

Bobbing on the Surface:

This is a short story about Herbert, a man in his late forties who was diagnosed with schizophrenia at the age of seventeen, and who has been living within the professional support system for a vast portion of the span between. Herbert became ill following the familiar pattern of leaving home for the first time, and then getting into a relationship which quickly and painfully broke down. As then did he.

He is slight in stature, partly due to build, and otherwise because of a capacity to fold in upon himself, rather as a bird tucks in its wings. He makes himself small, a pre-emptive demonstration of surrender. However, once noticed he is not easily ignored. Despite apparently teetering between anxiety and panic, his wild blue eyes sometimes attach themselves to the focus of his attention with an unnerving intensity. He has crow black dishevelled hair, and a triangular beard that, I suspect, was modelled on D.H. Lawrence; but actually my enduring image of Herbert is of a shy Rasputin.

Herbert is a writer, a poet. He partakes in poetry readings, and has had his work published but, whilst he enjoys his brief moments of local celebrity, it is the image that he cultivates; the impression of a mad bard, a (crazy) man of (beautiful) words. Whilst he undoubtedly uses his literary persona as a context for explaining why the world doesn't understand him, he is in fact a good writer. He is sensitive, intelligent, a clever manipulator of words, and he has a sense of the ubiquitous.

He is consistently praised as being gentle, thoughtful, kind, sensitive, considerate and so on. He is very liked. He is one of those clients for whom staff teams battle to restrain their favouritism. Yet this is also a man who wrote a pseudo-thesis that intended to scientifically demonstrate the genetic superiority of Caucasians, and in a number of other ways is able to trap staff members in surprising conflicts.

I facilitate training and support for the residential staff team who work with Herbert, and so had heard quite a bit about the man before I met him. One particular day, I was asked if we could concentrate our time talking about Herbert, as he had been struggling.

For some months Herbert had been quite settled in himself, more relaxed and conversational, less depressed and anxious, but in the week leading up to this group he had been in a manic panic, his only explanation, and one that he repeated often, was that he felt he was:

"...no longer submerged beneath the waves, but bobbing on the surface of the ocean, and all I need you to do is to throw me a hook..."

Despite an impressive vocabulary and a general ease with vocal expression, Herbert could or would not explain himself further, and the team were left with the symbolic content only, and they had interpreted this to mean that he felt close to a new sense of reality, and one that he imagined to be close to theirs, and he needs some help as he was scared. They were very worried for me, but other than try to talk to him they really didn't know what to do.

This conflict was further compounded by a feeling that they were not supposed to do anything, that they simply had to find a way of containing him and allow him to play it out his own way, wait and watch for an invitation to step into his drama and lend him a hand. Herbert was a solitary soul, and he had navigated a more or less coherent madness through his relationship with himself, and the team didn't want to undermine him with an unwanted intrusion; yet at the same time he seemed to be asking for help, but without explaining anything more than what it could symbolically look like.

My dilemma with them compared with theirs with him. I felt an urge to jump in and help them, but also a strong sense that they were ok, that it was important for us all to stay with our uncertainty and self-doubt; and I felt clear that we were all feeling a version of what Herbert was feeling. Then one of the staff members said with a half smile:

"we just don't have a clue what to do, and we need you to sort it out..."

I have worked with this team for several years, and they know that things don't resolve this way, that I can't go in and sort things out, which is why the sentence was delivered with a half smile; but yet the pregnancy of the pause that followed his statement seemed filled with expectation and passivity. I was left with a particular heaviness and confusion, one that I generally associate with feeling dumped on. My therapeutic position drowned as I abruptly acted into my panic by scurrying around the minds in the room in the energetic quest for a solution. Two hours later, by which time we were all looking tired and frustrated, I remembered feeling dumped on.

"Are you feeling dumped on by Herbert?" The affirmation came from everywhere in the room, and the air thinned.

"Is anybody angry with him?" (I had been feeling bursts of anger towards the team for putting me in such an uncomfortable position, for demanding god from me whilst they slouched back into dependency.) It took one person to admit it before many of the others confirmed that they had felt angry at him. Some had held it back because they felt guilty about the feeling, and some because they identified that they were really feeling angry at their own powerlessness.

"Is Herbert angry at his own powerlessness, perhaps?" again, enthusiastic agreement.

"Could he be feeling that he is being asked to do something that is beyond his powers." They looked confused. *"Or in other words: what has he had dumped on him recently?"* They still looked confused. *"It will be something to do with independence or dependence."* And then they got it.

For six months or so, the team had been quietly developing a proposal for a half way house, a home that would remain connected to the current home but which would be for the clients who wanted to live more independently. Staff would be on site only in the morning and in the evening, but the main team would be around the corner and available within minutes. It was a good scheme, and had just recently been carefully explained to the clients so that they would not feel that there was any pressure at all to move, that it was entirely a matter of choice, and that the team held no preference as to what any individual chose in this regard.

However, what had not been adequately considered was firstly the symbolic impact of this project; and secondly that the team *did* have an underlying belief, and thus an implicit expectation, as to who was ready and able to take such a step away from the home. And Herbert was on that list, along with his girlfriend, Clara, who lives in the same home.

There was no way that the team could establish this new project without it being value-laden, without at least the implicit suggestion that independence is relatively better than dependence; that it is a step on. Besides which, the excitement with which the team spoke about this new project, and the possibilities it would offer certain of their clients, would certainly have belied any philosophical neutrality that they might somehow have achieved. Navigating these conflicting needs and developmental processes is tricky for anyone, but for fully grown adults whose practical capacity is considerably more developed than their emotional security, this can be a painful reminder of what they can *almost* be, of a *normal* adult life; just as it can be an indictment of their current condition, an admonishment, a taunt; as it can be an implication that they will be less respected if they don't take these steps.

As we discussed this matter in the group, it became clear though that, for Herbert, there was a terrifying implication that he may be forced into a new lifestyle due to an emphasis on capacity that thereby ignored his frailty – an experience that a lot of people with schizophrenia will know, and one of the main reasons why the community care programme initially left so many victims in its wake.

I would like to add at this point that, for a lot of people in the residential support services, the pressure to become independent is a burden, just as for others it is a godsend. Within the institutional system, neglect, cruelty, and abuse were rife for centuries. The best of what usually then followed was the kindly nurse who treated patients as infants, thus accentuating any genetic condition or psychological pathology with a debilitating secondary disability, the patient never learning *how to* because they were *rarely required to*.

The latest generation of residential support workers have addressed this problem head-on by devising and implementing a philosophy which emphasises the principle of supporting a person to become as able as possible. Whilst I accept that this is a worthy ideal, we can become obsessed by it as we battle to counteract the infantilisation that our clients suffered and the prejudice they still receive. What we can fail to realise is that, for people who have been abused and neglected for years, the infantilisation offers a potentially appropriate regression; and that a more healthy experience of dependency is necessary for a more healthy experience of independence to grow.

The residential support professions often have as their blind spot an instinctive urge to make dependency wrong. So my point is this: in the unspoken culture of residential support there is a potent energy encouraging the implicit belief that the more able you become, the more respect and approval you will receive. Given the legacy that we carry, client independence is, after all, one excellent yardstick that we have for measuring the quality of our professionalism; or so the blind spot suggests.

Herbert felt dumped on, we believed. He felt bullied into partaking in a scheme that frightened him. He felt pushed into independence before he felt able. The team were unreserved in their acceptance that Herbert's behaviour was an indication of his fear of floating alone, that no reassurance as to the close proximity of help (be it in the form of the home or the boat) would be enough to calm Herbert down; and that the help that Herbert

was reaching out for was simply the acknowledgement that he does not feel able, and that any suggestion that he is throws him into a terrifying conflict with himself.

It was agreed that we would explain to Herbert our understanding of what was happening to him, and that otherwise we would not change the way we worked with him at all.

The following day Herbert went for a lunchtime walk with the area manager, Martine, who had been present in the group the day before. He was calm and relaxed, even though he had not yet been spoken to regarding the previous day's group. They were walking in the grounds of an Abbey and, passing a lake, they both noticed a duckling that was *bobbing on the surface of the water*, crying out for its mother. The lake went down under a small bridge, at which point it bent to the right. The mother and the other ducklings were at that far end.

Herbert immediately took off his shoes and socks, rolled up his trousers, and waded in to the lake so that he might save the lost duckling. Martine called that he should not touch the infant, as the mother would then reject it. Instead, Herbert spent *forty minutes* brushing the water behind the infant, encouraging it toward the bridge, in the direction of the mother. Eventually the mother was re-united with her lost baby, and Herbert strode to the lake edge triumphantly. Martine instinctively reached out a hand to *help him on shore*, as the edge was rocky. Herbert stretched to take her hand, stopped himself, looked up at her, smiled, and announced that he actually thought that he could do it himself. And he did.

He calmed right back down again from that day on, and continues about his life pretty much as normal, except that Herbert and Clara have talked about getting married, and Herbert has spoken of wanting a child. Clara though privately informs us that she wouldn't mind living with Herbert, but doesn't want to marry him, and that she thinks she they are both "too old and mad" to be parents; which is actually probably true.

Postscript:

Within a week of the death of his father, some six months after the first group, Herbert announced that he no-longer believed his more bigoted attitudes, and in fact that he had never held these beliefs other than on behalf of his father, and that now he was dead he didn't need them anymore.

