

Timelines:

Martin was sitting at the table waiting for me, head bowed, as I walked the long corridor toward him. He looked up at me and met my greeting with a nervous nod and a word that I couldn't decipher. He seemed scared of me, though I had never met him before.

My job is to train the staff teams, and so come into very little direct contact with the people that they support, but had decided that it might be helpful for me to visit each service regularly, to put faces to names, to develop an assessment of how effective the training was in practice, and to perhaps work with clients face to face regarding any issues that the staff team felt unable to address. I had been told that Martin had been going into violent rages on a regular basis, and that these were aimed at the staff team though he had not yet assaulted anyone. The general feeling in the team was that Martin was inappropriately placed, and that he should be moved to a more secure unit, serviced by people more experienced with violence.

I tried to engage him in some chit chat, so that I didn't begin the day solely on *what he had done*, but he wouldn't engage. His words seemed to me to come out at least three at a time, and to merge into a sound that fell from his hanging head, and that I just could not understand. I made him tea. I made him a cigarette. I tried to make a little eye contact. But he was almost completely unresponsive, enveloped in grey and seemingly surrendered to a bleak expectation of what the next moment would bring.

I assumed that he was so scared of the consequences of his actions that he could not concentrate on anything else, but I then realised that he wasn't scared of me, that he felt guilty.

"Are you feeling guilty Martin?" He looked up at me again but, for the first time, held the moment.

"Yes."

"What are the guilty of? What have you done?"

"I threaten people. Call them names. Threaten to hurt people. I hurt people."

"That's not true."

He nodded forlornly.

"Its not true. You haven't hurt anyone. You have been very very angry, but you haven't hurt anyone. I don't think you want to hurt anyone." He was looking at me now.

"I don't."

"And you haven't. So...not guilty." He smiled at me.

"But you are obviously getting very upset about something. Do you know what?"

His face creased with sincerity, revealing the struggle that he was having with himself: "I don't know." His tone of voice had deepened and he took a deep sigh, indicating that he wanted to know but really didn't understand what was happening to him. We talked for a while longer, which was good for our relationship, but which yielded no more information or insight. I told him that I would come back the following week, to see him again. He smiled and shook my hand.

I asked his manager to go through her record of the incidents, and to cross-check them with the staff duty rota. I wanted to know if there was any pattern to be found in who was

present when he lost his temper, and it transpired that in fact one particular woman was on duty for nearly 80% of the incidents. Just to clarify, I worked out that no other member of staff had been on duty for more than 30% of them. Here was a direction to consider.

This staff member was quite experienced, and seemed to me to be competent, kind, and professional. I had no sense at all that she might have been surreptitiously abusive toward Martin, though of course I bore the possibility in mind.

I had also requested copies of any and all official reports on Martin, which had been sent to me with his permission. I wanted to know more about his life, where he had lived, what his family background had been, the extent to which his learning disability had been genetic or acquired, and so on. Reading over them I was struck by their individual incompleteness. It was as though they each told different stories, at least until I thought to amalgamate them, at which point they painted a more complete picture.

For example: one report said that Martin had been removed from school at the age of 8 but didn't offer any explanation, whilst another report said that his older sister had been removed from school in the same year, because of a suspicion of abuse. A third report said that Martin's father had died the year previous, and that his father's brother had moved into the family home some six months later, two weeks before the first report from school that Martin had been disruptive, a month before another sister had started getting into trouble also. *Uncle John*.

It is easy to understand why a man might offer to help the family of his recently deceased brother, but why move into a home with eight children? That takes a lot of commitment or, of course, an ulterior motive. And I was by now resonating with the latter.

Reading the various reports from social services, it became increasingly clear that, although the family had lived in near poverty, and both parents probably had a mild learning difficulty that may have exacerbated the hardship of bringing up 8 kids, the severe problems begun when Uncle John moved in.

When I next saw Martin, I broached the subject.

"Tell me about your dad."

"He's dead."

"Did you like him?"

"He was ok."

"What was it like after he died?"

"No money."

"Must have been difficult." He nodded.

"Must have been hard for your mum. Eight kids and only one adult." He nodded again, but I could see that some thought was playing pinball with his comfort. There was a charged silence, and one which I had to fight hard not to break.

"John moved in." Martin's head was hung low again, and I had that familiar feeling that my next words would be intended to either step firmly into this enshadowed land, or purposefully step away from it, but I tried to hold a place between and connected to the two positions out of respect for (what I had assumed to be) Martin's need to both reveal and retreat.

"Your uncle? Your dad's brother?" He nodded.

"What was he like?"

"He gave us money." He said the words slowly, with a precision that is uncharacteristic to his speech pattern. I heard that John had helped, but I heard also that there was a price.

The phrase sounded rehearsed, as though repeated often, to him or in his own mind; and it had the texture of a justification tautened by conflict. I entertained the possibility that Uncle John was a kind man, and that the problems that occurred subsequent to his arrival may have been a more direct reflection of the death of the father.

"And what was he like as a person?"

"He gave us money." This time Martin looked me right in the eyes for a second.

"Did you like him?"

"No."

"Why?" Martin's back was becoming increasingly slumped, his chin almost touching his chest. The room drew in, and it was as though he sat in a small bubble of darkness, of shame. He shook his head, unable or unwilling to answer my question. I suggested that he try straightening his back, just a little. He did. I asked him to see if he could look at me, just for a second; and he did.

"Why didn't you like John?" I asked again.

"He made us do things for the money."

"Do you want to tell me what things?" He thought about it, and shook his head.

"Do you remember the things that you had to do for money?"

"Yes I do." His anger was in the room now, challenging the shadows and straightening his spine. I was reluctant to push him for details. Aside from a feeling that such details can sometimes be for the satisfaction or comfort of the professional, to tie up *our* loose ends, I really did not want to lose Martin by pushing him for more than he felt able to give.

"You look angry." Wrong thing to say, and I knew it immediately. Martin slumped, looking guilty again.

"Martin. There is nothing wrong with being angry. Are you thinking of attacking me." He looked up sharply.

"No. I promise."

"Then I have no problem with you being angry. Do you understand?"

"Think so."

"Do you want to say anything to me about John? Anything at all?"

"I wanted kill him."

"Why didn't you?"

"I was scared of him."

"He frightened you?"

"Yes."

"So you wanted to kill him?"

"Because of the things that he made me do."

"The things that he made you do for money?"

"Yes."

"Do you want to tell me what you had to do for money, or would you prefer not to tell me?" He thought about it.

“Touch him.”

“Do you want to tell me where you had to touch him?”

“Down.”

I knew that if I sought any more details I would open up Martin’s experience and memory. Much as I wanted to hear his whole story, I had to be careful of the professional’s justification that *it is good for him to get it off his chest*, as the blind-spot within this position usually has a quality of self-interest about it; and, given that I would not be able to see him personally on a regular basis, he would be the one to pay the price; again. There was a moment of silence between us, within which we both took a couple of deep breaths.

“How was your mum?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing? What do you mean?”

“My mum. Nothing any more.”

“I don’t understand Martin.”

“She didn’t do nothing any more.”

“I still don’t understand.”

“Food. Nothing else.”

“She gave you food, but had nothing else to do with you?”

“Yes.”

“Did she protect you?”

“Not from him.”

“How do feel about her?”

“I don’t see her. Don’t want to see her. Haven’t seen her for years.” It was actually nearly ten years since he had seen her.

“Are you angry with her for not protecting you?”

“Yes.”

“Is that why you don’t see her?”

“Yes.”

I had an overwhelming sense of a broken woman, a mother of eight whose man has just died, leaving them in poverty, she with a learning disability, feeling forced to take whatever help she could find, and at whatever price; a woman who just did not have the strength to resist, to protect her children; a woman who was just trying to get by. I felt touched by her helplessness.

“Was she very upset by the death of your dad.”

“She went to bed.”

“For a long time?”

“Yes.”

“Did John get anybody else to touch him?”

“Yes.”

“Who?”

“My sister. Maria.”

“And the other children?”

“Don’t think so.”

And then something occurred to me. I looked at my cross reference time-line of information regarding Martin and his family, and discovered that Maria would now be 38. I asked Martin to describe her.

"Big. Blonde hair. Big." Just like the woman who seemed always to be on duty when Martin became upset. A few minutes later I found out that the staff member was also 38 years old, and had just had her birthday.

"Does Lucy remind you of Maria?"

"Yes." He almost exclaimed.

"Does Lucy remind you of what happened when John came to stay?"

"Yes." He was staring at me, his eyes wide, his back straight.

We talked for another hour, Martin becoming more and more expressive as the moments went by. He more or less repeated himself in terms of the words that he used, but I could see that every time he repeated the words he was, within himself, remembering more and more. Rather than being distraught, he seemed happy, relieved. He had been upset with his behaviour, but yet had been unable to control himself, fuelled as he was by a trigger to a past trauma.

We brought his manager into the room, told her the story, and between us begun to look at ways in which Martin could express his panic and anger without becoming abusive or threatening. What we agreed upon was simple: when Martin was behaving like that, the staff team would ask him if he was feeling scared, and they would suggest that he sit alone with a staff member in the office, and discuss how he felt. He thought that this would be enough for him.

I also suggested that he set up a basic monitor, upon which Martin would record daily how he had felt and how he thought he had behaved; and that he would meet with a staff member every evening, for half an hour, just to talk through his day, to bring up anything that was on his mind. He was enthusiastic, seemingly unconcerned about his horrifying memories as he basked in the feeling of understanding why he had been feeling the way he had. We also asked Lucy if she would mind working at a different project for a couple of weeks. She readily agreed, herself pleased to escape the firing line, and in fact she stayed in the other home permanently.

Martin wanted me to come and see him regularly, but I felt that it was important now for me to back away from the home, and let the staff team do their work. His peace of mind was too closely inter-linked with me, and I wanted him to enjoy the experience of receiving a comparable understanding and contact from those who were responsible for his health and welfare on a daily basis, so that his sense of expectation could begin to be rewritten.

Two months later I returned. Martin ran from his bedroom, shook my hand, laughed when I tripped forward under the demands of his grip, and virtually dragged me to the office. The manager was looking on, grinning with pride. He showed me the monitor, which clearly revealed that he had experienced two incidents in two months, and not serious ones at that. He was very pleased with himself.

He offered me a cup of tea, and I sat looking at him as he made it. His back was straight, his head up. He was speaking more clearly, and he was even making jokes, though his manager had told me that laughing and joke-telling had never been aspects of Martin's

social repertoire. I asked him if he wanted to spend some time talking, and he said that he didn't, but that he did want to play football.

It was a beautiful day in a beautiful big garden. I took my top off to make a post, and Martin followed suit. We got together the other clients and the staff on duty, and ran around with a football for an hour. Martin fouled me frequently, laughed maniacally, and violently clapped me on the back when I scored.

Another six months on and Martin is barely recognisable from the surrendered, introverted, ashamed man. His back is still straight, his muscles have developed to reveal his strength, and he is suddenly handsome. Funny, playful, chatty, and determined, he is visibly proud of himself, and in love with his staff team.

A few weeks after our first meetings, Martin decided that he wanted contact with his mother again, given that Uncle John was dead. And one visit became another, and so on. I gather that they have got on very well with each other.