

Kaj je najbolje za sina? Kazuistični primer

Ključne besede: transpersonalna psihoterapija, navezanost, shizoidna rana, supervizija

Povzetek: V vsakem posamezniku je nadosebnostno jedro s potrebo, da raste in se razvija do svoje optimalne mere. Psihoterapevtski odnos nudi pacientu varnost in podporo, ki je potrebna, da se ta razvoj lahko zgodi. Transpersonalni pristop poudarja, da je potrebno spremljati pacienta na njegovi poti in v njegovem ritmu, brez da ga poskušamo strpati v neko kategorijo ali pa ga prilagoditi našim pričakovanjem.—Psihoterapija kazuističnega primera predstavljenega tukaj je potekala 2 leti. V njem je predstavljen oče, ki je po razvezi zakona prišel po pomoč za svojega 7-letnega sina. Že v uvodnih pogovorih se je pokazalo, da je bil on sam star 7 let, ko je njegov oče zapustil družino. Travmatični dogodek je v njem zapustil globoko psihološko rano in preko nje je nadaljeval z vzorcem zapuščenja in biti zapuščen. Njegova plahost, nizka samopodoba, odnosi z nestabilnimi ženskami in težave z odločitvami so še povečali njegovo anksioznost in zmedo. Z naporom in preko nekaj nenavadnih dogodkov tekom terapije, se je pacient okrepil in zaživel iz bolj trdne podobe o sebi.

What is best for my son? A case study

Key words: transpersonal psychotherapy, attachment, schizoid wound, supervision

Abstract: There is a healthy seed in each individual that wants to grow and develop into its full potential. The therapeutic vessel provides a safe and sound containing in which this development can occur. I believe it is important and part of a transpersonal view that we follow our client's journey and are alongside him in the process, rather than attempting to fit him into a particular theory or our own expectations.—The case study presented in this article took place over a period of 2 years. After the break up of his marriage a father came to seek help for his 7 year old son. As it soon transpired he himself was 7 years old when his father left the family. The trauma of that event was deeply embedded in him, causing him to continue a pattern of abandoning and being abandoned himself. His shyness, low self esteem, problematic relationships with volatile women and inability to make decisions increased his anxiety and confusion. After much struggle and some unusual events in the course of the therapy the client came to a stronger and a more adult sense of self.

Work setting

Peter was referred to me a few years ago, when I was working for a local counselling agency which focussed on family related problems. Clients were referred by local GPs or self-referred, sometimes they also came via school or Social Services. At the initial contact with the administrator the client's personal details were taken, together with a brief description of their problem. This information was then passed onto a therapist, who phoned the client to offer an appointment. While group supervision at the agency was offered weekly I worked with a private supervisor agreed by my psychotherapy training organisation. Work at the agency was underpinned by the understanding that an individual is part of a family and viewed from the systemic perspective.

The contact sheet I received said that Peter's presenting problem was "... concern as to what is best for his son Andy (7) and his own issues following the break-up of his marriage". The history read: "Peter (31) and Anne (28) split up four years ago and Andy witnessed the rows they had. He had a few wobbles then, but generally he is a happy lad and good at school. Anne has a new relationship and another child. She struggled with Andy and asked Peter to consider having him permanently. Her new partner is OK with him, but will not do anything for him or with him—that is Peter's job. Peter is very concerned about that and doesn't know what decision would be best for Andy. Peter can work flexible hours and spends much time with Andy: after

*ROMANA KEBE, PSIHOTERAPEVTKA; ✉ BLOČICE 36, 1384 GRAHOVO; E-MAIL: ROMANA-KEBE@VOLJA-NET

school, weekends and half of holidays. They have a good time together. But his new partner Ruth is jealous of their relationship and wants Peter for herself. He feels pulled in the middle and doesn't know which way to decide. He feels he needs to talk things through with someone."

The initial session

When I telephoned Peter he was very polite and sounded grateful for the appointment, even though he had to wait for two months. We arranged a session the following week and he arrived in a suit, tie and white shirt as he was going to work afterwards. My first impression of him was of an overgrown school boy in a uniform, with scruffy shoes and bitten nails. He wore glasses, had short dark hair and a handsome face.

I usually shake hands with my clients when I introduce myself. With Peter I didn't. It felt as if a physical touch would be too much for him. He sat in the chair, crossed his arms and legs and looked very uncomfortable. His eye contact was brief and he started talking straight away about his concerns with his son and how difficult it was to make the right decision for him.

Andy lived with his mother Anne, her new partner and their child. Anne suffered from depression and had been hospitalised on numerous occasions. When she was not capable of looking after Andy, he went to live with his maternal grandmother as she was the only stable person for the children. Peter also spent a lot of time in her house when he was with Andy.

Peter was about to move again as he was splitting up with his partner Ruth. They argued a lot and he did not want to bring Andy home. He said they were "all over the show" and that he found it impossible to make any decisions. (Peter was blinking nervously at this stage.) Is it right or wrong to see Andy at his nan's? Was it right or wrong to have Andy more than allocated by the divorce papers? Was it right that he lived with his mother who was unstable, or would it be better if he lived with him, after he has moved? And many more questions, all in one breath.

I felt this was a good time for me to explain how I worked. I said something along the lines: "I can hear how pressing these questions are for you, but I can not give you the answers. It is my fundamental belief that there is a wise part inside you that knows what is best for you and Andy. It may be buried deeply and you may not be in touch with it, but it is there. If you continue coming I would suggest this to be the focus of our work. I have also observed in my work that when parents understand and contain their lives better this is reflected in their children and their behaviour improves." I explained that sessions were weekly, at a regular time and lasted for 50 minutes. I explained about cancellations, fees, confidentiality and my supervision. I suggested we review our work together in 5-6 weeks time and said that the ending of the therapy was an equally important part and needed to be agreed between us. After we agreed the details, I said I was going to bring a written contract with me next week stating the above and would ask him to sign it.

As there was still some time left I asked Peter about his life. He said he had studied management and worked for an international bank, which he found boring but was "too lazy" to change. It paid well, was within walking distance from where he lived and was flexible enough when he needed time off for Andy. But although convenient, the job did not motivate him at all.

Peter had moved a lot throughout his life. He was born in Africa (he and his parents are white) and was five years old when his parents moved back to England. He moved home and school every few years, but did not remember much. He had a brother who was two years younger and used to be a rebel as a kid. They got on well. Peter spoke with admiration of their mother who had to bring up two children on her own. He used to help as much as he could and was very sensitive to her suffering. His father left the family when Peter was seven. He lived far away and they did not see each other often. Peter did not remember his father leaving nor indeed any family life when they were still together. He remembered being told by his mother that he was "no good with small children". He could totally believe this as his father was still cold with him and

showed no interest in Andy either.

After the session

I remember feeling sad after the first session. I imagined how hard it might be to have such limited memories of one's childhood. I understood that they may have been horrendously overwhelming to be pushed into the unconscious. I also imagined Peter at the age of seven and later trying hard to please his mother, helping her with housework and shopping, never making demands, never showing anger. I wondered if he felt guilty for his father leaving, if he was thinking it was his fault? What about the mental health of his ex-wife? He knew she was ill when they got married—was he trying to help her too? I thought it was significant that Peter came seeking help now, when his son was seven. Was his seed-self recognising the opportunity for healing of the stage that was particularly traumatic in his life?

Peter's nervous blinking indicated anxious behaviour and I felt I had to tread gently with this client. I noticed his body posture was self-protecting too. His story was full of abandonment, but Peter showed no emotions when narrating it to me. Various points in his story, the way he presented it to me and his whole demeanour made me wonder if this was part of schizoid wounding. There was also an indication of compensatory oral wounding, especially the way he looked after "needy women" in his life. I was aware he projected "the adult" role onto me and my sense of him was of a young boy, maybe seven years of age. And yet I was deeply moved by his courage to go and seek understanding, even if his reason was the welfare of his son. I remember thinking that if he had the guts to do it, I would have them too; to stay with him in the vessel of the therapeutic relationship and wait to see what the unknown would bring.

How the therapy evolved and how supervision helped me

There were several transformational moments in Peter's therapy, but he had difficulty in sustaining the changes. Peter was elusive and had an eel-like quality to slip away fast. He found it hard to hold on to my words. My supervisor pointed out that he found it hard to hold on to his memory. He had not been used to being held in a secure attachment with his mother and a challenge for me was to hold him long enough to make a difference. Johnson (1994, p27, p92) describes the schizoid character as resulting from traumas in the early environment where secure attachment was not possible, and a primitive defence of an infant was to disassociate. He states that the essence of psychotherapy with such a client is to provide a "corrective emotional experience" and continues: "... the therapeutic objectives are to repair the deficiencies in structural functioning, to restore the flow of instinctual self-expression, and to integrate these behavioural and cognitive abilities into a life-supporting system, which is able to adapt to or modify the external environment."

Working with Peter was a humbling experience—full of confusion, helplessness and sometimes frustration. Sometimes I felt we made progress, only to find my client in despair the following week. Sometimes I thought that a new understanding had sunk in deeply, only to find Peter reacting the same old way again and again. But we didn't give up and taking an overall look of our work Peter has uncovered resources he was previously unaware of. Psychologically he is in a new, more adult place.

Peter continued talking about his worries with his son. Disharmony at home continued and he felt he lacked boundaries with Anne. He wanted to protect his son and he would do whatever his ex-wife asked of him—be with him, take him to school in the morning, decorate his room or anything else that she said. This situation used to cause a lot of grief with Ruth. She hated him having any contact with his ex-wife and threw a jealous scene every time he saw her. This is over now since they recently split up and he feels free in this respect. But her anger always threw him completely. She would shout and accuse him of various things, then she would go silent. Peter

could not bear silences and would start pestering her, asking what was wrong. She would then send him away and Peter would feel rejected and helpless. Anger scared him and he could not bear it. He wanted to help and make it better. He panicked because it meant that something was wrong but he did not know what.

The above illustrates his repeated patterns from the past. Being a good boy and denying his own anger he would encounter it in others. As Peter talked about it, the sense of panic was vibrating in the room. I said so and asked him if he felt it in his body. He said no. I asked on what other occasions had he experienced it. Peter said that he used to argue with Anne. What about prior to that, when he was a child? No. I asked what the arguments with Anne were about? He replied that they were like petrol and a match and all over the show. He felt sad that Andy witnessed all of that as a small child.

That was a strong image of their destructive relationship, igniting each other and going up in flames. I commented on that and asked him to explore it further, but he would not: saying he did not remember or changing the subject were typical responses from him and this continued throughout the therapy. For the first few months he would also start blinking if I asked any questions. I felt deflected but honoured his resistance.

When I asked Peter to draw a family tree he looked very suspicious, but ultimately the exercise was done in a reflective mood. It was a small transformation, but it was the first one and therefore important. The lines went all over the page and when he finished he said: "What a mess!" Peter could not remember the name of his paternal grandfather. He said that this side of the family had not worked, there was no emotional connection between his grandfather, his father and him. He said that it certainly had affected him and will affect Andy, but generally Andy was fine, doing well at school and had lots of friends.

At that time Peter read a book 'Manhood' by S. Biddulph and commented on this with some insight. The author talks about the importance of a father-son relationship and a need for the younger man to "make the journey into their father's past" (p41). With some encouragement Peter visited his father on his own and initiated a talk about relationships. He came back much encouraged, but did not talk about it.

I said empathically that it must be difficult for Peter to know what is best for his son since there has been no emotional support from older men, nor a role model to demonstrate how to make decisions. Peter did not like my comment and changed the subject.

Supervision was of immense value for me. I learned about the value of resistance in Peter, about his feeling of shame if I empathised with his difficulties, about his panic, which belonged to his child self, even if he did not remember it. I realized it was OK to say to Peter that he was not holding onto my words, without analysing it any further. In the same way he was not holding onto his memory. Did he allow himself to attach, to relate, to take in? How much nurturing did he get and from whom?

I had prepared myself for our review session. I asked Peter how he would like it to be? He started, quite objectively, analysing his own situation. He said that he came because of his concerns for his son, but realized that the issues were his. Mainly he would like to learn about making decisions and setting boundaries with people. He said that he used his logical-rational mind and could always see reasons for Yes and reasons for No. He gave me an example: if someone was very angry and wanted to take it out on him and shoot him, Peter would understand how the other person was feeling and be concerned for him—even if he ended up being shot. We explored his fear of confrontation and ensuing panic. At the end of that session he asked me if he could continue coming to therapy for himself. This was an important transformational moment as it shifted the attention from his son onto himself.

After the summer break I was informed that the agency was going to be suspended and we needed to end our work within six weeks. There had been friction in the agency for a while and

many people had left. It really felt like a tragic event and I found it difficult to break the news to my clients. Peter was shocked and said what a shame that was. I summed up our work so far and asked him whether he would consider going somewhere else. He didn't think so and asked me if I was going to look for work elsewhere and whether we could continue without the agency, to which I replied I would have to talk to them. The agency agreed, clearly and in writing terminating the contract with Peter and subsequently I presented him with my private contract as I would with any other client. And so our work continued.

Peter wanted to continue the therapy. His request meant that he was increasingly allowing himself to take in the nourishment of our work together, learning to relate to me. I was aware I needed to contain him well in this process of transition.

At that time Peter rented a room in his friend's flat and spent most of his free time socializing. He met a new girl who seemed to like him a lot. The new romance flattered him and she was easy going, very sociable and had no problems with sharing Peter with Andy at weekends. But the fire was not there. Peter was still attracted to "problem relationships" with the focus on the other person. He was used to being needed to help his girlfriends with emotional stability.

Peter kept thinking of Ruth and blaming himself for letting go of this wonderful woman. I reminded him of the rows they had and the devastation he felt afterwards, but he ignored me. What a fool he was for leaving! Surely he was going to be punished now. I tried to explore where this idea was coming from, but it was a no-go area. She was so vulnerable and he wanted to protect her. He wondered whether he should phone her to see if she was OK.

In supervision we discussed what was he needing to understand in that situation, what part of him did Ruth represent, what energy did she carry for him? There were two sides of femininity for him: 1. vulnerable Ruth—his vulnerable side was not looked at, therefore he was compelled to go for somebody with this quality. 2. vicious Ruth—who carried anger that he was not aware of in himself. What did he do with his anger, especially when he was not playing sport? Could he find ways of talking to me about his anger?

I tried to explore these areas in the next session. Peter kept going in his self-blaming fashion and would not budge. It took me a few attempts to shift from 'vulnerable Ruth' to what vulnerable part of himself was he trying to protect. He said that standing up for himself and having no confidence were his weaknesses. There was confusion instead. Could we explore that? He was not going to, Peter laughed, started blinking and continue talking about Ruth. I backed off, taking his blinking as a warning sign.

After that session had finished Peter came back into the room. He appeared shy and said that he could not leave the building, because the door was locked. I went downstairs with him, only to find the lights were off and everything was locked. The alarm was making a terrible noise. Peter just stood there as if this was no concern of his. I tried to open the front door, check the other rooms, nothing—we were definitely locked in an empty building and could not get out. Finally we found a back door that we could open from inside and go out into the back yard of the building. But this back yard had a fence around it and the gate was also locked! It seemed ridiculous to be stuck like that. I suggested we drag a garden table close to the fence, climb on it and jump over. Peter accepted and that was how we got out. By then the alarm must have been going on for at least 5 minutes and I expected fire brigade outside, but there was nobody. I looked at Peter carefully and he said he was OK and was going home. I said I was going to phone the administrator at home to tell her about the situation, which I did. She was very apologetic and explained that the cleaner must have forgotten I was still in the building and left early.

I was concerned for Peter and that evening I phoned him to double check that he was OK. He was. I explained why that had happened and that the fire brigade finally did come and turn the alarm off. At the next session I asked Peter how that experience sat with him, what were his thoughts, feelings about the incident, but he just brushed it away. The one thing that did change

afterwards was slightly more contact: he would ask me “How are you?” or “What are you doing for Christmas?”

Towards the end of the year Ruth contacted Peter with regard to some of his things still left with her. He went to visit her and they fell into each other arms. It went well beyond his imagination. She was so beautiful and delicate, like a flower and Peter was beside himself with love. Also with regret for leaving her a few months previously.

J. Hillman (1996, p144) writes: “If ever we wanted obvious proof of the daimon and its calling, we need but fall in love. The rational sources of heredity and environment are not enough to give rise to the torrents of romantic agony. It’s all you, and never do you feel more flooded with importance and more destined; nor can what you do turn out to be more demonic.”

Peter seemed to hear nothing of what I said and was completely immersed into his own world of intense suffering. Had she got another boyfriend? Would she take him back and give him another chance? He had lost her because he couldn’t express his feelings. He ran away. Now he would do it differently. He felt he had learned to express his feelings. If Ruth wanted him back he would have to finish his relationship with the other girl. He could not decide. Decisions are always so hard for him. On top of that Anne had another depressive episode and was hospitalised. Andy was living with his nan and asking Peter to spend more time with him.

Again, Peter was “all over the show“. I felt for him deeply and my countertransference was of a fatherly nature: I wanted to teach him about women and the games we play, about values and priorities in life. Instead I held a steady, peaceful quality in the room so that he could gain some objectivity over his situation. We also looked at practical issues with his son and how to be emotionally present with him, and why he found decision making so difficult.

Yalom (2001, p146) warns therapists against the temptation of making decisions for their clients and says: “Decisions are *a via regia*, a royal road into ... the realm of freedom, responsibility, choice, regret, wishing and willing. To settle for superficial pre-emptive advice is to forgo the opportunity of exploring this realm with your patient.”

In supervision we reflected on early decision making and what makes it safe to make a decision; who needs to validate it? We generated ideas about how it was for Peter as a child. What male role models did he have, if any? Was he blamed? What were the consequences? What did he associate with decision making? Did he expect to be punished? Decision-making brought confusion: what did the word conjure up for him? Did he have an image? Sensation? Colour? Did he feel it in his body? Where?

I tried to help Peter explore his anxieties about decision making and the consequent confusion. I tried on the emotional level and cognitive level—with very little result. When I commented on the intensity of his anxiety and wondered if it was coming from an early experience, Peter got angry: “I can’t tell you whether you are right or wrong, I told you before that I really can’t remember. But I don’t want to think that my childhood was all crap, because it wasn’t. I remember playing with other kids in the woods behind houses ...” After some reflection he said that his decisions made no difference. This also may have been part of his early experience, where there was not enough security to practice standing his ground.

Another change that occurred around this stage of therapy was: Peter was not blinking anymore and it stayed so to the end of therapy. I believe that the quality of the vessel of our therapeutic relationship was good enough for Peter to feel securely attached to me. I also believe that the unusual events in the course of therapy contributed to that and I became a real person for him.

Over the Christmas period Peter spent a lot of time with Andy, they went to visit his mum and brother, went swimming and took trips to exhibitions or cinema. They had a good time together. But when Andy went back to his mum, he got upset and was aggressive towards her. Anne struggled and asked Peter to discipline him. When he tried to talk to him, Andy got upset and said: “Leave me alone“. With some admiration in his voice, Peter asked: “Can you imagine a 7-year

old saying ‘leave me’? I certainly didn’t do that.”

I: “What did you say?”

P: “I don’t know.”

I: “Let’s imagine what you might have said.”

P: “I don’t know, but certainly not ‘leave me alone’.”

A few months later Peter went to the country where he was born. When he came back he described the place to me and said that he saw some photographs of himself as a 4-year old. He said he was surprised and relieved to see himself smiling on those pictures. It was only through glimpses like that that we were slowly building a picture of his childhood.

At this time he was also seeing Ruth more often and together they visited her parents again. He started staying overnight and he was in heaven when she would cook him a meal after he returned from work. He called that love. They started talking again about getting married and it would have to be in church, because Ruth was a religious Catholic. They could not do that as Peter was divorced. Every time they talked about that Ruth would turn vicious and Peter would panic. When they were not loving to each other they were destroying each other. His suffering and confusion were intense again and he suggested they saw a couple counsellor, which they did. Peter expected Ruth to deal with her feelings of jealousy and coming to terms with his leaving her. He also needed a witness in front of whom he would profess his never ending love for Ruth and hopefully that would pacify her, but it did not work like that. Ruth kept raging madly, accusing him of destroying her life. The counsellor asked what there was for Peter in such a relationship? His reply was: “I love her“. The couple counselling came to an end very quickly.

The work at this stage was influenced by several things. I did a CAT (Cognitive Analytic Therapy) workshop which helped me identify Peter’s process. I understood his repeated pattern of abandonment in terms of core wounding and reciprocal roles, and I shared that with him.

My supervisor talked to me, quite unexpectedly, about erotic transference. I was unaware of this possibility, as I had seen Peter more as a school boy than a man. Also he never indicated that I might be anything other than his psychotherapist.

Becoming aware of the transference (energy of Eros which is about relatedness) somehow freed me—my responses were faster and more spontaneous. I would dare to link something that he had said before and did not make sense. I was more challenging without worrying that Peter was going to run out of the room. On one occasion I suggested we explore his panic on a big piece of paper and invited him to sit on the floor. Slowly, bit by bit, I drew rectangles with: fear of abandonment, abandoned child, abandoning adult, trying to get close to somebody but sabotaging it for fear of being abandoned. I explained his fear of intimacy, he added a few things and looked relieved. I believe it gave him a new understanding of his situation and provided words for how he was feeling.

Peter commented on a few occasions how much talking to me helped him and how he could be present with Ruth in a different way. On one occasion, when Ruth had a go at him for taking Andy to football, he did not shout back at her, he did not start apologising for taking his son to a football session, but he said: “I will talk to you when you’ve calmed down.” He spent the next two hours in a separate room and was still feeling quite awful, but not as bad as he used to. He wanted to go out and just walk about to calm down himself, but was worried that Ruth might lock him out, so he stayed in. Next time maybe.

On one occasion he commented that he could not stand mess and Andy was having his room very messy at that time. I asked him how he was when he was 8? He said: “I don’t remember ... (long, reflective silence), but I *imagine* everything had to be tidy for my mother to cope. We had to wash our plates after breakfast and tea. She worked full time and had two of us. It had to be tidy.” Apart from short comments like that he would not talk about his mother.

In supervision we discussed how keeping tidy is safe. Later in life Peter has found mess in

volatile women to help them with emotional tidiness and was terrified when he could not do it. He was compulsively re-enacting his previous experience. Was he trying to make a fairy tale come true? Did he understand the hook and how they fitted together? How realistic was it to form a stable marriage with a woman like that?

The image I had in this supervision session was of Peter being on ‘an impossible mission’. He was trying to heal his wound of being abandoned by his father by forging a relationship with a volatile woman who was not capable of a stable relationship. So he hurt himself again and again by abandoning her. This dynamic ensured that the old wound stayed, since healing was impossible.

I shared this with Peter in the next session. He said, with some sadness in his voice, that if his father died tomorrow it would be no big deal. He also said that he really did not remember how it was when his father left. He wondered if hypnotherapy would help him remember. He wondered whether he wanted enough to remember to take a step like that. He sounded scared.

After the session I noticed I felt unnerved. I wondered how was it to wish his dad dead. Then I found myself lost in a spontaneous daydream, feeling rage that was rising to overwhelming levels. I felt hot and my breathing got faster—until I jerked myself out of it, shocked. The daydream was of a man standing in front of a child with his penis exposed. Is this about me or have I tapped into Peter’s unconscious? Had Peter communicated to me contents of his early wounding? I told my supervisor about it. We reflected on it—it may be to do with Peter, it may not. We may never know whether Peter was sexually abused as a child.

Soon after that Peter informed me that he had applied in his company for a job abroad. They had branches in various countries and he believed that he and Ruth needed to escape the turmoil they had created here. He was still talking about having to get married to Ruth, organise the venue and the photographer, invitations ... Ruth wanted a big white wedding with a crowd of people; Peter just wanted it to be over. They argued over it and everything else, but he was more able to stand up for himself. He said that sometimes he was so fed up with situation that he acted cold with Ruth, hoping she would have had enough and leave him. That would be a relief.

Ending

Knowing that Peter was applying for a job abroad we then discussed the consequences of that. He wanted to stay in Europe so he could visit Andy every few months. He also considered taking him with him, but he thought that moving school, country and family would be too much for him. Peter himself hated moving around, he never made many friends because of it. Apart from Andy he was looking forward to a change, hoping that a new country would bring him peace and he would be able to settle down.

In the light of this news we agreed to plan to end at Christmas. That gave us four months for ending which seemed appropriate. I asked him how endings were for him and he responded that life went on, he did not attach much importance to them.

In supervision we discussed whether endings were too painful for Peter to acknowledge? Would our ending feel like another abandonment?

One session Peter came in and said he had read a book called *A man named Dave*. He was struck by recognizing in himself the type of behaviour described in the book, such as doing something when you really did not want to do it, or going somewhere when you did not want to go—this compulsive, driven urge. As Peter talked about it I started feeling hot and my stomach got tight. To calm myself I started breathing slowly and consciously. Then Peter said: “I understand that in the book, because that boy was so badly abused, but that of course didn’t happen to me, so I don’t understand why I behave like that?”

I remembered my daydream. There was no way I was going to share that with Peter, but I explained very generally what happened when traumas overwhelm our usual defences and were

placed into the unconscious, so the person could go on living (Kalsched, 1996). Nevertheless, they were part of our psyche and sometimes they gave us a prod, because they wanted to be recognized and integrated with the rest of us.

I asked Peter how would he like to spend the last few sessions. What would be meaningful to him and what would he like to take away from his almost 2-year psychotherapy? He said he would like us to write a guide book for him, to take home afterwards. I suggested we did that together.

In supervision I was reassured that some recognition was enough, we talked about milestones of his therapy and resources he had gained. He had made an effort to break the family pattern by being a conscientious dad. With Ruth he did not have to react compulsively, he had learned about controlled choice and found new ways of dealing with anger.

I asked him to spend time at home to reflect on our sessions and write a good-bye letter. I said I was going to do the same. In my letter I said:

“Dear Peter,

You came to counselling with concerns for your seven year old son. You wondered how to help him best with the fact that you are divorced and that he lives with his mother. I admired your determination to stay close to him and spend time with him as much as possible. Only after sharing your concerns about your son were you able to talk about yourself.

I felt it was no coincidence that you yourself were seven years old when your father left the family. The loss must have been painful and you adjusted to the new life by being ‘a good boy’ and doing everything you could to help your mother. That meant not showing any anger and staying in the background.

As so often happens, our early ways of coping don’t work so well in adult life and this can be seen in your relationships. I saw you struggle with new understandings on how you came to choose a volatile partner and were spending all your energy trying to change her. I believe you know now that you have a choice and when an argument flares up you are free to walk out until the situation feels calm enough to be able to talk about it.

Next week we are going to finish our work together and I am aware that you are searching for more answers about your early experience that shaped you into the man you are now. I do trust you will find the guidance you may need. I would also encourage you to give yourself time to recognize the driving force behind your actions before making any major life decisions.

I enjoyed working with you and I wish you well in the future.

Romana”

Peter was deeply moved, and he just kept reading it for a while. The word that stood out for him was ‘struggle’. He did not write his good-bye letter, but gave me a Christmas card that read: “All the best in the future. Thank you very much for your help. I feel a great deal more confident in being able to make my path in life.” □

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