

Fried Breakfast for the Soul:

At the age of ten Joe took himself to his local police station, and asked to be placed in care due to the violence, drunkenness, and general neglect that he experienced at home; and he spent the next eight years in the residential child care system, after which he was placed in a home for people with learning difficulties, but a home that specialises in supporting its clients with living independently in the community.

Joe is a tough guy. He is perhaps only ten stone of solid muscle, wiry and athletic in his movements, proud of his considerable physical strength, and definitely used to being top dog. He has fought his way through various children's homes, and through various streets of the East London that he proudly identifies himself with. He is bound tight, his muscles taut as guy-ropes and extending from a bouncer's stance, centred around the possibility of combat.

He has a facial psoriasis that brings a wince to my compassion, that makes me want to slightly retract as though in fear of contagion. However, when he scratches I am unable to look away. When Joe scratches, he does so with all ten digits simultaneously, and he rather looks as though his face is being sucked by two giant, throbbing, spiders. His skin flakes and his flesh becomes potholed and raw all over, as if the victim of a gravel attack.

When Joe is angry he visibly elongates, in that his whole body tightens in a heartbeat, drawing him inward and making him taller. His fists clench, and he somehow strides forward on the balls of his feet, his face a shot-gunned sunset, and surely violence on his mind. However, I have seen him angry often but violent never. He can bury his heels on the edge for days, but does not ever seem to slip. He is surprisingly able to restrain himself, and to then translate his feelings into a constructive attempt to resolve.

He was accused of bullying another client, to which I responded with several pages of guidelines for the staff team, to which he responded with a barely contained rage when he next saw me. I am rarely nervous about the possibility of violence, but on this occasion I made a point of sitting shoulder to shoulder with Joe, and to his right. Aside from establishing a contact boundary between us, and thus inferring our relationship, I wanted to be able to feel any violent impulse in his body before it became actualised. He is right handed, so better to be close to that arm so it would have less distance to travel before connecting with my bones. This was all unnecessary.

He admonished me for making assumptions, explaining that in fact he had been defending a staff member who was being verbally abused by the supposed victim of Joe's attitude, and that it was just unfortunate that nobody had linked the two incidents; but had chosen instead to write pages of guidelines without investigating the allegation first. Even in court, he told me, a person was allowed to express their own version of the story before being judged. He spoke to me for about ten minutes, citing further examples that validated the depth of his feelings, before allowing me the space to offer the apology that he readily accepted. His mood lightened, and we chatted for awhile, but I could see that some thought, something unconcluded, was tugging at his mind. Then he asked me why I had *assumed* him to be a bully, saying that this had happened to him on several occasions in the past, and that he just didn't understand why people would see in him something that he hates the thought of being.

I told him that I could imagine that there were times in his life when he had needed to be tough and look tough, times when it was helpful to react with aggression and anger, to frighten people away from him, to draw clear lines because of the dangers he might be facing from other people in everyday life. Looking at the ground in a sad reflection, he nodded. I continued by saying that times had perhaps now changed for him, in that he no longer lived in an abusive home or an aggressive environment, but that in my opinion he sometimes responded to situations as though he was. I ventured the possibility that the very characteristics that were once essential for his survival were now incompatible with his life. I wondered if it was time for him to concentrate on other ways of expressing his fear and insecurity. He looked at me with a short and sharp intensity, which I thought would precede a denial that he ever felt scared, but after a few seconds he nodded, and looked back at the ground. I finished by suggesting that I could well understand how people might be frightened of him, because they had not lived in the same world as he, and so did not quite understand where he was coming from. He told me that he would think about what I said, but I knew that he had already accepted my words as being true for him, and he simply needed a bit of space to let it all sink in.

Perhaps I need to clarify that, in my view, Joe was learning-disabled in the same sense that that a stick-insect is a twig. He does have some limitations within the mechanical process of his learning, but I am not yet convinced that these are the consequence of some genetic mishap rather than a reflection of educational opportunities, environmental circumstances that belie easy development, or most probably both. I find Joe to be particularly sophisticated in a number of ways that the world at large would do well to emulate, and I consider his diagnosis to be largely convenient and, for him, a useful camouflage.

I felt this within an hour of first meeting Joe, but strangely did not take the step to wonder what his motive for being here actually was, and to thus direct any therapeutic work around this unspoken premise as well as his own explicit agenda. I can now see that he wasn't quite ready for me or his team to tune into him at that level.

Shortly following this day, Joe learnt that a bacterial eye infection had resulted in a permanent condition and, except for whatever minimal amplification he gained from an eye-magnifier, he had become nearly blind.

Six months later I was spending a day with his staff team, our primary agenda being Joe again. For some months he had been refusing to get out of bed until late afternoon, when he could smell the evening meal being cooked. They recognised that he was in a depression, and felt some sympathy for him along with the more overwhelming need to motivate him, to get him going, to snap him out of it, to get him back on track and on with his life. This sentiment was further fuelled by the fact that this particular service does not offer permanent housing, but a five year contract to support the client into independent living in the community at large; and Joe was resisting every attempt to tempt him back into the(ir) world. They had been concentrating on leisure activities rather than occupational or educational, but he was still not responding positively. He had said only that he wanted to go to the gym, but this required a medical check up from the GP, a simple step made impossible by Joe's consistent failure to get out of bed for the appointments.

The emphasis was very much that Joe should be doing something about this situation and, on being challenged, defended themselves with the assertion that they really had been painstaking and exhaustive in their attempt to find things that Joe would like to do. It took a

good couple of hours for them to accept that, on one level, the fact that *he is the client* and *we the professionals* dictates that the primary, though perhaps not the ultimate, responsibility is ours. We hadn't found a way of working with him yet

Finally, one of the staff members solemnly announced that, in his view, they had so far failed Joe, that they hadn't done their job. It was a simple truth, but one that support-teams can find hard to hear, largely I think because they are not suitably trained in the principles of the very skills they are expected to have. After a five year psychotherapy training and several years of practice, I knew the value of recognising my failings. I knew that failure can rarely be understood simply in terms of me. And I knew that surrendering to my failure, without detracting from the relationship by becoming ensnared in guilt, was often exactly what was needed for an irresolvable dynamic problem to transform into a working alliance.

Therefore, I was impressed when the team responded to this announcement by taking a collective breath that seemed to me to be an acceptance that some things just are as they are. I felt a sadness from them that I understood to be connected to Joe's depression, and I sensed a commitment to digging deep in search of the extra energy needed to look at Joe's situation afresh, which I further understood to be a reflection of the very energy that Joe himself was lacking. Given that these moments are usually essential if there is to be a change in the dynamic patterns of support, I had a peaceful few moments.

By the time I got to my coffee break I was feeling irritated and judgmental. I had been talking to the group about how their process of acknowledging failure was important in dynamic terms too, as it quite probably reflected Joe's feelings about himself.

Perhaps he is unable to reconcile himself with his old identity, or struggling to cope with the possibility that he may have to develop a new sense of who he is. Perhaps he feels like a failure. Perhaps he actually feels handicapped instead of pretending to be disabled. Is he in danger now, unable to protect himself, to stand up for himself? Will he be laughed at, challenged? Will his vulnerability be abused? Again! If I had to process all of these thoughts and feelings at the same time, I can well imagine bed being an attractive prospect. He's shutting off, letting go of the responsibility for himself because he just cant carve a way through it all. And who is Joe going to entrust with his trauma, with his irresolvable conflicts? People he loves and trusts. And that is you guys. You have been trying to get him up, out of his haven and back into his reality, which is exactly what he cant deal with. He has no choice but to oppose your efforts, because the fact that you are making an effort means that you value one side of him more than another. Or at least, that is likely to be how he feels.

I was surprised to notice how my tone was losing the softness it begun with, how much I was gradually looking people in the eyes more for confrontation than for connection, how irritated I was feeling.

If you think about the GP thing, it's obvious. The last time he went to the GP, he found out that he was going to remain virtually blind for life. It would seem a trifle unfair to expect him to be excited about another visit. He's simply associated the GP with terrible news, which is the beginnings of a phobia if we don't understand what is happening for him. And what is the one thing he wants to do? The Gym. Why? So he can build muscle and try to save the life of his tough guy identity. But he cant even do that, for fear that the GP is going to tell him that he has a heart condition, or whatever, and has got to spend his life in a wheelchair, or whatever.

I acknowledged to the group that I had suddenly become irate, that I didn't exactly know why, but that I suspected that Joe was speaking through me, that I was representing an aspect of how he was feeling toward the team. I called for a break, feeling the loss of my peace, but taking *my* deep breath in preparation for (what was beginning to feel like) a rather difficult day.

During the break, two things happened. Firstly, I returned to an unanswered question, namely: why did Joe come to the residential services if not strictly due to a supposed learning disability? What did he need that he couldn't reveal to us? *To be cared for*. He had never been afforded a suitable opportunity to be vulnerable and needy as, with his background, it would be hard to imagine these feelings being well catered for.

Moments later I was talking to a staff member who, in the context of our conversation, announced rather proudly that he *didn't do care*. I felt a rising wave of irritation, much as I had been trying to restrain in the group a little earlier. He meant that he supports people to develop, rather than nurture them with pity, but his words were poignant to me. I wondered out loud how the clients might feel at the thought of him not caring. He assured me that he did care, and that they knew he did. And I suggested that their capacity to understand the difference between someone caring for them and someone who didn't do care might vary considerably according to the state of their mood at the time.

Joe wasn't feeling cared for, despite the efforts of the team and the indisputable level of care that they had for him. It was all being channelled into development, whereas he was himself deeply depressed.

Back in the group, I became quickly irritated again, this time with Mike. Mike is a very good support worker who could eventually become a very good manager, but there are moments when he gets on my nerves; and I am certain that the feeling is mutual. He puffs himself up sometimes, and makes churlish comments regarding his inclination to kick the shit out of someone or, in more general terms, confront aggression with violence; though I must add that these comments are never in reference to his work.

During a discussion about the way a particular client had been speaking to members of the team, specifically: calling them *cunts*, Mike announced that anyone who spoke to him like that in the street was liable to get a punch in the mouth. I found this comment irrelevant (who was talking about the streets anyway?) and very relevant (who was talking about the streets anyway?). What was his point? And what relevance did his comments and his intention have in terms of our day? However, I neglected to address the matter from this perspective, and instead picked an argument with him.

"You would punch someone in the mouth for calling you a name?" My tone was incredulous.

"Yeah." I saw self doubt pass a shadow across his face, and I knew for certain that it would take a lot more than a name to ruffle Mike's feathers. Like Joe, he looks very much like he can handle himself but, like Joe I suspected, he rarely wanted to. It was posturing, that was all. But he wouldn't back down, so I attacked from a flank.

"How do you think it is for a client to have the sense that you would punch him in the mouth if you were on the street? Just that energy? The stance that you take, and the sense of what it is that you are holding back?"

“It’s what would happen on the streets if they called a member of the general public a cunt.”

“No its not. It’s what you say you would do if they called *you* a cunt. I wouldn’t punch someone in the mouth for calling me a name, and I wouldn’t guess that anybody else in the team would either.” I felt that I had boxed him in, that he would relent.

“I would.” David said. I groaned, feeling frustrated. Mike’s smile had a small triumph in its slow stretch.

“I don’t believe you. Either of you. I don’t think either of you are the kind of people to be so mindless.” Whereas I had thought I had Mike trapped in a blind alley, in fact Mike and David had trapped me. Neither would back down, and I just felt more and more frustrated.

This conversation reverberated with text and feelings that paralleled a hybrid of those I had earlier with Joe and David; and my frustration was slightly sated by the knowledge that something was happening around me, something that may make perfect sense if only it wouldn’t curdle once meeting my consciousness.

So: Joe is not what he once thought he was. David is not what he thought he was. Mike and David are not what they thought they were. In my view, anyway.

But on the other hand, they all were in some way. Joe may not be top dog on the streets in the manner that he might prefer, but he is still well able to stand up for himself; to know his feelings, speak his mind, stand his ground, and take an apology. With these qualities being fronted by a strong physical presence, Joe would have a better chance of being safe in the world than most people.

David does care, but it is true that his work is largely focussed around motivation, and he will tend to bypass, skip, or plough over self pity and neediness. And David and Mike may not be the façade of the hard guys on the edge of pointless violence, but they are probably both quite tough, as well as insecure about letting go of the façade of being so.

They are what they think they are, but only once they have acknowledged that they are not. Was this the problem: that none of them were really accepting what they were not. This begun to settle in me, as we took a break, and I wandered around pondering. Things then became a little bizarre.

Looking up, I saw two policemen striding into the garden. They were with Paul, another client from the home, who was trying to hide sheepishness behind the mask of crisis; as can be his habit.

Paul is disposed to contacting the emergency services but, to date, the perception of emergency has been the sole property of his own experience. Paul is mugged on a fairly regular basis, and is unfortunate in that these attacks always occur when he has just collected his rent money from the post office, but fortuitous in that the muggers generally replace the stolen money with a commodity of equal value.

When Paul is not being mugged, he is on fire, which is why on other occasions the fire brigade and ambulance service arrive in unmerited haste. Whether Paul is symbolically signalling some internal emergency, some need for more attention to be paid to his plight, or perhaps even a rather creative way of bullying the staff team, we don’t know. Paul has a degree of professionalism to his handicap, which operates rather like selective hearing, in

that the more trouble his answer might land him in, the less able he is to understand the question.

So: the long and the short is that, when I saw Paul with two policemen my initial response was to groan rather than worry. Sure enough, Paul had been mugged again. But in a break to tradition, they had not left a gift, though Paul perhaps felt compensated when, to his apparent surprise, he discovered an envelope in his back pocket containing *some* of the money that had been stolen. The Police went on their way, warning Paul about false claims and so on.

Paul then started falling over, his guilt and fear of consequence in a drive to misdirect our irritation in the direction of sympathy. This is a kind of physical equivalent of becoming more disabled at the behest of guilt. He fell over three times, shoved by a force invisible to others, each time looking up at staff members, panic in his eyes.

I was tired and feeling distracted. I just wanted Paul to hand the goddamn money over and stop falling over, so that we could get on with the rest of our day. Several staff members had tried to intercede with him, but to no avail. He wouldn't be questioned, because he felt misunderstood as well as guilty. He wouldn't be helped, because he felt guilty as well as scared. And he couldn't be told anything, as he felt angry as well as guilty. Impatient, I asked Paul if I could have a private chat with him.

I told him that I didn't think he had called the police because he had been robbed, but actually that he had hidden the money somewhere, to be spent later; that I understood that he was upset by something, but that I thought it might be a good idea to suddenly find the money somewhere, and announce that everything was ok. I asked him if this was possible, and he nodded that it was, and told me that he thought he might be able to find the money, that perhaps it was in his room. I said that I would ask the staff team to sit down with him later, and try to help him understand what was bothering him, but for the time being I would appreciate it if he give us the space to finish the group. He agreed, and I suggested that he search his room for treasure. He smiled, and off he went. I felt good again.

Returning to the group, I related the conversation that Paul and I had just had. I felt quite good about what had happened, pleased with myself for stepping in and resolving an immediate problem. I don't often get the opportunity to work directly with people in residential support any more, and I enjoy the moments. I also fancy that I am quite good at it, able to form bonds quickly so that I can be both honest and gentle. I imagined that the group were fairly impressed.

Once I finished relating the episode, basking in one small success within a day of confusion, Mike spoke up:

"You have just gone against all of the guidelines that we have for working with Paul in these situations." I felt defensive, and I knew that he didn't have a point at all, that he was just being revengeful. I bristled, my irritation scratching at my skin.

"Which is strange," He continued. "seeing as how you wrote the guidelines in the first place, and seeing as how you go on about working consistently with Paul."

Whilst I am not always a big advocate of rigid consistency between different staff, as I find that it can undermine the natural relationship between individual support workers and individual clients, in the case of Paul it was true that I had emphasised the importance of providing him with an absolute structure to kick against.

“So you’ve just undermined the team.” He was not going to let go and, I had to admit, despite wanting to bite back, that he was right. “It might have worked this time, but won’t it just undermine the work and procedures that we have with Paul, that we have been building up with him?”

He was right of course. He may have been getting his own back, and he *was* enjoying himself now, and I *did* want to stick the boot in back, but he was right. I went red, feeling exposed and stupid. *I was not what I thought I was either.*

In addition, I had engaged in much of what I had emphasised in others. I had been judgmental. I had been posturing. I had been aggressive. I had shown precious little care for Paul’s plight. I got into a punch-up with David and Mike, which I lost. And my pride had come before a fall.

I owned up that he was right, and that I felt embarrassed that I had gone behind the back of the team in such a manner. My words were sincere, but it was a moment later that the breadth of my sincerity caught up with my words, and brought with it a feeling of release; a very pleasant feeling of liberation. Much as it can be a relief when the exposure of one’s less marketable habits indicate the deepening of a new relationship, it felt good to have tripped over my own feet in front of the team.

“The theme of the day seems to me about the men in the group not being quite who we thought we were. This is only my opinion, but I have a strong feeling for it.” I described my thoughts about David and care, about David and Mike and being tough, about me tripping over my own feet and generally being everything that I had noticed in others, about Joe and his identity, about Joe and care; and I felt authoritative in my assertion that we all needed to think about these experiences, perhaps only in private moments, but actually consider the extent to which we have something to learn from them, and something *within them* to let go of. No one argued, and everyone listened. I continued by describing my understanding of how and why Joe’s internal experience was being acted out by us, that our relationship to the experience will impact upon Joe’s own, that on certain levels it was all the same experience. I was beginning to feel good, gliding.

I suggested that it would be unwise to change too much by way of how Joe is supported, but more the attitude with which he is. I thought it important though to come up with a symbolic representation of our understanding of Joe’s depression, his fear of being identity-less or vulnerable, his deep need to be cared for. We decided to offer him a full fried breakfast at ten each morning, delivered to his room. Of course, already knowing that it was food that tempted Joe out of bed, and knowing that a fried breakfast was his culinary preference, I was hoping that Joe would be unable to go back to sleep with a fully belly, and thus be up by 1030 at the latest.

I should mention that several members of staff were not in full agreement with this idea, feeling that it compromised the fundamental philosophy of the company, in that it perpetuated dependence. I was pleased by their objections. Joe was caught in the conflict between independence and dependence, and it was healthy and containing that the team were carrying both positions.

The manager of the team contacted me four days later to say that Joe had started getting up by ten, and that they had already stopped taking the breakfast to his room. I gather that

his commitment has wavered slightly during short periods of the last few months, but generally he is up well before mid-day. I saw him last week.. He told me that he had bad days, but that he was much better, was going back to college, and thinking about getting himself a job. He offered me a coffee.

"I'm hungry actually. Do you mind if I make some food."

"Why do you always ask my permission?"

"Because it's your house."

"Nobody has to ask for food in my house. Help yourself. Don't ask."

A few months later, Joe slipped back into old ways and nothing seemed able to tempt him from a self destructive pattern. He did nothing in the house except be aggressive and threatening, and his attitude was escalating.

We would later learn that a staff member had been having sexual relations with several of the clients in this home, all young mildly disabled men seeking independent living as they attempted to develop a sturdy self identity. It was David who had been abusing them, and it was Joe who blew the whistle, though he was not himself a victim of contact-abuse.

It transpired that David had been a more powerful figure than anyone had realised, and had manipulated himself a silence from the clients with whom he was an abusive top dog. He really wasn't what we thought he was.

That the house managed to hold itself together was testament to the team's resources and the manager's professional maternalism. Two of the guys are nearing the time to fly the nest, and the others are coming along well. Joe no longer lives there, having moved to a home that specialises in working with people who are blind.

I think it's very likely that he is a congenial and protective top dog in his new home, as I strongly suspect that Joe tries to dominate when he is being dominated, or feels otherwise underpowered and so vulnerable to the world at large. He is not what he thought he would be, but he is who thinks he is anyway.