it, Jasmine, is that you were treated like a doormat for 15 years. Then you managed to escape. But then you returned, flipped the mat over and the abuse continued for the next few years'*. Jasmine responded to my empathic metaphor with anger: *'How can you say such a thing? No body has ever spoken to me like that'*. I acknowledged her anger. Jasmine and I held the pause that followed. Then she broke the silent spell: *'No, you are right. I did turn over the mat'*. I was trying to relate to Jasmine in all my honesty. I wanted her to see herself in this abusive relationship. I had the sense she might be angry with herself. I wondered where her anger was because all the time she was speaking, Jasmine appeared subdued.

Anger is a gift, a gift that has become outlawed. If the heartbeat is a vital sign of physical life, anger is the vital sign of emotional life.<sup>5</sup> Anger in my therapy room is always welcomed. One of my specialities in working with people who suffered at the hands of bullies is to help them unravel their gift of anger.

Empathy is the true champion in the battle for justice and I believe that, by sharing these exchanges, I have come out fighting in defence of empathy and shown just how helpful emotions can be in highly developed bodies. For empathy to thrive, it must feel the pulse of emotion. Emotion is the engine where the zest for life is created, sustained, deepened. Emotion is the true touch-stone in successful empathic communication and is a portal to creating deep meaningful connections.

Empathy is always, without fail, action-oriented.<sup>6</sup> Empathy is only ever a hopeless substitute for action when overdeveloped egos are overwhelmed by emotions.<sup>7</sup> That is, empathy is possible only when we leave the everyday mode of brain-function.<sup>8</sup> Empathy requires a holistic presence – you do need to be courageous in welcoming all aspects of self, while maintaining deep empathy. It is said the answer to injustice is not more feeling, it is more toughness.<sup>9</sup> I say this attitude is the last refuge of cowards. The answer to injustice is not more toughness, it is empathy.

Peter Ryan  
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*Note: All names and other identifying features have been changed.*

1 Van Der Kolk B. *The Body Keeps The Score*. London: Penguin Books Ltd; 2014

2 [https://www.themeadows.com/images/Trauma\\_Conference\\_Handouts/somatic\\_perspectives\\_interview.pdf](https://www.themeadows.com/images/Trauma_Conference_Handouts/somatic_perspectives_interview.pdf)

3 Mearns D. and Thorne B. *Person-Centred counselling in action*, 3rd edition. London: SAGE Publications, London; 2008

4 Bozarth. J. *Person-Centred Therapy: A revolutionary paradigm*. United Kingdom: PCCS Books, 2006

5 Parker Hall S. *Anger, rage and relationship*. East Sussex: Routledge Publishers; 2009

6 Cinramicol A & Ketcham K. *The power of empathy*. London: Piatkus publications; 2000

7 <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/world/the-times/empathy-is-a-hopeless-substitute-for-action/news-story/240bccaff6e417c4ddf1ae5dde163650>

8 (Freeman, W. J. *How brains make up their minds*. New York: Columbia University Press; 2000)

9 <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/world/the-times/empathy-is-a-hopeless-substitute-for-action/news-story/240bccaff6e417c4ddf1ae5dde163650>