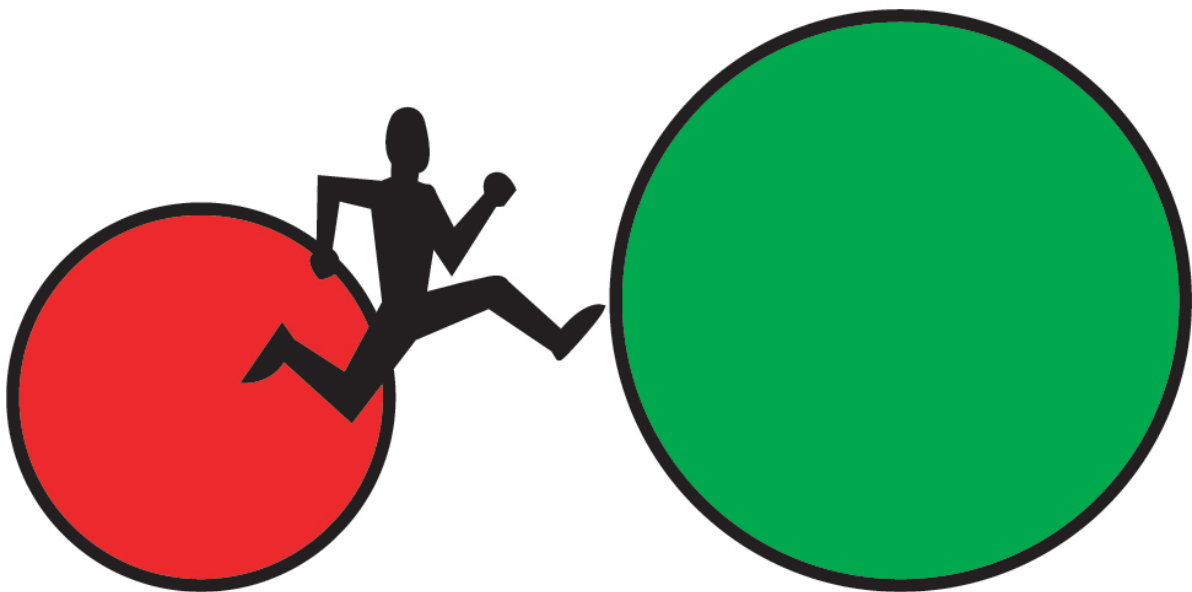

A Collection of Breakout Stories

The Second Edition

November 2006

50 stories of change
compiled by
Tony Page
and
Annette Broerse-Nijssen



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Foreword

Here you have a completely new edition, swollen from the original 17 to include 33 more breakout stories, more diverse in style, length and theme.

These stories are from and for people confronting a choice, which deep in our memories we first experienced as babies, venturing gleefully forth from armchair to coffee table, then effortlessly sweeping neatly placed objects into a heap on the floor, we felt our impact and new options. Since then from time to time, often starting with tentative and clumsy baby steps, we are compelled to re-invent our place in the world.

I have been inspired by friends making break-outs and break-ins, and become entranced by a set of themes that seem to run through their experiences. A learning set I began attending in 1996 has evolved into a sort of “pioneers club” as one by one my fellow members began breaking out of their former lives and rearranging themselves into new phases. For example T in self-employment was moving to be a full time mother, then exploring healing and deciding to enter a second career as teacher. Then A, finding herself hurt by values conflicts after her firm was acquired, left and drifted in an independent world before attaching herself to a fledgling enterprise called Human Insights. P completed his MBA, joined PA Consulting, left for a senior position in Deutsche Telecom then stopped coming to our meetings. J through various projects, alliances and start-ups is growing in skills and impact as he brings his heart to the centre of his work. R following a honeymoon period with Ashridge (a management development institution) is becoming inspired by an older dream she dared not believe could happen. G has navigated his way from a 21 year career with Hilton into a fresh start with Starbucks. M is drawing strength from her colleagues while leaving a firm she loved to embrace her next phase.

Earlier this year I could no longer ignore a need to express, make sense of and engage others in the breakout themes I was picking up. So my own current break-out was bound up with either sitting quietly on this, or doing something about it.

A hard lesson landed when my friends in the learning set did not really “get” where I was on this. Their hesitating rather than dashing off their stories, might in the past have stopped me in my tracks, but this time, I don’t know why, I became certain of my need to advance, and from then on I started to experience support from them and you and others, including Annette.

You might notice how each morning beside us quietly when we awake is a choice about how to approach the new day. One day we might awake boldly filled with a spirit of adventure, wanting to advance our lives, but another day be content to follow more familiar paths and routines. When you elect for adventure how are you to tap into the inner and outer resources you will need? Here, amongst the stories themselves, you will find feedback that is starting to reveal how the powerful twin processes of reading and writing stories can be harnessed to inspire and propel you on your breakouts.

Please dip in. If you find the sheer volume of this daunting, why not try short bursts, enjoying what you find, giving time for the stories to work their magic!

Tony, 16 November 2006

On Writing Your Story by Simon

This has really stirred something up inside me. It may seem odd but it's actually helping me "remember" why I do the things I do and what I'm about in terms of what I could give to others/a business.....

When I read my "story" again I do get uncomfortable, emotionally – but having written it I feel positive. In some respects I feel more confident - I've done some good things, I'm a good person, I CAN and WILL do this, again! I found writing the story is giving me (given I only finished it last night) a sense of perspective - something that I've been struggling with for a couple of months now. I now its clichéd but I am genuinely a big believer in the view that awareness is curative.

Mentally I've always tried to be acutely (too much at times because it can hinder me) aware of me, my behaviours/approach etc, and those around me - writing the story seems to help cement/commit this thinking - providing structure, freeing my head up to deal with what I need to do next and see the questions that only I can really answer. I shared the story with Caroline (tonight) which has helped me express and her understand where I'm at.

I do think that the writing definitely needs to be blended with coaching. I'm glad we (Tony and I) met beforehand because if we hadn't I'd now find myself with a desire for someone to ask me more questions - help move me on, interrogate what was really happening when the first breakout happened and what needs to the same/different for the arrival of the next. I could certainly see the benefits for an individual (myself included as my story continues) of writing at the point of breakout, as opposed to "post breakout", and working with a coach in the way I've described.

Does "everyone" know when they're breaking out? Is it the role of the coach/manager to help individuals "see it" for themselves? There's something momentous when it happens (I wrote about the rush, accountability, opportunity - I remember talking to people I met in the business about a huge bubble - and still had people asking me 2+yrs on "how my bubble was" - and nearly 4 years on it's all so refreshing and positively mentally stimulating).

Potentially, from a learning perspective for an individual, it's mind blowing stuff: often in life I think we "move on" too quickly. Breakout stories could hold you in the present whilst propelling you in to the future - helping you appreciate and capture what's actually going on. Maybe individuals would move quicker through the fear, uncertainty, doubt - keeping them focused on the point of breaking out.

The more I think about it the need or reason why I/someone is breaking out seems almost irrelevant???? - Is it about the courage, conviction, tenacity, competence that will be/is critical during the period of breakout? The point I made in my story about moving from good to great seems to keep running through my head... breakout story writing could help.

On Taking Inspiration from Others' Stories

by Malcolm ... and others

One of the things about reading the stories is it leaves me mulling over, pondering, which is perhaps the point. Some are easier to read than others. Some led me into conclusions I'm not sure I wanted. Some feel archetypal, and I'm a bit confined, oppressed.... then along comes a spark, and I'm somehow allowed to be who I am. If it seems done and dusted while this can be helpful in a way, it also makes me a bit cross. It is when you find yourself enmeshed in another story that you find it resonates.

A lot of it was about search for meaning, and a lot about chance. What is unsaid can be intriguing, disturbing, leaving me guessing, tragic...

In general this is about consciousness-raising. Stuff we keep hidden from ourselves, in the background, we choose to put it here because it is too frightening. The telling and reading of stories enables it to come to the surface. This happens more in the telling and writing process, letting words creep onto the page. Often when we are reading we do this in a more critical way: wanting to distil, not allowing myself to be immersed.

But I have found there is a different way to read, and some books are best read that way, James Joyce for example, then you enjoy it more. While there are people who specialise in free-fall writing in which you don't censor or punctuate or structure, a bigger question I am interested in is how to be in a flow state when reading.

After reading new questions arise: how would I like to approach my story-telling in a different way? If I wrote a paragraph from my new story, how might it read? What would be the flavour of it? How can reading and writing hold you in a place of possibility to make sense of your own experience?

Comments gathered from others:

- 1. Our behaviour is often a reaction to others*
- 2. I read them all wondering when I would get to mine. How will it compare? Will it measure up?*
- 3. Later I had a fantastic conversation with a colleague who had also written one of the stories.*
- 4. I am not alone. Gives me courage – there are others experiencing the same thing.*
- 5. Part of me is cross and frustrated, slightly resentful. It pisses me off all these people made transitions and I'm still stuck in it!*
- 6. I felt great empathy from and towards one author.*
- 7. There were bits in a number of stories that were really enlightening and a wake up call to me. I was struck by the fact that at different times, writers broke out with different things on their minds: some didn't care for money, some needed to care for money etc.*
- 8. I appreciate a story that says "Where I am right now is stuck and this is what stuck feels like!". I then feel gosh, I feel like that too and here's some reassurance. There's a value here in being helped to notice there's someone*

- else in this place, so I'm not a dismal failure: someone else is feeling stuck and inadequate too.*
- 9. When you find yourself enmeshed in another person's story, it resonates with you and that is interesting. Some left me mulling over, and this was the point: I did not want to be led into a fairytale conclusion.*
 - 10. I had a strong sense of many unfinished stories and as I reflected on my own unfinished story I felt both glad and frustrated.*
 - 11. Generally I felt a bit disappointed, and I am struggling to work out why. It may be because there was an element of sameness about them, including my own, which made them less stimulating than it could have been.*
 - 12. The fairytale story may be useful in some ways for making me think, but it seems too done and dusted. A lot were about a search for meaning and about chance.*
 - 13. I was struck by some pieces/phrases. Produces some affirmations/slogans I might be able to keep as a backdrop: Walk the line! Keep the faith! Ask for encouragement!*
 - 14. Hearing about someone else having lots of ideas, lots of fear and uncertainty, felt real and honest*
 - 15. Noticing someone else's massive commitment to change at a secure point in life was very impressive and inspirational.*
 - 16. Universal availability of support: it is always there.*
 - 17. There were bits in a number of stories that were really enlightening and were a wake up call to me. I was struck by the fact that at different times, writers broke out with different things on their minds – some didn't care for money, some needed to care for money etc.*
 - 18. I thought I've done bloody well to come out as unscathed as I feel.*
 - 19. To trust my urge towards creativity.*
 - 20. I realise I have a good relationship with fear; I'm afraid of the right things.*
 - 21. How respectful was I really of the other people who wrote stories? I took a long time to read and give my feedback.*
 - 22. I can read them again and again and every time pick out new things, wonder about aspects, think about 'what if's etc. It has been very inspirational!*
 - 23. A break out **can** bring you to the place where you want to be (in other words, the grass can indeed be greener on the other side). There is hope!*

No-one with a modicum of common sense would launch themselves in to the unknown unless they had to. It stands to reason. Risk takers invariably fail. And in my line of work, as a veterinary surgeon, who wants to take their cat or dog to a risk taker!



We would all prefer to stay in our own comfort zone, work with an acceptable level of stress that we can regard as 'healthy' but not place ourselves 'out there'. After taking the plunge of setting up a business the exciting times are always regarded as being the beginning of the venture. Well that's a luxury that people who are successful can reflect on. There's nothing exciting about facing bills that were not anticipated with an income stream that looks decidedly fragile.

So why on earth would a person venture out in business on their own. In my case there really wasn't any alternative. I got sacked. Feeling decidedly wounded from the injustice of it all I had a couple of options; find another job far away or stay where I was and set up on my own. Sure, I had been feeling for some time that I could do a better job self-employed. But like I said, in the healthcare sector you're not 'wired' to be a risk taker. So whilst it was a nice idea, if I was being honest with myself, it was always going to stay just that. Something fairly dramatic had to happen to move me from the comfort zone of regular income to self employment with all the precarious states it can leave you in. The injustice of being sacked for no good reason was the additional spur. As a minor aside I also took my former employer to court and won a case of unfair dismissal, which was sort-of cleansing in its own way, but financially a total waste of time.

Had I realised at the outset the plethora of petty (and not so petty) rules and regulations I would have to work through I'd have passed on the whole venture. Fortunately there isn't any such book that tells you all those things. I'm still surprised and bewildered, ten years in to running the business side of things, by the never ending stream of red tape and nuisance obstacles that the various organs of government put in the way. But even knowing what I do now there is absolutely no way that I wouldn't have gone it alone. The business itself has become an extension of my own personality, as I'm sure all small businesses become. It doesn't matter if you're a veterinary surgeon, plumber, IT consultant or whatever, being in charge of how you do things allows a lot more professional satisfaction than money can buy. Sure it's nice to be financially successful as well, but the real enjoyment is doing it your way, not being dictated to by others and not undertaking working practice that makes you uneasy.

I still run the single handed veterinary centre that I started ten years ago, and it's still single-handed. The end of each month is a financial 'concern' (it's improved from being a 'worry'). I'm still looking out of the window of my rented house at the same Peugeot 205 I bought second-hand all those years ago and I don't plan on replacing it too soon – my choice though as I can afford to.

Starting the veterinary centre was not something that I had a single minute of training for in all five years of my studies. Everything I've learnt about the business side of things has been done 'on the job'. It has been worrying more times than I've owned up to, and whilst I'm nowhere near as successful as many, I'm a lot happier than most. And ultimately that's worth an awful lot.

The benefit from writing the story was in terms of being able to reflect on the 'journey' (if that's not too melodramatic a term to use). It's always the case that we're meant to keep looking forward toward the next stage in the progress of a company. Rarely do we look backwards and reflect on just how far we've come. I'm not given to self-congratulatory backslapping, but every so often seeing just what has been achieved is a boost to confidence.

For me there was nothing to be lost by the exercise. Plenty to be gained (as indeed it was) and certainly no real difficulty in writing the piece. Having done it though I think a yearly review for the 'boss' wouldn't be a bad thing. The question is - who should do it?

breakout stories

(Told by a taxi driver at 9pm near Heathrow)

Seven years ago I was 42 years old and I lived happily with my wife and two children in Kosovo. Then the Serbs started killing and driving Albanians out of Kosovo and we had to leave our house which has since been destroyed.

Prior to this I worked as the export director of a large company employing 8000 people. Now I am driving this taxi.

It was a very difficult and confusing time. Can you imagine? You have created your life, your home and your family is happy. Then one day it is taken away from you.

15000 died and most of Europe did nothing. Britain was the only country that came in and supported us. There is a long relationship stretching back between Britain and Albania to before the first world war and this helped me gain a work permit here when we fled to Britain: we were fortunate.

Since then we have had to rebuild our lives. We will be passing my wife's flower shop in a minute. I will point it out. We can stop if you want to bring home some flowers to your wife. She has already completed her degree in design and had recently opened this shop. It is a really positive thing for her. Before this she was cleaning to earn money. One day the husband she cleans for turned up at our door and asked her if she had seen his wallet when she was cleaning. He was not actually accusing her but she felt accused and humiliated. She cried and cried. There was nothing I could do. It was terrible. Now she has opened the shop she is happy again.



My children are getting on well here. My son who is 13 has results equivalent to a 19 year old. He recently received an award presented by a government minister. My daughter is also settled and doing well.

It is taking me longer than my wife. My qualifications were not recognised so first I studied A levels and now I have just completed a law degree. I have one more year in law school before I can practice, then the challenge for me will be to get a job. I speak 5 languages but my English is not very good and being 49 it is not so easy to pick up. To be a lawyer it is all about the details of the language and my English is still not good. I did have a part-time job helping a lawyer in Watford but he has retired. Now I am thinking of getting involved with British people who want to buy and sell properties in former Yugoslavia.

Recently I have been invited back to Kosovo to get involved in restoring it. It is now protected by the UN and safe but I am not sure. It is not so easy. Our house is gone. But I will go back to see. The Serbs cannot harm us now and Milosovic is dead. But in truth one person could not have done this: politicians, the orthodox church, the propaganda, many people were involved. Although I will never be able to get back what we lost I am now optimistic for my children. So I can forgive. But I will never forget.

I keep asking myself questions like: “What is the right way? What will work best for me?”. In my position as an assistant to the CEO of part of a big international company, I was having my annual ‘performance review’, a conversation with my boss about my performance over the year and what my key learning points were and so on.

This time we also talked about ambition. My boss looked at me curiously and asked me: “Sometimes I wonder; what is your ambition?”

Now I have to tell you that in that time I owned a bookstore with two friends that we ran next to our day jobs. Volunteers helped us out and managed the shop. I did this for fun and to manage a balance with the work I was doing at my company. I did not tell my boss about the bookshop and I thought he did not know.



However he said: “I don’t understand what your goal is. If you want to become the owner of a chain of stores for example, you should focus on that and put all your time and effort into it. If you want to become a manager here, you should show that and plan your career so that you get there. So what is it you want? I cannot quite figure you out.”

As always he was spot on. He knew that I did like it to have a look at how the management team operated, and then I always asked myself the question; “Is this what I want to become?” I doubted the idea of becoming a manager. I liked the idea of being in control, of making decisions, of taking responsibility and working together in a team, but I had that with my bookshop friends on a small scale as well...and there were definitely aspects that I did not like working for this company; the working hours, the politics, the ego’s, the selfish decisions, the lack of care for other people.

So he told me his story, which is the heart of my story: “When I was young, I decided what I wanted to become when I was older. I have planned my career for 30 years ahead. And calculating from there, I figured which road I had to take. Everything I have done since that moment has been in line with my plan. Every step I take is towards the end goal. In my career I have not done anything that is not in line with my ambition. All the moves were calculated and only once have I lost half a year by a wrong step, which fortunately I can now make up in this position.”

Maybe I should explain that he did not have to tell me that the end goal he was talking about was a place on the managing board of this company, preferably the chairman position. This had been very clear to me from the beginning.

“So”, he told me; “what do you want to become?”

Now, reader, you might have asked this question to yourself, as I did many times. But doesn’t his story sound really simple?! How little time has he lost in his career to decide what he wants to achieve? If you think about the saying; - you only live once-, why am I spending so much time finding my own destiny?

Here is proof of another way of planning one's journey... in fact the other way around...you look at the end and then decide what you want to do, instead of just making up your plan along the way...I sometimes think that the way he does it is so easy and clear. Shouldn't we all sit down and figure out what we want to be in 20 year's time and then relax, focus and do everything we do with that end goal in mind?

For a more balanced picture I add to this a narrative of an incident that happened when working with my boss and Dicky, a strategy consultant.

Dicky's team and I had worked very hard on a proposal for the change programme that my boss wanted to undertake and one day we presented this to him. His reaction was very unexpected. My boss was truly obnoxious and rude while we kept talking about our plan. I knew it was well done and you could see clearly we had prepared ourselves well. I was extremely surprised by his reaction and felt let down. I was puzzled too. "Why be such a pain...?" So I asked Dicky (we had a good working relationship so I figured I could ask him) what he thought about this behaviour of my boss (his client).

Dicky said something like this to me; "Don't worry, it has nothing to do with you, us or the quality of the work. It is just the type of person that he is, and I have seen more of them; egocentric, over-concerned with their own power and trampling on more gentle people. He wants to achieve his goal (that is to become a member of the board – Dicky pointed out) as quickly as possible and he does not care how he gets there. We will suffer because of that. He got this far behaving like this so he will not change his behaviour."

So here you might see a bit of the flip side of the coin...

Now back to our conversation and the question my boss posed on what I wanted. I thought about his question for a moment and then I told him that I was struggling with something that was on my mind. I was in my early thirties, and wanted to start a family. As a woman I knew that I would have to leave my career for some time and I pictured a gap in my working life. I know that you can immediately start to work again after giving birth and you don't have to lose much time at all, but I had already decided I wanted to enjoy being a mother. I wanted to take time off to be with my children, if possible. This idea has always been in the back of my mind. I figured I would take time off (a few years maybe) and then I would start to work again. What that would mean for my future within this company, or for a career for that matter, I could not foresee.

This conversation took place about 2 years ago and I am now at home with my little son. My ex-boss soon became a member of the managing board as planned and I am in no doubt that he will next become chairman.

To stop working and become a full time mother was not easy for me. It takes time to get used to this different life but I enjoy being with my baby tremendously. I learned from writing this story that a goal in life can also be to be a wonderful person and with that you can start right away!

Employed on a work permit I was restricted to working with my current employer on a temporary contract. The job I was recruited for, initially sold to me as being “a high flying involving and challenging role”, turned out to be a dull, routine, administrative experience.

It doesn't take very much for me to get restless and bored being in the same space with the same people and doing the same work. Add to this opinionated managers, who force their will on you and keep you within the same trapped boxes they had themselves conformed into long ago, and pretty soon I started feeling frustrated and stuck.

I can't point out one significant moment when I realised that I wanted something different. It's been an organic, evolving process, experiencing a whole myriad of thoughts, emotions and feelings.

One day there was a particularly painful incident in a project meeting. I had willingly gotten involved in this interesting project, but what was happening was my input in a previous confidential meeting was now being raised and misconstrued. What followed was drama, hysterics and poor attention to boundaries. My boss accused me of showing the business in a bad light. I felt so angry and violated and I challenged my boss for lack of respect, for doubting my integrity, for failing to observe ethics and due process. I filed a formal complaint. The thing which upset me the most was not once was there an acknowledgement that anything wrong had been done. It was only after the company realised the legal implications that the matter was resolved. By this point I knew without a shadow of a doubt that my long term future did not reside in this place and I had to get out fast!

With each day that went by I could feel my 'pain' growing... resenting my boss, resenting being in this place in spite of the surroundings being comfortable: when you're not happy, it all pales into insignificance. Long boring meetings where nothing significant was ever decided and you lose the will to live. There was the worst of office life: changing goal posts, demands from “on high”, gossip and sucking up to the boss. It took me reaching deep into myself to find the strength to keep going, and to focus on what I could do.



I decided to rebel. This meant speaking my mind, challenging my boss's attempts to try to “assert his authority” over me. It is a sad, sad state of affairs to see just how much people management practice is about controlling and monitoring people and keeping them in their place. I found standing my ground and fighting very hard – on my mind, my body. The wear and tear takes its toll and I became very run down and determined to make a change.

Also realising my destiny was in my own hands, I prepared. I found freedom sometimes in small steps starting me towards my vision, and in making a decision to “suck it up and give my best”, not for anyone else, but for myself.

When I discovered my passion for coaching, it began with books and started to build from there. A free distance learning coaching introductory development programme

followed. Not long after this a new role opened up for me in another part of the organisation on a contract and I jumped at the chance. Then I found myself on an all expenses paid 9 month coaching programme which helped me realise my dream. I became a qualified coach without spending a penny of my own money!

Now the time has come for me to move on. My contract is up at the end of this month... and this coincides with winning the freedom to live and work in the UK and it's a whole new beginning!

At the end of it all I'm tired of fighting battles, of being among people who are fighting for position rather than keeping their eye on team wellbeing and welfare issues. I know now that I want to work on my terms, do things that I feel completely excited and passionate about, and ultimately to make a difference in people's lives.

So I guess the lessons I've learnt about transitions is that they are not always smooth. Sometimes the waters can get pretty rough, or you think you're stuck and it's too difficult to change. What has helped me move through has been pure motivation: the pain of staying put begins to exceed the pain (discomfort really) of breaking free and walking my own path.

Before making any major decisions, the most important thing for me is to be in a place where I feel mentally, physically and spiritually balanced – a state of total wellbeing. I know that this way I can make decisions which are not based on fear, anxiety or frustration but rather from a place of confidence and high self-esteem.

I challenge myself to reach further with each transition, to remain open enough and have enough feedback channels to recognise the need for change. My feedback channels are family, friends, positive work relationships and a professional network. I know that when I'm feeling frustrated, bored or restless, that I must first look inwards and see myself in the mirror before I can handle the situation.

Fundamentally, wherever I go, whatever I do, I bring myself and it is in those moments... knowing that I have the freedom to choose my response, always gives me hope. Life is too precious to give my power away and rely on other people to decide for me. And guess what...they are just as confused as I am ... or in some cases even more so! They're just trying to figure out their own way and we all have some dysfunction in us ...it keeps us moving forwards! I learnt that when you assert yourself, sometimes people don't know how to handle you and interpret your standing your ground as stubbornness or aggressiveness.

For the most part, I realise that what I am facing is really "inconvenience" and not "hopeless suffering".... of which there is so much of in the world today. I choose to be a force for good instead.

Doors were opening for me: delivering a change programme, highly visible results, a wider role with an international remit, in depth exposure to multiple cultures, success at engaging people to buy into corporate strategy and to work together.

Travelling away from home 2 to 3 weeks a month, immensely stimulated, I often returned home on a Friday night thrilled to be with my young family again... until the Sunday morning when my part time presence and life going on in my absence seemed to give rise to conflict. I was totally consumed by “one of the best jobs I ever had “. My long suffering wife, dealt with the challenges of bringing up two small children while I was on a thrilling roller coaster of challenge, self discovery, with the distinctive aromas of far-off places – the international trouble shooter. Potential for resentment and all the associated emotions was of course present.

The roller coaster continued and became addictive: I used to fly back on a Friday night, straight out to dinner with friends and hold forth about my adventures. Once spent I was disinterested in the ordinariness of their lives and fatigue set in. Little did I realise that I was living on a different planet. A period of corporate upheaval followed in which our company was acquired by a larger predator and although I came through this well I felt no empathy towards my new colleagues as they showed me none, fuelling my growing despondency, sense of impotence and anger until I took the initiative to seek a new position outside. Before too long another upheaval was to arrive which tipped the balance in my life.



It was a non threatening merger followed by a sales auction process as the shareholders of the merged business voted their displeasure at the new bedfellow. There were 22 companies bidding – and the due diligence process went on and on – for all of 15 months. The strain started to take its toll on people, their ability to cope with situations they had previously enjoyed. I learned a few important things through this time of major change.

The first: you must protect your mental and physical health. I discovered that whilst I felt I could cope with sudden downward movements of the roller coaster and the associated feelings of nausea at losing control, I had no ultimate release for the stress that was inexorably building up inside. Helping everyone else cope was denying me the opportunity to rationalise my situation and put things into perspective. I found it increasingly easier to justify opening a bottle of wine when I got home after another draining day: “to cut the dust of the trail”. It became a daily ritual and at the end of the working week, the opportunity to really relax and have yet another bottle or two came equally easier. The annual medical check up in the midst of this process came as a timely wake up call, prompted by the question: “how many units of alcohol do you consume on average a week?”

Encouraged by my wife, I joined a tennis club and to my joy discovered that exercise was much better for you than fermented grape juice: the former helped you get the stress out of your system and improved your ability to cope, the latter just dulled the negative feelings. This seems to resonate with a lot of corporate “victims” now when

I use parts of my story: they often come up to me at a break saying how much they personally relate to this place themselves.

Second: you must be brave and take control of your destiny. We had been acquired and recognised the familiar feeling of being marginalised: yesterday's men standing on the side lines listening to the new owners' vision of how they were going to do a better job than we did, with no recognition of the value we had created which made them buy us in the first place. I felt we were in the final throes of our time with our work of art (– the success of Le Meridien) and found ourselves stranded on a global road show in New York on September 11th 2001. In a bizarre way, being marooned there with no corporate role or responsibility helped us rationalise our predicament: we spent hours talking about what was really important to us as colleagues and business friends. We went walking in Central Park, sat on the grass and in that strange limbo agreed that if we escaped intact, nothing else was really that important (certainly not the takeover of “our “ company)!

I carried out a personal balance sheet during that experience in New York – reviewed my intellectual, character and personality assets and decided what I needed out of life. As the revolving door out of the company started, I looked back at my previous experience and decided I would not be used again. I challenged the new owners to declare my part in their future. They tried to fob me off but I persisted by hounding them until I got the answer I anticipated. I turned down their offer of “hold the fort until we find a replacement” and left on my own timetable.

After 21 years of exceptional success and job satisfaction I needed an extended break: partially to recover from the physical, mental and emotional demands of the change experience. I seized opportunities to do things I had not had time for in my work life: visiting art galleries, resurrecting dormant hobbies and interests, attending an HR Strategy programme at the London Business School and continued to play tennis...

My future was to be in my control and not at the whim of a corporate predator. I started my own organisational development consultancy and entered the next period of challenge, taking with me the positive lessons from corporate life, and leaving behind the negative experiences.

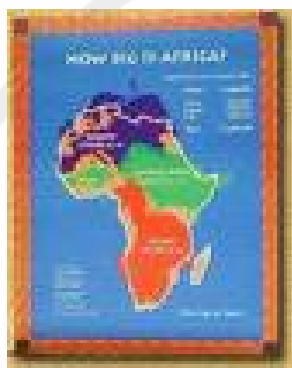
The reality of self-employment for me is a different kind of stress, with no financial guarantees but rich in learning and experience. I have developed myself in sales, marketing, product development and basic book-keeping. I have a healthier balance between work and personal life: more meaningful relationships with my children who are now in their twenties, a closer partnership with my wife and a more balanced contribution to our family. I work with a number of organisations in different industry sectors. I have more control of my own destiny.

Having a life is what it is all about. Laughter is the best medicine. I will never forget a good friend's words: “I am glad that happened to you in a way: you were becoming such a bore, and now at least we can have a decent conversation”. Job satisfaction is a great feeling, but watch out when it becomes the only thing that matters!

Moving jobs within England is a lot easier than moving on several levels at once: leaving my old life in Africa, starting a new life, and bringing change to a new organisation from day one. Today the transition is still not complete: only about 7 out of 10.

What was my old life like? In Africa I had good friendships and an active social life. At work a supportive boss made me more “strategic”, giving huge freedom to affect several operations simultaneously... and speed up the process of change. My African colleagues mostly felt I was doing a good thing, and that’s not something you get always. Yes there were tensions but I felt lucky with a team “around me”, albeit scattered across 11 countries. The life style was comfortable with short hours: starting work earlier you also finish earlier. Help with domestic tasks meant, for a single person, somebody cleaning who can also cook and shop, so more free time. Why would I want to leave?

Working in Africa brings an exciting surprise everyday: you are never quite sure what will happen! Being overseas gave me a tremendous space to grow which I relished. But I was overdue a move and a restructuring was wiping out overseas posts similar to mine. My boss would renew my contract but would not be able to renew it again and said it was “OK to start looking around”. I didn’t take that as negative: I took it as permission. When head office was restructured, I was told I was a good candidate for section head, but because promotions were not being allowed this route was also blocked. In effect my specialism was being downgraded but I didn’t want to be a specialist in closing libraries down. I couldn’t see much of a future! So two weeks later I registered on the website of my professional association. That was in January, and the first post they sent me I applied for. This is the post I have now!



It was not as linear as it sounds. Another overseas post seemed possible, but it didn’t come up. I could go back to head office and they find you something, but I didn’t want a sideways move. I wouldn’t leave for just anything but the one job I had applied for seemed the best way of growing and by March there was nothing else. Prodded on by a friend (“don’t bother - it is so difficult to get these jobs!”) I became determined! It was perhaps the one academic job where I had a chance because of my developing country experience. Preparing carefully, I spoke to more than a dozen people, did loads of background reading and at least 12 drafts of my presentation!

They postponed the interview twice but finally a video conference with nine people (two of them staff that I would be managing) and they offered me the job. I asked questions about their level of commitment to change, how much control I had over resources and what staff thought of me. When they said staff were very excited to work with me that did it! I somehow needed to know I would be credible as their manager.

Until then I had put my life on hold. I was starting to lose focus on my job after visiting the 11th country: the work was coming to a natural end. I didn’t want to plan any holidays: I couldn’t. Then phew! Three months notice seemed too much work-wise, but person-wise about right.

Moving country you need a home. It felt weird that I had not met anybody except by video, so six weeks later I was visiting my new colleagues, and some flats lined up for viewing. Giving up one fantastic lifestyle in Africa, I wanted an improvement, something to look forward to apart from the job that I could now enjoy in Britain: being able to walk out of my door and down the road. So I chose a central place with the open air, station, shops and restaurants nearby. With a home I felt more comfortable. Then I struggled in a busy and frustrating period during three weeks between jobs. Huge bureaucracies stood in my way! A hefty deposit just to get a mobile phone because I'm a "credit risk"! A terror incident left my stuff in Africa. My bed arrived only two days ago!

In the first three or four days I hated my job. Culture shock! The new boss wouldn't give any direction. He and his boss were at loggerheads. Our department an empire cut off and my colleagues saying "academics" were "impossible", but I plodded on, going round meeting them and I started to get happier. The academics were helpful, but it was my own department needing to change. How much influence can I have on other sections? Well I'm reaching out encouraging an integrated way. In a project with 100 developing country institutions I'm letting colleagues promote their services with us.

A library closing at lunchtime with practices dating back 30 years looked impossible to shift. Today a staff member quit, but I'm also getting incredible feedback. My deputy said: "since you've started change seems possible". An older staff member said "you know when you ask a question and we just look down, well no one has asked us before". I said "how does it feel?" and she said "it's good but it takes time". My boss is a bit threatened since I quickly introduced some changes but I needed to start with a bang and keep going! If I didn't act immediately I was afraid I might start to feel that I couldn't. Now I sense something is brewing but that's OK.

My 7 out of 10 is also to do with the personal aspect. After a few euphoric weeks, there's been a slump in my energy. I realise how lonely I am: missing my friends and going home without someone to talk to is hard. With some new friends, and others to see in London, I can also use up my time with work-related things in the evenings. But I'm focussing too much on work and need a way of breaking out of that.

I'm cooking quite a bit and that's good. Six months ago in Africa I wasn't well or happy and I'm really lucky my last job set me up so well for this. It's funny I was in Sweden the other week and felt I ought to be going home to Africa, not to Heathrow. Now in some ways it's a relief to leave Africa behind and live somewhere where things mostly work efficiently, people are nice to you on the street, I can walk... and I feel a lot healthier for it. I feel at home in my skin here somehow. Someone said give yourself time, don't be too hard on yourself, and I recognise that while I'm fairly selective about where I work I'm also selective about who I hang out with!

*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura
che la diritta via era smarrita.*

*In the middle of life's way,
I found myself in a dark wood
where the way ahead was hard to find.*

This possibly over dramatises my own situation, but I don't think I am alone in finding myself in mid-life and realising that I needed a change of direction. To continue Dante's metaphor, I feel that I am now finally hacking my way through the last few thickets and the road ahead is at last in sight.

The change I am going to describe is my movement from 'secure employment' in a Government Department to the more uncertain territory of self-employment doing several related things I love and am enthusiastic about.



When did all this start happening? I suppose about five years ago, when I was working as a training consultant and attended a course on coaching. This started me on the absorbing but disturbing process of self-examination and led me to question whether I was fully using all my skills and qualities in my then line of work, whether I felt truly fulfilled and happy, and whether there was more I could do with my life.

Becoming more self-aware tends to snowball, as others who have gone through the process will know, and after attending a few events at 'Alternatives' in Piccadilly, I got myself a coach and began seriously doing some of the things I had decided I really wanted to do. Before this, I would have classed myself as a dilettante - I did them, but not for money, and not consistently, maybe not believing in their value to myself and others.

My next step will be to cut loose finally from the good old Civil Service and go it alone, which I intend to do late this year or early next year.

Looking back on the way I've covered so far, the main landmarks that stand out for me are:

- help and advice I've received from the most unlikely people
- how many ideas I've had and how I've managed to carry them through
- how hard some of the barriers were (charging money for things, telling people I did them, and, related to this, self-belief, were some of the biggest which I think are still lurking in the background but have definitely diminished in size as I have confronted them)
- the usefulness of attending seminars, networking with like-minded people and reading the right books. 'Feel the Fear and do it anyway' is one of them!
- Just keep on doing things and believe in yourself and your unique contribution

Here's Dante again as I think he sums it all up very nicely:

*Tant'e amara che poco e piu morte;
ma per trattar del ben ch'io vi trovai
diro dell'altre cose ch'i' v'ho scorte.*

*It was almost as painful as death,
but to turn to the good that I found there
let me talk about the other things I saw (along the way)*

PS. Producing this makes me clarify my thoughts. Writing it increases my commitment and excitement especially when I can make connections with far greater writers than myself who have obviously struggled with the same emotions and issues.



breakout stories

At that time I often found myself walking round BBC Television Centre in a kind of dreamy state: enjoying the feel of the place, sometimes passing a familiar face from some programme or other, once or twice literally bumping into a famous actor or finding myself in a lift with a stray game show host.

Once I crept into a studio and, with an 'it's OK to be here' nod from the camera crew, I stood and silently watched a famous Russian ballet company rehearsing a Christmas show. Snow and mist were being pumped from a large machine and the scenery, lit by cardigan clad fanatics desperate to create something beautiful, made me sad and wanting to be home - with the fire going and mulled wine passed around by friends. It was August! I stayed for almost 2 hours.

But I realised in working here I was getting kind of empty. I had a lacking feeling, almost a hunger and it was growing. It felt like I needed freshening up, but this realisation was mixed with a big sadness at the possibility of leaving such a wonderful place. How could I leave?

I'd been approached by phone about a job with a retail company. Quite a creative company: not the BBC but at least not some dreadful financial institution where you sell your soul for money and career advancement!

I didn't get it but was advised to talk with someone at Coopers and Lybrand – they were looking for a consultant. Not a chance! No way! Never! God! Could you imagine me in a pin stripe suit?

I went for the interview anyway, just for the experience. I could do 'serious' and I wanted to prove it.

My heart sank as I was shown onto a floor with acres of grey steel desks all arranged in rows. People, like battery hens, had their heads down. No-one looked up to make eye contact. This was so far from my cosy rooms in the East Tower in Wood Lane just above the scenery block and a few doors from the Blue Peter offices.

I noticed then that I wasn't wearing a suit, rather a lime green jacket and open shirt. Not a good start. Yet they interviewed me, tested me, talked to me and offered me a job. With more money, working with highly qualified people, learning, career opportunities, on the surface it seemed good but... I split in two!

Part of me accepted the role in a businesslike, objective and cool way. This part of me knew all along I had to do something like this. This part of me wrote the acceptance letter, calmly resigned from the Beeb and went out and bought two grey business suits.

The other part of me cried, sulked, stomped and couldn't believe what I'd just done. I'd just sold out – big time!

What was I putting at risk? I'm not sure. Now I look back I'm not even sure what I was actually doing at the BBC or what my work was! The splitting in two was to do with my facing up to a need to stop playing and dreaming so much and to go and learn a trade.

I learned fast and sometimes painfully at Coopers. I also had a lot of laughs and now I also mourn the passing of that time. I particularly mourn the loss of Coopers and resent the merger with PW... which propelled my next career move, but that is another story.

Could I have changed and learned so much by staying in that dreamy place (dreamy for me)? Or did I need the harshness of a move into an alien space to shake me up, make me vulnerable, make me raw and tender and sensitive to all that was going on around me? I did the right thing – but that other playful part of me still wonders how it might have been different.

PS. Writing this made me think how much more there is to explore here



breakout stories

Being Who I Am and Doing My Thing... by Baz Submitted: 21 Sep 06

November 2001 11pm Southbourne Sea front, rain lashing down, dark, cold and alone eating a portion of chips, looking out to sea and thinking to myself what the fuck am I doing? I'm 35, I've just moved into a rented room in Bournemouth, away from my friends, family, ex partner, career and pretty much left my whole life. I'm going over and over the same 3 questions: who am I, what am I doing, how did I get here?

A year before I had been in a great relationship, good job, smart new company car, beautiful house, and more friends than I had time to spend with. So why was I dissatisfied? I was dissatisfied with the slow pace of my company, that I wasn't learning and growing, with how much I was earning and was likely to earn, with not being able to control my own destiny. Dissatisfied with everything.

Then along came the 12 week Dale Carnegie course, 3 hours every week of learning, interaction with different people and most of all the 'thing' I had been craving most: external validation, people telling me I was great, I loved it! Each week we stood in front of the room and told everyone a story. I was a natural: every week I would win a pen or some award, and sad as it sounds I took it all in, and realised I loved it. As a result, I became increasingly frustrated and self-questioning in my job and began to strike out in all directions.

6 months later I left my career of the last 11 years and become a 'top executive' consultant with Dale Carnegie. It sounded like my dream role, working with the largest training organisation in the world, having unlimited earning potential and only working with best clients. The reality hit me about 3 months later like a train: I was cold calling companies in the Midlands trying to get appointments with MD's and I was rubbish at it. More to the point I hated it! I loved the learning, meeting people, creating solutions, but the whole sales process of 'prospecting' 'farming', 'converting leads' just wasn't me.

After a further 9 months of 'trying' to get it by being 'more positive' I became a disillusioned salesman in a safe suit, sensible shoes and 'nice' tie. I felt more frustrated than ever. On the way I became a miserable pain in the ass to live with so my girlfriend of 3 years left me and got together with one of my 'best friends', which probably didn't contribute to my positive state of mind!

I felt stuck, I couldn't go back to my old career and I couldn't stay where I was. My soul was melting from the purgatory of doing a job that wasn't me.

Then I met Ali, a practical and down to earth woman from 'up North' who specialised in helping people like me (or so she said!). On a beautiful summer evening she laid three cards out on the grass: 'must have' 'like to have' and 'don't care'. She then asked me to sort fifty cards, each describing a professional behaviour or value under each heading. When she took away all the cards except those under 'must have', I had to reduce my 'must have' values and behaviours to 10, (from 17!) and put them in order of priority. The impact was immediate and fundamental, in that moment I knew why I had always been dissatisfied quickly after settling into any role: I had never felt wholly authentic. Some part of me was always being compromised.

How though, could I leave the certainty of 'employed work', with a regular salary going into the bank account every month? I was secure and comfortable, whilst also being

unfulfilled, miserable, with no assets. My goal of having an exciting professional life, being stimulated, owning my own company, having money in the bank and owning my own beautiful home seemed a lifetime away.

On the sea front that day I made a promise to myself, that I would never go back, only forward, and I would NOT be dependent on other people telling me I was great. During this time I would go anywhere, work on any project, give 100% of my time, focus and energy to whoever I was working for. Gradually from that point everything started to change, and week by week I picked up more and more work. I became fully aware of what working in line with my own values really meant. I almost felt fearless, like it didn't matter what the issue or challenge was, I knew I would always get a great result.

When I got a call to 'rescue' a situation where a consultant was having a nervous breakdown' on a very important project, I turned the day around and then re-created the programme for the client working 24/7 until it was completed. The client asked me to design and deliver the entire business programme for the next 6 months; the project was worth £100k. This was a massive turning point, fuelling the company I set up, which has since created unimaginable opportunities for me and my other business partners.

Moving house recently I found my top ten professional values from my chat in the garden with Ali and it made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. It struck me that my working life has become everything I asked for. I am congruent with my values and can be my 'authentic' self, I have the freedom to be and act as I choose. I use my creativity and flexibility to make a difference and work with like minded people. I am well rewarded and at 'the cutting edge' of my profession, creating a real difference.

I have just turned 40 and where am I now: dissatisfied? Yes, just about different things! With a successful business, financial independence and a partner I love dearly, why do I still feel dissatisfied? Because that is my natural state! I used to crave happiness, contentment and peace of mind. But when asked at my birthday party what I wanted for the next 10 years I said 'lots more adventures'. The difference is now I want to share them! Now I understand what really drives me and I accept that I will be happy, sad, excited, melancholy, reflective, moody, curious, frustrated etc at times and this is OK!

My 3 questions today as I write this are nearly the same 3 questions I was asking myself on the sea front in Bournemouth, Who am I, what am I doing, it's just the 3rd that has changed, where do I want to go?

PS. I have found the exercise thought provoking and unsettling as I am someone built without a rear view mirror. It is very challenging, as I've needed to think about 'stuff' I've chosen not to think about in a long time. This has brought up emotions I had in the past both positive and negative and I have not been sure what to do with these feelings. I feel very exposed writing this, much more than if I was telling this story, but this made me keep a commitment to myself that I have put off for at least 10 years. Someone once said 'the unexamined life is not worth living'.

Visiting the Cradle of Humanity... by Tony Submitted: 31 Aug 06

Arriving in Ethiopia, the “cradle of humanity”, where human tools have been unearthed dating back millions of years, you can’t help feeling in awe at references to King Solomon, The Queen of Sheba, early Christianity, Islam, and their early gold and ivory trade links. This promising history is hard to equate with more recent difficulties: a famine that gave rise to Live Aid, war with Eritrea, poverty, drought, thousands in prison without trial, political instability. The Foreign Office website warns there have been riots and bombs since elections six months ago. Undaunted we board a 25-seater coach for the Highlands. With us is Alemseged, our guide for the day, plus a bus driver and his assistant. The weather is warm but cloudy.

This week the British and US governments have cut off aid until those being imprisoned are given fair trials. This is a serious as the country, like the rest of Africa, runs on aid. The country will soon be bankrupt. As we leave the city we pass a school, children dressed in blue and white uniforms standing outside because the school gates are locked. Why? Because the government suspects teachers are stirring up unrest amongst their students: the school will now be closed for 45 days while teachers go through an “evaluation”. This is hard on the children who have exams to do, and come to the school as they do each day, just in case.



Next we pass an empty yellow city bus abandoned doors and windows open is blocking one lane of the road. Why? The bus was attacked with stones and passengers fled. Why? The bus service is run by a government unpopular for arresting opposition leaders, students, journalists and teachers, and the attack send a signal. But inside our bus there is no sense of fear: our private bus will not be taken as a target.

Leaving the city, Alemseged points to an open-backed truck load of uniformed police whipping in front on us. He seems concerned. Something is going on he says. The following day we hear that two people were shot dead by police in the city. A friend of Michael the Country Director appears in the hotel to see him. The man clearly upset and drunk pulls up his shirt to reveal evidence of a beating by police.

Meanwhile our bus has stopped in a village for coffee. Alemseged asks why the British government did not cut off aid sooner, as the government is illegal. I tell him about the demonstrations in London against war in Iraq, and public feeling in Britain against interfering, against causing suffering in other countries. He had not thought of this before and appreciates the situation is more complex than he imagined, but he doesn’t know how it can be resolved: it is too late for new elections, so things will get worse before they get better. I feel sad and anxious for his future.

Apart from little churches everywhere we see haystacks, fences and well-tended crops. This is not famine country. What is Ethiopia’s biggest export? Alemseged replies it used to be coffee but now it is “chat”, and explains that chat is a drug that has been consumed for centuries and is legal. The value of the coffee crop depends on the volatile international coffee price but for chat the price is more stable and so many farmers are choosing to uproot and replace their ancient coffee plants.

He says the effect of chat depends on the person's mood at the time they consume it. If you are angry, it makes you more angry, happy it makes you more happy and so on. The leaf is said to be particularly useful if you want to plan as it makes you sit and be concentrated for long periods. It has been an inspiration to poets and artists, but can also leave people with a hangover where they are weary and sullen. Alemseged pointed to problems created by chat in the economy, in marriages and in terms of longer-term well-being.

Meanwhile, as if we had all consumed chat, the euphoria and inspiration amongst the group starts to fade and is replaced with a more serious and downbeat mood. Someone talks about text messaging and we hear the government has switched off the SMS system in country. Why? Because this could be used as a tool to mobilise resistance against the government. But the government in a fleeting moment of compassion switched the SMS system back on last new year's eve enabling Happy New Year greetings to be sent.

Finally we glimpse a dome of the 13th century monastery of Debre Lebanos, perched on the edge of a Grand Canyon-like gorge where over the years various troubles have been experienced including a fire, an Islamic conquest, and an incident in 1936 when 425 monks were rounded up and shot under Mussolini's orders in his effort to overcome Ethiopian resistance.

The sky is clearing now. You notice the big clock on the monastery is set strangely at 5.50 instead of 11.50am because Ethiopian Time (ET) is different. The day begins at 1 o'clock (7am our time) just after daybreak, and ends when dusk starts to fall at 12 o'clock (6pm our time). And this is only the start of the differences! In Ethiopia the year is not 2006 but 1998! The year begins on 11 September not 1 January. There are 13 months not 12. Each month has 30 days except the 13th month which has 5 days and 6 in a leap year!

Disorientated by the new information, I wander round the monastery with our group, our shoes in our hands. There are beggars, many with a missing or withered leg. Drumming is coming up through the floor. Our guide as a special favour takes us down to see and the drumming gets louder as we enter a large low cellar. There are perhaps 200 monks in orange robes and novices in white huddled densely in a trance-like focus around a group of drummers. Some turn and smile. One hands me a small silver rattle to shake in time to the music. The drumming is due to go on for a further 6 hours until dusk.

A monastic tradition of self-imposed bodily torture was initiated here by a monk who stood praying on one leg for seven years as an act of penitence, which led to his other leg falling off and to his sprouting wings! The cave above the monastery where he stood contains waters which seep through the rock and have healing powers.

Refusing assistance from a guide armed with a rifle, we walk up the hill to visit the cave, stopping frequently in the high altitude to catch our breath. Alemseged, due to be married shortly, asks to be blessed by a monk who daubs sacred water from a plastic bowl, onto his head and arms. As he walks away Alemseged asks Julie a member of the group if she believes in God. She hedges and admits to some

scepticism. He says that is a pity because most people here believe in God. It doesn't matter so much whether they are Muslim or Christian. It is a country full of churches and with few religious tensions, except when tensions are provoked for political reasons. He seemed really sad for Julie.

Meanwhile the bus driver walks beside me and in broken English tells him he has a daughter. When I ask what she wants to be, he says people are poor and life is hard, so he prefers not to consider such questions and to live for today. The government is not helping them to improve their lives: *"They promised us democracy but that is on paper only, and not real: in reality they rule by force"*.

Religions unite people and give them hope particularly when they are afraid, poor and lacking in basic education. As countries get richer religion seems to lose its grip. Given the poverty in Ethiopia there is little danger of this: the idea of sprouting wings should continue to be attractive for the next 50 years or so.

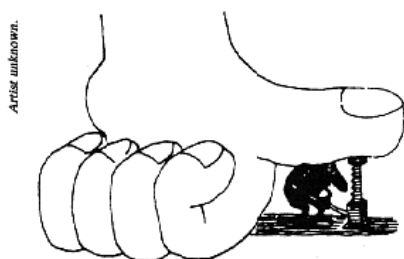
breakout stories

My story begins with a gradual transition I made a decade or more ago...from employed to self-employed.

The transition was gradual in that it began, almost accidentally, as I responded to my desire to attend a major course by offering to self-fund through income generation. I negotiated to work four long days for the organisation freeing up one day per week for freelance work and study.

When the course had finished the freelance requests did not! I then made two further steps to part time employed/part time self employed then became fully self employed as my confidence grew that the work stream would continue. I have earned a living, enough to support a family of four, for over ten years.

Today I feel as if I am in a similar and recognisable place of transition. I am funding a five year programme of study, currently at mid point. I notice a similar sense of dissatisfaction with my work. I need to break out. This time I am the boss. I have always found 'self' to be the greatest oppressor of all!!



I yearn to be creative but cannot articulate what this means. I have hundreds of ideas, they seem brilliant at 2am but fade quickly in the light of day. I am scared to take the risk. What risk? Of setbacks – they happen anyway. Of not being liked or gaining approval – this also is part of life anyway.

I sit where I am too scared to 'come out' and too nosy not to...I wonder why I struggle in this way. All my experience tells me that the difficult part is making the decision to change. Once that decision is made the struggle subsides. A simple example is giving up smoking, an odd phrase, to 'give up' systematically damaging health, at proven increased risk of death. When many years ago I finally decided to stop smoking the rest was relatively easy. Of course there were days I considered taking a cigarette, it was a habit, but the core decision was strong and sustaining.

At some level I regard my transition from employed to self-employed and my current transition to have a similar theme of self-harm. I feel I have recognised this many times but not quite acted.

What stops me? Inertia, lack of motivation, safety of the known, a feeling of responsibility, fear of what others may say. I am concerned about taking money for my services...selling uncertainty is a tricky business...and this adds another level of pressure as I strive to both act with integrity and earn a living. I shield myself with 'not knowing', using my uncertainty to stay put.

At the edge of this uncertainty lies the creative edge, the scratch for the itch, the call, the purpose. I try to be both patient and active. Watch this space!

Themes I notice in my transitions are:

- A growing and gnawing sense of dissatisfaction, beyond the day to day 'getting out of bed the wrong side'.
- A persistent sense, smaller than a voice, bigger than an itch, that something needs to change.
- My initial response is always a 'fingers in the ear...la, la, la' approach. I am as optimistic as an ostrich!
- A period of imbalance occurs. This imbalance subsides when I fully decide....then and only then does the necessary support appear and I wonder what took me so long....
- ... yet still I doubt that this will be so this time.

PS. I want to thank you for the opportunity to be involved. Whether you use it or not, I have found this 'therapeutic' in the widest sense of that word.



breakout stories

I'm at the beginning of my second breakout, but prefer to describe my first as it was probably more significant.

I'd been working in the NHS pathology service for 14 years when I decided to move. My friends, colleagues, family and husband thought I was crazy – I'd spent so many years studying and passing technical exams (I was a Fellow of the Institute of Biomedical Sciences). Science still is, my first love: my job was a hobby for which I got paid.

I was senior in my NHS role but had to take a pay cut. I was angry at being undervalued, and feeling a move would throw away everything I'd worked hard for. But I was also concerned I had defined my skills too narrowly and had to find a way to appeal outside my profession. I tried to move within the NHS first, but a regional HR director told me: 'You lack general managerial experience and it would be risky to take you on'.

A year-long management diploma opened up a world outside the lab door and gave me a shove. After two years I discovered I had many managerial skills (team leadership, budget management, coaching etc) plus wide experience of hospital environments.

I began to feel there were two of me – one wanting to go and one wanting to stay. I was hugely frustrated: I knew but couldn't prove I could do something different in the world. Eventually I was offered a management adviser's job with The Industrial Society in their health team. It was a tough decision but I took a fighting stance – I'd do anything to prove my worth in another field. I might not get another opportunity. I was lucky – The Industrial Society gave me a break and I found their values matched mine.



A big 'ah ha!' moment came at my first six month review. My team leader asked me how I thought I was doing. 'Oh I've survived,' I said – thinking I'd just about managed to deliver what was required. 'You've done more than just survived!' he exclaimed. It hit me that I was actually better than I thought. I'd always been used to passing exams to prove my worth and found it difficult to evaluate my performance without this clear measure.

I've spent many years struggling with identity. It felt right to say 'I'm a scientist' and indeed I still sometimes see myself this way. Although I enjoyed my time at The Industrial Society, my later career as a consultant left me with a deep disquiet. It was never an identity I found easy to wear, much as I enjoyed the work and developed many great client relationships. Now I feel confident saying 'I'm a writer'....but that's another story!

PS. Thinking about breakout stories I'm aware that many senior managers hate what they're doing but are too afraid to break out. There are lots of reasons for the fear - usually given as 'money', which is easy to say and makes sense to most listeners...but I suspect other things like: can I survive on my own (more than the money question) away from corporate life, who will I become, not knowing where to put my energies (what do I want to be). Plus many people are in relationships so a decision to move (and all that it brings with it on the identity front) is, in a sense, doubled.

I wonder too whether there are gender differences when changing track. Lots more start ups seem to be down to women - is the identity question (becoming and being) more difficult for many men?

Following the acquisition of the company I soon recognised that the “plate” that I had previously stepped up to had changed and that I needed to match passion, enthusiasm and drive with content, stability and rigour. Having been in the role of Learning & Development Director for 3 years, and working with the same line manager for 11 years, we began to discuss “my job being done” and time for change. but I continued to tread water – much safer, I thought, than swimming to different shores.

I started to feel like a fraud. I remember defining the future strategy, knowing that I wouldn’t be the one to see through its execution. I started to consider the job as just that – a job - which was an attitude alien to me. Leading the team became a chore not an honour. But, still, it seemed safer than moving on.

Was I comfortable? Yes. Was I lazy for not mustering up the energy required to find another job? Quite probably.

Instead of making some life changing career decisions I made a personal commitment to myself to shift some excess weight. I adopted the same determination that earlier had advanced my career during the following nine months I lost seven stone in weight! I felt good, looked good (became very vain!!) and had loads more energy. A job came up in another operating division and so came my breakthrough....

Unlike previous promotions it was in no way a “done deal”. The 3-stage interview process combined with a ½ day assessment centre was unnerving. I found myself “fighting” for the role, and getting quite angry at having to go through such a rigorous and lengthy process. This, I think, was a part of my “growing up”..

Clichéd as it is “I hit the ground running”. I remember a rush of liberation: wings unclipped. I realised the enormous accountability that I had taken on and the magnitude of the opportunity that lay ahead. I was not only reinventing myself or the Team but the whole business – FANTASTIC.....

Within a matter of days I was working with the Exec to bring greater clarity to the values that over 2000 team members would be encouraged to live by. We continued to work hard with the Senior Managers building their leadership competence and creating a profitable, values driven organisation. The following 12 months flew by: some of the best times in my career. Why? I could see the contribution that the team and I were making not just to the top and bottom lines but as (if not more!!) importantly to people’s lives. What we created, by way of culture and engagement, was unique.

And then things changed....

A new MD. We moved quickly through uncomfortable stages before recognising that by working together, and in particular with the Finance Director, we could really make inroads into the market. As the next 6 months played out, I grew, he grew, the business gathered traction and, as we thought might happen, a decision by the parent company was reached to sell the division!!

The next 2 months were really difficult – the decision to sell was absolutely right for the business but we all felt some resentment that we never got to live out the vision



and anchor the changes in the business or see the fruits of our labour. Many who are still with the company or have left talk about having gone through a grieving process. Others have felt very strongly that you don't always know what you've got until it's gone. For me, it was great to be a part of and also time to move on....

That brings me bang up to date, only I consider my current state of flux to be the most challenging yet and I now (or at least hope!) that another breakthrough story is to come. In writing this it's actually made me realise that, without getting too deep and meaningful, maybe life is all about breakthroughs. I have also started to think that maybe every breakthrough isn't about moving from a "bad" situation to a "good" one – maybe a more difficult breakthrough is about moving from good to great, both in our professional and personal lives.

In 6 weeks time I will be redundant. After 15 years with same group I am genuinely excited about the future. I joined at age 19 and will leave at 34!!! I do think I need to "de-institutionalise" myself – whatever this looks like! I think I'm probably in a fortunate position as financially I don't need to "rush" – but I am getting angry with myself because I, deep down, think I should be! This is my personal challenge at the moment.

And so, I have tons of questions that I continue to thrash about in my head. "Why am I not doing more to secure the next opportunity?" Sometimes I think it's because I'm at an impasse as to where and what I do next. Maybe I am lazy! Having re-invented myself before, have I the energy and/or inclination to do it again? What do I really stand for? What's my entry level? 3 ½ years ago I remember the rush of liberation – might I have to settle for a more constrained role/business? Am I disillusioned by the fact I'll be ok, for a while, financially? Am I "battle weary" – do I just need to take a little time out before focusing all my energies on "breaking through" – again?

She was waiting at her desk, not able to focus on anything, let alone work and staring at her telephone.

In the morning they had told everyone in the department that since the company had announced it would lay off 500 people, it also meant that some of them would have to go.

Some people had already had a phone call and when asked to come in to the office of the manager, they were told to pack their things and leave.

Then her phone rang and she was asked to go to the manager's office as well. Here they told her that it would be better for her if she would look for another job. There were no good reasons given. Her last performance evaluation was not bad so she definitely had not expected this.

A few minutes later she was out of the door, life completely changed and with no idea what / how / why?

She had been hired as a management trainee – a high potential! – by the company, with a training of several months, money spend on her as if she would save the company in the future. Now the only thing she could think of was that she wanted to leave this place, meet the others who were told the same and make some sense of this.

The people who heard this news went to the pub that day and were all very emotional. I believe it got bad because other colleagues (who were not sacked) were around as well and that did not make the situation any easier.

My friend she felt so taken aback, it came really out of the blue. She had no choice and that made her feel really bad.

Things worked out and later she moved to another job within the company but the damage was done. It has taken time to recover. For a long time she still felt insecure, - that the work she did was no good (although people told her it was OK),- that people might still arrive suddenly with a message.

Many years later, after her father had died, it was notable that she had adjusted, becoming more balanced and secure. She started to take business less seriously, less personally, realising there are more important things in life.

It happens all the time I'm sure, to lots of people – almost everyone at some stage, probably. You see it happen to colleagues and friends and family and you comment on it as if it were just a matter of course - “They’re splitting up, you know – pity”; or “I can’t believe it, they seemed so suited”; or “ Surely not after 20 years – I don’t think I’d have the energy!”. But when it happens to you, you don’t see it coming – it creeps up on you out of nowhere and surrounds you. You get a sense of it, but deny it; pretend it’s something else – something in the air.

‘We’ll be fine’



1.

I was pretty inexperienced, I guess. Or maybe I was just loyal. I stayed home for 15 years. It was a good place to be. Hospitality is a great business. Service is important but getting it right is not easy. It’s great to uncover the secret of service and then spread that secret like magic dust. The colleagues I worked with were like family - a team that stayed together through thick and thin, high times and low. Brothers and sisters, who quibbled and bickered, took sides, moaned about each other but who became a ‘line of one’ at the first hint of intrusion or attack.

The first 10 years were challenging and invigorating. The business had been doing fine, but then slumped. It struggled badly, close to collapse, but pulled itself through over 5 years and, having found new health, went on to acquire and grow and prosper. And I (we all) grew and prospered with it.

Then the business, having been acquisitive, was itself acquired. But it was a reverse take-over, and the leaders of the acquired company, including myself, took the leadership roles in the new company. More challenge, more opportunity, more to learn.

You get to feeling very close to someone, or something, that you have lived with 60 or 70 hours a week, for 15 years, through adversity, success, challenge and change.

2.

I hadn’t really known him that long, and didn’t know him that well. But when he died, it seemed to mark a turning point. He was 45. I cried at his memorial service and I thought, like John Lennon thought when Brian Epstein died – “I don’t know what’s going to happen now – we’ve fucking had it “. I have a picture of him in my study, presenting a prize to my son at a company family day. I think about him often.

3.

As a keen coach, I was being encouraged to “notice what I was noticing “. And what I was noticing was my self-doubt, my blaming of others, my crisis of confidence, and most of all, my anger. But only at home – never at work. Claustrophobic, everything closing in. Voices are muffled - **SPEAK UP**; things are too dark – **PUT THE LIGHTS ON, PUT EVERY LIGHT ON**; I bang my head on something 20ft high - I need more **SPACE**.

I need to get out of here.

I need to get out of here. But I have responsibilities, I have a family – I have to stay , even though they are saying I have to leave; I have to earn this amount even though they say half as much is fine; I have to keep things the same even though they can see I am not the same person I was.

Two things particularly helped. The first was making the decision to leave. The indecision was crippling and the decision, liberating. The second was realising that this was not my fault or my failure; it was not wrong even if not right, it just WAS.

We have grown together, you and I. I have grown and become better at being who I am. You have grown but have met new friends who I don't much care for. They turn your head, I think – you wouldn't have done that, or said that, or been so thoughtless and selfish before. We are growing, but growing apart. Not your fault, but not mine either. We have spent a great 21 years together.

I was amazed how little I missed you when I left – I hope you are happy and successful.

I gather that you have moved abroad.

4.

The job market is a jungle full of fickle folk – “we have clear and strict principles which guide us in business, but if you don't like them I have some different ones here in my drawer”. I'm great one day, worthless the next: 20 messages on Tuesday, not another one for a month. Everyone has a view – they are all different. I have a view – which is different from the one I had yesterday.

That's good. Listen to them all. They all are of value. Take my time. I am in charge.

Job offers are like busses - none for an age, then 3 in one week. All going my way.

5.

I have left home and am on a journey. The journey is fast and exciting – I don't know where it's going or how long it's going to last but I am happy to be here and pleased with my fellow passengers who are with me on this stage. Leaving home has made me more independent.

I have joined an amazing, fantastic, special company, which has values and principles which I share and which we (the company and I) live and work and make our decisions by. We, (the company and I) hold each other accountable for doing what we should, and for being as good as we can be. I have an extraordinary sense of belonging to this company. So do others. I have heard a number of colleagues say that joining this company is like coming home – like this is where they are meant to be, what they have been looking for. I know just what they mean.

But close to you as I am, I have not come home to you – and I will not move in with you. I will work hard with you, spend days and nights together with you, and share your passion. But there is more to me than just you. And anyway, I think we get more from our time together if we stay that bit detached. Once bitten.....

I have broken out. And I will not get locked in again. I will not commit to anything more than my intention to grow together for as long as it suits us both and in a way which, when the time is right, we can move on (- no hard feelings-) on to the next stage.

PS. Writing the story was important for me and I hope relevant to others in similar circumstances. It reminds me not to fall into the same old traps. I'm also encouraging others to be brave. to take the step out and feel the liberation I felt. Find a way to make this step safely.

I appreciate a story that says "Where I am right now is stuck and this is what stuck feels like!", to show there's someone else feeling stuck here, so I'm not a dismal failure, not inadequate. I suppose in every story there will be themes of entrapment, a comfortable route and it's harder to move the longer you stay, then a trigger that pulls you up short and puts you into play....

Reflecting on events is always easier than dealing with them. Looking back on my professional life story I can indicate two major moves leading to where I am now.

After my teenage dream of becoming a fireman, I anticipated sliding down the pole, I decided to study for a year in the States. Arriving in the country with an 'everything is possible' attitude I only took classes that had nothing to do with my future study. I enrolled for quite bit: Sculpture, Radio Production, Ceramics, Drawings and Design, and had a terrific time.

On my return, I started studying Business Economics, which was ok considering it wasn't too bloody. I kept taking private art classes on the side. Extra curricular activities produced a curriculum vitae which multinationals liked; meaning it contained topics like: having organised something with a couple of hotshots in it, pretending to be capable of leading anything and having made friends for life. A multinational fell for it and offered me a job as a trainee Marketing & Sales.

As the business unit I worked for was small, the opportunities were enormous. I had a great time.

They even placed me in their Management Development Program. There I was, a young but high potential on her way to conquer the business world. I became a New Business Development Manager with responsibilities in the field of innovation. The road to be travelled looked like a clear and cut case, nonetheless I decided I wanted something else. This resulted in me taking a position as a Strategist at an advertising agency.

My hopes were high and they were met. Only after a while the cloud nine I was on started to diminish. I had expected to arrive in a creative paradise: extremely well organised, with a zillion impulses from different angles. I hoped to meet and greet people who loved to visit ballet performances, loved to make their own incomprehensive art and most of all who had great visions. But at the end of each day they left the office at the same time as I did.

Maybe most importantly my boss and I differed 180 degrees in our thoughts about 'what makes a good strategy and strategist'.

Agencies and managements differ, thus I tried elsewhere. The job interviews, with everybody who was somebody, proved that visions were shared. I was optimistic again. But my happiness diminished very soon, and so did my self-esteem. Questions zigzagged through my frustrated brains: 'all ingredients are there, so why doesn't this cake taste good', 'what can I change to make it work?'. I tried everything, but nothing seemed to work. Although I delivered good results, something was indefinably wrong. I had never felt as unhappy. I had become a shadow of myself, completely lost. This career started looking very gloomy.

The situation had touched something deep within myself and after having tried every strategy, I decided that my strategies as a Strategist didn't succeed. It was clear my only way was the one out.

So there I was in the middle of 'what do we do NOW?' I did some thorough soul searching. When I finally found her we had lengthy debates. After our long nights four

words came out: diversity and new things.

I hate clichés and here I was, cherishing two. Help. But clichés are clichés for a reason, so I concluded I loved it: new things and diversity. Meanwhile different people wanted me to sit with them and think with them. After helping out on a couple of projects, I started growing again, my self-esteem to begin with. Apparently my opinion was worth something, so why not ask money for it, I thought.

My own business was born: consultancy on strategic and marketing related issues. The chamber of commerce welcomed me, I built my own website and smiled at the reflection of this new entrepreneur in my mirror. It felt great.

After a year I bumped into a couple of guys who worked with a very inspiring innovation method. They asked me to join them. Although I did not agree immediately, they gave me business cards as if I was already a part of their team. I wanted to believe in our cooperation so I began to decrease my own business, thinking it would be worth it.

But the start of their business was postponed and postponed again, it all became a little unpleasant. I decided to quit this cooperative future. While trying to rebuild what I once started, an encounter with my soul occurred, this time more deep than I, a lover of searching 'the' and 'my' soul, had experienced before: "Why had this episode occurred and what was there for me to learn?" Thoughts kept popping up: "do I really care if this WQX-enzyme gives the shampooed hair an extraordinary fluffiness and whether they buy it?" 'Suppose we don't have toothpaste with cinnamon from the hills in Tuscany, would that mean that we'd all be toothless soon?', and 'where is the end of more, more, more?' Meanwhile my own 'more, more, more' meant trying to understand more of my inner urges.

I had recently made a couple of sculptures: commissions for specific occasions. I loved doing it, having mastered different techniques in my continuing art classes. It always felt good to work with my hands and the right part of my brain. When delivering these sculptures the recipients were extremely pleased and touched. This gave me a magnificent but slightly scary feeling: were they really touched by



what I had made?

I decided to get rid of killing inner thoughts like 'I was not able to reach the level of my teachers'. What more could one want, doing the thing one loves the most and making a living of it? Apparently I was able to really touch people at the heart with what I was creating. The 'debacle' at the advertising agency and the innovative, but failing, cooperation with the innovation boys were blessings in disguise which opened my eyes for what life had in store. They forced a new look at the road I was travelling and what was really important.

Living from art is not realised overnight, so I decided to combine both sculpting and consulting with the balance gradually shifting towards sculpting. In these two seemingly different worlds the similarities became larger than the differences: with both I was able to build images, imaginary or physical, create concepts whether in the mind or in material. The work delivered was up to my standards, the diversity of projects was large, and in both metiers I had contact with the end customer.

With the balance shifted and looking back there is one big lesson for me. Things will really roll and keep on rolling if you do what your heart tells you. To really get rolling you have to step out of your cave, change your glasses and use a different hearing aid. All of this to be able to look and listen to yourself with a complete fresh and different view and above all to see the opportunities offered.



Julian hands me a piece of paper. In response to my aggressive “what are you doing?” he lovingly, gently, as always tells me that he is printing out something “for me”. I take the papers with a feeling of dread that I will have to do something, something imposed by someone else, something that I do not want to do, but know by duty I have to.

It takes only a heartbeat to know that these papers are for me. Might have been written just for my attention and sent to a cosmic address: FAO of Lara, struggling with transition and confusion, having leapt from the cliff and still floating in that precarious moment – will she fly or will she fall?

My story talks of 18 years of ceaseless working; of finishing A level exams on a Thursday, going to work at Harrods cheese counter on Saturday and then working ever since. Three years as an “admin girl” at an insurance company, a crude but effective band of 80s cowboys with their Ferraris and champagne; from the bosom of an all girls’ school into a bottom pinching culture, almost overnight. Then back to university, then, finally, a job with a charity, lobbying to improve the capital city.

I am saving London. Every day, I am evangelical. I feel London in my pores and being, I care passionately about the Tube, the buses, the need to improve the network of capillaries, veins, arteries that move people from one place to another. Every day, I undertake a seismic, heroic shift to get noticed. To do the right thing. To do more than I should, more than feels possible. And slowly, slowly, with some incredible shocks along the way, people begin to see me. Years pass, appraisals happen: you are one of the rising stars, they say. You are motivational and an important team player. You are a highly valued member of this organisation.



And now, every day, I step out onto the Northern line, sway my way into Leicester Square, walk through the back alleys reeking of piss in the summer, and ensconce myself in the office. Day on day, I smile as I walk in, I interact with others, radaring for those all important give-away signs of dissatisfaction and seeing if, as a director, it is in my power to help.

Day by day, I give presentations, I chair meetings, I talk knowingly, confidently to journalists, I write and edit, I read and précis, I sit, a captured group clustered around me as I hold and sniff marker pens and draw on flipcharts. I meet chairmen and chief executives; secretaries and receptionists treat me with deference when they know who I am waiting to see. I march into breakfast meetings, lunches, receptions: hand outstretched, bold, knowing handshake, firmly making eye contact, always in control, always passionate and knowledgeable. My success feeds me. I am on TV and radio, I meet ministers, I appear before the House of Commons Transport Select Committee. I am more than anyone ever thought I would be. Am I exaggerating for effect? I don’t think so. I can still feel the shiny miasma that surrounded me.

One day, I wake up and think, when my mother dies, I will stop working. Then no one will care any more what I do. It is a shock to think it. And in the moment of thinking it, I seem to know that I have found myself out. My brain carries the thought, like a worm, all day. And slowly, I come to face the reality. Even my mother doesn’t really care what

I do – in fact, I don't care what I do. I am doing it because I can, because I have status, power, control. These things define me, but am I these things?

Over the coming months, the thoughts come back to me. I start writing a journal again and I realise with a growing disgust that I have nothing in this life that I care about. I have no partner, no responsibilities, I have a house with a small mortgage, I have a mother who is well and looked after by her husband. I am existing to work. I look at friends and their complicated infrastructure of families and togetherness and the well-honed anchors that keep them, swaying like bearded mussels in their little rockpools. I realise I don't have a rockpool. I'm not even sure if I am near to the beach.

What I do have is eighteen years of the Northern line, of flipcharts, of immaculate suits, of deadening each day with wine, so that the next day dawns bleary and aching of reality.

At first I do not see it. It is the same for all the others, why should I be different? The (always beautiful) waiting staff at all these events extend their trays with pristine glasses of red and white wine so longingly, it seems a shame to disappoint them. Lunches with journalists over a bottle of wine. Drinks after work with the team. Cocktails with friends in "being-seen" places. And then the steady clack of the Northern line home, and what could be more comforting than another glass of wine, or perhaps whisky to lure me to sleep? I celebrate each pay rise with a different bottle of single malt and soon my drinks cabinet is crowded.

The crunch, when it comes, is not sudden. It is like a timeline, long drawn out. I see it now as a terminal decline, like the trajectory of a plane coming in to land and then skidding down to a halt. An unhappy relationship with an arrogant, pompous, uncaring youth. As we head towards our destruction and a mutual turning away from each other, I find out I am pregnant. A gentle horror of an early miscarriage that seems, more than anything else to signal a small life breathing: "You really think I'm going to be born into this?" and then the subsequent unravelling of our lives. Him, continuing on his upwards trajectory, me, left for the first time ever, with some sort of madness chewing in my brain, telling me to fight and regain control.

But this time I cannot. I have an image of The Grim Reaper, every day, dragging me behind him to the Tube and putting me on the train, with express orders to get myself off at Leicester Square, buy a coffee and re-enter the real world. Funny that the Grim Reaper is actually looking after me. My metamorphosis occurs, like some superhero in a phone box, in the crowded carriages of a Northern line train, where people are so close, that it is possible to be completely invisible.

Getting Off the Train

The mask begins to crack. For years, the rhythm of my body told me (not that I would listen) that I would have to take to my bed one week out of four. My body stepped up its complaining. The pain was unforgiving and planted and wove itself, like tendrils, inside of me. I took more and more time off work – never a full day – I always managed to get into the office.

The catalyst? My best friend arrives from Australia with her newborn babe. My god-daughter. We sit by the river, me drinking wine. I sense the compassion in her as she looks at my brokenness. She points to a newspaper – it is Sunday September 19th 2004.

My journal says: "Tess tells me tonight that I have one year to sort my life out and that if I don't she will be harsh on me. It makes me cry. I know she's right, but I don't know how to do something different with my life."

Somehow, I think with her influence deep inside me, I take myself off to a tarot card reading – I am told by a gentle Indian man, with his soul in his eyes, that I am a healer, and if I don't start to use these skills, I will lose them. I am told in no uncertain terms that I am lying to myself.

I begin to think of a way. Surely, after ten years working in one place, I am able to have a sabbatical? Surely I can duck out and tip my toe in the waters of life? Me, who has never had more than a two week holiday. I go to see my doctor to see if I can take sick leave from work and am taken aback when the hot tears flow and flow down my face as I talk about my miscarriage. He tells me he can sign me off. I talk to my chief executive and say I am unwell, I need time away, can I have three months away, one month holiday, one month sick leave and one month unpaid? She offers to pay me in full for the time I am away.

I have no excuses left. I book my ticket to Australia, via Thailand. In the weeks before I go, I drink with abandon, like a drowning woman. I have a work event in Cannes for 5 days. Every morning, I emerge and walk down the beach to the first networking breakfast. By lunch, the champagne is out and this carries everyone through to 3 or 4am, on various of the private yachts and villas around the harbour. I look around me in the bright sunshine and realise that even through the allure of the booze, I cannot see the beauty of the place, or appreciate the wealth, the status, the glamour. It is meaningless.

At the airport, I have my last glass of white wine, with my friend Kirsten. I say to her as I drink it, that it will be my last. She looks at me askance and I see the hesitation in her eyes.

Sixteen months later and it is still the last. The intervening time has been turbulent. My trip away unlocked something in me. Gave me some respect and a mirror with which to see myself. Surrounded me with loving friends who supported me through every inquiry: picking up paints for the first time, through to writing, to cooking and eating, to overcoming spider fears, through therapy sessions, through reading and kinesiology and reiki. But overall, just sitting, talking, talking, talking. I read the Joy of Burnout. I identified my "healing crisis". My body seemed to heal. Miraculously, my pain diminished. Left me alone as if it were a guest that had overstayed its welcome and only just realised that it had to go. I flew home, via a favourite Thai beach and fasted for seven days. I felt cleansed and renewed. I experienced a joy and energy I did not know I could have.

I arrive back in the office, brimming with joy and wanting to march to the beat of London. On day three, I scream and yell with the crowds in Trafalgar Square. London life and my job will not be the same again, we have won the Olympics.

The next day, I arrive late at the office, affected by the huge power surges on the Tube. As more people arrive late, Sky News broadcasts the extent of the disruption. All the other senior management are on a coach with Prince Charles, going to an event. I gather staff around me to tell them that something is clearly happening and that we all need to

stay in the building. I notice one of our young American interns weeping gently. One of the men calls out that he thinks it is a terrorist attack and I see the flash in her young eyes. I try and calm things down, saying there is no evidence of this, but behind us, the TV is showing the awful image of the no 30 bus. I falter and people turn to see what I am looking at. There is a shocked silence, until someone turns up the volume, and I realise we are in it, we are happening with it.

The next week, my pain returns with a vengeance. It grips me. I struggle with taking codeine, but I know that it is not the addict taking the drug, it is the quiet desperate face in the mirror, overcome with real pain. I need help.

What follows is farcical. I am dispatched to Harley Street by my CEO to get “proper” advice – none of this hippy stuff about going away and “being happy”. The results come back. I am seriously ill and need to be operated on instantly. The private health system whips into action and I can have a bed by the following Monday. Work offers to pay for the operation. It is all very straightforward.

All that remains is that I have to decide what to do. Calming phone calls to Australia, on my mobile phone, sitting on the steps at Trafalgar Square. I have met a gentle, honouring, loving man; nonetheless, the tension of the issues is so great that I choose to cut him out of my life. I cannot make decisions about myself – how am I meant to interact with another human being? It feels safer if I am just responsible for myself. I am a demon of control and precision.

I can barely keep pace with the beat of urgency. I am carried away by the desperate diagnosis. “I will treat you as I treat my cancer patients. You need care for the rest of your life.” I am ill. Really ill. It is not psychosomatic. My acupuncturist phones me to tell me that there are times when I have to help holistic medicine along and go for the knife. I am standing outside the Department for Transport, waiting to see the Secretary of State for Transport. Around me are the chairman of British Airways, of Sainsbury’s of Land Securities. I take the call in hushed tones. But I cannot respond. Alistair Darling is summoning us.

Finding a New Connection

As I am about to take off to the New Forest for the weekend, my CEO takes me into an office. She has had second thoughts. She will not pay for the operation. My carefully constructed infrastructure crumbles and I cry in front of her. Implicit in the discussion is the need for a guarantee that I will stay with the company, say for two years, then she will consider paying. She uses the phrase time and again: “you have to ask yourself, is it fair on the organisation?” It makes no sense to me. Is what fair? Is the organisation a living, beating thing? How does it feel? I know I have always been scrupulously fair. It has always been my weakness. I walk out of the meeting in tears.

Moments later, I walk back in again. Senior management does not walk out of a meeting. I apologise for being emotional and tell her that a lot is going on for me. I tell her I need time to think and will talk to her on Monday.

I phone Australia, no one there. I text my recently discarded lover. In careful messages, he appears to be unavailable. I reply saying I will get through it alone, as I have always done. Next moment, he calls me. He is on his way back. From where, I do not know.

It transpires he had been in Gatwick, about to board a plane and beseeches compassionate officials to let him back through customs, so that he can be with his recent ex-girlfriend, who now needs him.

We sit, gingerly, on concrete benches outside the South Bank. Whoever designed benches made out of concrete? A pigeon steals his entire sandwich. I get on the back of his bicycle, and we glide, Thai style along the promenade to his flat. He treats me with infinite gentleness, like a wounded soldier in shock. I do indeed feel battle weary. I lie on the sofa, drink tea and watch Daniel Day Lewis in *Last of the Mohicans*. Later, we cycle to Brick Lane, to a curry house and eat cheap food. Cycling back, me on the back of the bike, the tears flowing down my face, I ask the universe what to do. What shall I do? Show me a way? Do I sell my soul, my body? Do I say I will stay for two years if they pay for the operation?

As we are about to cycle over Tower Bridge, I see it. The universe tells me. It tells me that I have been asking for a sign and that it had given it to me. That it had asked my CEO to tell me she would not pay for the operation. Without that financial incentive, what was I going to do about my own body and soul? When was I going to take responsibility for myself?

I saw it so clearly, it bannered through my thoughts as large as a 48-sheet poster. The universe had given me my answer, I just hadn't been listening. I leant my cheek against Julian's back as he cycled along and knew I had to resign.

So, five months ago, I worked my last day. And stepped out of my fairy-tale castle in a cloud, into the abyss. It sounds dramatic. It is. Every day, I search for meaning, beyond ego, beyond construct, beyond fable. Every day, I am learning to feel my body, my emotions. I move to a different rhythm, a different timing. I am no longer that powerful woman who commanded attention. I am something different. I am no longer able to order another martini for the insatiable addict who wants to ignore her pain. I walk past shops that before, I would have spent pounds and pounds in, knowing I cannot buy anything. No alcohol, no job, no home. What am I? I was Director of Communications. Now, I am just Lara.

Few people understand. I seem to shun company and joke on the phone to once close friends that I am become a recluse. So many permeate their lives with drink and I seem overly sensitive to the unreal shift that happens in them, when they imbibe my drug of choice. But I cannot condemn them for it; I just wait patiently until I can be near it again, without judgement. I wait for the infinite meticulous slowness of our country's healthcare system, now ten months into its process. The countdown is real and my operation now seventeen days away. Twice weekly, I take myself to my therapist, along the river in Hammersmith. We talk about things long gone, expertly covered over. I try to feel the feelings.

Sometimes, I dare to ask the universe, what am I called to do? What is my vocation? But I ask it half-heartedly. Tarot cards and other levers to the unconscious world tell me time and again, that I am a healer. But I feel that before I can heal others, I have to heal myself. And I feel so raw and wide open – as if I walk around with the skin stripped from my body. What I have is hope and belief. But often, they feel like two impostors. I hope and believe that somewhere, sometime, I will find a door in the universe that matches this key I've been carrying. I will unlock it and walk through to another place,

with meaning, with sense. That I will be able to look in the mirror and see beauty and compassion and peace. Through all the pain and the uncertainty, I know I am doing the right thing. Little signs show me the way. The universe seems to pay back my trust.

Last week, I was having my tarot cards read. Mary told me she was a medium too and could feel my dead grandmother in the room. She was standing behind her and wanting to come into her body. “She’s a powerful woman.” Mary says. “She has something to tell you – she’s very insistent.” In trepidation, I ask what it is. Mary leans towards me, with a fervent voice, she breathes: “She’s saying: “Tell her she’s a writer. Tell her, she has to write.”



breakout stories

Moving to a Male Culture...

... by Sales Manager from Sweden

Submitted: 13 Nov 06

Earlier this year I moved from Stockholm (my home) to Dubai. I am the sort of person who throws themselves into new things without fear, but this was much more difficult. I wrote letters home to my sister sometimes excited, confused or in tears. It was like a tornado.



Normally when a man moves to a job in Dubai they can “sponsor” their wife and children to join them. But it is more complicated when you are a woman. This was also difficult because we did not know how long it would be. Meanwhile I lived in Dubai on my own.

When you are doing all this, moving, arriving, starting your new job, sorting everything out you need someone to talk to and it is not the same when they are a thousand miles away.

One Friday, soon after I arrived it was sunny as usual and I thought this is nice. We have our weekend on Friday and Saturday, so I thought why not go to the beach. Imagine me there on the beach in my swimming costume, taking a dip in the sea then relaxing on my sun bed. Then the next moment I’m not so relaxed – I can feel eyes on me as I look round I see the whole beach is full of men!

There are only 4 million people in Dubai and only a few percent are local. The rest are either wealthy expatriates or construction workers, and my beach was full of construction workers who came here from Afghanistan and Pakistan for 2 years. They are paid \$600 per month which they send home. What I did not know was that on Friday the public beach is for men, who come here in buses from the construction camp where they live all men and no women and strip down to their underpants to swim. I did not feel comfortable at the way they were looking at me!

As I felt in danger I moved along the beach and felt a bit safer when I found a couple of other women, and quickly I left.

Sometimes you actually need someone physically to hold onto while you sob and cry.

My husband’s job lets him work anywhere and after 3 months he was able to move over with our two teenage kids who are now settled into schools and loving it. Things are quite different here. For example if you have children you have to employ a maid at \$600 per month, and if you have two children you are meant to employ two maids, but I have only one and people think I am mad when they find this out.

I am not ready to write my story yet. Perhaps it will be a book, but for now it is all too new. One day I will go to my sister and read through all my letters. I will think about who was the person writing this and whether I am still the same person now.

I was working for a big bank, in a new unit that they set up in the days when the Internet was THE thing everybody was talking about. I will never forget the small period that I was in this job, as it was where I have seen the second plane fly into the twin towers that unforgettable September day.

The bank did not know what they had to do with Internet, but they thought that they should find out. So they set up this unit working at arm's length of the bank. It was meant to be something like a 'think-tank'.

This unit was called the @ccelerator. Here ideas were to float freely and creative minds were to find new ways of making money. Technical people worked alongside business people to create new Internet propositions. It was something out of character for a bank, as normally a bank's key strengths are to act in a conservative and trustworthy way while sticking to old methods. This new unit was to focus on breaking out looking into new possibilities. When I got into this new venture it already existed for some time.



For the story it is important to tell you the background of my move to this job. I was working in another department where I wanted to leave. This is another story, but the bottom line is that I had difficulty getting away from that department. It was my first job. It was a great place, with wonderful colleagues and work that I really liked, but on the other hand I hardly had a private life because I was working all the time and when I was not, I was having drinks with my colleagues. My colleagues loved me and I loved them but it became suffocating. At a point I felt it was too much and I desperately wanted to take a new step in my life. So there I was; wanting to leave that place, with the work I really enjoyed, just not the hours that went with it, the club feeling and the lack of free time.

Nowadays I feel like a coward back then because I could not explain to these wonderful colleagues why I wanted to leave them. They made so much possible for me. I just needed space and found that difficult to tell. I was looking for a good reason to leave. I was looking for a way out, a line thrown at me because I felt I was drowning and I wanted to grab something as quickly as I could.

Without much time to think it over I accepted an offer to work for the @ccelerator. This was my rescue. It sounded good so I used it as my excuse to leave my first job. It was a very defensive move, because I did not really wanted to work there, it was just the first opportunity that came along.

I tell you this story because I want to give you some background as to how I perceived my new job at the @ccelerator. I was relaxed and relieved to have left my other job as I tried to find my place at this new unit.

Soon I found out that the management of the @ccelerator had no clue of what they were doing. There were no goals, there was no plan and I think that people had different ideas about what this unit could or should achieve. Some senior people had

left and it became clear to me that the bank had not given much thought to what it expected from this unit; they just had put a lot of money in it when they set it up.

In the meantime it became obvious that people in the bank were discussing the future of the @ccelerator. There was some kind of vacuum where it was not clear where we were going but everybody came into work every day and just kept doing their jobs.

Because I had been working for some senior people before, I could guess what was going on. The people in the highest ranks were taking a close look at the @ccelerator one more time before taking a decision to close it down. I think I was able to see it coming because I was not too much involved and just came in. In another situation (for example when I would have been working there from the beginning) I would have been extremely angry and frustrated about it. There was so much uncertainty and no one knew what was going on.

What is especially sad is when I remember a team of 4 people who were working on a very big project, making sure that all the web sites in the world of the company were in the same 'look-and-feel', filled with the latest information in a 'state-of the art' fashion and so on. This was a huge project and they were working extremely hard on this while the management of the unit was already planning their exit...

I spoke to the managers of the @ccelerator trying to convince them that if they wanted to save this unit, they should come up with a good plan, strong reasons to why the bank should keep it and talk to the board about it. It was now or never.

In my opinion there was nothing to lose! In my view it was better to be pro-active and to give it a last try instead of letting people decide for you without involvement or discussion. I had a good feeling about it because I felt I could contribute. My persuasiveness resulted in discussions with the management team and finally a presentation. This was to be presented to a senior person to show that we knew what we were doing and that the bank should not close this unit. However, in the end no one had the guts to go to senior managers to present our plan and fight for it.

I felt very disappointed and angry with these guys. Besides this I felt naïve because I expected these guys to show more guts to save the @ccelerator. I thought they believed in it! That they only tried to save their own skin was something I loathed. I think in this kind of situation you can recognise a good leader.... they should have been there for their people! I guessed that if these managers were supposed to be the future leaders of the firm, it was not a place where I wanted to work. They failed to take responsibility and that is something that made others suffer.

When it was finally announced that the @ccelerator was closing down, people had been insecure and nervous for some time. Uncertainty makes people kind of paralysed. Finally several sessions were held to talk to the staff about the closure. This made a difference because people could now share their thoughts and feelings. When everybody was involved at last, things were starting to change. It was good that everybody was in the same situation. It had nothing to do with individual performance or anything; it was clear that the whole thing was closed down and everybody, including the management team, had to look for a new job. (The bad thing was obviously that the managers had started this process in an earlier stage!)

For the technical guys this was the end of a dream job. They had no chance of finding another job like that in the bank, or, with the Internet bubble bursting, outside either. A friend of mine who only started this job a few years before was back on the bottom rung of the ladder. But for my colleagues from mainstream banking they simply had to wait a few weeks, a vacancy came up and they happily settled in another department. For me, I suddenly felt like I had to start all over again. It was tough because I had no choice but on the other hand it felt liberating. I was surprised to find a wonderful job that fitted my expertise and experience. It was much better than my job at the @ccelerator - that in true honesty I had not enjoyed much. I felt almost grateful this all happened as I was again rescued from a job that I did not want to continue!

I was impressed by the way some of my colleagues handled the situation. They were flexible, had a free spirit and they seemed to easily change jobs. I guess this also had to do with their occupation. Those Internet days were quite turbulent! In the end I believe most people found a job, albeit for some it took some time.

The whole thing was dismantled in a few months time. It was good that it went relatively quick because when it was announced, nobody went to work anymore and obviously no one was motivated. We were all looking for new jobs and talked to each other about it. Since I had not come to this job with many expectations, I did not feel bad about what happened. I don't regret the period I worked there, nor the time when it was closed down. I have learned a lot that I take with me. I have met great people there and went through an amazing and turbulent time with them.

Two years ago at about this time of year we were at the swimming pool. 'We' being 'our family': a term my eldest daughter Emma savours when she says it. She wants to be clear: 'Is Stephen part of our family?' – 'No' I reply 'he's a very good friend' but he is your younger sister's godfather.

'Is my godfather part of our family?'. No he's another good friend.

'Uncle Steven's part of our family though'. 'Yes he is'

'And so are Jules and Simon. 'Yes – they are too'

Satisfied with this, Emma nods a serious nod and, having settled this important order-of-things, she runs off in a kind of confident, belonging way.

So when her younger sister Lara decided to opt out of swimming, two years ago, it shocked Emma and worried and saddened me. Till now Lara had allowed herself to be gently lowered into the water and we had taken it in turns to cuddle and bob her up and down. Her firm decision felt like a kind of rejection.



That afternoon Lara wrestled her way out of my arms when I walked down the steps into the water, and she clambered back, to sit on the steps. I playfully tugged at her and she wriggled back again.

We called to her – but she shrank further from the edge. I got out picked her up and climbed back down the steps. She screamed – and I gently put her back.

When Emma had done something like this, years before, a swift playful dunking had sorted things out. But now, with Lara, I felt like a bully and decided to leave her be.

For a few weeks she did the same thing. Never unwilling to get changed and come to the water's edge; just not willing to get in the water. The slightest move towards her put her on her guard. She became alert and ready to repel any attempt to coax her into the pool.

After a while we got used to this, and the three of us – Elaine, me and Emma, just horsed around - splashing and yelling and left little Lara quietly singing to herself with her legs dangling in the water.

Weeks went by – and we settled into a familiar way of being at the pool: accepting Lara the way she wanted to be and not putting any pressure on her.

One day, without warning - without any signal - no cries of 'watch me, watch me...' Without us even sensing something was about to happen (other than a slight, gentle, 'watching out of the corner of my eye' - which you always do with your children) – she got up from her usual position, walked to the side of the pool away from the steps and just jumped in. Not from the steps! – but from the side. She sank to the bottom and came up again giggling and coughing at the same time.

A call centre and credit card operation was undergoing a hostile takeover and my company came along as the white knight to rescue them. We made certain promises, the main one being we agreed not to relocate the staff and our bid succeeded.



The problem is that several months later our company is coming under cost pressure and our leadership team has decided to break the promise by closing the site and relocating those who are willing to move to their new parent company site.

My job is HR Manager and this puts me in a quandary. I have to oversee communications and also the logistics of the relocation. At this stage it's all a big secret. No one knows and I'm a bit worried because I've recently been promoted. I'm realising my boss has a role here as leader, and unless he does a proper job, recognising the feelings, helping staff manage the ending, then it's not going to go well. But he is looking for me to take responsibility and make this happen smoothly as if by magic.

I loved my job but a new Director started to manage me out by taking away my responsibilities as we disagreed about my role in the professional development centre. I was ready to quit the organisation (and had had a couple of preliminary interviews) when the HR manager post came up. I applied, got it and everything changed.

Q: Taking yourself back to the time before this transition, what was life like?

As a professional development consultant I spent a lot of time designing learning interventions and delivering them to a range of organisations. I got to really change the way people worked and improve their experience of work, turning it (I hope) into a more positive rewarding experience rather than a chore or a source of stress. However the new director cut back my development time so I was only delivering. Whilst I still liked this, I missed the creative side of putting new things together.

Also, the old director included everyone in decision making – putting out the problem for us to solve. With the new director, we were given instructions and not invited to strategy or planning meetings. This was very de-motivating. I felt like and was treated like a cog in a wheel. Everything in fact that I was training other organisations not to do!!



Q. Where and with whom are you doing this work?

I was working with managers of African organisations – taking them on courses to develop their leadership skills. These were young ambitious educated Kenyans hard working and committed to improving their lives by getting ahead. They were often “stars” in their own organisations picked to go through training – often a stretch for African budgets. Then I left the classroom and in the office saw daily the heavy handed aggressive dismissive management style of my director which was completely different from the leadership style I was exhorting as best practice!

I was deeply frustrated. My big project to extend operations into Uganda was cancelled without a thought about the impact on me (almost 6 months work!) I was not invited to meetings that dealt with my area and was sidelined in broader discussions.

Before the arrival of the new director my appraisal rating was exceptional – the highest possible. So I decided I would apply for three internal promotions and if I didn't get promoted I would quit and look elsewhere

Q. What 3 jobs did you apply for and why?

I applied for regional HR manager because of its large learning and development component – my main interest area -, and two project manager posts – one for a schools partnership and one for a series of events celebrating the end of slavery mainly because they looked interesting challenges. I like things that have clear start and finishes!

Q. What struggles did you experience over the selection process and making choices?

All were internal roles so followed set procedures with application forms based on competencies. I was short listed for two out of three. I had a face to face interview for the HR post and a telephone interview for the Project Manager Post.

I expected not to be short listed for any (such was the negative place I was in) so I was pleasantly surprised to get the interviews. They were 4 days apart but between the interviews I was offered the HR post before being interviewed for the other job. I was told that group HR felt it would be a bad for the organisation if I left – and that they should try to keep me in the organisation. I was so surprised having previously felt completely neglected and sidelined. I accepted the post but did the following interview anyway. I came second in that interview (

falling down on financial management –always my weak point) but the lead interviewer in feedback told me that it was the best telephone interview she had done in a long time. Again this boosted my feelings about myself and self esteem so that I started the new job with energy and a feeling that I belonged in this organisation – completely the opposite of 6 months earlier

Q. What was your experience of moving from the old to new role?

Actually when I got the new role my main feeling was one of relief. I had decided if I didn't get one of the jobs I would leave but had nowhere to go and living abroad makes it practically impossible to get jobs in the UK – I planned to have 6 months back in the UK job hunting and had set aside money to pay for this but the upheaval to my family, taking a child out of school etc was daunting.

So a lot of stress was immediately removed even before I started working. But then I found myself in a job where I spent all day at the computer. Before I had been active in the training room dealing with people – now I had to sit and think all day and it took a while to adjust. I felt a bit lonely. I came home and started to question if I had made the right choice so different were the two jobs!

However this feeling passed pretty quickly. I had moved from a situation where I was an outsider, sidelined and ignored to one where I felt fully part of the team with clear responsibilities. I had new energy. I took work home but it didn't feel like work. I was enjoying it – this is how I used to be in my previous job – how I prefer to be.

Home life improved – I was happier and the removal of the stress of thinking “what am I going to do with myself” made life more fun.

However I was not entirely free of the manager who had tried to manage me out. My first project was to standardise the terms and conditions of staff over 11 countries. 10 complied but the manager I had not got on with refused and is still digging his heels in.

So the saga continues but I feel different about it. I am confident in my new position and almost feel sorry for him! We will have to sit down and discuss but it will be about the issues and he will have to comply - the question is only when.

This changes the whole power relationship and (if I'm honest) makes me smile because in a way he is feeling the way he made me feel: dis-empowered and frustrated.

There was a Dutch man, probably in his late twenties, who was on holiday with a friend in Tanzania, Africa. He, who we will call Jim, visited a little town where



Maasai lived and there he met a woman. He fell in love with her on the spot. At first it was a little hard to communicate. But this Maasai woman had worked in a hotel and she spoke a little English. Let's call her Janet (she had a different Maasai name that was converted to a name that can be pronounced in English). The man, we call him Jim, he stayed in that town

somewhat longer than planned to get to know her better.

He got back to Holland but stayed in touch with Janet. He visited her a few times and she came over to Holland. After a while they decided that they wanted to be together and Janet moved to Holland.

Can you imagine this? A Maasai woman in Amsterdam, living in an apartment? With a dishwasher and machines she never knew even existed... in a foreign country, with a different culture and a strange language... not living outside anymore but in a cold climate where the people live inside... different food, a modern world. I found this amazing and very interesting.

But I shouldn't forget to tell you how they married! They had 2 weddings, one in the Netherlands, she in a white dress, in church I believe. And the other was in Tanzania, by the head of the tribe.. with Jim wearing local dress. They made it in the papers in Holland because of this story and because his spear was stolen at the airport on the way back.

I worked with Jim, for several years. I asked him many times how his wife was doing and he told me she enjoyed life in Holland. She learned the language and she adapted to local customs.

Jim had a job in banking and was very successful. He also worked many hours. Sometimes I wondered how she would comply with that. I mean, if you move to such a different country and give up everything for a man, it must be difficult when you hardly see him.

Omar is a Nigerian Yoruba with a shining white smile set in an angular black face, with a neat moustache and goatie. He is Finance Director for Nigeria and usually dresses sharply in dark suit and bright tie.

Sitting next to him in the Chinese Restaurant in Lagos he picks some meat from the rotating tray in front of us and asks “what’s this?”. “Pork” comes the reply. “Oh” and he tells me he’s a Muslim. Waiter removes his plate and he picks something else.

Three days later at breakfast I hardly recognised him as he is wearing baseball cap and t-shirt: “There are his fiddling with figures clothes” he tells me. As usually I strain to understand because he speaks fast and barely moves his mouth. He spoke about “the thread that connects us all”, and “as host he feels like a hostage too”, because there is not much tourism to see in Lagos and beyond visiting the fabric market he cannot recommend anywhere. He explains it is perfectly safe to walk up and down the street stalls outside the hotel, even at night when it is lined with street lamps... but when the power cuts out as it does every few hours the crime is spontaneous: “it turns into a dungeon”. You may find someone pressing a gun into you and demanding your money, telephone and watch. “It is very simple: when people are separated from the flow of money they become desperate”. When the light comes on again a few minutes later no one will know what has happened.



I ask about death threats he has received in the office. He is introducing finance and procurement systems which prevent corruption and this makes him unpopular with the buyers who were paying 300N\$ for items only worth 3N\$ and lining their pockets with a hefty commission. These people are like ogres who exploit their power with programme managers. Projects only get resources if the ogres oblige. He does not expect to be popular and is clearly up for the challenge of the job that includes fighting against a culture of corruption and intimidation. Anonymous threatening emails do not bother him too much.

But one day just over a year ago while introducing a new procurement process he was sitting across the desk from a colleague, and the following threat was delivered:

“From now on you do not greet me and I will not greet you. I will just do my job and you will not exist for me, and if you try to touch me I will take it to the point of death.”

He decided to speak to his boss about this who asked him to put it in writing. I asked Jane, from another West African country sitting beside us, what she would do about this if one of her management team brought such a situation to her. She said she would act immediately: the person should be sacked. She has recently had to sack more people than ever before in her career. She expects to have her tyres slashed. She has been told not to accept gifts of food arriving at her house in case they are poisoned but so far nothing has happened.

One year later though nothing has happened for Omar. In fact the situation has got worse. There are bad staff relations over tax changes. The management teams are not doing their job. The national staff association is in charge of events. Currently negotiations are happening to sort out pensions and medical insurance but what is not being talked about is the need to achieve a significant reorganisation.

Omar's boss has avoided the issue so Omar asks him "What will we do? Will we need bullet proof protection?" He proposes alternatives but "it all gets lost in his hair" in other words he is not being listened to. Omar says why don't we fly in to all the offices and speak to people, find out their concerns and answer their questions. Then we can offer an attractive voluntary redundancy package which many of the troublemakers will accept and go away. This leaves fewer ogres to deal with, and gives the opportunity also to get rid of the staff association.

Now his motivation and respect for his employer has dropped. He has moved his family's residence so that they cannot be targeted and announced that he will be looking for another job. "It is not right for me to put my family at risk". He has become emotionally disengaged and he is in survival mode. His reputation in the company is not good. When he points to a case of corruption people say "Omar wants to fire someone". Managers are not standing up and taking responsibility leaving it all on him. The company is condoning intimidation and corruption.

I was wondering how to bring this conversation to a close and checked with Omar that the Regional Director was now aware. Omar was very grateful to have been listened to: "It is like a mine being flooded with water and all the muck floating out. I feel much better now."

Once I almost had a nervous breakdown over my workload. This made me notice and stop. I noticed I don't feel very well, then cut down my hours and it made no difference except it stopped getting worse.



People think it's only them. But if they go out to the shop, or go to lie down, then they think the world will end but it doesn't. It just didn't get better.

Then it became a relearning thing: how to make the pile of work go down.

I realised it was about the type of energy I bring to work. You might at times think "Bastards!", and all your anger comes up, but I make myself remember it is not about me: it is just stuff that is coming my way. When you forget this it seems a larger burden you're struggling with. I remind myself it is business and it's not personal. All criticism is not against you.

I ask what is important; perhaps only 25% percent of the work at the margin.

Now thinking like this helps me assimilate new workload quickly. And I help other people by asking them "What would you like to let go of?" Often they don't know and if I stand there expecting them to answer this does not help. So I say don't answer now but think carefully about it.

Feedback from a trusted colleague recently pulled me up. We had been speaking about the natural order in families between parents and children, and in teams between leaders and followers. He invited me to consider bringing my full “authority” to what I was doing, and something in this eerily rang true. But how could I pin down specifically what this was about, whether I really wanted to change and anyway how easy would it be?

I set off on a quest that took me further and deeper into the past than I expected. I asked which parts of me do I naturally bring into the room, and which do I tend to hide when I am working as a facilitator, and what can be different now that I have been doing this work for more than 20 years? Trying as I do to “be the change I want to see in the world” (like Gandhi) is not always enough: for example the leadership programme I am running in Finland asks me for more attitude and aggression. Often I feel a truth inside me that seems unwelcome to others and remains unexpressed, like having the opposite of Tourette’s Syndrome I spontaneously inhibit spontaneous expression.

In Finland I am given authority and I feel my recoil (in modesty? Not prepared to play act? Against my values?) but then an opportunity to fulfil my purpose just dies between us. Is it really true that I hold no anger, no attitude, no aggression inside me, or is it somehow blocked? Then I turn the question over and ask do I sometimes too easily confer authority on others? For example Bill Clinton was charming until “that woman” and Tony Blair trustworthy until Iraq. Noticing my recoil from trust stirs a distant memory that I know is connected to my back story.

David Whyte (corporate poet) asks leaders “what blood is pumping through your veins?” and I know. The blood... of a mother who was a doctor committed to service yet failed to diagnose an illness that killed her eldest daughter. She felt guilt, left her children out of the funeral and found it too painful to talk about ever again. And of a father committed to adventure who was a pioneer in the field of personal growth in the 1960s and 70s yet he died alone, unreconstructed, a stranger to his 3 wives and to his 5 sons, who were also strangers to one another. Here and now I feel my rage well up!

These authority figures let me down when I was 16. I was confused and angry but unable to say so, even when my father ineptly laid a big one on me: “you’re the eldest now”. Deep down this has been shaping how I lead and am led, in ways that others often see more clearly than me.

Back then I remained “happy” on the surface but, one day in my head, my parents fell from heroes to villains. That day I grew up abruptly independent and rational, determined not to be a victim, while my parents disappeared into their grief, and, not long after, an abandoned son went off to university. In the years since I have grown into husband and father – but perhaps not yet fully into son or brother. At work I have experienced many bosses and clients, on occasion being a boss or client myself. Today I am a person invited into rooms, thus into “authority” to do with helping leaders, teams and organisations develop.

With this blood thumping through my veins, I have been inwardly committed to service but involuntarily pulling against being an elder (in order not to replace my sister). I won’t create a shiny happy heaven: instead I invite others to join me in a learning adventure. That is why I will not be a classic trainer, spoon-feeding you with neat little learning

points, or a classic leader giving solid protection and direction. I am more like an anti-trainer and an anti-leader but strongly pro-development, like a growth hormone bringing you on to your next phase. I get impatient if you depend too much on me: then you are sleep-walking to danger. When it's clear and sunny I may ask for another, unexpressed side, sometimes in the face of your scepticism. I ask questions more than telling you what to do.

If this is not the "tell and entertain" show you expected, sorry, but this is me doing my job and this is you being dependent, passive and lazy. I coach you, facilitate the team and tell you what I notice, but it is YOUR sacred duty not mine to reflect on what is happening. Out of any confusion and mess you can make sense. I refuse the tidy safe service which lets you to hide.

Writing this slight rant I feel re-connected again with an inner source of strength and I have found my mission. Here is an attitude I can express to dependent people who in their own best interests need to wake up and smell the coffee, and to leaders who are human, fallible, and either over-protective or negligent. In this volatile world where we all risk random events shattering our status quo (as happened in my family), and if anything the risk is increasing, I want to awaken you from the inhibition of fallible "parents", call you to responsibility both in leading and being led.

This summer for the first time in my life, 35 years after the death of my sister, I discovered and visited the cemetery where her ashes are scattered. I felt OK and easy, pleased to have done this, but no tears, and no longer anger, just a wave of sadness: as a son and brother I miss my parents and siblings more than I've been able to admit. But now it's just something that happened, part of me, in my blood from a previous life.

Pavlina comes from Sofia, Bulgaria and lives in Barcelona. She left Bulgaria because it is a difficult place to live.

Bulgaria's years under communist rule saw Sofia become industrialised and over populated. Poverty is still rife across Bulgaria and nowhere is this more obvious than on some city streets in Sofia where a wealthy Bulgarian businessman can lunch at a sophisticated bistro with his international clients and look out across the street at a pack of under nourished stray dogs which in turn may sit and watch as a poverty stricken individual is forced to look through rubbish for scraps of food or items to recycle, use or sell on.

Pavlina found it hard to earn a living there. She studied Economics and found a job in a bank. She did not like it at all and each month she realized there would be no money left to save. This made her see no future in Bulgaria and after some time she and her daughter moved to Barcelona, while her husband and son stayed in Sofia.

Due to the lack of right papers in Spain she could not apply for a normal job so she started working as a cleaning lady. At the moment she works in a small factory, waiting for papers that will make it possible for her to look for a better-paid job.

Pavlina's dream is to save some money to buy a place in Bulgaria and set up her own café. She told me it is a beautiful country.

Part 1

It was almost unconscious, and only in recent months have I realised I am in a process of transition.

Over the last few years a number of my associates had moved overseas or were going into early retirement leaving me with less support and less opportunities for work. However, the quieter time gave me a chance to finish writing a book that I felt passionately about and to start to run workshops based on the book.

As I started to move forward with this, networked locally and found new and interesting people to work with, this year began with the first 5 or so months feeling very disheartened that nothing seemed to be changing. Each month I set targets and actions to take, but it all seemed to go nowhere in terms of creating work.

After 14 years of running my business this just appeared to be difficult year and understandable after the end of a large, on-going project that took me around the country, the postponement of a couple of projects, and a sick mother which took me to Surrey a lot in the previous two years. Work was very quiet and I knew I needed to get out and market myself.

But once I made the realisation about this being a transitional process, I was able to see everything in a new light. I was also able to see small changes, seeds being sown and to realise that a groundswell was being created. With more of a 'glass half full' mentality, I knew I would reach a tipping point.

My father who ran a consultancy knows all about marketing and about surviving the downturns in business. He has been incredibly supportive and encouraging, both in a practical way (proofing my monthly email newsletter Inspire; providing financial support when cash flow was an issue) and emotionally encouraging me by drawing on his own experience of tough times in business and how to survive them.

It is interesting that this is the first time in about 14 years since going independent when I have not had a coach or peer coach to support me. This has made me more self reliant – I have coached myself, writing in my journal, encouraging myself. I would set monthly goals and actions, reviewing and learning as I went along.

I have also had a mutually supportive relationship with a new associate (who used to be a client years ago) who has set up her own business. We feel free to pick each other's brains about work issues, marketing etc, which has been hugely helpful. Being a member of the AMED writers group has also provided me with support and validation that goes beyond my writing.

Looking back I can now see that before this year I was still too dependent on associate work and I was holding back from achieving my dreams. By getting caught in fear about not earning enough money I would go through cycles of anxiety about work, replaced by relief when projects came in, regardless as to whether they were moving me towards my dreams in terms of the work I wanted to do. I now feel much more independent, like I am truly creating the future for myself.

Now I turn down work that is either too low paid or not likely to be enjoyable, realising that unless I did this I would not have the time and space to achieve what I want to do.

When you sum it all up it is to do with trust: when I really trust myself with patience and persistence and hang on in there despite the setbacks then the universe comes up trumps!

Part 2

What I've said so far does not show what it has been really like on an emotional basis.

There has been a constant fight with what I call fundamental darkness within me. I believe this is because I am getting closer to what I really want to do – what I am here on this earth to do, therefore the struggles have been more intense.

There has been a fear of writing – sharing my daily pain and struggle – the times when I have felt so low, fearful – felt like I was going mad. All through this year I have had times when I have wanted to run away, give up – it is that internal battle. One or two people have said maybe I should chuck it all in and get a different job or a job – but they don't understand me, while others do and they understand this process of change.

I recognise that there is a struggle going on to be totally independent – like growing up yet again. I am really learning to dream – to hold on to those dreams and go for it – but not base my happiness on the outcome – the challenge is to be happy now.

I am reminded of a poem I wrote years ago that takes me back to a power that I can feel now.

Centredness

*This has always been and will always be here
Quiet, enormous power*

*I can cope with anything, everything is OK
Anything I feel from this centred place is OK
I can bring other states here and that would be OK*

*I can radiate it out towards other people
I am a Buddha and a common mortal
I radiate enthusiasm, energy and happiness out into the world*

*Events are part of the journey, I can just let them be
Events are not what I am, they are not my life
Possibilities are endless and nothingness*

There is an energy that goes through everything and everyone, connected

I now realise going deep inside, dealing with past influences and current inner conflicts is vital to move forward, and we do survive even the hardest of times/situations, we grow stronger through them. The poem assists me now as I am still in the process of transition – it gives me hope, strength and inspiration. So I have decided to read the poem aloud regularly to encourage me to keep going.

Handling Redundancies in Asia...

... by Management Consultant from Australia

Submitted 17 Aug 06

I was contracted as Project Manager for the integration of three Asian subsidiary companies into one. The main aim was to achieve reductions in operational costs and present a single face to customers.



The parent company had been operating in the country for over 100 years and had an enviable reputation as a wonderful employer. Not a single person had ever been "redundated" before! In fact the concept was very difficult for many to grasp. As a result, I was very careful to help them review and select the very best outplacement service provider that could be found, as a measure of the esteem and high regard for those employees who would go through the program. We also did a fine job of job impact assessment and organisational change management. The communication program was honest, extensive and timely.

Although I knew the people aspect would present real challenges, I wasn't prepared for the extent of resistance that erupted in the face of the outplacement program. I went in armed with a view that I had gained in previous assignments in companies with "Western" cultures: that an organisation restructure involving consolidation inevitably results in redundant positions, and that people in these positions "have to go" if there are no other suitable positions.

This was definitely the view of the project sponsor and parent company executives the other side of the world and it was communicated very clearly to me. According to senior execs, the management of all three companies were to blame. Despite warnings not to "build silos" within each company, each one did exactly that, by duplicating operators, administration and support staff.

My complete rethink occurred when I finally listened to what the local people were trying to tell me and really looked at the uniqueness of the companies' culture and situation. The factors which affected me most were:

- In the country concerned approximately 70% of people are below the poverty line
- There are no social welfare programs for any citizen
- The transition from corporate citizen to life on the street can happen in the blink of any eye
- A combination of local traditional values, religion and company values resulted in a very powerful cocktail; one that was widely felt and fiercely shared by all employees in all levels of all three organisations.
- The parent company had a track record which demonstrated a sense of corporate social conscience I had never seen before. Any negative financial implications seemed to be offset by intangible benefits in the form of good will in business, employee retention and positive morale.
- That every manager was prepared to be as "creative" as necessary to do what was best for every single individual, even if it meant hoodwinking senior management. One example was when a much loved manager who had been with the company for 40 years died of a heart attack during a trip to break the news

of redundancies to his people. Although he had officially retired, he was given a posthumous redundancy for the sake of his remaining family.

The culture was something most companies aspire to but never attain: people fiercely loyal to their "family"/company, take enormous pride in the services they provide to their customers, treat each other with enormous respect and dignity and above all, look out for each other.

I began to see that the application of the standard economic rationalist view of people management could do more damage to the organisation than retraining a few extra people, or finding more creative ways to employ people. After all, the numbers of people weren't huge! The real issue, I felt, was a lack of creativity in finding a solution. There had to be better ways to achieve the end aim.

I began to work towards that aim, to express my thoughts and to work with the local managers who espoused similar views. Alas, to no avail!

Everything happened as originally planned, and the integrated organisation is still doing well. Despite a feeling of general failure, I do, however, feel proud that I presented an alternative view to the executive regional management for Asia which was best summed up by the final slide in my presentation:

"Not everything that can be counted, counts - and not everything that counts, can be counted"
Albert Einstein

More than a year ago my then-boyfriend, now-husband, was working as a lawyer while I was working for a bank. In our opinion we both worked too hard and travelled too much, leaving hardly any time for each other and a social life. We were both not happy with this. We talked this over a lot as we thought about bringing some changes to our lives...

This was not easy as we were both working all the time and we were on a course, in a train called career path. It proved to be difficult to change course or more drastically; get out of this situation. Why did we feel that it was difficult to get out, when we were not happy? There are many reasons, but I think the following list will ring some bells: money, security, great secondary labour conditions (mortgage etc.), status, nice colleagues, challenging work, recognition and so on. All these aspects made us feel comfortable and secure. But on the other side, there was that nagging feeling.

There was a moment when my boyfriend asked me: "I never hear you talking about kids, don't you see your future with them?" And at that moment I could see clearly what was going on and I replied: "Who can see a future with kids when her husband comes home every night at around midnight and she herself is travelling most of the week and both work weekends?"

We both felt that money was not important to us so we started to weigh the different aspects of our work and life.

Believe me, this whole process took time. As I write it, it may seem like it all went easily, but that is not the case. We learned that when you know for sure that you want to change things in your life, you have to act upon it because if you don't, you will continue to lead the life as you know it. You may feel comfortable, as you know what you get right now and if you change things you don't. The idea of change is frightening. I think it has also to do with identity. Everybody knows you in that role or in a certain position and you might wonder if the people will still look at you the same way when you are not in that role anymore.

Once I started to make the changes in my life - first I quit my job - it felt liberating. I also learned a lot from it. I need change to develop and grow. And it became clear to me that no one else but me can make these changes.

We talked and dreamed... It all had to come together. First my boyfriend proposed and we planned to get married. We wanted to start a family. On the professional side, my boyfriend wanted to move out of his legal job into business. This proved to be difficult at that time and when he realized that, he applied for an MBA.

The decisions we made started to bear fruit. My boyfriend got accepted for a fulltime MBA in Barcelona. We were enthusiastic about the idea to move there together, so in a relatively small period of time we both quit our jobs and moved to Spain. In the period in between we got married.

In the transition period we went through we have known times of uncertainty and insecurity. At times it felt as if the ground was swept away under my feet. But I had a good time along the way and it was a period in which I learnt a lot about myself.

My personal key lessons learned of this period are:

- You are the master of your own destiny
- Look ahead but live now
- Times of change are rough, but remember that the road to your dreams is there to enjoy
- Moving out of your so called 'comfort zone' can be liberating
- Go with the flow, but act at the right time!

Now I am in Barcelona with my son, who was born here. We are having a great time together although I took a long time to adjust. It is not easy in a new country with a new language and a new culture. Suddenly you are in this new situation that is totally out of your comfort zone. I miss contact with colleagues and talks about issues that can arise in an office. We had expectations about our life here and it did not turn out the way we expected.

Living here you realise that you have nothing to fall back on, no family, no friends, no social circle. With the social system in Holland,- it is not just welfare but if you need anything there are people you know everywhere: you ask them and they help you. The good part is that we spent much more time together than any other young family I know back home.

Writing this was good but what about people who work together – could it be coming too close for them to tell each other their stories like this?

Roadside Religion...

... Office Manager from Mombassa

Submitted 13 Nov 06

Two white Land Rovers with a “Jesus Saves Mission” logo on the side race out of an empty marquee by roadside. There are four people in each. They look so much more wealthy, busy, self-important and Western than most people around here. As our driver whisks us past the oil tanker which just turned itself over onto the central reservation and might at any moment explode, and undoubtedly will create long delays on the road behind us, I turn round to check, did the religious people stop like Good Samaritans. No. Like us they drove past towards the airport. We can’t afford to miss this plane. Later I asked Mary “What is this roadside religion thing?”.



“Anyone in Kenya with the gift of the gab can start preaching by the roadside with a promise to improve lives and end suffering. A crowd gathers. They then ask for money for the church and in no time you have poor, ignorant and vulnerable people making someone rich. The church soon raises the game by asking up to a tenth of earnings, and as people give more their belief and expectation rises accordingly. It is a form of pyramid selling and a get-rich-quick-scheme for the preacher: religion is the new business.”

Our city has 20m inhabitants with 95% very poor and the other 5% very rich.



When schools are expensive and full there is no much chance for 95% of people to change their lives and become rich, so if you are a poor and ignorant young man, and someone promises your family money and tells you you'll go to heaven, this can be very attractive.

breakout stories

A slim black boy stands on a rocky ledge 1000 metres above the Blue Nile as it cuts through a breathtaking rocky gorge. His khaki trousers, and beige check shirt buttoned at the collar suggest an easy confidence, but his worn red flip-flops on bare dusty feet picking just now through rocky terrain tell a story of scarcity and making do. Besides his water bottle, he carries a white plastic bag of crafts for sale including a small raffia basket in the rasta colours of red, yellow and green.



A bus arrives with tourists for a picnic. I stand there and a middle-aged man buys a raffia basket from me.

“Follow... I show you”. The tourist follows me down a rocky path.

“Look...” I break a leaf from a cactus and smear its cloudy yellow sap over the tourist’s hand.

“Aloe Vera... good for skin”, and I lead the tourist to the ledge, on the way telling him some history, pointing out the bridge, the old road, the waterfall, the Gelada baboons.

The tourist turns back, and concerned at this opportunity ending I grab his arm: “My name is Salomen. I have three sisters and a mother but no father. They made this basket. I bring things here to sell and take money home. I walked 15 kilometres here today and I will walk 15 kilometres back. I want to be a guide. Please give me something for the tour. I also need pens to study. Do you have a pen?”.

The man seems taken aback at my desperate tone and disappointed in me, but still he retrieves small change and a pen from his bag. In return I give him a small carved pink cross as he boards the bus. We nod goodbye. The bus driver, noticing our hunger, offloads spare sandwiches to me and my friends at the bus door.

We both know I crossed a line, and his respect for me suddenly vanished. Now he is sorry for me. His money is not helping me in the way he had hoped.

Just before Christmas 2003 I saw a three line advertisement in the local paper, describing a person just like me, needed on the near side of town. After a phone call and a couple of meetings I had an offer of more money than I had dared to hope for.

Was I pleased? Not a bit. I knew I really must accept but it was only after a startling outburst from my wife as she saw me hesitating that I understood the toll our financial uncertainty had been taking on her. I realised it was carry on with my failing business or stay married. Absurd as it sounds, as plain and easy as the choice should have been, it seemed heartbreaking to me.

I got over my crisis and accepted. Nearly three years later, I am still married, still in work and unexpectedly enjoying myself. The company employs 60 people and provides software, training and consulting to the oil industry.

On the social side, I found the company immediately attractive: small in size, diverse in age, gender, skills and yet informal, close-knit and friendly. After the loneliness of self-employment, it was great to be part of a team. It was also wonderful to have regular cash (although boringly, only the same amount every month), specialist IT advice on hand and no responsibility for sales or invoicing! I'm sure most people are happy to work there because of the good atmosphere. However, they seem strangely indifferent about the work, as if it were just a job like any other – and indeed, that is all the organisation seems to expect them to feel.

In spite of its smallness, the company is rather hierarchical. Managers are reluctant to share commercial information and general communication is poor. Staff being considered for assignments are often the last to know. For example, it was only after some time that I found an organisation chart which showed I was seconded to the training department and seen as different from the other trainers: having a deeper background than most in learning and development.

I was cheered by this because I already saw myself as the unrecognised internal OD consultant and had spotted a huge opportunity for improvement. If managers can capture the deeper interest of their staff I feel sure there is great potential to improve performance.

Imagine my excitement then, to receive a note from the managing director: "I am looking for some assistance in team and personal development and would welcome a chat about possibilities." Here is my chance to show him how to transform the company, I thought... (Can you see a mistake coming up?) and I got out my PowerPoint slides! In fact, he wanted me to re-energise a moribund appraisal scheme. This may have been the same thing but you can probably tell he didn't see it quite this way.

Somehow, feeling good about the company and growing excited about the opportunities I could see for quite dramatic improvement I forgot all experience in consulting and started to blunder about with extraordinary lack of tact.

However, the opportunity was real. The existing appraisal scheme was actually rather good, development-oriented and self-evaluating in its approach but it hadn't landed well with the organisation. The management team is dominated by engineers and rather

traditional in their interpretation of their role as managers. The scheme was seen as over-complicated, touchy-feely and vague.

What was deeply unsettling for me was how difficult I found it consulting with the MD. The first briefing with him was fine. The first review was disappointing because I seemed to have misunderstood the brief. The second was devastating because I still didn't seem to have grasped it. Here is an extract from my notes: *"All the original material is still here. You haven't simplified it you've just made it optional."* Devastated. *What kind of consultant am I? Three meetings with the client and I still haven't made a single step of progress.*

I came out of the meeting with a good plan. I needed to go back to first principles, map out the original process as an agreed starting point, schedule daily "unstuck" meetings with the MD and seek more support from the one department head who had been using the scheme effectively. It was a Friday and after a black evening I recovered my composure during the weekend. My notes relate: *I know I am a skilful consultant. It's not just me. Something interesting is happening here.*

I sensed a turning point when I presented a flow chart and the MD observed that he thought one of the arrows was the wrong way round. At last, we have a foundation, I thought. It's a detail that's wrong and not the whole thing. There were other tough meetings (*Came out shaking*, say the notes) and disappointing outcomes but the daily "unstuck" was no longer necessary. I have since grown to appreciate the rigour of the MDs challenge and to prepare for it better.

It has been difficult to keep up the effort with what has been a more or less extra-curricular activity and I came to another crisis after a year. Shall I keep at it, I wondered or is it too difficult? Should I just get on with my job as a trainer? I had tried to introduce notions like the value of associating ourselves more with learning than training, the importance of induction, the "attitude" component of learning and so on but I was rather a lone voice. An action learning set helped me to re-discover my enthusiasm and to find new ways to engage more creatively with the organisation.

Inertia is still a challenge. Our training work has spread from the North Sea across the whole world and fee-earning work pressure distracts me but I have noticed that I am listened to more. Now that I have proved myself in the field, the MD seems to value my contributions. I don't think I'll be dusting off the old PowerPoint slides again. (How can I ever have been so clumsy!)

Ten years ago I was 32. I had just passed my exams and had worked in a lot of places but decided I wanted to work in Asia. Then I realised, why wait for the company to find me a post I want. I can just go, take a year off and travel. So I did and I learnt a lot.

I travelled mainly in India: Calcutta and the South. I did some voluntary work. You soon realise things take longer there. It could take half a day to buy a train ticket.



For everyone who travels, there comes a day, perhaps when they're sitting on a train or in a bus station far away from home and they realise that what they are getting away from is right there with them still. You can travel but you cannot escape the things that are inside you that make you who you are and your life the way it is.

Another thing I learned was how travel affects people: they become strange and more extreme. For example everyone seemed to end up obsessed, either with their health, their food ("I'll die if I eat that"), doing good, or they became "white gods".

What do I mean by "white god"? What it says really. You notice that local people recognise you have certain advantages, starting with money, a passport, and a better command of the English language. This means you seem to have more resources and more power to do things. It leads into certain negative behaviours like talking over them, having all the ideas, behaving as if you are better than them, and often without realising, suppressing them.

This journey is like a T.S. Eliot moment: returning to where you started and knowing the place for the first time. Certain features are similar to what I was doing 33 years ago, yet today the world feels and is very different.

Ten years ago in 1996 as president of a professional institute I was a volunteer donating pro bono time in a struggle to establish the relevance of consultancy. I now feel the relevance of consultancy is not an issue.

We were ambitious to achieve a membership of 10,000 and bet the reserves on a change programme but today it is still under 5,000 and the institute has merged with a larger professional body. Now is that a good thing, a bad thing or just a different thing? I now realise as president I was thinking in a top down strategy fashion which in some ways contradicts my approach to consulting.

Yet I know that I have talent for this volunteer stuff and that it has helped me in the consulting that I'm doing now, but on the other hand, taking these official voluntary positions has been hugely expensive in lost income. During my recent consulting work in China and Russia I was reconsidering both the top down mould I was in then, and whether or not to continue taking voluntary roles.

Before deciding to take on my last official position as Chair of an NGO (an international umbrella body of professional institutes) I asked for coaching from several colleagues, on whether or not to let my name go forward. Rationally, it wasn't the sensible thing to do, but chatting with my wife it was clear I had to do it, or I would never have forgiven myself.

So far this story has been about my professional side (consulting, taking positions as chair of this and that), not the personal. Obviously the two are related, but my personal transition story remains largely undeclared. When you ask why did I make such an apparently irrational decision to take on the international chairman role, the two sides of my story seem to merge. This is what happened.

My wife and I were in Tahiti on the way to Australia for the 2001 Congress that would be a no turning back point for me in progressing to the top honorary office as chairman. Just before we boarded a call from my sister said my mum had died. That day was 9/11 and we were in the air when it all went up... as though my mother gave up: dying on that day. Now my mother's life had been devoted to service: public service, Christian service, community service, if it had a service tag on she did it. And she would have said "well if you think you can do it and you'd like to then do it". By contrast my father was an innovative, mercurial and unpredictable businessman who had a lifetime of rollercoaster business rises and falls. These voices within me have been an urge to do public service to please my mum and an urge to fix busted businesses to repair my father. Hence the two sides: voluntary and business.

So I put my hat in the ring then, and now with my term of office over I have decided to withdraw from all voluntary positions after 25 years active service. Recognising that without the experience of these "soppy societies", there is less I would bring to consulting and that they feed each other, I realise what I enjoy most is flying to a

country, going to the hotel, doing the prep, getting up the next morning to be in relationship with an organisation and team, more so than chairing a volunteer council.

Recently consulting work has taken me to China and Russia and I find there is no struggle to find a place for officially recognised and certified consulting.. In those “post” communist, command and control transition economies people understand that unless top leadership are very careful, they can totally screw up the energy, creativity and freedom to act of the people they lead. Hence their interest in consulting skills to engage employees. Perhaps it is to do with their history: in Beijing or Moscow the question of whether employee energy is present is crucial. That’s not rocket science and many always believed that... but maybe the principle just got a bit lost.

My farewell Chairman’s address in Beijing was something of a personal declaration, effecting a change in my life away from voluntary work. The only thing I want to do now is consulting, consulting, and consulting. I am back doing the more or less international, relationship-based, general management consulting that I know and love. I’m moving away from voluntary stuff, although just the other day I was up for re-election as a trustee director in another voluntary organisation where I sit on the council. I said “I’ve done 10 years, that’s enough. I’m certainly not going to do another three”. They said “Would you stay on for one?”. I said yes but then go I must. It is time.

Yes I want to shed that skin of servitude: not to discard it but to incorporate it in the consulting relationships and dialogue, because above all I’m a consultant. I take energy from reclaiming my life from professional servitude (the maternal obligation) and return to fix the broken business (the paternal obligation), which of course is my own consulting business, whose fee income fell radically, as I knew it would, during the period of the Chairmanship. Income is continuing to return.

I am reminded of the Chinese saying that there are three phases in a man’s life, a student phase, a warrior phase and the statesman phase: a time to learn, a time to fight and a time to grow wise. I think that this marks the end of my warrior phase and hopefully the beginning of wisdom. It is certainly a life transition such as would be recognised by Daniel Levinson, who wrote *The Seasons of a Man's Life*.

As a next step I am also inclined to deal with all of the personal and family things that have been neglected – in so far as I can, given the demands of clients. It is striking that none of us is getting any younger and things seem more urgent now. At 58, I do not have all the time in the world. By age 60 I shall have retired from voluntary work to concentrate on earning a living for my old age!

PS. The process is continuing to bubble away and has opened up something. My trip to Moscow this month continued the fermentation. I said little in the official conference sessions, leaving the talking to my successors, although I made some strong interventions away from the plenary. Something is unfolding here and I am glad we are doing it! Today a call from Taiwan asking me to do a keynote speech and run a master-class in December. Perhaps my wife can join me and we can spend Christmas in Hong Kong, just as we did all those years ago when we were courting!

An Urge to Support Others... by Manager in Beijing Submitted: 13Nov 06

I am a marketing manager specialising in multimedia software devices. I'm married for eight years. We have a privileged life including an "ai" who comes in, cooks and cleans for 3 hours a day. We are intending to have a child but I am finding this is more difficult than a product launch!

There were 6 months of real difficulty in my marriage with no one to turn to. In



China we have no Relate, no psychological support. Many senior executives face "unwanted attention".

What do I mean? From women. It was an old tradition in China 100 years ago to have more than one wife. Now this is illegal but still happens "underwater". You face all sorts of pressure in this direction, with no support. I think this is an opportunity.

Whenever I undergo personality tests they always say the same thing about me, and how I get my energy through working with people. Now I feel drawn to becoming a counselling psychologist. This is an open opportunity in China but I don't know how to move forwards. It is tough because it means at least three years of study with no income. And I have no idea where to study. Hong Kong? UK?

It is not urgent but I am already losing interest in my marketing career and if I don't do it now I never will.

I'm lying in the bath, thinking about enforced change and what a strong word "enforced" is. What, do something against my will? That is not what my life has been about. I turn things around and around in my mind. The bubbles lap against my skin. What about the time I left home? That was enforced. Or the time I had to move job because of the unwelcome attentions of my boss? Perhaps.

I am rinsing out a handkerchief in the bath. Rather than put it in the laundry basket, I am swirling it around in the water with me. It catches the air and floats on the surface of the bath, like a small parachute. I catch sight of the initial embroidered on it and my heart seems to stop a beat. It is an L. There is only one person who has been in my life with the initial L and I do not own his handkerchief. My heart slowing, I realise that it is in fact, a J seen from the wrong side. But the L is a sign. L is for Larry. L is for a Longed-for Daddy, long gone. L seems to say, write about me. Write about the only enforced change in your life that matters.

Do I start with a freezing, wet May Day bank holiday? Do I start with the feelings of a tiny me being pushed in a swing, higher and higher, iridescent with bubbling giggling that bursts out of me as the thrill combines with the ultimate feeling of safety - being pushed by my dad? Perhaps I start with a man, worn down by intrigues and machinations that bring him, exhausted at the age of 49, to the very brink of his life?

Maybe it has to be an element of all three. Once upon a time, we lived, the four of us, in a happy little house, with a yellow front door and a yellow front gate. Mummy, Daddy, Robert and me. There is a photograph of Robert and I playing cowboys and indians in the street outside. It is the early 70s and behind us, the kerb stretches away, totally car free. A photograph today would show a road full of Chelsea tractors. I, of course, am the indian - always the one shot at, having to die instantly on the pavement, whilst Robert retains the glamour of the sheriff's role with his badge, gun and stetson. My plastic tomahawk is no match, although the feathers on my head-dress are beautiful and gay.

We spend our days playing, going to school, going to friend's houses, going to church. A little community is implanted around us and we freewheel between the points on a compass that never seem to be more than a few miles away in any direction.

Mum and Dad had come here from Trinidad in the mid 1950's, tempted by the vestiges of colonialism that were still trying to lure workers here, to do the jobs that others did not want to. They were both teachers, but wanted a different life where they could "get ahead". Signs in windows in those days said "no dogs, no blacks, no irish" - black being the generic description for anything not white - in spite of the fact that my parents and I are more a tawny coppery colour than anything else. They had the luck to find a small bedsit, on the top floor of a house owned by a local vicar and his wife. He was to marry my mother and father later that month. In a bizarrely synchronistic parallel, his then unborn son would later marry my mother to my stepfather, twenty-nine years hence. But I am jumping ahead of my story.

Mum and Dad epitomised the phrase that "protestant work ethic" brings to mind. They appeared to spend the first 15 years of their married life working - day jobs,

night jobs, training, learning, getting qualifications, moving ever increasingly up a ladder of sorts. Scrimping and saving to buy the next little thing that would move them one step closer to the ultimate dream - owning their own home, in time for them to create their own little family.

Piece by piece the jigsaw came together. Dad worked as a chemist whilst mum re-qualified as a teacher; mum taught whilst dad underwent his pupillage at the bar. They bought their beautiful small home in a quiet, leafy green part of London. And a car. And things with which to furnish their home. In time, in good time, my brother and I were born and thus our family unit began its activity, its normality, its familiarity.

In a need to authenticate this experience, my diary from aged 6 for Monday, 16th January 1976 says: "On Saturday we watched Sleeping Beauty. And then we went to the pond to give the ducks some food. Then some friends came and my brother pushed me off the bed. On Sunday we went to church and Sunday school then I had dinner. I read my book until bedtime."

Halcyon days of simple actions: a family together, feeding the ducks, having friends round, going to church. The sibling rivalry is already apparent though. I remember being pushed off the bed and hitting my head on the corner of the radiator and the bright red blood flowing. Mum sitting in the rocking chair with her orange and pink paisley dress on and with me on her lap, holding a clean, damp tea towel on the wound to staunch the bleeding. "How did it happen?" "Robert pushed me" "I'm sure he didn't mean to." Inside me, a voice says, I'm sure he did. But how to explain to mum and dad all the things that Robert did that people were sure he didn't really mean to?

One thing we both did that I'm sure we really didn't mean to. We watched our dad die.

And so fast forward to the cold, miserable May Day bank holiday. A Monday. A day off school, for all of us, as mum and dad are both teachers. What happened to the bar? What indeed. A story that is hard to paraphrase because the brevity will not express the soul-tearing lurch I feel when I talk about it. When I speak of it now, my stalwart, resonant voice quavers and I cannot find the words. It goes like this: Dad, walking home late at night from one of the dinners that he has to attend in order to qualify as a barrister at the Inner Temple - ostensibly to save the bus fare. Walking down a street, only to find himself attacked from behind and flung to the ground. In a senseless twist of morality, he discovers that his attackers are two policemen, who accuse him of trying to steal a car. He points out that he has a car at home - why would he try to steal one? It does not wash. He is arrested and taken to jail overnight, denied a phone call home, laughed at when he insists he is a law student. I do not know what else happens. My mother, distraught with worry, is finally called the next day, once dad has already appeared in front of the magistrate and is already sentenced for the crime he clearly did not commit. So much for the burnished tawny copper of us. The fact is, dad is seen as a Paki and so deserves everything he got.

What he got was the end of his dreams. He was unable to finish his studies at the bar, because he had a criminal record. He was found innocent on appeal, an appeal that was mounted and funded by his fellow law students. By this time though, he had missed half of his first year and could not afford to repeat it. But more than the very real daily repercussions, I am told that the episode broke his

spirit. A gentle-souled man, he believed passionately and innately in justice and fairness. To be wronged in this way struck at the very heart of him. And as if it was not enough for him to simply feel "heart-broken" at his loss, fate took it one step further - he suffered his first heart attack on his way to visit his newborn baby son.

The second, fatal one came eight years later, on the cold, wintry May Day bank holiday I keep talking about. As we played in the living room downstairs, mum was sewing on the machine upstairs. The tv was on - bank holiday sport and dad was on the sofa. Was I with him, curled up as usual in the z shape of his body? I simply cannot remember. Or is it that I simply don't want to remember? The details are awful. The choking, barking noises he suddenly made, so loud, so loud that surely mum upstairs could hear? Robert and I appealing to each other to go and get mum - "you go" - "no, you do it".... on and on, whilst our father lay jerkily dying.

The next impressions are of running the pouring rain to the neighbour's house to get help; the ambulance finally appearing, the ambulance man saying: "can you take the kiddies out please?"; mum telling us to kneel by her bed and pray for dad and us complying; and the one that haunts me, if only I would let it. Dad, lying on a stretcher and mum calling us down the stairs. She tells us that we have to kiss our father goodbye, that he won't be coming back. I kneel down next to him, to kiss his lips and say goodbye, but I cannot. There is a thin trickle of vomit that has eased out of his mouth; it coats his lips. I cannot bring myself to do it. It is too repulsive to put my lips close to his. I imagine that I look up, mutely, wanting someone to help me with this situation, to wipe his lips, to sanitise the death. But it doesn't happen. All I know now is that I don't say goodbye to my daddy, I don't kiss him goodbye and then he is gone. I do not see him again.

I think he has gone from life to death in about three minutes. His after-life has been 28 years, 4 months and 29 days. On Tuesday, we would have celebrated his 78th birthday. Now, we barely acknowledge it.

I am sure I am supposed to write about what this enforced change meant to my life, our lives - perhaps what I learnt from it and how I feel about it. I don't think I am capable of doing this. Not right now, not yet. Perhaps ever? Yes. I'm learning more about what it meant to be that girl, curled up on the sofa with her daddy as his heart breaks for the final time. Maybe my next essay title could be "my loss" or "my grief" so that I cannot wriggle out of it, using euphemisms of change.

I just walked upstairs to look at the bed that Ikea had delivered, to take a break from writing and to figure out how to end this - how to feel this heart and its brokenness and my reaction to it. Once again, the universe speaks to me. The bed had the wrong name on the label. The name I read was in capital letters: "ROBERTSON". My tears begin to flow. My father's name had been Robertson Crispin Paras Lalla-Maharajh. Changed to Larry once he arrived in the UK - a new identity, a rebirth? So in my story, both Larry and Robertson have come together, to have some of their story told. I hope I have done them both justice. Now I have to work on me.

A friend of mine fell off a flight of stairs and broke her back. She is 35 years old. She woke up at the bottom of the stairs one morning and did not know what had happened. Her head was in a puddle of blood. She did not realise immediately how bad this could be.

Things came back to her... she felt sick that morning, so she had called the office telling them that she was not feeling well and that she would stay at home... then she walked past the stairs and got very dizzy, she fainted and she fell down.

Now she was lying there and she realised no one would look for her or find her there for a long time. And she did not know how bad her injuries were. She was unconscious from time to time but she was strong of mind and she decided she needed her phone. Her phone was lying on a table around 5 meters away. She managed to get there, by moving some body parts, and it took her 3 hours. Her back was stiff and she was wondering why she could not move it.

At the end she phoned her office and by her voice the other person on the line could tell something was terribly wrong. They broke in to her apartment and found her on her bed in a mess. Blood everywhere.

Now she can reconstruct parts of what happened from the moment she fell to the moment she was found. It is amazing to hear her tell us that she hoisted herself up on the kitchen sink to get her phone. Later she walked to her bed.

The doctors tell her that she should not have moved because she could have been paralysed for life. But things turned out well. It is about a year ago that this happened and she has almost her old life back. She can walk again.

It took her almost a year to recover. She was operated on and she had to lie down for months. Then she had to wait a long time for another operation. After that she had to recover again and keep rest for 6 months.

All that time she lived with her parents. She told me she had enjoyed that because she could get along with them well. She joked that a normal 35 year old would not have a chance to spend so much time with their parents again. It was hard too because for most of the time she was not allowed to move and she could not do anything. People of her age were all living their lives while she was in bed all day.

She is back on the job but she told me life would never be the same. She feels really lucky that despite of the accident she came out a whole person.

PS. I thought about this story when we talked about 'imposed' change.. but now I am not so sure it is about 'breaking out'.. what do you think?

As I reflect, there have been a number of breakout stories in my recent working life including:

- Shifting from an accountant into a change consultant
- Leaving KPMG to go independent
- Breaking away from being an associate to a small change consultancy
- Moving from big change projects into the short sharp interventions.

I chose the latter because it took the most courage and determination. I chose to do it deliberately in spite of the personal risk, and right now it holds the most success.

In 1999 - 2001 I had been agonising: while I was financially very successful working on big programmes of change and I was in demand, I was creating a dependency with my clients. I consciously wanted to change this: it went against my values, and yet I found myself setting things up again and again in a way that made me wonder whether sub-consciously I really wanted dependency.

Then in 2001 at my main client of that time, I noticed a large consultancy firm appeared to manipulate my client into taking on many more of their people. They wrote an “unbalanced” review report, people got sacked, senior client people went on long-term sick, the programme was delayed by six months and as a result the consultancy in question doubled its fee from the job. After this, another large consultancy firm walked away in disgust and I thought I would be asked to leave but I wasn’t: I was asked to stay and help. But the whole incident upset me so much that I got very emotional – on two occasions being close to tears, and I was forced to re-evaluate my approach. I determined to satisfy my present assignment and then never take on a major project again.

On completion I stuck to my guns and left. Shortly before this Sept 11th 2001 happened and work had dried up. So I was helped in my resolve by the fact that there were few major projects but I went from May 2002 to February 2003 with virtually nothing. As I reflect now I am reminded of the Murray quote “once you are committed...the whole of nature colludes to support your commitment”.

A poem I wrote about myself years before was helping me set my direction:

I don't do anything.

I am.

Only one little part of our whole picture - equally important as every other little part.

No more...and no less.

Available to those with whom I come into contact

To use when they want or need to

As a safe challenge to their assumptions and perceptions - without judgement

As a clear mirror to their behaviour and attitudes in developing their self awareness

As a route to thinking from the perspective of others in developing and improving their relationships

As a source of energy and love in developing their self-confidence and trust in their abilities and instincts

To move on from without pain and come back to without recrimination

Without needing to be recognised or appreciated

Without being judged or constrained or given any further responsibility.

During this period I noticed that it was very difficult to phone people up. At one point a close client got very angry with me for not telling them that I wasn't busy. I suddenly realised how much of my ego was invested in being busy and how difficult it was for me to tell people that I wasn't. The incident with the angry client jolted me into a different mindset: it was the strength of my relationship with my clients, not my busy-ness, that connected me with them.

I resolved to contact four clients a week with a light-hearted email that explained my availability. I sent four of these to clients I trusted not to judge me negatively by doing this. I got four very welcoming responses, all delighted I had contacted them but all saying that there was nothing on at the moment. And then the work started coming in – and I never sent another email. I firmly believe this was caused by my mindset change: I was putting something out into the ether that made my availability obvious but not in a way that undermined me.

The work built up slowly from February 2003. There was a slight hitch in January and February 2005: I found myself in November and December 2004 doing some meaningless facilitation of big events which was no more than chairing the meeting and I hated it. I resolved to not do that again. Also, my main client left to become a consultant removing at a stroke 40% of my workload.

Support came to me in a number of ways. Firstly my Learning Set provided a firm challenge to move by highlighting my discomfort with the current situation. Once things started to change, it gave me huge encouragement to keep going. And this came also from individuals within the set. The Learning Set affirmed me as an individual and held me up when I needed it most. I remember many specific incidents.

Secondly at home, Julia supported me by accepting the risks and letting me have my head even though I was putting the family home at risk and even though she was personally very uncomfortable and well away from the locus of control. Thirdly, my supervision helped and Steve acted as a source of real challenge and support in the lowest moments. And now that I think back on it, my ongoing clients also gave support, maybe sub-consciously, as pieces of work were arriving just when I needed them the most.

I think I was resilient too. My optimism has kept me going. My work on myself has helped bring curiosity and observation to the darkest moments of most uncertainty.

Since June/July 2005 work has picked up in a fabulous way and now the pipeline is magical – rich, varied, broad. I am left proud of the way that for the vast majority of this time I stuck to my core values of only being there when I was needed, not pushing the client to do more work with me than was absolutely needed at the time, holding smaller pieces of work very lightly yet with an intense joy.



Like most people who have worked for organisations I have had a number of changes imposed upon me during my working life. I take 'imposed change' in this context to mean a change which is in no way of your choice (or you might have been given the illusion of choice around the edges which is probably worse than just gritting your teeth and getting on with it).

A few years ago I moved from the training arm of my organisation, where I had been feeling increasingly frustrated, on promotion to an internal communications role. All went well for a year or so, as I was in a great team where you could 'be yourself' and doing what felt like fulfilling work. Then, the Department I work for embarked on the efficiency program which entailed cutting jobs. I thought I was one of the lucky ones, in that I didn't lose my job, but the team changed around me and I acquired a new boss, and inevitably the nature of the work changed.

The main changes were loss of autonomy and for me loss of a certain amount of self-esteem as the new boss was of the school 'my way or the highway' and although she did 'consult' me and gave me positive feedback on my creative and idea-generating skills everything else was called into question. Where something had gone well it was a case of 'OK, but what about....?' and something that had been left out or forgotten was picked up on.

It wasn't a rapid decline but a slow, subtle pecking away at my carapace of self-esteem as I increasingly became more unable to take decisions without consulting her (when I did take decisions on my own and took action, this was criticised). At the same time I was struggling to learn new skills which had not been called on before, from scratch, which left me feeling very exposed.

In case this sounds like a whinge, others working for this boss reported the same phenomenon, the same faint unease. While being very friendly and pleasant face to face, my written reports were always 'damning with faint praise'.

The main support and help I received through this was from my peers in the section who were undergoing the same treatment, and we all concluded that moving on in one way or another was the best way to deal with this.

The net result of all this has been to strengthen my resolve to leave the Department, confirming the thought I had been revolving around in my head for a while, that I was ready to move on and that the place has nothing further to offer me nor I it. In the long run, I suppose I should be grateful to this boss as she clarified my thoughts and spurred me to take the decision I have now taken.

A chemical site has enjoyed years of profitable success: a flagship unit in a global chemical firm. Recently losing our local marketing operation to centralisation, and shortly afterwards their 2 biggest customers (40% of sales), they have been dealt a heavy blow. In response the site leadership team has developed a 5 year "view" and 6 "must win battles" to create a sustainable future. This requires them to shut production lines, make 77 redundancies from a workforce of around 650, introduce new shift patterns and innovate to provide new income. They want senior managers to become capable leaders of change and are prepared to invest in their development.

Site Manager's Reflection:

One measure of success would be the smoothness of getting through all changes to the 5 day production in March... and without having all the extra demand this would have been a very smooth transition, and that is an indication that all the changes have gone smoothly.

This morning I had a quiet group. No response when I asked them. So I provoke them, to get to some juicy stuff, gritty things. One person asked me a question and I said you'll get an honest answer but you may not like it. He said "people are leaving us - so does that mean we've got it wrong?" I said "no. You won't like me saying this but turnover is good for the site. Attracting is not a difficulty and if people aren't leaving we would be paying too much, more than we can afford. Some turnover is good. 50% would be too much. This is a sign our package is about right. Have I answered your question?" "Yes". "Did you like the answer?" "No".

If we turned the clock back, I would have involved people at site 3 months earlier, if I could have been organised enough to say here is the structure we're heading to, you are the people who are key, here's where you sit... even before the 90 day consultation, to force us out of doing things on the hoof.

I would have communicated more with the management team. I would not be as tight as I was. The trades unions were meant to be tight during the consultation period but they could not so leaks happened. They don't like the vacuum. I needed to say earlier: "Look, you guys are key to this. You're going to have these projects. Learn how to manage this. Another part is showing you we think this is a big and important thing. Our desire is to put resource into you and it". This is a motivating thing. Shows it is exceptional change, not just a normal time.

An imposed change happened when I had to leave a job to move to another part of the country because my husband's job changed.

I couldn't get the level of job I had just left, but at least I was lucky enough to get a job. I had to travel a very long way to work and often in bad weather. We only had a motor bike so my husband had to take me to the station on it. I remember it was pretty grim for both of us.

I felt angry that I was pushed into a job that wasn't of my choosing and that I had to accept a drop in status. As it happened the status thing was no big deal – people respect what they see, not your grade.

My inner reactions were what they usually are when I have to do something that's hard to take – just submerge, deaden my thinking, and get on with it. This strikes me as a contrast to self-directed change when the feeling is more of emerging and waking.

I remember feeling fearful that the situation would go on and on. I couldn't see any end in sight. Days dragged on and on and I dreaded going home time and that awful travel.

In retrospect my husband probably suffered as much as me because he could see it wasn't what I wanted. I didn't really appreciate that at the time as I was so submerged in my own world.

We lived in a dreary little village, in a tiny rented house, so the whole experience was awful. Funny how everything is always awful at once. Or maybe a big thing being awful makes everything seem awful?

At least we had lots of hedgehogs and their snuffling about in the evening on our stroll to the pub lifted my spirits and made us both laugh.

Eventually I got a better job, closer to home, and we bought our first house. Things were still not great though and in general it was a bad time.

Hurrah, the sun came out! After three years we moved to London and had the time of our lives. *I had to put this last bit in as just remembering the awfulness made me feel bad ☹*

Surviving the Curse of Diamonds...

...by Operations Manager from Sierra Leone

Submitted: 13 Nov 06

She is a big tall woman wearing a bright floral print wraparound with matching headdress: a Baptist preacher in her spare time and she lives in Freetown, Sierra Leone. As we travel on a bus in Lagos I ask her if she would like to live here and the crazy-eyed recoil on her face says it all. "Why? It's far too risky here". So what is it like in Freetown?

"Well the war ended in 1997 but now the social problems are surfacing: drugs, prostitution and guns in schools. Since the war embassies are closing then national airlines withdraw flights. It took me 2 days to fly from West Africa to East via London. Britain continues and we are so grateful we sometimes say please make us a colony again – but we don't really mean it!"

"During the war my life was difficult. Nigerian forces were in Freetown fighting the rebels and it was dangerous so one day we decided to take the 3 children and my mother into a hotel which was being protected by Nigerian forces while my husband and father stayed at home to defend the house against looting. What we never expected to happen was the Nigerian forces being over-run by the rebels and then our hotel was undefended. We were so frightened. I was on the phone to my husband telling him I had to get off the phone in order not to attract attention. I said to him I will see you if I get out of here. The British High Commissioner then negotiated with the rebels and we were released".

"When we went home we decided it was safest to leave the city. I went in a Land Rover to a camp near the border. We had to go through 25 rebel checkpoints. I was so frightened. I was dressed as an old lady and sat right at the back so not to attract attention. I had all our money on me. My mother sat in the front and she had just a little money to give if the rebels forced her. Then I saw someone, a rebel at a checkpoint, someone I know so I hid my face because they kill the ones they know."

"We stayed there nine months then had to go as refugees over the border into The Gambia. My husband stayed behind for his work. And after this we returned home safely. But you know what: it was all caused by the discovery of diamonds. That was a curse!"



Learning to Depend More on Others...

... by Project Manager from Finland

Submitted: 13 Nov 06

I am a manager not in charge of any staff, but I run complicated projects with lots of stakeholders.

I'm also a single mother who used to work in Holland but I have recently returned to Finland. I am not really comfortable leaving my son but sometimes work requires this. Now I am back in Finland I can leave him with my brother and I think the male bonding is probably good for him.

I wanted to talk to you because last time I came on a workshop I went away wanting to be different, but forgot and did nothing. This time I want it to be different.



All my life I have relied upon myself and I've been very successful at whatever I tried even from being a small girl. But now I'm unhappy with this and I want to be different. I need to expand beyond myself and pay more attention to others – be more connected. Why? I want to contribute more. Not to be so self-reliant... expanding myself, creating more purpose for others.

At work I have no subordinates, many peers and many projects.

My problem is this issue is massive, not only about work and I don't know where to start. I know what I want but don't know how to start.

If I give you an example of something specific, this coming Friday I have a 2 hour telephone meeting at 10 o'clock with India. Usually I arrive at this meeting with a pre-formed idea and takes only contributions from the people who support my idea!

What I want to do instead is listen more to others and the key difference I am looking for will be in getting more communication going.

Yes that is what I'm going to do. Thank you. I think I'm going to cry!

I have a strong belief that nothing happens without a reason. Also, I would like to think that in time the right steps or moves do come along in your professional life. That does not mean however that you can sit back and relax, waiting for the right things to come by. It is still a question of being able to spot the opportunity at the right time and jump at it. However, one of the lessons I learned during the last years is that it is ok to jump, but to do it with the right preparation or else get hurt. For me, a period of working as interim lawyer for almost two years, lead to the position I am currently in: in-house counsel for a large retail company.



Having tremendously enjoyed working for an international law firm for almost five years, I also became aware of the fact that if I would stay with this firm a specific career path would be my future. For some reason I could not see myself following that route.

I was offered a position with a more national focused mid-size law firm. This seemed the ideal opportunity offering me a wide range of possibilities, in particular the chance to become an entrepreneur, developing my own practice and clients and in time join the partnership of the firm.

Much to my disappointment however, the firm within a year's time, decided that it was time to move forward and that the only right way was to become an international law firm. This was exactly the opposite of my ambitions and put me back in the type of firm I had just left! At the same time, the experience of the past year had raised serious doubts whether this was what I really wanted: to be a commercial lawyer in private practice.

I did not really enjoy the practice and clients I was working for. Also, the atmosphere in the office was very hierarchical, which I did not like. More and more I began to take an aversion to the dominating culture of making sure you made enough billable hours instead of focusing on the actual content and fun of the legal work.

When the partner I worked for announced that he was leaving the firm as he could not come to grips with its international ambitions, this for some reason confirmed my doubts about the choice I had made 12 months ago: I was with the wrong firm. Coincidentally, I ran into one of the partners I had worked for at my previous firm. Much to my surprise he called me sometime thereafter to sound me out whether I was interested in a move back to the international law firm as he had picked up that I was not happy with the work I was doing at this mid-sized law firm.

He offered me the opportunity to be involved a high profile mergers and acquisitions; exactly what I thought was missing at the mid-size firm. Also I cannot deny the fact that I was flattered by the idea of being asked back to my old firm. It all seemed to make sense: the right opportunity at the right time! In retrospect I can truly say that my choice to go back was the worst decision I could have made. The only motivation was my discontent with the life at the mid-size firm, instead of that the work at my previous firm matched my ambitions and interests. More in particular - in hindsight - I failed to see that it was not about being with the wrong or right law firm. Instead, it was about me working as a lawyer in private practice or not.

The fact however that someone had deluded me with false hopes helped speed up the process. My involvement in those months did not go beyond spending long days in boring data rooms and hard nights work in the office working on due diligence reports. Not the glamorous life

of a transaction lawyer most people have in mind. At first I was very angry with the partner who asked me back as I felt that he had presented a picture that was not in line with reality.

I decided to take matters in my own hands. The options in my view were twofold: either stay and hope for better times or leave as soon as possible and go it alone. I decided to pursue a freelance career for a while, in the hopes this would offer me the time and possibilities to find out where to go in my professional life.

In retrospect despite all the uncertainties that were involved in this step, it was the best decision I could have made. I was happy to discover that it was not about the type of law firm, but instead about me being not enjoying working as a lawyer in private practice. This was one thing, but what about the future? Pursue a career in a completely different line of business or become in house lawyer as a number of my former colleagues had done?

After the disappointing moves of the past two years I was very hesitant. However, as it turned out my “career” as interim lawyer proved to be perfect: I was able to work in several different positions and different companies. It almost seemed like well paid internships, offering me the opportunity to experience life as in-house counsel! What more could I want? I soon discovered that this would well be my next step. People were happy with the work I was doing which gave me back my self confidence, but more importantly it made me happy again. After time, instead of looking backward, I was able to look to the future again and think about what to do in the long term.

Beginning of last year, I was offered an interim position with a large retail company. The job was actually the result of the company not being able to find the right person for the job on a permanent basis. After having read out the description in full, I thought: that is you! As it turned out it was me!

After five months, the company asked me whether I would be interested to join them on a permanent basis. It took me a while to think things over and decide. It felt really good. I was really enjoying the work I was doing. The problem was: could I trust my own judgment again, after two serious failures within a relatively short time frame? How to decide?

First I decided to list all the positive and negative aspects of the job and compare these to my previous work in private practice. I discovered that most of the negative aspects of private practice were gone. More importantly I tremendously enjoyed the role and my work as in-house counsel, in particular for a large retail company. It resembled the same feelings I had when I first joined the international law firm after university.

However, this was only part of the solution. I decided to sound out close personal friends. They confirmed that they had noticed that I was really happy in this job. But were they really objective or just telling me this to push me in a particular direction in the hopes this would indeed be the right choice for me to see me happy again? It simply failed to take away the last doubts: was a career as in-house legal counsel really what suited me best?

Finally I decided to meet with someone who did not know me very well at all. He quizzed me at length about the job, but also about my personal life. During dinner he advised me to accept the offer. Upon my question why, he replied that it was my excitement with which I spoke about this job. He confirmed to me what I had already experienced myself: after two years this did indeed seem the right opportunity at the right time. I decided to jump at it!

The lesson I learned was that it is OK to jump at career opportunities as these come by. However, make sure to take the right run-up!

“What is your next step?” my manager surprised me a bit with this question during our one on one meeting. Good question, but what was my answer? “Do you want to have my position?”, as a natural extravert he couldn’t stand my silence and prompted another question. “No, certainly not”, that much was clear to me. Director of IT would mean more politics and I knew I didn’t want that. I replayed the film of my career within one of the big five firms (at least in those days).

After my study Pedagogies I had started my career in IT because that was where most positions were. So I gave up my idealistic dream of helping children before I had even started. I worked as a project manager within one of the government organisations before joining as a management consultant one of the big five firms. I made a very fast career and after 8 years and only 33 years old they told me that I was running for partner. That was probably the final wake up call that I needed to have. I had learned a lot, I had made a lot of fun with my colleagues, I had enjoyed the development of younger, less experienced colleagues, I had loved the clients, but I had severely hated the partner culture. I had asked myself every half year what in the hell am I doing here? This culture wasn’t me, but I never had a good idea of where I should go next, so I stayed.... Until that final wake up call. At the same time the IT department of the firm was being restructured and they had hired a young, dynamic new director. He asked me if I would join him in building that department. The right invitation at the right time. I was done being a project manager and a consultant and the opportunity to become a manager and not run for partner was a great idea!

As with most great ideas there is a downside. I joined a management team and we were all inexperienced as managers. The responsible partner was restructuring the IT department as fare well project and was dying to make it a success. He learned us everything the hard way. Every mistake was answered with emotional outbursts in public, making us feel like idiots and we responded by working harder and harder and harder.. He was very powerful and created the political conditions for us to be successful, our hard work did the rest. After two years the department was a big success and I was burnt out. I had so much vacation left that I simply took a three months leave. Already before my leave I had started to spend some of my time on development work. Team coaching, team building, individual coaching, some training work and some large events for the entire department. I was very inspired by this work, I could see that I was making a difference, I was really helping people to be and do their best. After all these years of project management, technology delivery, managing and dealing with the political environment it finally felt that I could be myself. I still often say to people: the best you can become in life is yourself. At the same time I finally met my big love and we started building our dream.



Both very fond of animals our dream involved a farm where there’s enough room for the animals but also for groups so I can work with groups and spend time with Eric and the animals (since we both have wasted half our lives finding each other we don’t want to miss any more time together). And if we would have that we would also have the room to invite children to come and spend some time with us and the animals. Kids that need a place to be themselves because

they were born in the wrong families or because their family is going through a difficult time. After 14 years the children were back in my dream.

I finally answered his question by sharing this dream with him and he was very enthusiastic. For a couple of months we hold this dream as a secret project between us. I continued with my development work and my manager helped me by creating conditions for me to practice this and to develop my own way of working with groups and even my own materials. Building the dream with Eric and sharing that dream with my manager, somebody that I value very much from a professional point of view made the dream reality. A year after his question it was officially announced that I would start my own company Djihn Personal & Team Development. Not ever in my wildest dreams would I have believed that I would start my own company, but I did. That firm gave me a hard time, I had to fight hard to stay myself and be successful, I had to endure a lot of emotional outbursts, sexism, manipulation and politics. But in the end they have helped me not only with practical support to start my own company but more importantly their culture has challenged me to become myself and follow my own dreams although I had given them up quite a couple of times.

So if you have a dream, let nobody steal that from you. But be aware: the biggest dream killer might be yourself!

Handing Over the Baby...

... by CFO & Company Secretary

Submitted: 13 Nov 06

September 05

I've been in the company four and a half years. It's been good. I've been stretched but also frustrated as I can see clearly where we need to be going. When I joined we were the number one priority to fix and bring into profit. As soon as we started making profit we had loads of visitors from head office.

As a leadership team we're all quite defensive and see challenge as criticism. The others tend to see me as aggressive and I do get emotional. It's good to be passionate and we all are, but we also need to agree it's OK to challenge, that it's not personal. When we get into conflict we're not good at dealing with it. The others think they're being "respectful and inclusive" but I think they're avoiding what needs to be said.

Some of them think I am being inappropriate socialising at the pub, but I've given a lot to the company. You have to relax sometime. Now what I want to do is channel my frustrated energy into being collaborative and supportive to others who want to change.

November 05

I've given up smoking and this is having an effect on my sleep. My usual problem is I have an abundance of energy but not today.

What do I want next? I don't see myself as a Finance Director going forwards but the problem is my boss doesn't see me as a General Manager. What I would really like is to be MD of a smaller stand-alone business.

December 05

I feel clearer now I've decided I don't see myself in this job in 12 months time, although please don't say that to the others just yet. This feels good, more like being a consultant, less attached: we serve product to our customers and stop the building burning down and that's it!

There is so much going on but there is lots of denial. We're two months into the new financial year with four director vacancies. We're being asked to double profit this year and open 70 new stores. Of course this is having an impact. Everyone in the leadership team needs someone to say to them: *"I know you're a director, and you're grown up and capable, but there's lots of change going on right now and how are you feeling about it?"*. Then let them talk it out and bring it round to a positive feeling. But I don't need a coach to have this conversation with: it is something my boss should be doing. Perhaps if I do decide to leave the business, that will be different.

For now I have decided to provide stability and bring the new directors into the business... but if I'm honest I'm not excited by this.

January 06

Thanks I had a good holiday. We went through the diary last week in the leadership team and highlighted how much time is being sucked up in meetings. We're starting

discussions with directors about our resourcing issues but struggling to get them to take charge of this.

February 06

It's a really busy time with the annual strategy review underway and working long hours to meet the deadline. We need to be really effective in our working relationships with a lot to deliver this year.

March 06

I'm really happy now. I met a man. I've just got used to having him around but he works overseas and now I have to get used to him going off again.

April 06.

I realise I've been left holding the baby and I'm not pleased about that, but it's not helpful to see the baby as mine. I need to get more responsibility coming from others and get ready for the new MD to arrive.



But when I stepped forwards to help the leadership team put together its objectives and a change management process, I felt little or no support coming from them. They kept missing deadlines and failing to agree. This was frustrating and you were there that day I threw my papers up in the air. To be honest I felt isolated and betrayed.

In the next meeting when our New Operations Director attended, I drove this firmly with my PA capturing the action points but I was once again frustrated with having to drag information out of others. I know I can get isolated out front and I need to build more collaborative relationships with colleagues.

July 06

Yes we've moved forwards, none of our earlier strategic work has been lost. The new MD is on board now, bringing a focus onto next year's business plan, and we're still trying to pull it all into a framework with tangible cross-functional goals. He's good – he really gets it: a rod of steel with a nice style and a good sense of humour.

Today though, I feel trapped in corporate life, like a rat on a wheel. I've been doing this role for 20 years and I need a break. I'm going on holiday backpacking, then in January I'm taking a career break to re-assess. Yes it should be easy to find a job if I need to come back.

Starting as a trainee in banking was a promising career, my first job being in what I considered the most exiting department of the bank, but also the one with the most working hours. This aspect I did not like very much as I have always had many hobbies and interests so I moved to another job within the company. As I was always on the lookout for challenges (or maybe I got bored easily), I changed jobs every time I was looking for something new. I thought my first move was because of the long hours, but after several years and different jobs in the company, I realized that, even when my job was great, hours were normal, I did not feel really fulfilled. It felt like being a racehorse in top condition that is held back and not allowed to run to its full strength. I had a lot of energy left that I could not apply in my day-to-day work.

I believe that because of the structure of the organization I did not have much responsibility and was not encouraged to think for myself. This meant that the job was relatively easy and without taking risks. I felt that the results achieved were not my own, and that it was not possible to even get results myself as I needed sign-off from many people to get something done.

Obviously, I had my dreams... and one of them was about books. Books have always had my interest. Earlier in my life I sometimes considered doing something with this passion for literature, but it had never come to anything concrete. However suddenly I could act as an opportunity came along...

On holiday with some friends, I found a friend who shared my passion for books. We fantasized; "how wonderful would it be to open our own bookstore with a coffee bar, where you can sit down and browse somewhat, meet other booklovers, talk about books and enjoy a coffee."

And then... something wonderful happened. This was not a joke: back from holiday I heard from my hairdresser that the bookshop around the corner was for sale. One thing led to the other and we started talking. After many ups and downs and issues about the financing, we were the proud owners of a bookstore in the street where I lived! At the end we bought the shop with three girls. And we all kept our banking jobs. We worked 4 days a week for our employer, leaving us one day a week to work in the shop. So the bookshop was more like a hobby, whilst the banking job provided a steady income. An example we used explaining this to people was a story of a man who worked for 2 days a week in an office and 3 days a week as a gardener, because he wanted to work with both his head and hands.

There were moments when we doubted if we should go ahead with the plan. Some family members advised me to not do it. Friends warned me that when you start such a thing with others you might end up having a fight. But I had a good feeling about it and we had a wonderful time together fantasizing about the shop.

We divided the tasks (marketing, finance, purchasing etc.) amongst the three of us, with the much-needed help of four very kind, enthusiastic and dedicated volunteers who supervised the shop the other days of the week. This concept worked very well and I was extremely happy, because the things I missed in my normal job (direct impact or result of my efforts, decision-making, responsibility) I found in the bookshop.

Although the work at the bank was about millions, in the shop I was proud to sell a book for € 2.95, only because of something I had done, like changing the display in

the window. It gave me a liberating feeling compared to the bank where I felt tied up. I got loads of positive reactions, also from colleagues, and my boss liked the idea. I felt I could cope easier with issues in my formal job, as I also had the bookshop to think about. I could see similarities and I learned things from one job that I could apply to the other. I worked hard, more hours than ever, but because I liked it so much it did not bother me.

The combination of the two; the job at the bank and running our own shop, was great. We had a lot of fun although we also have had our difficult moments together.

After 5 years we sold the shop, because in different stages in our lives we all moved abroad and started having a family. I truly regretted this because I felt that the bookshop experience was great. I miss the Sundays in the shop...the peace and quiet, the chats with clients, the books and an occasional friend dropping in for coffee.



breakout stories

Jeremy in his feedback said: *I would love you to write up your story of the whole impact and process right from when you first mentioned doing this through to the work you had to do to edit it, chase replies, amend things to everybody's demand, etc. The story of the catalysis. Am I right in saying a catalyst is unchanged by the reaction?*

So yes Jeremy I'll try. And the first thing that I want to remark on is the "strange dynamics". What do I mean? Annette said to me today: *There are a lot of ups and downs. You call people who agreed to write a story and after a few good calls that feels like a good week. Then in spite of promises they don't respond for various reasons – they were rather busy or whatever. They can easily forget they are writing the story for their own good. One person had promised, then realised she didn't want to because she was too frustrated in her struggle. I said maybe it would be good for you. Like this it goes back and forth between us.*

Could these ups and downs be to do with working remotely, or because we are outside the familiar tramlines of paid employment or consultancy contract? If not pay then what is the deal? I suppose it is a "give and take" transaction, an exchange of learning and I recognise that I am also being energised by "catalysing" this. How are you and I supposed to prioritise this against a paid project or leisure time?

The bumpy ride began in my learning set with a range of reactions from colleagues when I had expected solid support. Gordon and Jeremy helped clarify my motivation and encouraged me strongly, while my other three friends were able to be honest about their difficulties with whether to or not and this yielded learning points which informed the project while also sparking interesting dialogue in the learning set.

When Annette, on the point of leaving her employer copied me on her farewell email, I asked if she would like to write her breakout story. Silence. A few weeks later I asked her again and she said yes and she would also help with the project for free. I was excited about having a colleague but also wary, knowing how weird email can be over the cultural distance (British-Dutch), geographical distance (London-Barcelona) and age distance (my kids are leaving home while Annette's are just being born) and not knowing her expectations, I asked why and we carefully agreed some parameters.

Seizing the opportunities in front of us we made a series of invitations, of which perhaps 50% have produced stories. Di, Gill, Di Pringle, Julia, Melanie and David joined in from the AMED writers group, Tim after a tapas lunch together and Steve after a visit to his home in Kent. Gordon brought Simon in. Baz brought Dai in. I brought in people I have been working with: Julie B, Andy, Lydia, Tritia and Alex. Barry C brought our project to London City Uni Business School (CASS). Annette brought Caroline and Rob in and is talking with old and new colleagues and a university prof in Barcelona. Malcolm after an earlier excited meeting dashed his story in at the very last minute.

Your reactions easily inflate or deflate us. When we invite someone, some blank us, others challenge, some applaud then flee, say yes then drag their feet, or rather talk than write, while others miss deadlines and warm to a chasing up call. A few knock something off with apparent ease. Being at a distance and involved in the rhythm of different lives perhaps helps bolster one another: my occasional fears and doubts can evaporate in the face of Annette's enthusiasm, and vice versa. Days without email, for example when I'm

delivering workshops, or Annette is travelling or en famille can be corrosive of project morale, and recently a week of silence suggested the project had fallen into a black hole.

In the chasing and keeping alive of offers it shifts from something of mutual benefit to you doing me a favour: you are apologising for being late with a simple but meaningless writing task. We have varied the writing process to show flexibility and respect for others' needs. A purely email activity has morphed into coffee shop meetings, tape recorded transcripts, piece by piece email dialogues, feedbacks, extended phone calls.

Later after stories are delivered we bring them into a collection with some common features. We settled on a two page limit (with one exception), a standard font, a disguised author name (except for one author who had expressly asked to be named), a rough sequence from early to later life and we dreamed up titles which captured something of the essence.

Reactions seem bizarrely strong: the author who wanted to be identified angrily demanded the names of the anonymous authors before withdrawing! Another was cross about her story being reduced to two pages and produced a new version in her own voice. Someone "disappointed" at a "sameness", another "embarrassed and ashamed" that his own story inspired him most, another "pissed off" that he is still stuck when others are making breakouts. The last two required persistent chasing but reconfirmed a strong interest in the project. Each time we are baffled by a response, with sleep and discussion, out of the mist a next step appears.

Why such an uneven ride? We could say we're busy, and no one is being paid for this, but isn't this a choice about priorities, risk and reward? The upside possibility for you as authors includes excitement, inspiration, validation, an anchor or lever for stepping up, a development community of colleagues, a route to growth for yourself and your "brand". But writing your story also confronts you starkly with yourself, your life, your vulnerability, an uncomfortable gap between "who am I?" and "who do I want to be?". We notice the collection thrust you into a company of strangers and touched competitive and self esteem issues like "Who are you anyway? and "Am I good enough?". Could some confusion of expectation and "how best to contribute?" also play a part?

Impulsively before sending out the first collection I decided to slip in a story of my own. This surprised me as I had not consciously planned to, but in the moment it seemed a good idea. I could say it was out of a wish to experience directly with you all the perspective of the author. But it would be truer to admit I needed to get this heavy story expressed, out of me and I was spotting this as a forum in which that could be possible. I noticed my strong wish to publish (call it interest, courage or madness), a strong opposite force (call it fear), but I did it anyway.

Now your feedback and my own direct experience says that telling your story alongside others can bring you to an "edge", where excitement and fear go hand in hand. My "edge" in this is also to do with being convenor. Jeremy observed that a convenor risks being the busy committed one while others are just along for the ride. Malcolm noticed my characteristic ambivalence between being a convenor or a participant. Both observations ring true with echoes going all the way back through previous projects, to the playground and early family dynamics.

But what is wonderful about this particular project is I am surprised at my own self-confidence in the face of scepticism. My invitation comes to you from a committed place deep inside me, even if I can't fully explain the reasons. I am not doing this project to please a client or meet the expectations of any particular person. It is purely to catalyse personal growth. I think some people "get" my sincerity on this. For others their take is that Tony is doing this as part of writing another book (which I haven't ruled out either). Maybe it is a mix of ambition, generosity, loneliness and madness, but whether eyes glaze over or start to sparkle with interest helps me know whether we're on the same wavelength. I am identifying people with whom I can or cannot do the most purposeful, committed and enjoyable work.

Finally an esoteric bit. In this project I feel I am coming into my power, like electricity flowing through me into others and back again, making a circuit. Standing in my shoes you would experience a discernible ripple in the fabric of the universe, where the expression of our inner experience is and will be making a difference and could be creating new conditions for how we work and live and lead and change. The fact that this is small, fleeting (a bit like a flashmob experience?) does not matter to me: it is connective, transformative and real, touching the spirit and the soul.

Many of you are convenors or catalysts in other projects. As catalysts we do our work with others and walk away, unchanged perhaps but at the same time profoundly affected. Having experienced the rush of adrenaline and our own significance in giving others something special, we want that high feeling again. The great thing about this kind of energy is it grows when you share it out.

The considerable volume of background work has not been difficult because this project still makes my heart sing! But going forwards I want you to share in the excitement and benefits of this, and I rely heavily on your input, feedback and energy coming back, which shows me which direction to steer, and when it is time for a rest.

Next Steps

So where now?

What breakout is trying to happen in your life?

Why not write your current breakout story?

Who would you tell the story to?

What do you need from them in return?



breakout stories

Details of authors

Name	Brief details (max 3 lines)

Contact details

Annette Broerse-Nijsen



... is living with her husband and son Pieter in Barcelona. She worked for the ABN AMRO bank until May of this year and quit her job because she wanted to be with her family and do something different for a change. She has always been fascinated by stories of people who are looking for ways to move on, step up, break out and grow themselves in this fast changing world.

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