

The straw man and the red ball

Jules et Gem

The Locked Room

The Blind Watchmaker

The Straw Man

When a client asked **Johanna Sartori** if she would read some of his short stories between sessions, she was concerned that in doing so she might be colluding with his avoidance to talk about his feelings in the room. By agreeing to read them, however, she believes she met her client where he felt able to be met



Affectional bonds and subjective states of strong emotion tend to go together, as every novelist and playwright knows – John Bowlby¹ ”

This is the story of my client B and how his writing conveyed to me his childhood injuries until he was strong enough to articulate them himself. B first came to me for counselling in 2010. We worked together for six sessions and, after a break, recommenced for a further 11 sessions. B was 41 and had been divorced for a couple of years. He had a stepdaughter and a son from this marriage and was still very much involved in their lives and had an amicable relationship with his ex-wife.

In the assessment I became aware of the contradictions in B's life. I wrote in my notes, 'Feels like B is searching for something – home?' Yet it was a home with his wife and children that he had left because it felt suffocating. He was ostensibly happy; he lived alone yet had a good social life. He had time and money enough to indulge his interests and he saw his children regularly. He came to counselling because he felt unable to make a lasting connection with anyone. His relationships began excitedly but after a few weeks he grew bored and looked for a way out. He wanted to connect but didn't like it when he did. Not surprisingly, B wanted a time-limited number of sessions, so we agreed to meet for six and then review.

Struggling to connect

Although B was interesting, articulate, and psychologically minded (in many ways the ideal client), I struggled to really meet him; in the room, as in his relationships, B seemed uncommitted. Relationships seemed to overwhelm him, almost like Winnicott's² description of the annihilation feared by the baby when impingements render him unable to go on being. As B said to me, he lost himself in relationships. It felt as if he had learned to hold himself together behind a false self and in the room was 'hiding his fraught inner state behind an outward appearance of coping and compliance'.²

Our first few sessions therefore remained very cognitive. I sensed that B felt that he was too extraordinary to be constrained by a long-term relationship. At the same time, I noted my countertransference was expressed in a fear that I was not extraordinary enough to be his counsellor and that he might leave me, as he did his other relationships. We were perhaps a little stuck when, in our fourth session, he asked if I would read some of his stories before we next met. I was aware that his self image as a writer was part of what kept him out of relationships and I wondered if agreeing to read his stories might make it even harder for us to experience a real connection. However, he had also expressed a fear that relationships took away his ability to express himself as an individual, and by offering me his stories, he seemed to be saying he wanted to be heard; so I agreed.

Thus it was that I came to read *The Straw Man*. In it, a first time novelist retreats from his success and fame to endure a solitary breakdown. When literary fans shatter his peace, he builds a straw man to take his place, which he controls through his mind: 'The straw man became more or less self-sufficient,' B writes, 'and this enabled Daniel to continue his writing unhindered.' Suddenly B was expressing through his story my thoughts around his sense of impingement and his carefully constructed false self as a defence. In the next session, using

his words, we were able to talk about B's own straw man, which I suggested was doing a good job of protecting his inner self. B agreed and for the first time it felt as if I was beginning to walk alongside him, rather than observing him.

Don't be who you are, be who I need you to be

As our sessions continued, I learned more about B's early life and the genesis of his false self, as well as his sense of being extraordinary. His childhood was characterised by disruption – his mother took him and his sister away from his father and into another relationship when he was six and there were several further house moves and new schools where he was always the outsider. His early childhood was full of impingements and the resulting false self was nurtured by his mother's use of B as a narcissistically cathected object. She gave him the message that he was 'brilliant', that she knew he would be successful.

As he said to me, he grew up knowing he must shine, but it was not clear how he was to do this nor was he shown by example (the atmosphere in his family home was not a happy one). Instead he lived with the understanding that his father had not been good enough for his mother, and that his stepfather was an inadequate replacement. The message was clear: the men in his mother's life had let her down and B must be better. In Johnson's words, his mother was saying, 'Don't be who you are, be who I need you to be.'³ In response, B became polarised and in seeking to promulgate his false self of magnificence, his buried true self became bound up in a fear of being 'ordinary'.

This struggle for magnificence was reflected in the next story I read, *The Blind Watchmaker*, in which Peter lives a bohemian life with his mother, a singer and painter, and his genius father, a watchmaker of world renown. This charmed life begins to fall apart when the watchmaker's sight fails and the family descends into banality. 'His mother gave up her artistic pursuits,' B writes, 'and became a housewife, baking and cleaning' as his father fretted over money. Mundane worries intrude, his parents retire, and the business dwindles further until Sarah arrives, bringing with her order, technical skills and business acumen. As the business once again flourishes, she and Peter talk about 'faith versus science, the romantic versus the rational and artistic integrity versus material success'. For me this illustrated, and subsequently brought into the room, the great splits at the centre of B's existence: the impossibility of integrating his sense of personal and intellectual freedom with the day-to-day business of existing. It seemed fitting that the fictional woman who facilitated this balance appears at the end of the story as an angel, the unattainable perfect woman. Did she also represent the internalised secure base and balance that B was lacking? The disruptions of his childhood were not mitigated in any way by an attuned and sensitive attachment figure.

Unlike in the story where his parents 'bathed Peter in a stream of admiration and support', B did not have the experience of 'a stable family base from which first the child, then the adolescent and finally the young adult moves out in a series of ever-lengthening excursions'.¹ Instead he learned early on that nothing and no one is dependable enough to be relied upon. There was a sense in which his writing was a form of self-soothing, as his stories allowed him to name and examine his fears but in a way that externalised them. With each story that I read I would reflect back to him my own thoughts in the room on how they might relate to him. In this way we were able to begin to link his projected feelings to his own sense of self, and so B began to retell his own story.

Communicating from a safe distance

The lack of an internalised secure base had led B to be fearful of intimacy and to avoid closeness. He acknowledged this by saying of relationships that 'fleeting is attractive'; he was also aware that his pattern of bailing out when the first flush of excitement died down meant that he did not have to risk rejection from the other. Yet his stories frequently suggested his fascination with the idea of committed and lasting relationship.

In *The Locked Room*, Sara works part time as a projectionist in an empty art house cinema, where she chooses the films she wants to watch. Eventually, a man begins attending her screenings and pushes a scribbled note about each film under the door of the projection room. In this way, Sara, through her choice of film and his comments, learns what the man likes and what makes him think. When she is ready and sure of him, she unlocks the door and instead of leaving a note, the man enters the room and into her arms. They have found each other intellectually and emotionally and are both safe in that knowledge, so that all that remains is to consummate their love.

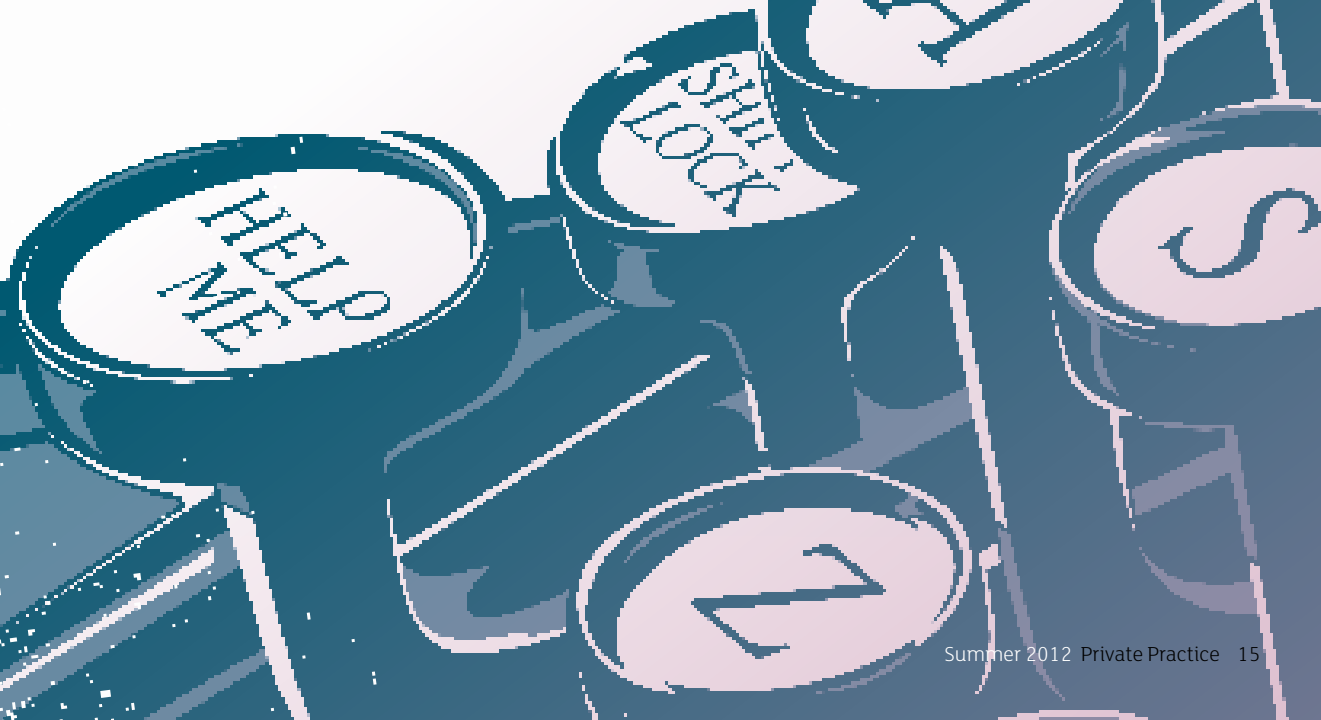
I noted in the next session how convenient it would be for two people to realise they were compatible before they had actually met, that it allows a relationship to begin without any actual connection or risk. At the same time I was beginning to wonder if B's stories were like the locked door, a way for us to communicate our thoughts but from a safe distance. He asked me to read *Jules et Gem*. This story is set in Paris, where Jules fires paper darts into the world on which he writes his deepest thoughts (my favourite of which is 'love is about coming home'). Gemma, an English girl abroad, had roamed the world before ending up in Paris. One night Jules and Gemma literally bump into each other and, in scooping up her dropped belongings, Jules sees she has found and kept one of his paper darts. Again, two people who, by the time they meet, know that it is safe to love.

Given my sense that it was hard for B in the room to make an emotional connection, I asked if his stories represented paper darts for me to read; he agreed that they did. This marked a shift for B

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and for the therapy. B realised that rather than speak through his stories, the therapy room was a safe space to explore and accept his true feelings. His feelings were no longer isolated in the stories, but were allowed into the space between us as well.

In the following sessions B acknowledged the effect of his inconsistent childhood – the lack of his father, his unattuned mother – and now, rather than make an intellectual comment or crack a joke, he accepted the past and allowed himself to feel its effect. He described the accumulated pain as a big red ball that he carried around with him. It was red because it was raw and he felt it dragging him down. Initially he was angry at the ball and he wanted to smash it to bits, but as we talked this changed to an acceptance; the ball became integrated into him, but soothed and looked after, so that the rawness died down.

Discovering home

Alice Miller says, 'It is only after it is liberated in analysis that the self begins to be articulate, to grow and to develop its creativity.'⁵ B said that he thought it was time to take down the straw man and use it to stuff cushions with. In either summation, it seemed to me that B had reached a new place in his life. He left therapy feeling happy with the unknown, happy to take life as it came, and divorced from the need to fulfil anyone else's destiny. Miller again captures the sense in which this was a new start when she writes, 'This is not a homecoming since this home had never before existed. It is the discovery of home.'⁵

At first thought it might seem strange for a relational counsellor to work with a client whose major insights were expressed through the written word rather than in the room. At the beginning of our sessions B half jokingly asked me to assure him that whatever happened he would still be able to write; in other words that he would be able to maintain his defensive habit of intellectualising his feelings. I was concerned that in agreeing to read B's stories outside our sessions I might be both supporting this defence and ignoring the fact that 'dialogue is at the heart of the human'.⁶ Certainly I think that wanting me to read his work was part of B's way of tending to his narcissistic injury. But it was also clear that by reading his stories I was meeting him where he felt able to be met. Whilst he came to therapy keen to work, the pain of his childhood was so ill defined that he was unable to articulate it other than through his writing.

Wilkinson⁷ believes that the use of metaphor is often the only way in which implicit (irretrievable) memories can be accessed and verbalised; only then do they become explicit, allowing the corresponding emotions to be felt. In fact, she has written that metaphors 'have long been established as indicators to the therapist and the patient of progress in the healing process'.⁸ Certainly I have always worked with metaphors in the room. I find them helpful in both clarifying my understanding of and also naming what is figural for the client.

A door to the unconscious

Since working with B, however, I have become more aware of the extent to which a client's creativity can be an important aspect of the work. At the same time, the universe has conspired to send me more clients who are actively in touch with their creativity, including those who work with words, art and music. As well as a door to unconscious thoughts and feelings, it is clear to me that creativity is very closely tied to sense of self, and its expression can be as fragile as a broken sense of self. For that reason, although a client's creativity might be figural to the

work, I don't assume to ask for the evidence to be brought into the room. The choice to show me lies with the client; as with counselling, allowing one's art/self to be seen takes a strong working alliance, and enough holding and connection to make it safe. At the same time, creativity can hold the hope.

B's last story was *The Red Wheelbarrow*, a tale of people trying to find how they wanted to be in the world, in different ways and with differing levels of success. It struck a chord because in the midst of this confusion was a young girl: 'For as long as she could remember, she'd carried a large, red ball by her side.' She didn't know why she had it and she tried to smash it but couldn't and, resigned to it, she tried to disguise it. But a change occurs and one day she realises the ball has gone and in its place she is wearing a necklace: 'She took the necklace off and she stared at it. It was a simple chain, with a bright blue ball hanging from it. The ball was soft and malleable... she saw also that it was beautiful, and she placed it around her neck with pride and joy.' A beautiful final metaphor for the therapy that really touched me. ■

Johanna Sartori is an integrative-relational counsellor in private practice. Her other interests include the ways in which technology can promote good practice amongst professionals whilst ensuring that counselling remains relational in the room. She would like to thank B for allowing her to share his journey and his stories so freely.

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Do you have a story to tell?

Do you have a story you would like to share with readers? It could be the story of what led you into the therapy profession, an account of an event or experience which has been a turning point in your life, or your reflections on the way you work. Email your story to privatepractice.editorial@bacp.co.uk

Your thoughts please

If you have any responses to the issues raised in Johanna's story, we want to hear from you. You can write a letter or respond with an article or story of your own. Email privatepractice.editorial@bacp.co.uk



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