

CHAPTER 6

DARK SIDE OF THE MOON

Night

When I accepted a position with my previous employer at the end of my internship, I violated one of my important life rules: that you can never return to the place you came from. I should have known better. My instincts were all against it, but intellectually it sounded so practical on a financial level. The previous three years had been a challenging journey, but I had grown and developed at a tremendous speed. Above all, I had been treated as a responsible and professional adult who could be trusted and whose work was valued. However, I had not completed my dissertation and therefore I could not practise as a psychologist. My savings had dwindled and unless I was prepared to consider the ZoZo hut and yoghurt option again, I had to fall back on my previous profession as a pharmacist. This was good for the finances, but a very unfortunate choice for my physical and psychological wellbeing.

During my internship year I worked with very little supervision and was mostly left to my own devices to ensure that my work was of a high standard and was completed on time. I functioned very well within this structure and felt valued and respected. Upon my return to the pharmaceutical world, I was at a disadvantage. I had to learn brand new skills and had to report to a manager whose management style was very authoritarian (Baumrind, cited in Louw et al., 1995). I was expected to request permission to leave my desk, was not allowed any social interaction during working hours and was expected to work through lunchtimes. This meant a nine-hour working day, sitting behind a computer screen without a break. I soon started feeling extremely lonely and isolated. No privacy was allowed, and I resented my manager eavesdropping on personal conversations and making derogatory comments about people's personal habits.

To say that the effect on me was devastating would be an understatement. Even as a grade one child I had been responsible enough to take care of myself and ensure that my homework was done. I regarded this kind of behaviour as disrespectful and insulting both personally and professionally. It also robbed me of

essential social interaction that I needed for my emotional and physical wellbeing. Gerdes and van Ede (1995) highlight the importance of friendships and comment that attachment is one of the most fundamental needs of people during all life stages. They refer, too, to the loneliness that may result from its absence. Positive relationships with colleagues give me a sense of belonging and form part of my power base for ensuring good teamwork, as I am not very comfortable with demanding cooperation. Insisting that I function like an automaton was expecting me to become a no-self again, which was akin to psychological and spiritual suicide. What made the situation worse was that paradoxical messages were the chosen method of communication within the unit. Statements were made and instructions given that were later denied and countermanded. The end result was an intrusive, schizophrenogenic system characterised by paradoxical communication (Bateson, 1980), which did not tolerate any differentiation of its members. People were forced into alliances and restricted roles within the system, and rewards and punishments were never consistent with regard to the achievement or misdemeanour. There was a constant atmosphere of anticipation and dread. This was a form of mind rape that gave me new insights into the family structure of a schizophrenic client. If I had learnt one thing from dysfunctional work systems it was that, as Bowen (1988) contends, alliances and personal friendships with colleagues were dangerous buffers against the abuse of power. I was not prepared to be trapped in another set of Bowen-type triads, and attempted to treat my colleagues equally and fairly whilst maintaining individual working relationships with them. If they attempted to involve me in their personal feuds, I told them that they had the skills to manage the problem on their own and that I was convinced they would be able to handle it successfully.

I came to realise that management positions in the corporate world are awarded on the basis of work performance, but hardly ever is the ability of the applicant to manage people successfully taken into consideration. A work environment imitates a family structure, where managers and colleagues resemble benevolent parents and siblings (Bowen, 1988). However, when the real picture finally becomes clear, I am always saddened at the loss of innocence when people learn how brutal the corporate world can be. Here are no soft places to fall.

Lot's Wife

At Unisa, I was trained for two years by a formidable supervisor who always respected my dignity and allowed me to share in the rich mosaic of his differentiated self. The support and encouragement of supervisors and medical staff during my internship year continued this developmental process. My professional abilities and commitment to the task at hand had never been questioned. In the pharmaceutical world I felt as if I had dared to look around briefly at the burning city I had left behind, and had turned to stone.

I tried to make sense of the absurdity of the situation. I examined the patterns of behaviour I had learnt in my family of origin (Bowen, 1988). I was playing my self-sacrificial victim role to perfection, and my boundaries had been shot full of holes. I mostly suffered in silence, but when my level of frustration and feelings of indignation became intolerable I was prone to brief, but intense outbursts followed by a period of quiet sulking. I was ashamed that with all my psychology training I still could not deal with the situation. I doubted my abilities not only as a pharmacist, but also as a psychologist. The constant stress took a high toll on my physical and mental health, and I spent most of my weekends in bed. Bowen (1988) rightly states that a lack of differentiation may result in physical or emotional illness during periods of stress. I constantly felt ill and started showing clear signs of depression. Seeking assistance from another psychologist seemed to be the most practical solution, but I did not know who to consult. It also did not seem like a good idea to commence with a new profession by admitting that you are not coping very well.

All my instincts told me to hand in my resignation and run like hell. However, my manager fell pregnant within the first year of my return and I felt obliged to stay on and run the unit for a few months in her absence. This company had provided me with an income for two years while I was studying and my gratitude prevented me from deserting them at this stage. The one consolation about being a psychologist is that you can always tell yourself that whatever pain you are experiencing will come in handy one day when you face a client with a similar problem. I have often told clients that I understood what they were trying to tell me and truly meant it. I had come face to face with old demons and maybe I was being

given another chance to break their spell. You can shut the ghosts away in the dark corners of the cupboard, but one spooky night they will come out again to haunt you.

Some insights came from unlikely sources. I phoned the person who usually services my car and we started chatting about his new career plans. He had spent the last two years in the Middle East designing motorised vehicles for the destruction of land mines. He is a very creative and ethical person and had clashed with managers on numerous occasions about decisions that he deemed immoral or dangerous to the health and welfare of others. Eventually he decided to resign and start his own design business with a friend. His cousin is a good friend of mine and also recently resigned her job to start her own business after experiencing similar problems. As I digested this information, I realised that there was a pattern here. Although we were three very different people, there were definite similarities in our way of thinking and behaviour. We had had multiple career paths and had a variety of interests, we thought independently and expressed our opinions, we were creative and innovative, we had internalised ethical and moral principles and we cared deeply about the health and welfare of all living beings. It was not that we tried, deliberately, to be troublemakers, but just to sit back and watch the Titanic hit the iceberg was not in our nature.

Realising that all my unhappiness was not due to a fatal flaw in my personality lifted a huge weight off my shoulders. I no longer felt guilty and realised that I should not even try to mend a dysfunctional system from within. I recalled Stan's epic words of "don't you try and play therapist here" and saw that I was not the psychologist of the department, but merely an employee who rented out her services for eight hours a day. I remembered Ricky's warning about my problem with boundaries and came to the conclusion that I should put my interests first for once in my life and protect myself in this noxious system. I knew that my three options in a double-bind situation were meta-communication, developing pathology or leaving the battleground. Meta-communication would fall on deaf ears, I had already developed pathology and I was not ready to resign my position. I decided to disengage emotionally, keep one eye on the iceberg and the other on the life rafts. I would no longer be the firebreak in the Department, and would conserve my energies, in accordance with Fouché's (1999) Enerology level 8 (see table 7.1) for

more constructive endeavours like finishing my dissertation. However, I knew that I would have to explore other alternatives to stay afloat financially. I have reaped the benefits of differentiation, but I have also paid the price. Once you have discovered your wings and soared with the wind you will never again be happy to sit in a cage and sing for your master. If I stayed I would be frozen in a mould – it would be a living death. I was facing a mid-life crisis in my personal as well as my professional life, and as pointed out by Gould (cited in Gerdes & van Ede, 1995) this required a critical re-evaluation of my life in planning the road ahead.

I started to ask some serious questions about my own level of differentiation in comparison with my parents. During times of emotional stability I seemed to function at the third quarter of the Differentiation of Self Scale (Bowen, 1988). In terms of the scale, I could state my beliefs openly, whilst being tolerant of the differing opinions and values of others and sensitive to the emotional climate of the context. I was realistic about my strengths and limitations and was able to utilise resources for goal-directed activities. At lower levels of stress I could also maintain a reasonable level of intellectual functioning without being sucked into the maelstrom of the emotional system. However, during periods of chronic, severe stress I would rely on emotional-cut off and intellectual conformity as a detour that would take me around trouble. Chronic stress would once again result in emotional, physical and psychological dysfunction and regression to a lower level of differentiation. Achieving and maintaining a level of differentiation and integration, in accordance with Bowen's (1988) third quarter of the Differentiation of Self Scale, to permit functioning of my emotional and intellectual systems as a cooperative unit still seemed out of my reach. I continued to blame my parents for my difficulties, struggled with interpersonal boundaries and could not take the plunge into close emotional relationships. It reminded me of the paradox a friend once expressed: "I don't know if it is worse not knowing what you want or knowing that you cannot have what you want" (E. Essenwein, personal communication, 1992). I knew that in order to have a successful, meaningful career and personal life I would have to achieve a higher level of differentiation and integration, but the pragmatics of this process still eluded me.

During the formal training period I had sought the assistance of my supervisors to achieve this goal, but my questions were either met with annoyance or avoidance of the issue and I came to the conclusion that nobody knew the answer. I was searching for appropriate role models of highly differentiated people outside the training milieu, but these people seemed to be on the endangered species list. The results of my search yielded meagre results: Mr. Miyake from the “Karate Kid” films, the Dalai Lama and Hawking (1998, 2001). My life was like the picture of a little dog peering through the fence at a fire hydrant, with the caption “so near and yet so far”. I had reached a level of social saturation and differentiation where the self was infused with so many alternative and sometimes opposing voices that my sense of coherent identity and self-consistency was lost (Gergen, 1991). I had had to fulfil so many roles during the preceding few years that I had constructed and deconstructed my self continuously to meet the demands of a particular social system. This had led to the fragmentation of my self-concept, dissolution of self, isolation and disconnected relationships to which Gergen (1991) refers. Once more I had walked into the paradoxical wall of individuation versus belonging (Andolfi 1980; Andolfi et al, 1983), which had always been the stumbling block to reaching my goals. I had developed the potential for so many different selves that I had become an enigma to myself as well as to other people. To illustrate: A new colleague at work asked me whether I was a chemist. I explained that I had knowledge of chemistry, but that I was a pharmacist. Then she asked me where I had acquired my medical background and I told her that doing clinical pharmacology had expanded my knowledge. A few days later she heard via the grapevine that I was busy with my psychology dissertation. Exasperated she said to me: “Are you a counsellor? I thought you are a pharmacist!” “Yes”, I replied, “I am that too.” At that stage I think she gave up trying to figure out what and who I “really” am behind my masks of social performance (Gergen, 1991).

Going Home

Your joy is your sorrow unmasked. And is not the lute that soothes your spirit the very wood that was hollowed with knives? (Gibran, 1980, p. 36)

It is late on a Sunday night. I have spent most of the day packing my suitcases for a business trip to Zambia the next day with the rest of my department.

I'm busy doing my last checks for passport, airline ticket and malaria tablets when the phone rings. My mother's voice sounds more shaky than usual. My father has been admitted to the hospital's intensive care unit (ICU) with a severe respiratory problem. He is going for diagnostic tests the next day. From my mother's limited knowledge I try to find out how a man who is a non-smoker would develop something which sounds like a lung tumour. I try to ease her mind and explain the basic principles of a bronchoscopy to her, which will be used to diagnose the problem with the aid of a fiberoptic tube. My mind is racing. I am not sure if she is just overreacting out of fear or whether we are facing a major catastrophe. I phone the ICU and they confirm that he is scheduled for diagnostic procedures and subsequent surgery the next day. It is now after midnight and I am faced with a dilemma. If I go away on the business trip I might never see him alive again and if I stay, I face the wrath of management for backing out of a compulsory and very expensive meeting.

I lie awake the rest of the night. The next morning I make my decision and face the consequences. I tell the director of my department of my situation and she is not pleased, but concedes. I attempt some redemption by promising to stay at work in their absence and hold the fort. They leave me with hasty instructions and then they are gone in a rush. It is still very early and the parking grounds outside my office are quiet and empty. It is cloudy and stormy outside and I am completely alone on our floor of the building. I sink down in my chair with a cup of coffee. I feel strangely numb and disconnected from my body. I spend the rest of the day in a haze, waiting for the results of my father's tests. At the end of the day I'm none the wiser and go home to spend another sleepless night.

When I phone the next day he has been taken to theatre, but nobody can tell me exactly what is wrong with him. After work I find the courage to drive to the hospital near my parent's home. The area has changed a lot, but there is still a comforting familiarity about the surroundings. I make my way up to the ICU and ask to see my father outside of visiting hours. They are strangely accommodating and I realise what this means. Everything feels surreal and I walk up to his bed as if my body is automated. I have not seen him for years and I do not know what to expect. The nursing sister warns me that it looks very scary if you have not seen a family

member in ICU before. All my medical knowledge and experience as a pharmacist working in an ICU have not prepared me for this. I stop dead in my tracks from the shock. On the bed is a very frail old man, naked underneath the white sheet, with a multitude of tubes connected to a variety of apparatus. The sister makes a concerned effort to explain everything to me. A part of me wants to tell her that I know what all the machines and intravenous fluids are for, but I let her tell me nicely as she would do for other family members without a medical background. In this situation the pharmacist recedes into the background and I am just a daughter with an acutely ill father.

She leaves me alone with him. I keep my distance. I am too scared to get close. He is completely unconscious. I look at the tube of the respirator taped to his mouth and the subclavian central line in his neck where the catheter going into his heart is placed. I look at the approximately fifteen bags of intravenous fluids, with their well-known names, running into the veins in his arms and the huge suctioning pipes connected to his chest. I notice the ECG machine with the low blood pressure read-outs and the uneven heart beat pulsating across the screen. I hear the urgent beeps of the alarm when the readings become too low and uneven. I take it all in, but my mind will not comprehend the meaning.

I slowly step over the pipes to reach him. He looks peaceful and I am surprised how smooth his skin looks for a 75-year-old man. His hair has greyed and thinned with age, but still curls attractively around his face. Then something strange happens to me. I am filled with a feeling of exquisite tenderness and protectiveness. I stretch out my hand and touch his cheek. I trace the contours of his face with my hands and run my fingers through his hair. It is as if I am trying to rediscover this stranger who is my father. I look at the shape of his mouth, the delicate fingers, and the wavy curl in his hair and see parts of myself. This man whom I hated so much that I wanted to tear his DNA out of my cells. This man with whom I could not bear to share a room. This man whose presence made me feel ugly and disgusting. I dare to stop and look and I do not turn to stone. I bend over him and my tears come warm and slow. They run down my face and drip on his hands and his face. I cry for the years of loss and neglect, and the tremendous price he has paid in the name of love. I whisper in his ear that I want him to live. Our togetherness becomes an island of

peaceful quiet and the whoosh and buzzing of the equipment fade into the background. It is as if we are completely alone.

The sister touches my shoulder. It is time to go. She says softly: “His condition is critical. We don’t know if he will survive through the night, but we will not give up.” She tells me how he cried the previous night and that they prayed together to ask God to spare his life. I stay awake during the night, trying to comprehend the magnitude of the situation if my father were to die. My mother is bedridden and completely dependent on him. She will become my responsibility in his absence. I do not have the strength or the will to take on this task. The situation seems overwhelming and I have nowhere to go for comfort.

When I saw him the next day his condition was more stable, but visiting him was very upsetting. They were trying to wean him off the respirator and as he was still very confused, he was fighting the respirator and trying to pull out the tube. He was panicking and seemed in severe discomfort, but could not talk whilst being intubated. Eventually with the use of sign language and by a method of elimination, I tracked down the source of the problem. The more upset he became the more his heart rate destabilised and eventually I left because my presence seemed to worsen the situation. By the next day he was more lucid and was breathing on his own. He seemed very frightened by all the equipment and procedures and this placed a big strain on his already weakened heart. To him it felt like being tortured in a German concentration camp. At this stage I had managed to take stock of the situation and the pharmacist and psychologist in me kicked in. I explained the need for all the equipment and intravenous fluids and how these were helping him to get better. Then I used progressive relaxation to calm him down. I left the ICU with a sense of quiet dignity.

Showing kindness to my father when he was frightened and vulnerable put me in touch with my own humanity. It had stripped me of all pretence. The reality of my own life dawned on me with a crushing force. I was a middle-aged spinster with no children, very little money and a very shaky social support system. Just like my father, I was humbled by my utter vulnerability. When I left this life, what would be left would be no more than a couple of belongings – just like my father’s little suitcase at the hospital with his Reader’s Digest and lemon cream biscuits. The cruel

truth was that there would be no one who would care enough to remember. I had to face the reality that even though my father had survived this crisis, his underlying heart failure would remain a continuous threat to his life. My mother had an inoperable spinal tumour just below the brain stem. I knew the inevitable outcome. I just did not know when it would happen or how I would deal with it. Once they left I would be completely alone - I would be orphaned. I also knew that our narrowly defined relationship was one-directional. I was giving, they were taking. They were complete strangers to me and this time I honoured my boundaries for my own protection. I had accepted that they had tried to provide for me as a child as best they could, and for that I was grateful. What I had so desperately needed, they had never had to give. This was going to be a long and very painful good-bye. In the words of Gibran (1980, p. 2): “And alone and without his nest shall the eagle fly across the sun.” Such is the crucible of life in which we burn.

This was a life-altering experience for me. In the process I managed to squeeze in behind my parents’ “united front”, even though that was not my conscious goal. I acted as a channel of communication between my parents during my father’s hospital stay. Due to the artificial separation of the parental “we-ness”, I had the opportunity to take an “I” stance and develop a person-to-person relationship with both my parents, instead of being triangled into their emotional system (Bowen, 1988). My father shared his personal fears about his illness with me without making any reference to my mother and, for the first time, my mother was prepared to discuss her family of origin and extended family with me. As Bowen suggests, this person-to-person relationship allowed all three of us to heal and differentiate to a certain extent and revealed a resilience in my parents that gained my respect. My father had fought his way out of a deathbed to resume his role of caretaker of my mother and I was very thankful for the reprieve. During this period my mother had shown tremendous courage and strength of character, which had won my admiration. Even though she was faced with the prospect of losing her husband and the person on whom she relied, she managed to organise their financial and other daily necessities from the telephone in her bedroom, a giant feat for someone who is almost completely paralysed and cannot even dial or hold the telephone receiver on her own. I seem to come from more resilient stock than I ever realised, and I was

humbled by the knowledge that my parents are much stronger people than I could ever hope to be. However, this was a solitary and painful experience for me and the assistance of the kind of “coach” described by Bowen (1988) would have been extremely helpful to normalise the process from a meta-perspective. As Bowen (1988) and Andolfi et al. (1983) observe, the family member who takes the initiative and achieves differentiation from the family of origin becomes a valued and respected member of the family and the ripple effect promotes differentiation and individuation in the rest of the members.

Via Dolorosa

For one person in the history of humanity to be crucified for the sins of the fathers was an ordained destiny; for the rest of us it is just a very bad habit. When I decided to become a clinical psychologist I knew it would be a long and arduous journey. What I did not know was that I would end up exactly where I had started. This disturbing bit of wisdom came to me at 02h00 in the morning as I was reading through the draft dissertation I had handed in to my supervisor the previous day.

It had taken me quite a long time to get my dissertation to this point of completion and the visit had been strained. He definitely did not roll out the red carpet for me and his controlled disapproval was disconcerting. I wanted to tell him about how isolated and disconnected I had felt during the last three years, about the long working hours and the unreasonable demands that had left me physically and emotionally drained, about how people’s lives and jobs depended on my dedication, how desperately unhappy I had been and how the feeling of being trapped was reflected in the impasse with my dissertation. I wanted to explain that I had not wanted to burden him with unnecessary demands and had wanted to gain some clarity about my life and my dissertation before approaching him. I also wanted to tell him about my father and how deeply his illness had affected me. I wanted him to know that the conceptual framework of my dissertation had only started falling into place during the preceding three weeks and that I had been working night and day to complete it. However, I did not offer any of this in my defence. I knew that my life events, struggles and good intentions were not important; what mattered were the consequences of my actions.

I placed a “completed” dissertation on his desk with the request that he review it as quickly as possible so that I could still register with the Health Professions Council before the end of the year. It had only recently come to my knowledge that failing to do so would result in an obligatory year of community service. As the 2003 placements for Gauteng were full and I had to be close to Johannesburg due to the poor health of my parents, I would have to wait until the intake of 2004. This would mean that I could only start my own practice in 2005, at the age of nearly 48. This was a devastating realisation and I felt like a marathon runner who was competing in a race where the finishing line was constantly being moved further away each time I got close to the end. I had been working and studying for 10 years without taking a holiday and I was running on empty. I would once again be uprooted and lose the support structure and sense of security I had finally managed to build up over the last two years. This was a critical situation for me and I felt desperate, frightened and extremely vulnerable, but I could not tell him this either. I had been weighed on his scales and found wanting.

My fellow student, Toni, seemed to have been in regular contact with Ricky and their relationship had grown into a comfortable collegial alliance (Stoltenberg et al., 1998). However, Ricky and I had become estranged and I tried in vain to reconnect across the vastness of the empty silences that lay between us. I remembered his warning during our two years of training. He said that when he pointed out errors and seemed to be giving us a hard time it meant that he was interested in our work, but if he started ignoring someone it would be because he had given up on that person. That is why I sat bolt upright in my bed at 02h00 in the morning and thought: “Oh my God, what have I done?” I had been so busy meeting the demands of my employers and gaining their accolades, that I had damaged the one relationship that really meant something to me. According to Bowen’s (1988) theory, I had played out the old scenario, learnt in my family of origin, of the invisible, independent child who did not want to burden anyone in order to avoid rejection. I had cocooned myself in the daily hustle and bustle of my intellectual world in an effort to gain a sense of approval and belonging. Once again I had “run away from home” when I felt abandoned, in an effort to resolve the situation on my own. However, I had become so disconnected that unconsciously a crisis had to be

created in order to reconnect. This time the “hiding” was far worse than the one I had received as a teenager, because the bruises were on the inside and I placed a lot more value on the relationship. I had enacted the same dysfunctional drama with the same devastating results, but this time the loss was much more significant (Bowen, 1988). Despite all the growth and development achieved during my training, I did not seem to have learnt anything. I was back at square one.

My Master’s degree, which would have been my crowning achievement, had become my crown of thorns. This sacred voyage was now transformed into a mockery. I had disappointed and lost the trust and respect of a highly valued “parent” in my training “family of origin” (Bowen, 1988). As in my biological family of origin, I had never been quite sure that I belonged, which made it difficult to differentiate and separate (Andolfi, 1980; Bowen, 1988). My goodbye gift for Ricky was still sitting on a shelf in my study, because I did not know what to write in the front of the book. Together with the insights that suddenly dawned upon me with regard to my dissertation, my muse also made a comeback and I completed the poem I had written for him. Events in my own life had assisted my differentiation from my biological family of origin, which prepared me to reconnect and differentiate from the training family of origin. However, the bridge between Ricky and myself had since fallen into disrepair and I was facing him across an abyss. Now, while the rest of the students were starting their own private practices, I would be “sent away” to community service as punishment for enacting the sins of the fathers. I experienced the same sense of unfairness, anger, guilt and fear as I had during adolescence. However, this time I did not want to disengage emotionally from the relationship and I had no intention of burning my dissertation in the back yard. I felt regret, despair and shame of an intensity that I had never experienced before. I was carrying my cross along the Via Dolorosa to be crucified for the patterns of behaviour established by my family of origin over many generations, and I had no guarantee of a resurrection. If I were unable to reconnect and achieve a sense of belonging, this “castle on the hill” would remain my Golgotha; the place of shame to which I could never return. It would be another long and very painful good-bye. According to the Buddhist parable of development, described in chapter 7 of this dissertation, I was now like the “fool on the hill” (Zohar & Marshall, 2001) who had gained some

understanding of the forces of creation and destruction from a meta-perspective, but I still felt overwhelmed by this knowledge and could not apply it to everyday functioning.

My distress and inner turmoil were like Winston Churchill's proverbial black dog that followed him everywhere. I could not eat, I could not sleep and at work I found myself staring aimlessly out of the window. In the company gym I tried to externalise the pain by exercising until I was gasping for breath and I struggled against the weights until my muscles burnt and I ached all over. At least here I was still respected for my achievements. Jacques, our French gym instructor, considers me his prodigy and uses me as an example of the degree of "physical differentiation" that can be achieved if one is willing to make a commitment to a regular exercise programme. I was one of the fittest and strongest women in the gym and knowing this gave me a sense of control and empowerment. However, it only offered a temporary reprieve from my internal agony.

In the silences of the early morning hours something started to form in the "black hole" (Fouché, 1999) that had become lodged somewhere in my chest. I felt as if the patterns of my ancestors had all been scrunched up into this one pivotal spot, and I felt the stirrings of their presence. Then I came to know the voices that I carry within me.

I understood my maternal grandfather's intense loneliness that had made him scrape together the money to catch a train from Ficksburg to Cape Town after years of isolation to try and reconnect with his brothers and sisters. I could feel his rage at having to toil away endlessly to try and make a living, without any love or support. My maternal grandmother was kind and sensitive, and I wondered if she also sometimes felt as if she was walking around without a skin to shield her from the onslaught of the world. My paternal grandfather was an artist and a dreamer and our thoughts met in the quiet places of creation where we can escape the banality of everyday life. In the corners of my mind I held a treasury of my paternal grandmother's caring voice, the smell of her face powder and the smoothness of the pearls around her neck. I could feel her pride and her stubbornness and knew that for her, too, humiliation and shame were an injury to the soul. I came to understand their pain and their struggle against disconnection, isolation and loneliness; how they tried

desperately to maintain a sense of dignity and to gain a feeling of belonging. They had passed on a terrible legacy to me through the centuries, but I harboured no ill feelings toward them (Bowen, 1988). In this story there are no villains, no victims and no victors; there is only vulnerability. They were merely people who struggled hard to overcome the obstacles in their lives and in the end they all died of “broken hearts”. We inherit some wonderful gifts from our ancestors, but it is up to each generation to make the decision whether to live out the dysfunctional patterns in an effort to heal these old wounds or to have the courage to change and differentiate (Bowen, 1988). I had reached the time of the Big Crunch versus burnout in my life history – the choice was mine (Hawking, 1998).

In psychology the question of when people are prepared to change is often posed, and the answer would seem to be that the time has arrived when the pain is bad enough. The pain and overwhelming sense of regret was bad enough all right. I was sick of playing my pitiful role as “Orphan Anny” to the world. However, I had to leave the safety of my ledge and venture onto a rickety bridge across a dangerous divide without knowing what was awaiting me on the other side. I was plagued by a recurring nightmare. It is the opening night of a play and I have a leading part in it. I arrive at the theatre but I do not have the faintest idea of the title of the play or what role I am supposed to enact. The director does not know about my confusion and I am searching around frantically backstage for a script to try and figure out who I am supposed to be and to learn some lines before the curtain goes up. I cannot face the humiliation of making a fool of myself on stage and letting everybody down. This dream reflects my struggle with identity confusion and lack of integration (Erikson, cited in Thom, 1995). It is one thing letting go of a victim role, but this process leaves you with a no-self; with a void in your repertoire. This quantum vacuum is a place of silent chaos where nothing else exists except potential and faith in the endurance of the human spirit. It is here that scripts are rewritten and where we can read for new roles in the drama of life, if we are brave enough and the hunger is big enough!

I Am

It would seem that after toiling away for a considerable time to create the earth, even God decided that it was time for a little rest. A very good plan indeed to allow time to look back and reflect on the results of the creative process. Unfortunately I was still in the process of completing my long-neglected dissertation and taking a holiday would have to wait for a while. At this stage of my development I felt decidedly “used up” and a few years at a Buddhist retreat to “find myself” sounded very inviting. I had come up against the last developmental crisis of Erikson (cited in Meyer & van Ede, 1995). I had reached the most crucial step of my development and had to achieve a synthesis between ego-integrity and despair to attain wisdom and achieve ego transcendence. If I failed in this task, the result would be a sense of dissatisfaction and despair, which carried the risk of regression to lower levels of development and the loss of meaning in my life.

I took my concerns regarding this position of no-self I had reached to a community that embraces the concept rather than being alarmed by it. The person who would be speaking to our group that particular Sunday, by special arrangement, was the Abbess of a Chinese Buddhist temple. We were briefed beforehand regarding appropriate behaviour when she entered and left the room, as most of us were not *au fait* with Buddhist etiquette. What happened in between was entrusted to our common sense and good manners. I was hesitant to pose my question due to the unfamiliarity of the situation and because when I had raised similar questions in an academic environment I had either been reprimanded or my question had met with silence. I waited until she had time for only one more question and then decided to take a chance. I asked her how one could function in everyday life from a position of no-self as society expects us to present a functional and coherent self to the world. In addition, interpersonal boundaries are essential to protect integrity of the self and to avoid being abused by others. To me no-self felt like annihilation of self or non-existence. She nodded even before I had finished the question and I felt a tremendous sense of relief that she seemed to understand what I wanted to know. Her reply was as follows: “No-self means that you have to get rid of the ‘darkness’ and the

‘imprints’ of the past. You have to let go of the ‘conditioned self’ or ‘ego self’ to know the ‘real self’ you were meant to be - to become whole” (Venerable Man Ya, personal communication, February 16, 2003). Her answer reiterated something I had known all along and which forms the core of most psychotherapeutic techniques. One has to change the dysfunctional cognitive and behavioural patterns programmed into the neural pathways during childhood that, with time, come to be regarded as the only knowable self. The most important question, of course, remained to be answered – how does one accomplish that? I looked out of the window and the heavy mist that blanketed the surroundings was dissipating in the rays of the morning sun. Through the haze appeared a patchwork of green corn fields waving in the breeze and a flock of birds against the blue sky. “So that is how we observe life from the ‘conditioned self’,” I thought. Most of what is happening around us is obscured by the ways we were taught to view ourselves and the world and each of us piece together a different reality of what lies beyond the mist.

Later during the day I was introduced to someone in the coffee shop, from whom I wanted to buy a CD before I returned home. He had brought four friends with him and they were all enjoying some cake and tea at the same table. It was a relaxing afternoon after a tiring week and my nagging backache, caused by an injury in the gym, seemed to have eased up a bit after a session of yoga early that morning. I was so engrossed in trying to pick one CD from a wide selection that I did not take much note of my surroundings. Out of the corner of my eye I noticed someone and when I looked up the Abbess was standing next to me. “Something for the lady,” she said and placed a delicately carved jade pendant in the palm of my hand. In that moment time stood still. She had taken me completely by surprise at a time when my defences were down; I felt physically and emotionally vulnerable and was in a cultural context where I had not yet acquired the necessary social graces. The only thing I was aware of was the enormous presence of this tiny wisp of a woman and how deftly she had placed me in a position where I had no idea how to react. I carefully touched the pendant and said: “Thank you so much, Venerable”, folded my hands together and bowed. She returned the gesture, smiled and with a faint rustle of her robes was gone. I sat for a few minutes in stunned silence, trying to comprehend what had just happened.

The Abbess was a much revered, very busy and somewhat elusive figure in these hallways and one would not strike up a casual conversation if you happened to see her, let alone expect a gift from her. At first I felt I very special and thought that she must have been impressed by my question. Then I looked around the table and noticed that the other two women had received similar gifts. I started wondering if they weren't perhaps regular visitors to the temple and that she had brought them gifts to say thank you for their support. When she noticed me sitting at the same table, she must have felt sorry for me and decided to give me one as well so that I would not feel left out. Then I noticed that the other two women were just as perplexed as I was, and I had a little chuckle. Whether intended or not, the Abbess's intervention was certainly skilful. In my analysis of the situation I had managed to subvert the event into a paradox for myself that made it impossible to obtain any joy from it. If she had singled me out for special treatment, it meant that I could get hurt if she treated me differently in the future or that her gift might make me feel obligated to her. On the other hand, if I relied on past experience I had to come to the conclusion that she merely pitied me and I would end up feeling foolish and humiliated. Such is the tangled web we weave! What happened in the reality of the moment was a spontaneous act of generosity, kindness and compassion; nothing more and nothing less! All that was required of me was to accept the gift graciously. In the simplicity and fragility of this brief moment lay its beauty; if you hang on to its magic or analyse it in accordance with the thought patterns of the "conditioned self" you end up destroying it. We live most of our lives not experiencing the gifts of the present moment. Instead we try to avoid repeating the "mistakes" and "hurts" from the past or we create expectations for the future. In doing this we live a fantasy life, constructed by our individual perception of reality, while the richness it has to offer goes by unnoticed.

Whether the Abbess singled me (and the other two women) out for some reason or whether she regularly walked around and handed out gifts was not important. The real gift that she offered me was the insight and wisdom gleaned from her well-timed act of kindness. For a brief moment I had experienced no-self and it felt real and solid. Then I understood her words: "If I point my finger to the moon,

don't look at my finger, look at the moon" (Venerable Man Ya, 2003). That night, when I looked up at the sky, the moon was dark no more!

My thoughts wandered back to a dream I had had during one of my darkest hours at a previous pivotal point in my life, just before I decided to study psychology. I wrote the following poem about my experience:

Voyage

The time has come
to travel the aisle
Lined by those in white
in unspoken embrace

The bright light beckons
to enter the presence
Expanse of earth around
guiding the way

In knowing I become
It is complete
It is done
I am

This was the closest experience I have ever had to being completely differentiated, integrated, whole and complete. It was a peaceful knowing that I am, and that it was enough. For me it was what Elkins (1995) would call a soul-nurturing experience. Once experienced it is never forgotten. It has become a life goal to explore my own diversity of self in a quest for completion and to utilise this diversity to enhance differentiation and integration of others in the therapeutic context. Elkaïm (1990, p. 138) believes that resonances from the effect of common elements arise in the intersections of the constructions of reality by members of a system. These resonances can be utilised to differentiate and amplify certain aspects of the self, which make them available for fine-tuning to appropriate contexts, further development and integration with other facets of the self. Gergen (1991) proposes a synergy between romanticism and modernism through postmodernism. He believes

that postmodernism eliminates the dilemma of having to choose between relationship and individual autonomy by suggesting a choice between different forms of interdependence that enable us to live out the wide array of selves housed within our personhood. Interdependence, instead of emotional enmeshment or rigid intellectualism, is also a characteristic of the highly differentiated person described by Bowen (1988). According to him, these people have a well-developed sense of solid self, have internalised values, pursue independent life goals, take responsibility for their lives, respect the self, identity and opinions of others, have appropriate interpersonal boundaries, are aware of their dependence on others and can participate in close emotional relationships. However, Rome was not built in a day and I believe that finding these silent places of wholeness and universal wisdom within ourselves in order to become “masters in the marketplace” is a lifelong task (Zohar & Marshall, 2001).

While we remain here in our role as psychologists, we are compelled to dwell in the surrealist world of this profession, because this is who we are and it nourishes and renews our spirit. It is a craft that requires us to make sacrifices, and there is an inherent loneliness and isolation that comes with this choice. Yet, I would do it all again in the blink of an eye. I have received a precious gift – the chance of a lifetime – and my life was inexorably changed by the experience. A fellow student used a metaphor during our selection process to describe me. He said: “You are like a giant oak tree in my garden. I can rest in your shade and I can build my nest amongst your branches.” How could he have known about the seeds of my own strength and tenderness that still lay dormant in the ashes of winter? When I think about my reasons for wanting to be a therapist, I am reminded of a client’s parting words during the final session: “You helped me to cry again, and you helped me to laugh again, but above all you showed me what it is to be human.” When all of life’s triumphs and disappointments fall into place, you know that if you helped only one person to find their way home it would all have been worth while. However, life’s destination is just a means to an end. We ultimately only go home when we die, but searching for it gives meaning and purpose to life. The art is in the celebration of the rich fabric of life itself, and to know that you have travelled well. Bon Voyage! The journey has only just begun.