Dear Anxiety.

This is my life.

John Crawford
DEAR ANXIETY. THIS IS MY LIFE.

A REAL LIFE RECOVERY STORY

By

JOHN CRAWFORD

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Please read this medical disclaimer before reading this book
When John’s frantic search for spiritual accomplishment delivered way more than he expected, things suddenly got extremely weird! A reality-shattering event propelled John, an ordinary twenty two year old Londoner, into a terrifying world where the very fabric of reality itself could not be trusted.

This sounds like fiction. It is not.

Dear Anxiety is a first-hand account of John’s extraordinary journey of recovery from an existential crisis so profound that it left most therapists clueless about where to even begin. After many years of fruitless attempts to resolve the debilitating anxiety and depression which followed, John finally met a gifted therapist who was willing and able to go with him to the complex depths of healing necessary for recovery.

Dear Anxiety is at once a deep and fascinating biography, and a companion for people who are going through tough times.

Anxiety and depression are lonely places. This story is reassurance for those experiencing dark, possibly unbearable times, that people can and do make full recoveries from even the most severe illnesses and go on to live happy and full lives. I am one of those people and I know how incredibly difficult it is to believe that better days can lie ahead when anxiety or depression are daily visitors, especially if you’ve been suffering for a long time.

I experienced repeated failures when trying to recover. I tried everything I thought would help, and there were times when I gave up hope. I’m glad I stayed the course. I might have another forty plus years left if I’m lucky and I intend to make them great, but I almost didn’t make it.

This isn’t one of those books which will tell you that I had a great realisation which cured my anxiety overnight and if you just follow my
lead, yours will disappear too! After I recovered, I became a therapist myself, and I’ve spent the last thirteen years of my life specialising in helping people with anxiety related disorders. I speak from great experience when I say that recovery from severe anxiety or depression is not usually a quick fix issue. As an anxiety specialist, my work has tended to invite the most severely unwell people to my door, and I know that for those people recovery is invariably a journey, not an overnight epiphany. This is no reason to lament. As I will explain and demonstrate, the expectation of a quick fix can distract us from making the necessary commitment to working fully on finding a solution which lasts. That was one of my mistakes.

In sharing my story with you, particularly my protracted search for that elusive miracle, I can highlight the ways in which I wasted time, energy, and money on pursuing ineffective resolutions, explain how my anxiety came about, demonstrate what ultimately helped, and outline clearly why it helped. I will share with you here what true healing looks like so that you can avoid similar pitfalls and recognise clearly what’s most likely to lead you towards solution.

I want you to know that you’re not the only person in the World who ever felt this rotten, and I want you to know that with courage and determination you can find your way through terrible times and back into a life you enjoy living. Hope is important, and I want this book to supply that for you in good measure.

If you’re reading casually because you’re interested in life stories, this is an unusual tale told with plenty of thought provoking detail. I’m sure you too will find it a fascinating story!
INTRODUCTION

In case you skipped the first section, let me open by saying that I have been a successful full-time professional therapist specialising in the treatment of anxiety related disorders for the last thirteen years. This is not an anxiety workbook though. This is my personal story of recovery. Dear Anxiety is my third book. I've always written from the heart, but this one is a completely different offering. In my other books you will see my professional face. This time, I’m going to show my personal hand, and I’ll tell you what inspired it...

I recently spent an evening perusing the myriad of different treatments available online for anxiety resolution, and I came across some material which made my jaw drop to the floor. In the comments on one blog post, a well-known anxiety resolution course threatened the anxiety suffering blogger with litigation because she had shared in her review that the programme hadn’t worked well for her. With a little more research I discovered that this was not an isolated incident. The blogger in question was told that the failing was her own, that she couldn’t have followed the instructions correctly, and called “terribly selfish” for preventing others from gaining the help they need with her review. I found repeated claims that an inability to promise a cure is a weakness of modern therapists used as a get-out clause for psychotherapists who don’t know the real secrets to overcoming anxiety.

Professional associations disagree, and for the record, so do I. It’s written into every reputable association’s code of conduct that practitioners must never promise cures, and with good reason. It’s not a get-out clause. It’s called being in line with reality. We are experienced helpers and facilitators. We do not have God-like powers. It’s likely that nobody does. Promises of guaranteed cures can create confusion and unrealistic expectations in sufferers. Any therapist with experience will confirm that no therapist or therapeutic method has a one hundred percent record of success. Anyone who claims that they do should be treated with suspicion. I believe that people can heal, but their paths will differ. One
size doesn’t fit all.

One of my favourite books in the World is called “After the ecstasy, the laundry”. No, it’s not about dance drugs and Monday mornings. The author Jack Kornfield, a great teacher I might add, visits with some of the greatest spiritual teachers of our time, and interviews them with the question “What happens after you are enlightened?” The short answer, they explain, is that we go back to chopping wood, carrying water, and being unable to cope with our parents! (I am paraphrasing loosely). This book is a fantastic breath of fresh air for anyone who believes that there’s some grand moment of unique exclusive epiphany in which all suffering and neuroses dissolve into complete permanent wellbeing. Evidently, that’s not that case. There are enlightened moments and illuminating experiences, but there is no final state of everlasting peace free from all Worldly concerns, even for our self-aware elite.

So, I spent an hour just lying there in bed (unusual for me but I was thinking), trying to figure out exactly what the feeling I was feeling was telling me. It wanted expression. It was a bit angry. It was like a shout from the depths saying something like “Can we just GET REAL here?!“ I burrowed deeper into the feeling. What was it really saying? In the stillness of the early morning quiet I could hear it. It was saying “I know how lonely and terrifying it is to be at your wits end in a private hell, when the body which is your vehicle through life has apparently turned against you. You look frantically for help and find a mass of confusing, and often downright suspicious claims from people lining up to “cure” you, and you find the courage to “hope”, just once more, that this time might be the time that something actually does. You need clarity and honesty. What you don’t need is questionable hope, or hype. You need someone to hold your hand, tell you the truth, and walk you out of this dark and frightening place.” So that’s what I decided to provide. I was inspired to want to reach out and shout, “There really are still genuine people out here who truly understand the difficulty you’re going through, how hard you’ve tried, and whose first priority is to help! Have faith, please!”

As a result this book is going to tell the truth as I know it. I don’t claim it’s
the only truth. I’m just telling you how it was for me. It’s going to acknowledge that my own journey was convoluted and unnecessarily arduous because I didn’t have the right understanding in place in the right order. It’s also going to reveal some of my own weaknesses, even quite recent ones, despite being an experienced therapist. In telling you my story I hope to illuminate the shadowy passageways which we can lose ourselves in, and hopefully save you a multitude of wrong-turns. Of course I recognise that everybody will take an individual path. By reading this book you may gain a clearer idea of what you want to investigate in terms of solutions to distress, and have a better idea of what to avoid. I will also highlight that vulnerability is human, and nothing to be ashamed of.

Next up, this book is intended to be offered free of charge. Not all distribution platforms allow me to do that, but it does remain free directly from my website. This is partly altruistic, and partly a career launch. It’s genuinely a nice feeling to be in a position to give something of value freely. If you enjoy reading it, and it helps you, then that is a gift to me. Beyond that, it’s a way for me to make a connection with real human beings, some of whom may be in suffering, and to offer genuine help. Robert Louis Stevenson famously said “Everybody lives by selling something.” That may be true, but I’m sincere about the model of sharing what I do which honours giving first. I like this. I really do. This way I can let you sample my work and you can decide for yourself whether you think you’ll find my other works useful.

So, in my quiet morning reverie I thought “What could have real value as a giveaway? What’s truly selfless?” I thought about it deeply. I could give more hypnosis recordings, maybe a short course? I wanted it to be a true gift though, something of real value and depth. As I searched my feelings for what that might look like, the answer crystallized. “Give openly from yourself. Give vulnerability”. I thought about the integrity and honesty of those spiritual teachers in “After the Ecstasy, the laundry”. These people, who have written numerous books on inner peace and wise living, despite their elevated status, had also been willing to speak honestly about their own weaknesses and foibles. That was courageous! When I
read that book it had a profound effect upon my awareness. I received their generosity of spirit as a true gift because it gave me permission to give up my impossible quest for (imagined) perfection and embrace my weaknesses as part of what it means to be a whole person. Such practice is hugely freeing, and continually challenging. To speak of this though is so culturally unpopular and taboo that even as I write it I feel like I am pulling the trigger on the gun which is pointed at my boot. That’s what swimming against the tide feels like. There will be naysayers and critics, but the heart must be followed. I know that there will be many who will find great comfort in having someone stand by their side in solidarity. It’s for you that I offer this book as an antidote to the “everyone else is doing just fine so there must be something wrong with me” theme which predominates our culture. There is still an elephant in the room. The Emperor is still without clothes. Let’s tell it like it is.

In a culture where people routinely digitally alter their photos before posting online, where our teenagers are increasingly self-harming, and where one in four people suffer with some form of mental health difficulty at any given time, the need for honesty is more urgent than ever before. As a therapist you learn that many people, even those in high places, have something difficult going on privately. I believe passionately that it’s time to address the taboo of mental health difficulties openly now.

As a balance to this however, I also believe that we must guard against normalising victimhood. I note a trend on social media which I champion at one level, and am concerned about at another level. This is the trend towards saying “I am anxious. I have an illness. I cannot do anything about it. If you have a problem with it, that’s your problem, not mine”. When we are in crisis or severe anxiety, I believe that this is entirely the correct position because trying to force oneself to pretend wellness through a real illness can be counter-productive. I have been in that space many times myself, and I know that there are times when surrender is the only sensible option for that particular moment or period of crisis. Everyone else will just have to deal with the inconvenience that may present. That’s the part I champion.
The concern for me though is that should this way of thinking become the normalised permanent position for sufferers, we may end up enabling the anxiety instead of encouraging solution and the motivation to heal. Identifying oneself as a lifetime victim with no hope of recovery can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, and this position should be vehemently challenged at every opportunity. We have to fight for our health when it fails. Of course, the strength isn’t always there, but when the opportunity arises, we should mobilise with commitment! I know that anxiety and depression will argue very persuasively that our own particular dilemma is so much worse than other sufferers’, so in telling my story I hope to communicate that we can make it out alive and well from even the most severe difficulties. Mine was a pickle of quite epic proportions as I’ll shortly explain.

On this point I need to insert a cautionary note. I lived this story, and I’ve healed these wounds. Although living it was a nightmare, recording it here wasn’t particularly troubling for me. I did so with an almost journalistic detachment. It’s a story. It’s over. Before publishing however I asked a few people to read the book and give me some feedback. I was genuinely surprised by the powerful responses I received. One person said they found it quite distressing in places. This puzzled me a little as it’s ultimately a story of hope and healing. I put this to another reader. He said, “I can understand what your reader means when she says it’s distressing. But, I think it’s bound to be distressing, except for the most severe sufferers, who will feel affirmed and feel like someone else has been there and got out. The moment where you describe the sickening black crack is truly horrifying though! It did make me pretty emotional thinking of how dark and horrible things were for you.” Had I written a book so heavy that no one would want to read it?

Then, another reader sent this, “Wow! John it means so much because it speaks so honestly of what it means to live with anxiety & mental illness. It’s giving a heartfelt message of hope & understanding. As I read it, it instilled in me again the need for the healing to come from within. It made me come across a website group who use yoga & meditation to help people with mental illness. I think this is along the lines I need to use to help
quieten my mind. That’s what the book has done for me. Yes I take my meds but that’s not enough. By reading this I think I may have found my way.”

The very last thing I intended was to write a book which might alarm or distress. What is clear though is that this is a story which has elicited some strong responses in readers. If this book ultimately inspires people to heal, that is probably a good thing, but do be advised that it may have an emotional impact for you, and it may shift some readers into a place of healing action. That’s a process, and it’s rarely convenient. Some writers would sell their right arm to achieve such impact, but I didn’t set out with sensationalist intentions. I just wanted to share a story of hope for people who may have lost theirs. This book contains some genuinely interesting tales and much positivity too. Only you can decide whether you want to take this journey with me. There’s a happy ending, but there are some dark moments in between. Please be advised and read safely!

(Disclaimer)

In order to set the scene for what follows I’m going to need to tell you about some pretty unusual stuff. I ask that you don’t abandon the book when things get weird. It starts with a fair bit of new-age thinking, but it ends somewhere else entirely. This was all a long time ago! I am very different now, and ultimately what I have learned has helped me to become grounded as a human being. I do keep an open mind still, but I am as sceptical as the next person these days of all wild claims and magical thinking, so please don’t assume that this author is a bit wacky! I had some unusual interests at the time, and they’re highly relevant here because my story cannot be properly told without explaining these fringe pursuits. It may be a little out of most peoples’ usual thought processes in places but I’ll add soothing grounded explanation later, so don’t be alarmed. I’m going to tell the story as it happened.

Things have turned out very well in the end. This is ultimately a story of great hope, so if you can stay with me through the strangeness it will be worthwhile for you. I hope that it will be an entertaining read too. Writing it has been quite a journey for me! Lastly, I just want to add that you won’t find anything of this nature in my other books. There I stick fairly rigidly to the clinical facts. Like I said, this one is a special offering.
It’s personal. I hope it will help those who are suffering to know it can end, and those who want to understand mental illness better to come away with a clearer picture of causes and resolutions, and a bit of true empathy for the very real challenges that sufferers face.

*John Crawford – Bristol – November 2016*
CHAPTER ONE – LIFE BEFORE THE DAY IT HAPPENED

When I was growing up, I used to experience sleep paralysis. This is where you wake up and you can’t move your body. It feels like you’re being pinned down by an unseen force. Later, I started experiencing strange shifts in orientation when I had my eyes closed. I would be sat in a chair, eyes closed, and suddenly have the sensation that I had rolled forwards ninety degrees so that my eyes were now facing the ground and my feet were now facing the wall. When I opened my eyes I would re-orientate to the correct position. It was the unsettling sensation of falling out of my body.

Often, when drifting off to sleep I would hear a sound which I can only describe as all of the air being sucked out of the room. It would reach a crescendo before absolute silence for a nanosecond, and then something would just explode, except the explosion was really just the sound of a camera shutter as it clicks. My vision would explode into flashes of colours and chaos and I would be violently jolted awake in alarm. It felt very much as if something had charged at me at high speed and smashed into my mind. I know how weird this sounds. I came to dread it. I’m just reporting it as I experienced it. It was very unpleasant. It went on for many years, but I haven’t experienced it now for probably two decades. I have no explanation for why it suddenly stopped except that I moved home.

Sometimes, with my eyes closed, usually in bed, I would become aware of murky shapes gathering in the blackness behind my eyelids. With my curious mind I would penetrate the darkness with my mind’s eye, and these shapes would suddenly crystallize all at once in high definition detail into a fully lit room of slowly swirling patterns of hanging smoke which appeared to congeal into long strands of fibres hanging like spider webs in DNA spiral formations. This was quite different from the kind of hypnogogic hallucinations we all experience from time to time. It would feel as though I was looking into an unseen realm. It wasn’t particularly threatening, but it was so “real” that I could only stand it for a few
seconds before it became just too scary and I’d open my eyes and switch the lights on in alarm. This continues to this day but is very rare now.

One day, I woke up from a sleep to find myself sitting in the chair opposite my bed. I looked over at my sleeping body in the bed. For a moment, I was amused, but it quickly dawned on me that if my body was there, I probably shouldn’t be here. I panicked a bit and suddenly floated up from the chair, across the room, and back into my body whereupon I immediately opened my eyes. It was seamless. It wasn’t a dream in the usual sense. I was already fully awake when I found myself on the other side of the room to my body.

The house I lived in seemed to be pretty well haunted. I frequently had the sensation I was being watched in the hallways. Guitars strummed themselves. Light switches could be heard clicking on and off when there was no-one in the house. Sometimes there was banging on the windows.

I have had so many déjà vu’s and lucid dreams that I won’t even go there. Life often had a strange edge to it in my early years! It’s much quieter now...thankfully!

When I was about fourteen years old, a friend of mine handed me a book called “Gifts Of Unknown Things” by the author and biologist Lyall Watson. This book blew my mind. I suddenly became aware that there might be much more to the World than meets the eye. Lyall Watson is famed for his book “Supernature” in which he argues that much of what could be described as paranormal or extra sensory perception may actually be simply natural extensions of the hidden senses and forces of nature which are only now being understood by science. Reindeer for instance can see through snow because they see in the ultraviolet spectrum. It’s a biological development to help them locate the food below. These books are somewhat dated now. Some of Watson’s theories are now disproven, but the books themselves remain thought-provoking to this day. In any case, they were filled with magic for me at the time, and can only be described as mind opening. I became fascinated by the strange, the hidden, and the unknown.
When I was about fifteen years old I built a Ouija board. Because this is a book for people with anxiety, I’m going to deliberately skip the detail. I don’t want to give anyone the horrors, but I’ll just say this. First of all, it worked. Secondly, we received communications which only one person in the room could possibly have known about and she wasn’t touching the glass. Thirdly, the communications became very ominous, very quickly, with horrible profanities (think Exorcist), abusive messages, and predictions of death! I’m pretty sure nobody did die, but it was enough to scare the pants off all of us. I burned the board and things didn’t feel right for quite some time afterwards. I perceived that I had a period of bad luck for quite a while afterwards and I was genuinely anxious that I’d unleashed something dark into my world. Eventually, the weirdness passed, to my great relief. Kids, don’t play with Ouija boards! I don’t know what’s going on there but it’s seriously something not to play with. Even if there’s a rational explanation, it will mess with your head!

My obsession with the unknown (Ouija-boards firmly aside!) continued throughout my teenage years, and I became an avid reader of all things metaphysical. I read about psychic phenomenon, the paranormal, the mind, astral travel, near death experiences, reincarnation, alchemy, ufos, magic, and the extremes of science. Anything with a bit of mystery attached to it was for me. Many evenings were spent with friends in bedrooms mulling over the secrets of the Universe. My book collection is eclectic!

GOING TO AMERICA

When I was eighteen I was invited by my best friend at the time to join him, his two brothers, and another friend, on a three month visit to California. A few weeks later I met my wife, Kati, there in Santa Barbara, and I split my time between being with the boys and living with Kati. We fell in love and when I had to leave for home we committed to continuing our relationship from across the pond.

I returned some months later to Santa Barbara. Our efforts to build a life there were virtually impossible. I was only on a tourist visa without any
real funds or any real plan. Love will do that to you. Our residence fell through in the first week, and we ended up literally homeless sleeping in the back of a van full of tools which somebody offered us for shelter, in a seedy industrial complex. We spent our days in a coffee shop playing backgammon and drinking copious amounts of coffee (25c refills) and wondering why we were sleeping so badly at night. Gee?! Kati sold the last of her possessions so we could eat. Some days we didn’t. At least we were together. Then someone was kind enough to take us in for a bit. He was strange, but kind, but there was a complication in this arrangement. There was an old toothless Indian who claimed to be dying of AIDS staying there too. This guy also claimed to be an enlightened master guru who had contracted AIDS when he was attacked by some skinheads, the virus transmitted as they cut their hands on his teeth. He said that he’d forgiven them as they kicked him in the head saying “Why do you persecute yourself in this way?” He had half of the spiritual townsfolk of Santa Barbara wrapped around his little finger with his esoteric talk and his promise of spiritual gifts, but privately Kati and I found him menacing and unhinged. He seemed to me to be a lecherous con-artist who traded on his air of superior mystical status to get what he needed. People were always giving him things in the hope that he might transfer some of his mystical power to them. Somehow he was managing to entice much younger ladies to sexual interest despite having AIDS. It was all very strange, and wrong! He said to my wife “I will be dead soon, and then I will be everywhere. I can even be your panties”. I think he knew we were wise to his tricks and he convinced the kind man who had taken us in to evict us before we exposed his fraud. Disappointingly, he bought it, and we were out on the streets again. We managed to get a little bit of money to buy some food with but we were made homeless two more times after staying at different places before I admitted defeat and came home. Kati returned to her Mother's home in Utah, a fate she considered worse than death. There was more, oh so much more. Much as I’d love to indulge, this story is for you, not me. Suffice to say, it was a crazy three months, and not in a good way.

When I returned home, Kati had worked her feet off as a waitress in Utah and quickly followed me to England as soon as she had the airfare. She
was refused entry to the UK at the airport due to lack of funds, and admitting that she had a boyfriend here. We were both interrogated in separate cells at the airport for seven hours before she was released to me for an excruciating bittersweet twenty four hours before being deported back to Utah.

After many months of planning and proper preparation, my wife made it to the UK and we were married. Then the real stress began. We needed to prove that we had adequate means for self-support. My grandparents helped with a £2000 donation, but that wasn’t to spend. That was just to show the home office. This was right at the beginning of the 1990’s and there was a severe recession in full swing. Work was genuinely hard to come by, even in London. I managed to find a temporary position in a private investment bank in Central London as a glorified janitor, and I ended up working with my good friend Rod. I’ve had worse jobs, but we were treated poorly at first. The pay was terrible and the lifestyle was stressful. It involved a daily commute into the city which meant long days. I remember being at work with full blown influenza (no...not a man cold!) because I couldn’t afford not to be. I could barely stand. We had no sick pay or holidays, and I took all the overtime I could get because Kati was not allowed to work while we were awaiting her residency status. I started to get really worn out. There was a constant uncertainty as to whether she would be allowed to stay in the UK and our prospects generally were not good. All we wanted was to be together. It’s fair to say that we had a very stressful few years, and much as I didn’t recognise it at the time, there was definitely some anxiety and depression hanging around for me. Youth hid it from me though, and I just kept going because I had to.

**SHAMANISM**

Meanwhile, privately, my obsession with the strange had continued. I was fascinated by the first hand tales of people who claimed to have had experience with ectoplasm, materialisation and teleportation of objects, remote viewing, miraculous healings, telepathic communications, alien encounters, past life memories, extraordinary coincidences, and near...
death experiences. There really are some fascinating stories out there when you look for them, and I consumed these books with insatiable interest.

I had also become particularly interested in the field of Shamanism. For those who don’t know, Shamanism is the name given to the practicing of traditional folk medicine by Shamans or Medicine Men and Women. It concerns itself with all manner of strange ideas such as soul retrieval (mending fragmented souls), entity extraction, divination, plant medicine, energy medicine, trance states, interdimensional travel, the acquisition of personal power, spirit helpers, connection to the ancestors, prayer, shape shifting, and guidance of the dead! In indigenous cultures shamanic practice is considered to be a science of sorts, and Shamans have been called “Technicians of the sacred”. We in the West are quick to dismiss such practices as primitive and superstitious, but a fuller investigation would leave most people intrigued at the very least. There is much shamanic content which is highly questionable, but there are areas relating to shamanic practice which are deserving of further attention. At the very least shamanism is a marvellous piece of theatrical illusionism which capitalises heavily on the placebo effect for healing self and others, and at best, it may be truly miraculous. Throwing six sixes with six dice is almost unheard of (46,656 -1 to be precise), but at some point the unusual occurs. Maybe miraculous human beings are simply rare?

If many of the first-hand accounts of those who have had direct experience with the indigenous Shamans of the Americas are to be believed, then it would appear that some gifted individuals do indeed have access to powers and understanding beyond our normal comprehension. It’s possible that we are dealing purely with delusion too, or maybe a bit of both? Who can know for sure? Still, as you can imagine, this stuff fitted the “unknown” bill quite nicely for me, and without going into too much detail, let’s just say I got in pretty deep, pretty quickly, and started to have designs on the notion that I might be a shaman in training. In hindsight (oh hindsight!) this was naïve because I had a rather glamorous outlook on what that meant. In fact, there’s no
glamour in being a Shaman. It’s a role which is rarely self-appointed. Nowadays our bookshops have entire shelves full of shamanic tales, but at that time in history, user-friendly information was difficult to come by. It’s easy to look back and see how misguided my perception was, but we were doing our best with what we had, and making it up as we went along.

I had been reading about the psychedelic shamanism practiced by indigenous tribes down in the Amazon, South America. You may or may not know that many of the tribes in the Amazon use a “medicine” known as Ayahuasca. Ayahuasca is a psychoactive plant mixture which produces a visionary entheogenic experience similar to LSD or magic mushrooms when ingested. Typically, the Ayahuasca experience will involve a profound encounter with one’s deeper self, and/or Nature as a living, minded, communicating entity, sometimes resulting in deep healing and life-changing shifts in personal consciousness. The experience could become heaven or hell, depending on set and setting and which way the psychic wind blows! Regardless of whether the core claims of Ayahuasca users are empirically true or not, one thing is for sure; subjectively, these are powerful life-changing experiences and there is no shortage of experienced people who will attest to that.

I had read about one phenomenon which particularly piqued my interest. Evidently, some Master Shamans were in possession of an ability to generate a magical fluid from their bodies which could be seen while under the influence of the Ayahuasca. This fluid, it was proposed, could be used for healing, divination, and other magic. Terence McKenna said of it: -

This is the idea of the mysterious magical phlegm, the legend of which survives on the less-traveled side tributaries of the Amazon. There, persistent rumours circulate of a magical material, generated out of one's body by master shamans, that allows one to cure, work magic, and obtain information unavailable by any normal means. Like the magic mirrors familiar from fairy tales, the magical fluids of rainforest rumor are windows on distant times and places.
This passage fascinated me. You must remember that I was a very young man with a head full of crazy hope and ideas, still discovering what the World was really all about. To my mind, at that time, anything was possible. My wife joked “Your mind is so open your brains are falling out”. I mention my interest in this phenomenon because I believe it was the seed which made possible in my mind what would follow later. I now know that “belief” is what holds our personal realities together, possibly quite literally, for better or worse! The notion that things could be materialised out of the body for some reason fascinated me greatly. I heard of others performing similar feats. Sai Baba, an Indian mystic was famed for producing scented ash from his hands in vast amounts. He has now been discredited as an illusionist, a fact proven by video evidence. I didn’t know that at the time. I wasn’t sure I believed it, but I was fascinated still. Others have made similar claims, even locally, and while they have not been publically discredited I’m pretty sure that those claims are similarly suspect.

Parallel to this, I was doing my own investigative work into the field of energetic healing. There is an interesting experiment which anyone can try. Only do this if you don’t think it would trouble you emotionally if it works, which it probably will! Here’s the process. Rub your hands together for thirty seconds. Then visualise a ball of energy, maybe the size of an inflated party balloon between your hands. Very patiently and gently you imagine that the ball is expanding, filling with energy, and you should start to feel a little pressure against each palm. You need to give it thirty seconds to a minute. Just keep concentrating and imagining and then very gently start to bring your hands together by just millimetres. You should feel a definite sense of resistance almost like two magnets of the same polarity repelling each other. It’s quite subtle, but it’s a fascinating effect if you can feel it. I don’t claim to know for sure, but my guess nowadays is that this is probably a “hypnotic” effect. At the time though, knowing nothing of the brains ability to experience hypnotic effects, I took this as evidence of an energetic field. I studied books on energetic healing and started to work on being able to “see” energy. The theory here is that one learns to look with one’s third eye. In short you work on becoming more psychically attuned to the “unseen” dimensions.
of the World. I found I was able to do this with practice. By softening my gaze and “looking without looking” I could begin to perceive a kind of watery quality to thin air. Solid surfaces and edges started to look less “solid” too. If I looked at a person’s body with this soft gaze technique I could see billions of tiny pinhead size coloured bubbles bouncing around in a soupy field which extended around the person’s form, which I understood was their energy field. This went on for some time, and I became more adept at perceiving this “unseen” dimension with practice.

Kati was very spiritually minded but she didn’t have the same fervent interests I did in such matters. Still, Rod, Kati, and I visited a local Mind Body and Spirit fair. My intention was to try to find somebody to help me make use of all that I had learned through my shamanic and energetic practices. We met a hands-on-healer named Hugh there, and I explained what I wanted. He agreed to come to my home the following week to teach us some hands-on-healing techniques. It was in itself a fascinating experience. Rod joined me. It’s just a shame what happened next…..
I mentioned a moment ago that life was very stressful during this period, but I didn’t really elaborate. I think it would be accurate to say that I had been manic, exhausted, despairing, and anxious, though I didn’t really understand what “anxiety” was at that time. I believe my obsession with these strange ideas and practices was a form of escapism, and a desperate search for some healing. I had watched my Mum die from cancer at the age of nineteen, and processing her death was not a straightforward matter for me. My relationship with her was bittersweet. I loved her dearly, but I was also frightened by her. I hated her a little bit too. She was a volatile person, prone to fits of rage and sometimes cruel in her comments, some of which did lasting damage to my sense of self. She could make the household extremely tense. My Dad was a nervous wreck, partly as a result of the constant tension of not knowing if or when she would explode next. She was also incredibly talented and creative; a musician, a singer, an artist, a writer, a dressmaker, and a potter, all of which she did exquisitely. She herself was well loved by many, but behind closed doors she could be extremely unpleasant at times. Still, she could also be very sweet, and I do have some nice memories of her from my earliest years, when it counted the most, for which I must thank her. She died at the age of 45, the same age as me at the time of writing this book, which is weird. My good-hearted nature is at least in part down to her efforts. Maybe life got her down later? I’ll never know. We never had the chance to speak as true adults. This just made her passing all the more complicated for me. I struggled with my confusing feelings of simultaneous relief and grief that she had gone.

My Dad was in no position financially to offer any assistance, and he had made it clear that Kati and I were essentially out in the World now and had to make it on our own, which was fine by me, I wanted independence. Though I’m sure he would have helped if we had really fallen into desperation, I took him at his word, and there was no option in my mind of a safety net to fall into. Our home was a cheap and nasty dark flat above a restaurant in South Croydon with a restaurant cooking
exhaust outside our front window, the smell of which you could never get away from. It was all we could afford. Our bedroom had old single pane windows and was right on the main road. You couldn't escape the noise. We had infestations of ants and cockroaches, and it smelled old and weird. The daily commute into Central London was a tiresome drudgery, and daily Rod and I transported crates of £100 a bottle Champagne into the conference rooms for the bankers who paid us so little that we could barely survive, even though we worked ourselves to exhaustion. We felt that they treated us with contempt too. This was partly a young persons’ angst, but it was upsetting nonetheless. Kati and I were at the complete mercy of the home office. They could at any moment tear us apart by refusing our residency application. Being so utterly powerless over something so desperately important is a powerful recipe for depression and anxiety. It was bleak. I was angry too. No wonder I was looking for magic!

HUGH

Hugh was a delightful human being. He had warmth about him. We sat down for a cup of tea and he explained to us how he experienced the technique of hands-on-healing. He explained that the first thing to do is to draw back the layers of the energy field around the body. He explained that you simply placed your hands where you saw or felt the outer edge of the field and then simply pull the field back with the intention of releasing stuck and stagnant energy. Once completed, you would then use your intention to become a conduit for “source love” by simply touching with palms at various places on the body. He demonstrated on Rod first. I softened my gaze with the lights dimmed and watched. I could see sheets of those tiny coloured bubbles flying away from Rod’s body as he gently pulled the layers away. I was amazed. Then he placed both hands on Rod’s head, shoulders, outer arms, back, hips, and ankles for about twenty minutes. Then it was my turn. I sat in the chair and closed my eyes. The releasing part felt nice. I could feel myself letting go. Then his hands went to my head. It felt good. Then he came to my shoulders. It felt really warm, and I could feel a soft pulse, and then, I believed at least, that he started to actually massage them gently. I thought
“Hmmm...nice...he’s throwing in a little massage for good measure.” This continued with holding and then gently massaging down through my back, hips, and knees until he arrived at my ankles. I’d had my eyes closed the whole time but in anticipation that we were close to ending the session I opened them, and looked down to his hands at my ankles. Holy Cow! His hands were static on my ankles, but I was experiencing an actual massage motion! I asked him “Hugh, were you massaging me at all during this session?” “No, I was just holding, like I’m doing now.” I could barely speak. There was no doubt about it for me. I felt a full blown massage. I told him, and he said that people commonly report that. I’ve had many hands on healings in my time since. I’ve never experienced anything remotely like that. It was genuinely extraordinary!

Twenty minutes later Hugh was gone, and I was feeling really great. I had this sense of amazing warmth and benevolence. I felt “full” of wellbeing, but I did also feel a little bit over-amped. We talked for a while and all was well, but as I was expressing my amazement at what had just happened I decided to tune in to my “energy field” to see how it looked. I held my hands up in front of me and softened my gaze. I could see this boosted field of energy at first, and then I noticed that the tiny bubbles seemed to be connecting together and forming something. Then “it” happened! I “saw” a little crumb form on my hand. I was horrified. I shook it off. I looked again, and another crumb formed, then another, and another. I went to the kitchen sink and quickly washed my hands with soap and water just to be sure that the crumbs weren’t already there. At this point I was already feeling an unpleasant sense of panic rising, but I was holding it together. What the hell was happening? With my hands washed, I looked again. More crumbs appeared as the tiny coloured bubbles merged, and not only could I see them, but I could feel them too. I appeared to be literally materialising these tiny crumbs. They were forming out of the energy field as I looked at it. I tried to un-see it! “No, it can’t be!” I tried to throw the crumbs off by shaking my hands, but I could still feel them between my fingers. I rinsed again, but they were still there! “Okay” I thought. “If I’ve somehow made this happen, I can make it stop too”. With great courage, I looked squarely at my hands as these tiny crumbs formed and I willed it to stop. I ordered it to stop.
Absolutely nothing changed. It was useless. I rinsed again but still the crumbs came. I was rubbing my hands down my trousers but as soon as I looked again, more appeared. I suddenly knew I was done for. I couldn’t turn it off. What if this doesn’t stop? It was at this point that I felt a panic like none I had ever experienced before (readers of the intro to my first book will recognise this part of the story). I went into a deep existential shock. My world came apart. I heard a “snap” sound, and I had this sense that this sound marked the moment that something inside me literally sheared into two pieces diagonally, almost like the ground would tear in a severe Earthquake. I felt deeply sick, and it felt like blackness just poured into every cell of my body. If I could have cried, I would have sobbed, but I was suspended in shock and terror. A foul darkness enveloped me. I paced for a while trying to get away from the sensation of crumbs between my fingers. I didn’t dare to look at my hands another time. Instinctively, I knew that to do so would just increase my panic further and it was already unworldly. I could feel the crumbs. I knew I would see them too. I just kept wiping them away on my trousers, but as soon as I did, more came. Terror is really the only word that comes anywhere close to describing what I was feeling and that’s not enough. I’d had panic attacks in my life before. I knew what it was to feel really afraid, but this was an entirely new level of experience. Rod had followed me into the kitchen, quite unsure of what was going on, though he knew it wasn’t good because I’d glared at him in horror moments before. “We need to get out of here”, I said. “Okay, sure...let’s go” he said, obviously willing to give me whatever might help. We left the house. I didn’t know where I was going. South Croydon isn’t the most inviting place in the World but I just needed to walk. I was literally gasping for breath, but we just walked a little way before I realised that I was just as scared outside as inside and we went back home. I was trying to get away, but it wasn’t in the house. It was in me. There was nowhere to hide. I gathered myself. I had no idea what I was supposed to do now? Just calm down....somehow...calm down. Clearly, the more anxious I became, the more intense the phenomenon was. After maybe twenty minutes or so I’d managed to reason myself into a space of some level of acceptance. The sensation of the crumbs between my fingers diminished, but didn’t completely retreat. My palms were soaking with sweat, and I had intense
pins and needles in my fingers coupled with the nerves firing erratically. What happened immediately next is all a bit of a blur to be honest. Somehow, I went back to my life, but from that moment forward, the “me” that I used to be ceased to exist. Nothing would ever be the same again. I now felt permanently threatened by a dimension of reality which nobody else could even see!

THE IMMEDIATE AFTERMATH

First of all, let me just clarify. Hugh was not the problem. Neither, really, do I believe was the spiritual healing, though that may have had some part to play. If I had to propose a spiritual theory, it would be that I was energetically pumped up, and all that positive energy suddenly converted to negative “fear” energy, and my “being” just couldn’t contain it. My human constraints blew a fuse! This explanation is fine if you believe in “energy” healing and the idea that we are primarily energetic beings, but if you think that’s mumbo jumbo, then you’ll prefer a clinical explanation. I’m actually fine with both explanations. I reserve judgement to this day. Anyway, if you want the clinical explanation that’s something like “my brain didn’t cope too well with the weirdness of what I’d just witnessed, whether it was true or not, and my unrecognised stress levels suddenly overloaded”. It was reality shattering. As we’ll get to, something doesn’t have to be true for the emotional brain to respond. It just has to be believed as true, and my obsession with the themes of materialisation had obviously had a huge role to play in planting the seeds of possibility into my perceptions (where attention goes, energy flows they say!) I seemed to have jumped from consensual reality into a place where the laws of the dream were operative – literally. In addition to a total stress overload, I believe my experience and subsequent terror was strongly compounded by the fact that I believed I had some very good understanding for how my experience was occurring. In addition to my interest in energy and shamanic studies, I had also become fascinated with the world of quantum physics. Most people now have at least a passing understanding of these matters, but for the benefit of clarity, let me explain what I was thinking. Here are some quantum physics principles which laid the foundation for my conviction that what was
happening to me was real.

* All matter in the Universe is made up of atoms. Atoms themselves are made up of subatomic particles which are believed to be (according to science) 99.99999 percent empty space, and the remaining ”matter” accounts for 0.00001 percent. If you removed all the “space” from atoms, a teaspoon full of the remaining matter would have a mass of five billion tonnes. According to Quantum Physics, most of what we see around us isn’t actually solid at all. It’s mostly “space”. Form is created with the “illusion” of solidity. In fact it’s all just vibrating energy, and atoms themselves can become any “matter” they may choose to be, much as stem cells in the body can grow an arm or a tooth. Atoms are building blocks.

* Experiments have shown that there is no such thing as a true vacuum. At the quantum level virtual particles are seen to jump in and out of existence within a space containing “nothing”.

* Quantum outcomes are dependent on an “observer”, meaning that particles behave differently when they are being “measured” or “observed” than they do when they are not. Quantum states and consciousness itself may be linked only by analogy rather than literally, but to my mind at the time, I took the Schrödinger’s Cat theory literally, and believed that it may be possible that mind could indeed influence matter at the quantum level.

* Nonlocality is a principle which demonstrates that two objects separated by vast (billions of light years) physical space, can apparently have instantaneous influence upon each other, suggesting an “all at once-ness”. Einstein’s model tells us that nothing can travel faster than the speed of light, so there must be some plane which exists outside of “time” where everything is connected.

These are the observations, and they are considered scientific. In short then, Classical Physics sees the World in concrete and definite terms. Everything is solid, measurable, and constant, but Quantum Physics suggests that at the quantum level, the world of matter, time, and energy
may be far more mysterious and fluid than we can know. Furthermore it suggests that mind or consciousness itself may be involved in the creation of solid reality in some strange and unfathomable way. I had an intense interest in the idea of the holographic mind. If I draw a picture and then tear one half away, I lose half of the picture. Holograms are different. If you smash a hologram into smaller pieces, each piece continues to contain the whole image. The proposal is that the mind is holographic in nature also. In other words, all pieces, no matter how small, contain the image of the whole. Furthermore, it is possible to burn multiple images into a single holographic plate. Suppose we have two images. We burn one image in from a forty five degree angle from the right, and another from a forty five degree angle from the left. When I view from the left I see one image. When I view from the right, I see the other. Using this notion, what reality looks like to you all depends on where you’re standing! Thankfully, we all have a body and brain which uses serotonin as its principle standpoint for viewing reality and so most of us agree that we see the same thing. During a psychosis though, perhaps this viewpoint is fundamentally shifted in some way. Perhaps there is a chemical shift which causes the projector to dysfunction. All I can tell you is that I experienced it as “real”.

It has been suggested that the entire Universe exists within each individual part in some mysterious and holographic way. As far out as this seems, the quantum physics discovery of non-locality does lend some weight to this idea. There would appear to be a place in “non-space/time” where everything is instantaneously connected to everything else. My basic conclusion at that time was that mind is not a product of reality, but that reality is a product of the mind, or consciousness.

In my mind at that time then, “knowing” all of this, it was very simple. My projector’s reality regulator chip had somehow penetrated into seeing the construction of reality itself, and the projector was now displaying a reality which was operating from a different set of constraints than the laws of physics usually provide. That made it literally still “real”, just screwed up! Suddenly, in my perceived world, this notion of mind
affecting matter had become quite literal and immediate. I believed I understood how it was happening. I just didn’t know why it was happening, and I could find no mechanism to switch it off! My interest in the phenomena written about down in the Amazon, had subconsciously planted the notion that such things were possible, and somehow my reality projector was making it so. I’d never really thought it would actually ever happen! Under normal circumstance no such thing could occur, but somehow, under these unusual conditions (referred to in shamanism as non-ordinary reality, or in clinical speak, psychosis) I had slipped into some form of altered perception which obviated the usual rulebook. Apparently, years and years of obsessive interest and practice in the weird had finally tipped me over an edge!

Now, don’t run a mile; stay with me. It’s not my intention to blow your mind with cosmic theories, or to try to convince you that the World is stranger than you can suppose. Maybe we’re just a mass of cells, our brains are just computers which can go wrong, and we are finished at brain death. I don’t know. I include these details as an explanation of how I managed to get into the particular perceptual mess I eventually found myself in. Not only was I experiencing bizarre and terrifying mental phenomenon, I also had the belief that I understood how it was occurring. This was the fact that made this thing all the more terrifying. I didn’t have an ounce of doubt that what was happening was real. I reasoned that I had spent so long using my mind to penetrate into the “unseen” realms of reality that I had now broken through to the very fabric of reality itself, where the atoms assemble themselves to become form. I reasoned that I had trained my “holographic” mind to read from a non-ordinary state of consciousness and that somehow I had unleashed a phenomenon at this level which I now did not understand and could not control. As crazy as this sounds, my experience of the phenomenon at the time was so utterly “real”, that I don’t think that anyone could have convinced me otherwise. I would have given anything to switch it off. I tried. Believe me, I tried. Willpower and intention was about as useful as a chocolate teapot.

You may be asking “Why didn’t you simply get someone else to look and
confirm it one way or another?" There’s an answer to that question. I’m pretty sure I did as time went by, but it seemed like every time I tried to show somebody, nothing was happening! Even for me the phenomenon was intermittent. It became an obsession that it “might” be happening, much as an obsessive compulsive disorder operates. It was also as much a physical feeling as it was a visual one. I often just “felt” the crumbs, but when I looked they weren’t quite there. They just seemed to “threaten” to materialise. I’d see them almost form and then decide not to! Beyond this though, there was another important reason that I didn’t push too hard to have it confirmed one way or another by an outsider. I knew that if I could see it and someone else couldn’t, that would be even worse news. It would mean that I was stuck in a World that I could see and feel, but nobody else could! I know logic would suggest that the correct conclusion would be to resolve to treat it as a hallucination then, but that would have been merely a formality at that point. My unenviable position was “You can call it what you like but it’s real to me. If I’m not in the same World as you, then where in the hell am I?!“ That was too terrifying to contemplate, so I wilfully avoided asking the question because I didn’t want the answer.

**Why Did It Happen?**

Regardless of whether there was any truth to my beliefs and perceptions, I’m quite sure that what happened was primarily about me, more specifically, about my stress levels. I mean, this was not a good thing. I had been living a life which was frantic, exhausting, weird, unbalanced, stressed, angry, uncertain, scary, threatened, and powerless. What happened, I believe, is that I had been living with extremely high stress levels which had gone somewhat unrecognised for a long time. I knew I was stressed. I just didn’t know I should be concerned about that. There was essentially a pressure cooker effect, and eventually the pot simply exploded. I suffered with what is clinically known as a psychotic break. Others might call it a spiritual awakening. To me it’s irrelevant. The outcome was the same. One way or another, my body/brain system collapsed. Extreme stress is well-recognised as a precipitating factor in psychosis.
Here’s the NHS definition: -

*Psychosis is a mental health problem that causes people to perceive or interpret things differently from those around them. This might involve hallucinations or delusions.*

**The two main symptoms of psychosis are:**

*Hallucinations – where a person hears, sees, and in some cases, feels, smells or tastes things that aren’t there; a common hallucination is hearing voices.*

*Delusions – where a person believes things that, when examined rationally, are obviously untrue – for example, thinking your next door neighbour is planning to kill you.*

The combination of hallucinations and delusional thinking can often severely disrupt perception, thinking, emotion, and behaviour.

Experiencing the symptoms of psychosis is often referred to as having a psychotic episode.

Joe Griffin and Ivan Tyrell, the authors of Human Givens propose that psychosis is in fact a waking dream of sorts. Stress and lack of sleep creates a dysfunction which causes the brain to start operating in Rapid Eye Movement mode, usually reserved only for sleeping (dreaming), while the person is awake – literally, dreaming awake. Thus, the laws of the dream, which are very different from the laws of physics, can become operative in waking reality. This seems to me the most interesting analysis of how a psychosis works. It’s well documented that people who are subjected to extended periods of sleeplessness will quickly develop hallucinations and delusions. The brain needs REM and if sleep is denied, presumably it does it anyway. Then you have ordinary waking reality overlaid with REM reality. Clearly there’s a link. It also explains why the experience is so “real”. It’s a note of interest that the same areas of hardware in the brain are in use during the dreaming period as when awake. That’s why dreams feel so real. It makes sense to me that under extreme conditions the hardware can begin to confuse the two states. As
I said, I was exhausted and stressed at the time, and though I don’t remember clearly, I’m pretty sure I wasn’t sleeping well due to all the stress and worry my life was providing. The conditions were ripe.

At the time, my understanding of mental illness was practically non-existent. What probably should have happened next is that I should have received medical attention. Unfortunately, I was stoutly of the opinion at that time that the medical profession didn’t know what they were talking about, and I didn’t trust them. I considered my dilemma to be a spiritual problem, not a medical one, and I expected no sympathy from the orthodoxy for my position. In fact, I was frightened that I would be disbelieved and **mistreated**. I don’t think I had a very clear understanding at that time of psychosis as a medical condition, or that there may be useful treatments available. I thought they’d just label me nuts, medicate me to the point of zombification, and lock me up in a mental institution forevermore. That’s if I was delusional. If what was happening were actually to be confirmed, I’d end up in a secret Governmental X-files facility, probably being experimented on! There was no internet to speak of in the early nineties, at least not widely available anyway, so I had to guess. I was also frightened by the idea of using psychiatric drugs. I figured that the last thing my mind needed was for anyone to add pharmacological noise into the mix. I now understand that this was probably twisted thinking. Some sleeping pills and some Diazepam would probably have done me the World of good, but that’s where I was! I know many anxiety sufferers feel this way too, even today.

My position was also compounded by other factors. First of all, my obsession with Shamanism made me determined to see this process through without medication. In the shamanic worldview, healers become healers by surviving an initiation. This can take the shape of a physical illness which takes one to the edge of death, or a mental illness which involves a recovery from insanity, a process often described metaphorically as dismemberment followed by reconstruction. This descent into the extremes of life experience is what ultimately qualifies one human being to offer assistance to others, to become “The Wounded Healer”. So, I believed that it was possible to recover, and that became
my chosen model to describe what was going on for me. Ironically, I actually didn’t consider myself ill at the time. I just believed I had seen too much reality. In addition to this, I also found my way to a book called Spiritual Emergency by Stanislav and Christina Grof which sets out the premise that mental illness can, in some cases, be a precursor to extraordinary personal growth. They go on to suggest that the standard Western method of medication as a first line treatment may interfere with the process of healing and important self-development. They acknowledge that this will not always be true, but highlight important case studies where non-medical interventions have brought about remarkably positive results in the long run. Here’s what the authors say:

“There exist spontaneous non-ordinary states of consciousness, (NOSC) that would in the West be seen and treated as psychosis, and treated mostly by suppressive medication. But if we use the observations from the study of non-ordinary states, and also from other spiritual traditions, they should really be treated as crises of transformation, or crises of spiritual opening, something that should really be supported rather than suppressed. If properly understood and properly supported, they are actually conducive to healing and transformation”.

So that was my belief, and I walked alone. It wasn’t really a choice for me. It was the only path I saw as viable. If I’d known then what I know now, I believe I would choose differently. I’ll speak more on this later, but let’s get back to the story.

Now, I’m painfully aware that what I’m about to write may be difficult for anyone who is troubled with severe anxiety to read, and this is intended as a book of healing. The last thing I want to do is give you bad things to think about, so I’m going to give you an option here. If you prefer to skip the painful description of my actual symptoms and experience, simply skip to the next chapter where I promise things will be considerably lighter. For you, let’s just say that the anxiety I experienced was about as bad as it can get.

For everyone else, I’m going to detail exactly what was going on for me.
What’s the point of this? Well, it’s not for my benefit. It’s not a catharsis. I’m past that. It’s for two reasons. The first is that it may be important for you to recognise that this book isn’t written by someone who just thinks they’ve been anxious but actually has no idea of the depth of terror that anxiety can generate. Trust me. I know. The second reason is that the whole point of this book is to highlight point one, and then remind you that people can recover from even the most severe difficulties. I can’t make that point without being specific. I promise not to overstate the facts. This is how it happened.

In the weeks that followed Armageddon Day things went from bad to worse. The immediate panic had subsided, but it was replaced with a high level of generalized anxiety, punctuated by frequent, almost constant mini panic attacks. Physically, I was in quite bad shape. I could hardly breathe. My solar plexus area had locked itself tight into a ball. If you breathe in deeply and hold your breath, then feel how your midriff becomes tense, then that was how my solar plexus felt constantly. My hands were constantly clenched into fists. My shoulders and back were raised defensively and my muscles ached where they were so taught. Essentially I found that my body had adopted the same position a person would adopt when they see a large object hurtling towards them and know they have no time to escape, braced for impact; a constant flinch. If I consciously relaxed my muscles, they’d instantly spring back into that position the moment I stopped concentrating. My jaw ached from the continuing teeth clench, and I ruined my teeth by grinding them at night. My eyes were bright red with grey circles underneath from exhaustion, and they stung constantly. My heart was palpitating, missing beats, and fluttering like crazy pretty much full time. I felt weak at the knees. I was dizzy, really dizzy. The feeling that I was about to vomit at any moment was relentless. I had a steady stream of mouth ulcers. The nerve endings in my hands were firing continuously and became literally painful. They felt like I’d been struck by lightning. My digestive system turned output from solid to liquid and stayed that way. My skin itched. I felt toxic, and literally poisoned. I couldn’t sleep properly. Most times when I fell into sleep, my body would jerk me violently awake again with a start. When I did sleep, it was so light that it never felt restful. With each day that
passed, I felt the life force draining out of me. I was becoming weaker and weaker. I was sure that I would eventually die.

Mentally and emotionally I was in a state of constant terror. You have to understand that I really believed that I had triggered something truly paranormal. My interest in the weird had left me pre-disposed to this as a very real possibility. My reasoning was that “just because it hasn’t been proven, it doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist”. So, for me, it was experienced as real. This was part of the reason that I was so reticent about seeing a doctor. They would tell me it wasn’t real. To me, it was, at least at that time. I didn’t understand then that the definition of psychosis involves the complete conviction that your reality is the real one. Even if I’d known that, I still wouldn’t have trusted the opinion of a doctor over my own first-hand experience.

I had really disturbing dreams. In one, I dreamt that I started materialising glass shards in my mouth. Every time I spat them out, more would appear, and soon my mouth was filled with broken glass which was cutting me. This dream ended with me waking up in a cold sweat as a huge pane of glass cut through my head. I was terrified that this might start happening in my waking reality and that if I went to the doctor for help they would just call in MI5. In another, I was sat in the corner of a cell like box and when I tried to scream out for help, I couldn’t speak. Just alien noise came out of my mouth; the symbolism of a cry for help which could not be heard. Then there was the journey across a hell-like landscape. This continued for many weeks. Every time I fell asleep I would begin the dream roughly where it left off last time. In these dreams I was walking across a sandy dusty arid landscape which was filled with traps. I was navigating my way through these areas and had to be constantly on guard. There I was faced with trials, and there was the sense that my soul was in mortal peril. If I didn’t make it out of here, I would die physically, and be trapped there indefinitely. One in particular stands out. I came to a vast lake, but the surface was covered in ice. I needed to cross it, but as I was about to step out there was a rumble and I knew something was coming. Suddenly the surface of the ice exploded with nuclear force, and a creature of unimaginable size, maybe a hundred
meters tall, shot high up into the air before somersaulting and crashing back down nose first through the ice and back into the depths. It looked like a huge dragon with a beak for a face. The size and power of this leviathan was like nothing I could imagine. I don’t remember a tidy conclusion to these dreams. I think they eventually stopped, but one of the net effects for me was the sense that suicide needed to be marked up as a non-option. I had a strong sense that I’d be living in that place full time if I vacated my body. Another was a nightmare dimension filled with sinister clown killers (remember Stephen King’s “It”?) It was like a fairground crazy house, but every time I took a different route through the house I emerged at the same place. The clowns were constantly on my heels. I didn’t know what would happen if they caught me, but I knew it was a fate worse than death. I somehow knew that I had seen this place before, and it was a dimension I could become trapped in. I became terrified. It felt so very true, and for a while this freaked me out no end. What if I did die and end up there? Eventually I figured it out. I’m here aren’t I? Therefore, I never got “trapped” anywhere permanently, right? Ah...sweet logic! So, yes, there were a lot of dreams about being trapped, in immortal peril, other dimensions, trials, helplessness, and loss of control. That’s severe anxiety for you!

In addition to my colourful night life, my daytime existence was no bag of candy floss either. I continued to “feel” tiny crumbs between my fingers. In addition to the firing nerve syndrome, my hands became really warm. I mean ridiculously warm. My palms sweated constantly. My hands were literally soaked in sweat 24/7. They were so warm that when I held my hand three inches above my friend’s arm to show him what was happening he yanked his arm away and gave me a dirty look. If you believe in “energy” you would say that they were constantly throwing out two megawatts a day. The clinical explanation is that the fight/flight mechanism was firing so powerfully that I was generating mega heat. I sweated constantly. Then, a new physical problem began. The skin on my hands erupted with tiny blisters. They were like tiny red bumps which came up all over my palms and along the sides of my fingers. They were ridiculously painful. Each one felt like a papercut, so every time I used my hands to do anything, it hurt. They would flair up in daily flushes.
After I’d been awake for an hour or so, they would suddenly erupt, and by the end of the day they would begin to recede. Each night I would hope that tomorrow would be different, but it never was. They came ferociously without fail. Some days were worse than others, but they always came. If the psychosis I was experiencing was all a terrible hallucination, these were definitely real. These bumps seemed to come from deep within the skin. I did visit a doctor. He prescribed some creams but they did nothing to help. He was baffled.

So, my hands were doing weird stuff, and I had become completely obsessed with the notion that they **might** be producing crumbs. I was frightened to look because I knew if I saw it again it would just produce more panic which would set any calming I achieved back, but at the same time I could kind of feel them there all the time anyway. I did have courageous moments where I gathered myself and looked at my hands closely. I could see the watery film of those millions of microscopic coloured bubbles, and often there would be a spec of something on my hands, but it was never conclusive one way or the other. I couldn’t tell whether that had just appeared or was just something I’d picked up earlier. I couldn’t look for long before the panic started rising to unbearable levels so I could never quite convince myself that it definitely wasn’t happening. I experienced the same phenomenon when I looked at a clean surface, wherever it was. I could see the same phenomenon on other peoples’ skin too, so I often literally didn’t know where to look. Reading was difficult because tiny flecks were appearing and disappearing all over the page as I tried to read. Though I tried relentlessly to convince myself that it wasn’t real, my mind continued to promote the conviction that it was.

In hindsight, I suspect that what caused the crumby sensation was the firing of nerves, but my mind was very definitely interpreting those sensations as **exactly** how crumbs between your fingers would feel. For me, the feeling was very real. I would feel these crumbs between my fingers just as clearly as if they were there. I couldn’t get away from the obsessive belief that if I looked for long enough, something terrible would happen, namely that I’d see it again and fall so far into terror that
I'd never escape. Severe OCD sufferers will understand this feeling.

It wasn’t only my hands that were experiencing weird sensations. I was also plagued by the sensation of cobwebs or hairs brushing against my skin, particularly on my arms. Again, it was a very real sensation, but when I looked to pick the offending hair off, there was none. This was constant. I became convinced that I was unwillingly interacting with an invisible dimension that nobody else could see. Healers I saw told me that this was because I had become so afraid that my protective etheric field of energy was now so thin as a result of the fear, that I was essentially unprotected from errant energies. I kept also finding hairs in my mouth, loads of them, and after my glass shards in the mouth dream, I became terrified that these hairs were materialising, and if that were found to be true, then it was just a short hop to terror that one day I could actually be picking glass shards out of my mouth. Who could help with that?!

So, that gives you some idea of the ridiculous pickle I found myself in. I think you’ll agree that this is a fate one actually wouldn’t wish on a worst enemy. With truly the greatest respect towards ANY sufferer of anxiety because I understand entirely that all suffering is relative, I hope it also makes the point that I am qualified to speak with understanding on these matters. I don’t think it gets too much worse than this. I felt absolutely wretched. I would gladly have died given the opportunity, but as I said, I was certain that a fate much worse than death awaited me should I have attempted to leave my body... so I chose to stay. I’m glad I did!
CHAPTER THREE – A TURNING POINT

The living nightmare I have just described continued for about a month or so at this intensity. Somehow, and don’t ask me how I did it, probably because I was so determined not to fail my wife and was otherwise literally out of options, I managed to keep getting up in the morning and doing a day of work in the City, but I remember that every day was an absolute hell. Rod and I made contact with the Shamanic author and teacher Leo Rutherford, and I explained what I was experiencing, and he was keen to meet us. We arrived at his house in North London, and there was another gentleman there, Howard Charing, who I’d never met before. We had tea and chatted about life and shamanism for twenty minutes before I started to tell them how awful things had been, and what had led to this moment. As I explained what had transpired, Howard chimed in “I know…I can see it all over you”. I asked “What do you mean?” He said “Your energy field is peppered with something that looks a little bit like electricity or lightning”. I said “Yes, yes, that’s exactly what it feels like!” He went on “Do you want me to take a look at that for you properly, and see if I can help?” My heart leapt! “Do I?! You bet I do!”

We went into the healing room, and he smudged the space with sage and got immediately to work. There was no theatrics, no ceremony or chanting. He just sat me in a chair, and proceeded to start pulling the thin air around my body explaining that he was releasing the layers of the energy field to get to where he needed to work. I was understandably sceptical, but suspended my judgement. Something about this guy told me he was the real deal, not a charlatan. Then he explained that something foreign had become trapped in my energy field. He asked my permission to remove it and proceeded to make some very interesting movements as if he was holding something, before wringing his hands and blowing. He was whistling very gently too, and breathing strangely in places with big huffs. Again, I didn’t sense that this was theatrical for my benefit. This was how he did his work, and he was genuinely intensely focussed even though I didn’t really understand what he was doing or how he was doing it.
Then he said “I have a soul part belonging to you here who has been very frightened by this experience. He says he would like to return now. Would that be okay with you?” I felt a surge of excitement. Was this it? Was I going to be well now? “Of course” I replied. He instructed me to welcome the part home as he blew into my chest from his hands. I imagined that I felt it, but I couldn’t say for sure. He closed the space, and then explained what had happened. He said that this energy had become accidentally trapped inside my energy field. He said it was not malevolent but had been attacking me because it was trying to find a way out. We spoke some more before we left and his advice was to now take a period of convalescence, walks by the sea, time in nature, and relaxation. The chance of a period of convalescence would be a fine thing I thought, but I took it on board. He counselled that recovery would still take time, and that I should allow myself to fully feel whatever emotions might surface over the coming period. He explained that was part of the healing process. As I left the house I was feeling hopeful, but I was also feeling quite disappointed. I was still anxious as hell, and I’d hoped dearly that I’d feel a significant shift. I didn’t though. Not yet, at least.

Over the coming weeks things did start to get slowly better. The intense heat in my hands started to slowly subside. It was gradual. And, the dreams stopped, at least the ones in which my soul was in mortal peril. I’d like to report that I was out of the woods, but that was not the case. Good news did come however. Kati was finally granted her residency here in the UK and an enormous weight was lifted. To celebrate, we took a weekend trip away to Glastonbury in Somerset. My paternal Grandmother had lived there in my early years and we had visited for holidays. I had fond memories of it. We wanted to get away from the city smoke to somewhere suitable for convalescence, and Glastonbury’s reputation as a healing town made it an obvious choice. We stepped off the coach into the summer evening, and it was nice to breathe different air. With the tent pitched at the foot of the famous Tor I relaxed a bit. I remember still feeling very unwell. I walked down to the bathrooms at the campsite, feeling exhausted, and looked in the mirror. I hardly recognised the person that stared back at me. I was a young man, but I looked old. I checked my teeth, and I noticed that my gums looked awful.
They had receded in places, and looked really unhealthy. I thought my teeth might fall out if this atrophy continued. It was worrying. This crisis, despite signs of recovery, was really taking a toll on my health, and yes I was looking after my teeth with a toothbrush.

The next day we headed for the healing sanctuary of the famous Chalice Well Gardens, where I felt some real peace for the first time in a long time. We drank the water from the well, legendary for its iron-laden healing properties, and climbed the hill of Glastonbury Tor to enjoy the views from the top, across the Somerset levels and beyond. I was still extremely anxious the whole time, but the trip did remind me that there was another World out there beyond my claustrophobic horizons. Later, we saw an advert on a notice board for a room for rent in a house just outside of Glastonbury. I took the number and filed it under fantasy, never really expecting I’d call it. When we walked back into our dark London flat after a weekend in the splendour of the Somerset hills, I knew right there and then though that we had to call that number. My grandparents were kind enough to tell me we could keep the two thousand pounds they’d donated in support of our residency case and in June 1995 I quit my job in the city and we moved to a quaint quiet town full of stone houses called Somerton in Somerset.

A Year In Somerset

I had explained to our new housemate that I wasn’t very well. Being a healer himself, he was super cool about it. We are still friends today. The house was magic. We were minutes away from beautiful rolling hills and there was an acre of garden outside, complete with Victorian greenhouse, rose paths, and hidden areas. It was rather wild but it was quite beautiful. Our bedroom window opened onto views of fields. I was more hopeful than I had been in a long time, and couldn’t believe that we had been so lucky. It was just what I needed. Now, I thought...I could finally heal.

I expected then that with all of this countryside, fresh air, and freedom from pressure that I would naturally bounce back into shape in no time
at all. It didn’t happen that way, but it was a very interesting and educational year. I remained deeply unwell throughout the entire year, and although I slowly willed myself to stop checking my hands for crumbs, I continued to experience severe generalized anxiety, and complete exhaustion. It mostly wasn’t about anything external. I could visit the local shops or get on a bus, but my solar plexus remained locked tight like a vice, and most of the other symptoms continued unabated. I definitely couldn’t cope with crowded or busy places though. I remember we took a trip back to London to see some friends, and going out into the hustle and bustle felt like an overwhelming assault on my senses which left me very panicky and exhausted. I hated it. I couldn’t cope with that much activity. My hands weren’t burning up quite so badly but they remained soaked in sweat and the predictable rounds of painful bumps were a daily cause for dashed hope. The skin condition was painful physically, but mentally it was incredibly wearing because it was so immediately connected to the anxiety. Every new daily round of bumps brought with it a flood of despondency that I could never be well again. It looked like it was here to stay. Sadly, it would be a long time before my hands were disease-free again.

As the months passed, I started to gain some distance from ground zero. I’d had some minor breakthroughs in challenging my certainty that I was materialising crumbs between my fingers but despite my internal belief that I would just bounce back, it dawned on me that I wasn’t really getting significantly better. There was definitely some progress but it seemed to go just as far as moving beyond the immediate trauma of the psychosis, and no further. Essentially, all of the anxiety-related symptoms remained strongly in evidence.

Glastonbury, as many people may know, is a very spiritually focussed town. Almost all of the shops on the high street have a Bohemian element to them. You will find books, crystals, essential oils, shamanic tools, healing centres, music venues, vegan cafes, flower essences, herbs, incense, and tarot cards. Although we lived seven miles outside of Glastonbury itself, we were introduced to many interesting and colourful characters from the Glastonbury scene by our housemate David, who
was deeply involved with many of the influential people of the town. He himself was a semi-professional musician who also crafted and sold flower essence vibrational remedies for his living. I remained hopeful that somebody somewhere might know how to fix me!

As a regular visitor to Glastonbury, I involved myself in some way with just about every healing modality I could find. I used vibrational flower essences, massage, aura-soma colour therapy, crystals, dowsing, acupuncture, hands on healing, essential oils, formal ceremony, herbal tinctures, organic food, meditations, guided visualisations, Reiki, sound therapy (gongs and Tibetan bowls etc), coloured crystal light pens. I walked the fields. I cycled. I attended seminars. I joined a spiritual men’s group. I had psychic healers work on me. I must have read thirty books that year. You get the picture. I was certainly not idle. Actually, I was frantic to find a solution because daily life was torturous.

Despite the ongoing anxiety and desperation though, this was one of the most interesting years of my life. Looking back, I marvel at how much stuff I got involved with. I went to a sound healing ceremony at Stonehenge. Special permission had been given to actually enter the stones (beyond the usual perimeter fence), which was very special. I did formal Pagan ceremony at night in the Chalice Well Gardens with a very small group who had special access. I visited a local crop circle. Kati and I took a short eight week evening course at Strode College in Street to learn Shiatsu, a skill I still possess to this day, much to the delight of friends with bad backs. I get that these things may be meaningless to many, but for me, at that time, with my interests, these moments had me thanking my stars to have such privileged experiences.

HEALING HANDS

The house in which we lived had a kind of revolving door system for the third bedroom. In the space of the year that we lived there, we had no less than three new housemates. Soon after we’d arrived, a young lady called Sabine moved in. She was German by descent but settling in the UK. Sabine was one of the softest, gentlest, most cuddly human beings
I've ever met. When she hugged you, it was like being wrapped in cotton wool. My physical wellbeing continued to be very fragile, and I managed to contract full blown influenza three times during my stay there. I know that’s the second time in this book I’ve mentioned the flu, and it would be easy to conclude I’m talking about man flu, but these were severe illnesses. One bout of flu was a stomach flu that left me passing blood, and literally crawling to the loo. It lasted a full two weeks. My immune system was failing badly. I will never forget what Sabine did for me one night when I was in the full throes of the flu. It was two or three o’clock in the morning, and I had been writhing in agony all night. My head was pounding. I have never had a headache before or since like it. I was convinced that I would die; this had to be a brain tumour! It was that bad. I was sobbing. Kati just didn’t know what to do. In a panic she knocked on Sabine’s door for advice. Sabine came into the bedroom and proceeded to have me sit up while she massaged my back, my neck, my head, and my shoulders. She stayed with me for an hour, gently working out all the knots in my twisted body with her healing hands (she was a Reiki practitioner). She might as well have been an actual angel. By the end of the hour, my headache was practically gone, and I felt safe. What mattered most was the absolute love she poured into her work that night. We’ve taken different paths in life and drifted apart but she may have done me the greatest single moment of service that anyone ever has that night, and my heart is a warm glow when I think of her. It made me understand the importance of pure intention, love, and the willingness to help. I doubt very much whether any old massage would have done for me what she managed.

**Ceremony**

I mentioned ceremony in passing earlier. I want to include this short story because it is particularly interesting, and I still cannot for the life of me find a rational explanation for what happened. The men’s group I had joined, although primarily a men’s support group, had Druidic/Pagan practice at its heart. So we would meet each week, and somebody would lead a guided visualisation. We’d talk about what was going on for us, and then we’d learn a bit about nature, or the seasons, the moon cycles,
the land, or herbs, or incense etc. The members were just lovely human beings and I looked forward to it. I wasn’t hugely invested in it, but it was always light and easy-going. No doctrine or expectation, just a nice meet, which often took place at our house with tea and biscuits, which was how I got involved. I remained eager to learn all I could as a means to make myself well again too! As October approached we arranged a full ceremony which was to take place in our one acre garden on Samhain – 31st October (what most people celebrate as Halloween). This time however, we’d have the Women’s group present too, and they would do their ceremony at the opposite end of the garden, with the plan that we’d meet afterwards for a little feast. In the Pagan calendar, Samhain marks the approach of winter. It is a time or preparation for the descent into darkness which accompanies the suns transit to the Southern hemisphere. It is also considered the time when the veil between the living and the dead is at its thinnest, and it is traditional to honour the ancestors at this festival (hence the Halloween themes of skulls and grim reapers that we still celebrate today). One part of the ceremony was to be a “giveaway” where you throw something into the fire which you are ready to let go of. That could be an old relationship, grief, an illness etc. I fashioned a pair of hands from Fimo and painted them pink with red dots to represent my illness. Here’s what happened to the best of my memory.

We all left the house via the front door at just after seven pm. We walked slowly to the fire pit, just yards away. Freddie, a big Canadian bear of a man opened the “sacred space” with some short prayers and the placing of objects representing Air, Fire, Water, and Earth at the four compass points around the fire-pit. Each of us made our own individual offerings to these elements in turn. There were about eight people. This took perhaps thirty minutes at most. Then we lit candles for our ancestors, spoke from our hearts about their passing, and asked for their blessings in our lives before taking turns to throw our giveaways into the fire with the intention of moving forwards. There was then quiet for a while as we each contemplated the meaning and intention of our ceremony. My mind was obviously focussed on my Mother and my Grandfather, both of whom had passed away relatively recently. Soon, the space was then formally closed and we made our way back into the house, just yards
Now, there was definitely a sense that we had been out here for some time, but I was genuinely flabbergasted when I returned to the house to find that it was now 10.15pm! I absolutely could not account for three hours. I reviewed in my mind what we had actually done over and over, and I could make no sense of it whatsoever. My subjective experience of it was that it had been an hour at most. Everyone agreed that the time had passed unaccountably quickly. I later learned that “ceremonial time” is considered “sacred time”, and is believed to move faster. I make no claims about this, but that’s an honest report of my experience. Despite my genuine and heartfelt wish to “giveaway” or “let go” of my illness, my hands, sadly, continued with their daily flush of sore red lumps, and my anxiety levels were no better either. I was very disappointed. I’d had high hopes for this one!

**Howard – Revisited**

I received a communication from Howard, the shamanic practitioner who had helped me earlier the previous year, explaining that he planned to write a book detailing his clients’ experiences, and he offered me a free shamanic healing session in return for me writing my story for the book, which I was happy to agree to. I arrived at Howard’s home in West London, eager for help but not really sure what to expect. I sat in a chair and he knelt beside me with his hand on my arm. He explained that he was going to find out where we needed to work. He closed his eyes and proceeded to whistle before he came back to me and explained that he had a part of me that he needed to work with. I said okay and he proceeded. Suddenly I was gripped by a deep discomfort. I could feel a panic arising inside me. It felt like something trying to run away. He opened his eyes and said “Are you okay?” I said “Yes…just about”. He said “These things are not without their discomfort…can I finish?” I gave him the nod and he closed his eyes again and moments later the internal panic spiralled to an almost unbearable level, but it was strange. It felt like it was something going on inside of me, but not me actually having a panic attack. I trusted him, so I just held on, and then suddenly, it was
gone! I felt it lift in a single moment, and then nothing. He emerged again. “Are you okay?” I was shaken. I was actually surprised that I had felt anything. Despite my weird lifestyle, I was still somewhat sceptical about these methods, or at least that any practitioners were actually doing what they say they do. Until this point, all the treatments I’d had in Glastonbury had been soothing, but ultimately disappointing. He explained that he had met with one of my past selves (lives), and that this particular past-self had needed to tell his story. I asked for more information. He said “You don’t need to know. There’s no work to be done on it now. It’s cleared.” I returned to Somerset with renewed hope.

**MOVING ON**

Did the healing with Howard help? It’s hard to say. It might have, but I couldn’t honestly say that I felt much different as the weeks went by, despite truly wanting to believe that something of substance had occurred. We’d been in Somerton for almost a year when the last of our money ran out. We’d lived frugally, but it soon became evident that we couldn’t afford to stay. There was very little work in that area, we didn’t have a car, and we were quite isolated. We knew we’d have to move to where there was work. All I knew was that I couldn’t return to London. There was too much history there now that I just didn’t want to be around, and as exciting as London can be, it was just too frantic for my fragile state of mind.

Bristol was the nearest city. The thought of being forced back to the hustle and bustle of a city scared me. I was easily overwhelmed by too much activity, but we had little choice. We scoured the Bristol press, found some rooms for rent, chose one, and used the last of our money to move to Bristol. We knew nothing whatsoever about it. We arrived in Bristol with a few belongings and no clue as to what the city was about. I was braced for a new hell, but something completely unexpected happened. Instead of finding Bristol to be an assault on the senses, we found our new lodgings to be an oasis of calm. We’d arrived at a four bedroom house in Downend, which is a quiet suburbia on the outskirts of Bristol. Actually technically, it’s South Gloucestershire. We moved in with
a kind gentleman Steve, and his two children. He just needed lodgers, and the arrangement was that simple. He was undemanding and made us feel really at home. The overriding atmosphere of the house was just one of “normality”. It suddenly dawned on me how desperately I had needed NORMALITY, and it was on that note that our new life in Bristol began.
CHAPTER FOUR – DEAD TIME

The year in Somerton was truly interesting, and undoubtedly a valuable life experience, but there was a great irony to my position. The countryside was nice, but I had found myself immersed in more cosmic themes than ever before in my life. I believed at that time that that was what I needed to do in order to solve the problem. This was understandable, given my thinking, but in retrospect it seems obvious that it was probably the last thing I actually needed! I only realised this when I found myself returning to Earth in a small bedroom in Bristol in summer 1996.

The last year had been a crazy and difficult journey, and moving to Bristol was like surfacing from a great depth. Despite being in a city, there was something deeply soothing about our new soft blue bedroom overlooking a suburban garden. Although my recovery had been very slow, and I was still extremely fragile, there was now the possibility of finding work and building a new life. While we had been in Somerton we had remained completely teetotal. Our new housemate Steve was rather partial to a pint or two, and he often invited us down to the local pub. I was never a big drinker, but in the preceding year I had found that even a small amount of alcohol would make me feel quite panicky so I avoided it completely. Once in Bristol I found that I was able to tolerate alcohol without the panic setting in. This made me feel like I was becoming part of the world again. Our social life until this point had been nothing but cosmic seminars and sober meetings. It had all been terribly serious! It was a relief to go and have a couple of pints, tell jokes, and talk about the weather. I was still very anxious indeed, but there was movement.

Kati went to a temporary agency and secured a job working on the helplines for a courier company. As it turned out the job was a complete nightmare, because the company wasn’t very good at delivering their packages on time, and she spent all day having people shouting at her. It meant that we had money coming in though. Soon afterwards I secured a job at an insurance company working in the post room. Likewise, my
first job also turned out to be a bit of a nightmare. The problem wasn't with the job itself. The problem was with the two women I worked with. One of them was okay, if not a little uptight, but the other was a woman who obviously believed that her advanced age gave her the right to talk down to the young. They had run the post room between themselves for many years and they clearly had a bit of a chip on their shoulders about their lowly position within the company. They saw us in the post room as the lowly, and all the other professionals as looking down upon us. It wasn't like that at all, but that's what an inferiority complex will do to people! Since I was now their junior, they had somebody to bully and they pranced around like little tyrants making sure that I knew my place. This basically meant giving me all of the intolerable jobs like stuffing envelopes all day while they got on with the “important” business. They never treated me as an equal, and they barked their orders at me. Under ordinary circumstances this may not have been so stressful, but since I was still very fragile I didn't cope particularly well with their petty tyranny and I became quite depressed. I was it seemed, once again, trapped in a horrible situation with very little power. I was also incredibly lonely, stuck in a room with them every day, having them play out their little power trips. The dragon was always rude. She spoke to me like I was a child. I was more grown up, even then, than she would ever be in her whole life. I had just been to hell and back. I didn’t need this, but they made it perfectly clear that no dissent would be tolerated. She was vindictive and I knew she could make trouble for me. I needed the job, so I swallowed it.

Thankfully, I didn't have to stay with them for too long. I think it was about a year. Internally, I continued to suffer quite deeply. I still had the daily flushes of bumps on my hands, and I was still extremely anxious and low. Nonetheless, I was able to present a positive smiling face to the world, and I took pleasure in delivering the post around the offices, and getting to know everybody. One day, a kind man from the accounts department took me to one side and told me that there was a junior job coming up. He suggested I applied. I got the job, and a whole new life began. I was so relieved. If I hadn’t been depressed, I would have felt elated. I felt something like muted elation. The money wasn’t great, but it
was enough to get by, and I didn’t have to face the dragon every day. That was enough right there!

This opportunity was a great boost to my sense of wellbeing. I was overjoyed that someone had noticed me. I had gotten used to feeling separated from the World. Though I knew that I was loved by those close to me, I still felt desperately alone in my dilemma. There was something about the way this man, Jeff, had reached out to me, practically a stranger, to give me a hand up when I really needed it, and I’ve never forgotten the kindness he showed me. His kindness continued over many years. He had his grumpy moments. He could be a little un-PC on occasion too, but although he was my boss, I considered him a true mentor and a friend. He treated me with respect, and he had my back. The job had prospects too, and it was the first time in my life that I’d had a job with a desk with just my name on it. I had purpose.

So that was the background. Things were definitely a lot better than they had been in a long time. By this time I had managed to control the compulsion to look at my hands every moment of every day. The prickly sensation between my fingers had not completely retreated, but somehow I had managed to convince myself that my hands weren’t about to start creating crumbs out of thin air, at least not imminently, despite them still generating enough heat and sweat to power a small island which made handshakes embarrassing. My visual disturbances had also settled considerably. I now had enough distance between myself and Armageddon day to believe that I was out of immediate danger, and my anxiety levels reduced somewhat as a result. That doesn’t mean that it had completely withdrawn from my sensory perceptions. I had just managed to learn that nothing really ever came of it. It was still on my mind constantly though, and I remained deeply fearful that I may be thrown back into the maelstrom at some point. I still didn’t fully understand why it had happened, and that created an ongoing feeling of being quite unsafe.

The main problem now was the skin condition, which continued to erupt fiercely every day. It’s worth understanding just how distressing this was to me though. I would imagine that if you had a skin condition like this
under normal circumstances it would be painful and upsetting, but it wouldn't necessarily create the same deep emotional disturbance that this did for me. It was in some way a lasting symbol of the fact that I had been irrevocably and permanently damaged by my psychotic experience. Every time I handled something, which was all day every day, it hurt. In addition to the physical soreness, I would also receive a wave of fresh anxiety and frustration with the arrival of each new daily flush. Sometimes the bumps would blister and I’d squeeze the water out of them which would leave the skin broken and enflamed further. It was by now really getting me down. My skin was a real mess. I remember thinking very clearly that if only these bumps would go away, then I would stop being anxious. I really believed that. I would later learn that this was not the case.

It was clear to me that I wasn’t out of the woods yet. It had now been two and a half years since the event itself had occurred. I had moved away from absolute terror, and that was something to be hugely grateful for, but I was left with plain old generalized anxiety, and this was horribly wearing. The immediate crisis had passed, but now it was a slow-burn misery. We were moving on with our lives but I still had no idea how I was going to make anything like a full recovery. I was in fact slowly coming to terms with the fact that I may never recover. One day was the same as the next. I’d open my eyes each morning, feel fine for about thirty seconds, have a moment of hope that today might be different, and then the waves of sickness and anxiety would flood in to take up residence for the rest of the day. This is business as usual for severe anxiety sufferers, and it’s supremely tedious.

I’d tried just about everything and nothing had really “worked”. The progress I had made seemed to me to be just a result of putting time and space between me and Armageddon Day. Of all the treatments I had tried whilst spending time in Glastonbury though, probably the most helpful one, rather surprisingly, was the acupuncture, so I decided to give it another go. I found a nice lady to work with, and faithfully attended about eight or nine weekly acupuncture sessions. I found that the acupuncture was helpful immediately after each session, but despite
really wanting it to work, the anxiety would return with full force soon after. There was definitely some potential there for it to be of use, but I believe my anxiety levels were still just too high, and any positive movement was quickly undermined by my overall state of shakiness. Eventually I quit the acupuncture because it wasn’t giving me the fix I’d hoped for, and if I’m really honest, (sorry acupuncturists!) it hurt too. I just got sick of having needles stuck into nerve bundles. Evidently, the points my therapist needed to target were in some rather sensitive areas, like the nerve bundles in my wrist, so my acupuncture came with bonus electric shocks! I would like to qualify that though by saying that I had some acupuncture a couple of years back as part of a treatment for a shoulder injury and there were no electric shocks, and it helped loads, so I’m not knocking acupuncture!

A NEW SHAMANIC CHAPTER

We bounced around for six months or so, and bit by bit I got my feet on the ground again. I was still trying to figure out how to help myself. I noticed an advert in a local publication for a shamanic group. Much as there was an irony to my still having an interest in shamanism despite all that had happened, I reasoned that I had to work on myself if I was to stand any chance of recovery, and this particular offering appeared to be structured in a grounded and practical format for self-development. I called the number, spoke to the group leader, explained my situation, and I liked what I heard. Kati and I enrolled on the course which was for something like sixteen weeks initially. As groups like this go I have to say it was a very good one indeed. The teachings were in-depth and there was a lot of wisdom imparted to us all as students. The practical exercises were generally very interesting, and the systems presented for personal growth and development made a huge amount of sense. The emphasis was on working with the inner-warrior to embrace life powerfully, and peacefully. Sure, it was still a bit hokey by some peoples’ standards, but I found it practical and useful overall. I faithfully followed the instruction given. I had a daily practice of meditation, breathing, acupressure, yoga-like postures, and chanting, which took about an hour a day to complete. I wasn’t sure I believed it would help, but I did it
anyway, reasoning that if I didn’t at least try, then I’d never know.

I also took part in a few sweat lodge ceremonies. A sweat lodge is basically akin to a sauna, except the intention is sacred. A sweat lodge is usually constructed using wooden poles to form an igloo shape which is then covered with blankets, skins, or mud to form a shelter with an opening. It is designed to represent the “Womb of the Earth”. A large fire is used to heat special rocks which are then delivered to the steam pit in the centre of the sweat lodge. The participants enter and sit in a circle. Prayers of intention and invocations to benevolent universal forces are then made, and water is poured on the rocks to produce steam. Then, basically, you sweat! There are “rounds”, so after fifteen minutes or so the air is cleared, you get to breathe for a few minutes, and then new rocks are delivered and the sweating begins again! My experience of sweat lodges was that they are extremely intense. In fact, it was often a little too much for me. I found myself cheating by lifting up the covering slightly on occasion to breathe in some of the fresh air from outside. It was the only way I could hang in there. Kati only did one, and never came back for any more. The idea is that the sweat lodge is at once a test of focus and intention, but also a purification ceremony. To be honest, they too left me feeling weird!

My shamanic work with this group culminated in a gateway ceremony which involved a twenty four hour fast, followed by a sweat lodge, followed by an all-night ceremony undertaken alone on a hill in deepest Devon. It rained hard all night. Although I had waterproof clothing on, it was pretty miserable. I lasted until about 2am. At this point, I was literally hallucinating. As I looked towards the large group teepee I was rubbing my eyes as I could see ghostly figures walking across the fields. I couldn’t focus or concentrate on the ceremony I was supposed to be doing. In the end I conceded defeat. I was going out of my mind. I was afraid, wet, and miserable. The group leader encouraged me to continue, but I was beaten. I didn’t care. I’d given it my best shot. I returned to my tiny tent and got into my dry sleeping bag. As I closed my eyes, I had visions of my wife at home being brutally raped and killed by intruders in our house. They were awful. I tried to still my mind, but faces flew at
me every time I closed my eyes. Somehow, eventually, I slept. The next day, the group congregated, wet and bedraggled. Some had slept on the hill in the rain. I was the only one who had retreated to my tent, but I knew that I was probably a lot more fragile than the others. I forgave myself. The ordeal was over, and everybody except me and one other group member remained. We approached the land owner and got talking. It transpired that he ran regular shamanic groups here himself. He said “I can’t believe you guys did that in those conditions. I’m surprised no one died of hypothermia! If I’d been running that ceremony you would have had shelters”.

I don’t know what to make of all of this. Shamanism is known to be a fairly extreme path. Shamanic practices date back millennia, and they include deeply challenging, sometimes downright dangerous ceremony. It’s designed to shake you out of normality, so I can’t grumble. I signed up for it! Would I do any of this these days? I’m in no rush, but you can be sure that it was all character building stuff. I returned home, truly changed. I think mostly I was traumatised but it certainly did make me much more grateful for the simple things in my life!

By now I really had had just about all I could stand of spiritual practices. For three years solid I had devoted my energy tirelessly to finding something that would fix me. I was tormented. Our group leader had mentioned that she could be available to offer one to one shamanic healing sessions if required, and I decided to approach her for advice on the ongoing skin affliction I was suffering with. One last try! To cut a long story short we had a session which focussed on cutting the negative emotional and energetic ties to my Mother (deceased), and re-organising my energy field. It was a powerful experience. There were tears. Within a week of this session my hands started to recover. It wasn’t immediate. It still took a few months, but day by day the flushes of bumps reduced in frequency and severity until I was left with just the odd one here and there. I cannot even begin to describe my relief. My anxiety levels halved. My persistence it seemed had finally paid off. Was it time, or did the shamanic work actually do the job? You’ll have to make up your own mind. It seemed to me like it initiated the change. In any event, the
nightmare was ending.

**Snakes And Ladders**

Our housemate needed his room back and a friend from work had a flat for rent so we moved to the Bedminster area in Bristol’s heartland. Kati had found a new job, and circumstances were the best they’d ever been for us. We both finally had employers who seemed to value us, and a life was developing. We made new friends at our jobs, and our social life started to take shape too. So, everything was moving along nicely. As the skin on my hands continued to recover, I was certain that it was now just a matter of time before I’d be feeling something like my old self again. My hands were drying up at last. The profuse sweating was receding and I remember the incredible pleasure of being able to rub my (dry!) hands together without pain. That something so simple could be so much pleasure! I was riding high on the certainty that all would now improve. And, it did, to a point, but as the months passed by I found that further recovery was still not going to be as straightforward as I’d hoped.

Have you ever experienced being in an emergency situation, and found yourself operating more efficiently than you ever have done before in your life? You’re thinking quickly and accurately. You’re acting with focus and purpose. You’re doing what needs to be done. There’s no place for emotions. You feel like a lean, mean, doing machine. Well that’s pretty much how the last three years had been for me; complete and total focus on survival. So, now that I had this massive sense of relief that the worst was over, I started to relax a little bit. It was then that the exhaustion hit me like a ton of bricks. I’d been so busy hanging on by my fingernails for dear life, that I really hadn’t had time or space to actually process the shock of what had happened. I had been almost literally holding my breath for three years, and now I could exhale, it all came flooding out. I was absolutely exhausted. I felt like I’d just been running, and running, Forrest Gump style. I was not just tired, but truly drained and depleted at just about every level imaginable. I found myself shaking my head in disbelief as I started to process what had just happened to me. It’s no exaggeration to say it had been three years of living in a hell of sorts, a
waking nightmare. I slowly started to download the sequence of events that had led me to this time and place. Everything had been changed. I had lost my innocence. The bright eyed kid, full of hope and wonder that I had been was no more. The World was now a frightening and threatening place which could turn on me at any moment. I was out of the dragons den, but the sense of imminent threat that I could be thrown unwittingly back into that place at the drop of a hat persisted, and I feared that deeply. It had taken so much out of me that I doubted whether I could survive a repeat. I still didn’t feel anything like safe.

What I did become aware of though as the months went by were feelings of deep loss. My joy had gone. As you can imagine, my illness had also been a terrible burden for my fun-loving wife. We had begun our life together in the UK as truly kindred spirits, but this ordeal had moved me away from that innocence into an ominous place where it was hard to smile, and she could do little to help except be patient. It had been frustrating for her to feel so powerless, and I felt deeply guilty for not being able to be the husband I wanted to be. Although I hadn’t exactly planned to become desperately ill, I still felt responsible for it. My decisions, I felt, had caused suffering for her. This was not the fairy tale she’d hoped for when she’d travelled six thousand miles to be with me, and in many ways I was not even the man she’d come to marry any more. Despite all the positive changes in our circumstances, I was realising that there would be no going back now. I had a hard time coming to terms with that, and I was literally grieving the loss of who I had been. I’d liked him a lot. This new me I didn’t recognise at all. I didn’t like him much either, and I supposed that Kati must be disappointed with her new man, even though she was gracious enough to hide it. To top it all off, even though my hands were ninety percent recovered, I still felt as anxious as hell. I’d really believed that once my hands recovered I’d be right again, and the realisation that I was still hugely anxious was crushing. Hope started to dry up, and the dark clouds of depression were gathering on the horizon. I didn’t want to feel sorry for myself. I was genuinely trying to stay positive, but the energy just wasn’t there.

At the time, I didn’t really understand what depression was. I just called
it “feeling like crap.” I was struggling at work, not really because of the work, but because I was so exhausted. I wasn't sleeping well, and my job was extremely busy. I liked the work, but it had its stresses. I was yawning at my desk and my eyes were stinging with tiredness all day as I struggled to stay focused. I was feeling dizzy, constantly nauseous, and felt like I was observing my life from a distance. The nausea in particular was extremely wearing. My work days became a test of endurance and I could feel myself slipping into a dark place as my exhaustion levels rose steadily. I took a couple of days off work to try to recover.

I made a bad mistake. I was feeling pretty desperate as I wracked my brains trying to figure out why I was feeling so ill and low. It made no sense. I mean, things were good, right? Circumstantially, they were better than they'd ever been. Kati had a new job too and was happier. I should be feeling better. I remember reasoning quite carefully that perhaps I could recapture some of the magic of my early days if I could just let myself go a bit. Then I spied the unopened bottle of bourbon on the side. I poured a drink. It was about two o’clock in the afternoon, and it was a beautiful spring day outside. Two or three drinks later I was feeling pretty good! I put the bottle in my bag and headed down to the local park where I sat down on a small blanket, soaked up the spring sun, and proceeded to get well and truly hammered. It was great for a while, but as the afternoon wore on I decided I should get back to the house for Kati’s return from work. I walked back to the house marveling at the sensation of being all wobbly in the middle of the day (this was unusual behaviour for me), and when I entered the house it suddenly felt very claustrophobic inside. We’d moved again recently, and we were now in a house that was again a bit uninviting. It was livable but it had some damp, and was really old and a bit musty. It was again what we could afford. If I’d managed to let myself relax a bit at the park in the sunshine, now I was starting to feel hungover already, and I was coming down with a huge bump. I was suddenly plagued with guilt. This was really irresponsible behaviour for someone who was feeling so fragile. Any warm cuddles the whisky had offered earlier vanished, and I felt a huge surge of adrenaline. My hands prickled intensely and my palms broke out into sweat. I looked down at my hands and I was suddenly certain that it
was all about to happen all over again. I felt my body lock violently, and
the panic started coming at me in waves. Metaphorically, it was like
hearing slamming prison doors. The more I panicked, the more tightly
my body locked into the brace position, and the prickling heat in my
hands became increasingly intense. I started to feel the sensation of
crumbs between my fingers. I began pacing up and down the hallway. My
mind was racing. “No, no, no, not again! Please, not again! How would I
go back to work feeling like this? I’m going to lose my job. I can’t go
through this again. Three years of fighting has all been undone with one
stupid mistake. I’m done for. I’ll never get out of this space. I’m trapped
in this nightmare. I was only kidding myself that I could be well
again”….and so on. I was once again in shock. I immediately considered
suicide. Perhaps it would be better for everyone. What would I tell Kati
when she got home? She would be so disappointed in me. That was a
killer that one. The thought of her disappointment in me was crushing.
How could I even expect her to support me through another round of
this?

In every anxiety sufferer’s life there are anxious days which are worse
than others. I have deliberately avoided laboring the details of the daily
anxiety I had faced for the last three years, but this was different. This
was landing on the snake at ninety five and slipping all the way back to
square one. That’s how it seemed in that moment anyway. In some ways
it wasn’t as bad as round one. It wasn’t quite the level of terror it had
been back at the beginning when it was all completely new, but this time
it was merged with all of the disappointment of my failed attempts to get
well again, so it was a state full of despondency as well as terror. I was
already exhausted, and I simply didn’t have the strength to do another
three years. I really didn’t know what I was going to do. I looked through
the phone book, and discovered that there was a crisis team number you
could phone if you were in an emergency. I phoned it. I was asked
whether I was about to take my own life. I really had to think about the
answer. I was desperate enough, but I was still certain that I’d probably
end up somewhere worse than this if I did. “No…I don’t think so” I
answered. Very quickly I was told that no help would be available and I
should visit my doctor.
I’d come all this way on my own, but I didn’t have the fight left in me to do it any more. Going to the doctor felt like a total surrender, but I didn’t see what other options I had. I called the doctor and got an appointment the next day. I curled up in a ball on the sofa and literally trembled with fear for the rest of the evening. Kati couldn’t hide her disappointment when she came in. I couldn’t blame her. I’d done this to myself. I have a very strong memory of lying on the couch that night, wet with sweat, with such severe anxiety that I was afraid to move. Literally, every movement sent terrifying waves of panic through my body. The only way I could get through it was to remain incredibly still while I shook as if I was naked at the North Pole. I felt pathetic and emasculated.

I was still a bundle of fear as I walked into the Doctors office the next day. I had not been to the Doctors’ since I had arrived in Bristol, so I had no idea who would greet me in the consulting room. Luck was not on my side that day. The doctor was the other side of sixty, and she was what you might call “old school”. She scowled as I explained that I had made myself really anxious by drinking whisky and her bitter face let her disapproval be known. She seemed to be looking me up and down in disgust. I asked her whether she would be willing to sign me off work for a bit so that I could recover. She flat refused and said that I could sign myself off work for up to a week. I remember thinking that my pride would not allow that. I said “Is there anything you can give me to help me calm down? I can’t even tell you how awful I feel right now.” I am struggling here in 2016 to believe that this is accurate, but I’m sure it is because I went home and told my wife. I remember the Doctor saying to me, with disgust and anger in her tone, “I’m afraid I don’t treat drug addicts in my office!” It was like a kick in the guts. She made it clear that our consultation was over, and I left feeling more alone and despondent than I think I have ever felt in my life. I was literally speechless, and because I was so incredibly low I just didn’t have the immediate fight in me to process how wronged I had just been. In some screwed up way, I figured it was probably all I deserved.

I returned home and told Kati. She was appalled, and encouraged me to write a letter of complaint to the practice, and they changed my doctor. I
returned to work on the Monday and I embarrassingly broke down in tears at my desk. I was a mess. There were some resident counsellors in the Company I worked in. They were a helpline for customers, but a staff benefit meant that I could see them free of charge. I told my story. It helped a bit to share it, but they had little to offer except a kind ear, and I was still on my own. I visited the new doctor a few days later, and it was a whole different story. He was really nice. He may well have offered me an anti-depressant, I don’t remember, but I’m sure I would have refused if he had. I ended up walking away with a box of propranolol (beta blockers) for the physical symptoms of anxiety like sweating and racing heart. They didn’t really help much, but I didn’t feel so alone. I shared my story with my boss Jeff, and he confirmed that the first doctor I had visited was well known in the area for being a nasty piece of work. He’d had run-ins with her himself, and he informed me that many people had made complaints about her. They never fired her. She retired a few years later. I imagine she would have done a lot of damage over the years.

QUICKSAND

Slowly but surely, I started to regain some of the ground I’d lost. Although that day and the following few weeks were every bit as much of a crisis as ever, I did bounce-back from the immediate sense of being completely broken reasonably quickly. Some sense of normality returned, but I was far from being truly okay. One aspect which stands out from this period of time was my inability to cry. Every single day was accompanied with the feeling that I desperately needed to sob my heart out, but no tears would come. I was permanently poised at that moment just before you release, but I remained in a constant state of shock, and the release never came. It was torturous. Another similarly frustrating sensation which endured was the strange feeling that I needed to stretch my legs, but even when I did, the feeling remained. These, as well as other odd sensations were all variations on being completely uncomfortable in my own body. Life bumped along for a while without any major crises, but I was now just locked into daily anxiety and severe discomfort. I felt nauseous, dizzy, and dissociated. I continued to feel exhausted too. When the winter came around, I couldn’t keep my eyes
open past 8.00pm. Then I’d fall asleep early and wake up at three or four in the morning. My energy extended to going to work, and that was about it. I was functioning, but there wasn’t much joy. I worked hard to keep it to myself, and continued to smile when I was expected to. It’s amazing how practiced sufferers can become at putting on a brave face. That’s the thing with invisible illnesses. They are very lonely.

In the last couple of years I had managed to be a good sport on most occasions. I pretended okay-ness for the sake of our social lives. Going out socially, since becoming unwell, was always a bit of an ordeal internally for me, but I did what I could to make the best of it. It was good for me to have some pressure on me to do normal stuff as well. After this latest round of crisis though, going out for the night became more difficult. I wanted to try to normalise life as much as possible, and that meant that I wanted to keep alcohol on the menu. This posed a problem though. I was acutely aware that if I drank too much alcohol, I could potentially unsettle myself again, and if I didn’t drink at all, in my hyper-sensitized state I’d be likely to spend the night highly anxious. The onslaught of a loud pub or other party environment is fine when you’re sober providing you’re feeling okay, but it’s an absolute assault on the senses when you’re anxious. Alcohol helped to take that edge off a little. Of course, I’m aware that self-medicating with alcohol is not to be encouraged, but that was what helped to get me through at that time. The easy option would have been just not to go out, but I felt I owed so much to Kati that I just wasn’t willing to impose a withdrawn lifestyle upon her. Every night out therefore, contained tension and fear about whether, and how I might get the balance right, with the impending threat that if I got it wrong, the consequences could be extremely uncomfortable, or even disastrous. I have many memories of standing at our local bus stop feeling like death warmed up in order to make sure Kati’s social life didn’t grind to a halt. This meant an inevitable sense of rising stress when I knew that a night out was coming up. I didn’t spend my time worrying as such, or having negative thoughts about it. My body simply responded with fear as the day approached. I think every anxiety sufferer will know exactly what I’m describing here.
It was now 1999. I had been unwell for over five years. I’d been heroic in my efforts to lead a normal life though, at least over the last three or four years, so Kati had become accustomed to me saying yes to social engagements, and that was fine with me. I did what I could, and I did it willingly, albeit with difficulty. The situation came to a head though on a summer evening in 1999. We had bought tickets to go to a club night. My anxiety levels had been extremely uncomfortable in the lead up to it, but I put on my brave face and we went out at about eight pm (I was longing for my bed) for a couple of pre-club drinks. We drank the drinks, and we started walking towards the club. With every step I could feel a deep anger and resentment rising inside me. I REALLY did not want to go to this damn club! I was feeling wretched with anxiety. My throat was tight, my solar plexus was rigid, I had a dry mouth, I felt sick and exhausted, my skin itched, and I couldn’t have raised a smile if my life had depended on it. I felt my feet literally stopping me from walking another step towards the club. “I can’t go”. I said. It wasn’t quite what you might call a row which developed, but let’s just say it involved raised voices and some intense talk. We went home. I felt terrible for letting her down, but I couldn’t do it anymore. I’d had enough of pretending. This illness might cost me my marriage, but forcing myself constantly to do what was beyond me wasn’t helping, and I realised it just wasn’t an option going forwards. It wasn’t Kati’s fault. I understood her frustration. It was just a situation, a very difficult, awkward situation. It’s one that many anxiety and depression sufferers face all the time in their lives. It’s an often quoted sentiment, but if you’ve never been truly anxious or depressed, it really is quite difficult to understand what the experience is like, and therefore difficult to show true empathy. That’s nobody’s fault. It’s like asking an aristocrat to understand what it’s like to live in poverty. Sadly, partners suffer too, and if your partner doesn’t know the territory personally, it’s pretty difficult for them to show anything but feigned sympathy, and often repressed irritation. That’s one of the worst things about it.

I spent the Millennium celebrations alone on the couch watching the fireworks on the TV. I was happy that Kati had gone out to celebrate with friends, and I honestly had a great sense of relief that I wasn’t out there
pretending to do the same. We had come to an agreement that I should only come out if I actually wanted to. I just wasn't up to it. I was having a very anxious time. It was a really sad evening though, because this was only going to happen once. I was alive for the turn of the millennium, but I missed it, just like I missed all the other joys that everyone else was experiencing. I wasn't like everyone else. I was a freak. I felt deeply ostracized from the World. What had happened to my life? Of course, I was feeling sorry for myself. I hadn't yet arrived at the place in myself that I needed to be for things to get better. And this is how it continued. I became increasingly miserable in my quicksand. It didn't matter what I did it seemed, I couldn't win. Either way I was a burden. I felt inconsolably useless.

Something good came out of this. I faced up squarely to the facts. Nothing good was going to happen any time soon. After five years of battling for my health, I just had to accept that I was well and truly screwed. I started to let go of the fantasy that I might have my old life back. This was my life now. I stopped hoping for joy. It was a constant disappointment to try so hard and end up with misery over and over again, no matter how willing I was.

Believe it or not, this was a step forward. I remember the particular moment that this information finally crystallized into a useable form. It was the year of the foot and mouth disease outbreak in 2001 which meant that huge swathes of countryside were closed so as not to spread the disease. The annual “must go to” Bristol event, Ashton Court Free Festival, had therefore been relocated for the year to a large park nearby. I had the usual tensions about going out, but I was still trying to please and I agreed to go with the best intentions. By the time we arrived at the park I was already feeling quite unpleasant. The build up to going had worked its usual dysphoric charm on me, and as the day progressed I felt worse and worse. I soon had the full spectrum of symptoms appearing; itchy skin, sick and dizzy, hot palms, lump in the throat, raw fear about absolutely nothing, and above all this, a quiet simmering RAGE!! I was sick of being sick. I was utterly, utterly, utterly frustrated. I wanted so badly to be fun, but this damned illness was going to torture me forever. I
remember very clearly the feeling that I wanted to explode with this rage. I wanted to take life by the lapels and beat the living crap out of it and to hell with me if this was a crime against existence. I didn’t even care anymore. Existence hadn’t done me any favours! I’d spit in life’s face for what I’d gone through. Whatever poor decisions I’d made didn’t justify the relentless pounding and kicking while I was down that my life had become. It would be worth it just to express the last five years plus of agony, whatever the cost. I’m not proud of thinking that way, but I’m reporting it as it happened. Yes, I really was that angry. There could be no justice in a World where good guys go to hell and back for seemingly no reason. It seems that the road to hell really is paved with good intentions. I’d never had anything else. How could that be a crime?! “F*** life!!” was how I felt in that moment. I sat down on the ground just to try to calm down a bit. I had tears of anger. Internally, my body was in frenzy. I closed my eyes for a second, realising that however justified I was to feel the way I was feeling, it wasn’t making things any better, and then I had a moment of illumination. “I have to surrender! There are no lapels to grab. There is nothing to beat to a pulp and no face to spit in. This rage has nowhere to go. I have to accept what is happening. I have to stop wishing it was different. I have to stop being frustrated that life is not what I want it to be, or think it should be. It is what it is right now, and the more I rage against that, the worse I feel.” In that moment I felt myself surrender, and as I did so, the world softened. I still felt awful, but my suffering reduced. It became just a fact. “I feel awful. It is what it is.” I realised that the unbearable suffering I was experiencing was caused by my own lack of willingness to surrender to it. It had been the same with my hands. The physical condition had been extremely difficult, but that was nothing compared to the suffering I experienced because I kept wishing it wasn’t happening. Buddha said “Your suffering is caused by your clinging and your aversion.” Here I was clinging to what I thought should be, and being averse to what actually was. Buddha was wise in his words. I knew this now. It was a powerful moment, and I knew that I would have to keep surrendering, and somehow learn to be okay with this. It was a pivotal moment. It’s all very well to understand something intellectually, but it was this moment that sealed the deal for me.
I also made another important promise to myself there and then. I decided I would stop complaining to Kati about how rotten I was feeling. There was often the hope that a problem shared would be a problem halved, and there may be many situations in this life where that is true, but it's generally not the case with anxiety or depression. Still, even though I knew this by now, the compulsion to hope that sharing might ease the pain was strong and repetitive. It's a little bit like watching a movie which you know has a sad ending and hoping that this time the protagonist will survive the finale. They never do of course. Complaining about how rotten you feel to your loved one/s doesn't have a very different outcome either. I could see that complaining about it, justified as that might be, was not leading to any improvements. In fact, it was making me feel worse because I was always aware of the emotional load this was placing on her shoulders, and that just made me hate myself for doing it. She wasn’t my therapist, she was my partner. I needed to be a bigger person. It was my problem, not hers, and I decided to fully own it. This was surprisingly empowering. It was another bold step towards the ultimate realisation that nobody else could fix me. I was learning.

With these new lessons installed in my being I realised that it was wise to surrender to the fact that I couldn’t generate any real happiness without faking it at this point in my life. That may sound like I was giving up or making excuses, but do please understand that it was quite the opposite. It was in fact the beginning of making peace with the situation. I knew that I wasn’t great company, and I knew that I couldn’t continue to pretend to be great company without doing damage to myself. It was better to accept this than to continue to rage against it. This is one of the greatest pains that anxiety and depression sufferers experience. The desire to be a functioning, joyful, engaged member of the World, particularly with regards to those close to you is painfully present. The means to make that happen however are frustratingly absent! So, while I had made a vow to myself to keep my complaints to myself, I also had to recognise that I couldn’t pretend happiness anymore. Unfortunately, it was going to have to be Kati’s work to deal with that. I wasn’t planning on sulking or making a stink. I’d do all I could to be pleasant company, and be the best partner I could be for her, but I just didn’t want to have
too much asked of me anymore. I couldn’t deliver it. I was just being real about where I was at that time.

I went to work and paid the bills, but otherwise I abandoned the search for pleasure and wellness. It clearly wouldn’t come because I asked it to, and the only other option was to rage, and that clearly wasn’t working either. Instead I reasoned that I should use this time of dysphoria to build something worth having. I was still an “unskilled” worker. I had no advanced qualifications to speak of and I would be doomed to a life of low wages if I didn’t do something about that. I accepted that right now I was useless as a soul mate or friend. I didn’t know if this would ever change but maybe I could be useful in some other way? If I could use this time to put us in a stronger financial position, it could only improve our lives if better times ever arrived. So that’s what I did.

I worked in the sales ledger section of an accounts department where the focus was on accounting for sales of business and credit debt collection. I’d been promoted from my junior job to a more responsible position which involved vetting potential insurance agents for creditworthiness in order to sell the company’s insurance products, and it was a logical step then to study in this field. I got myself signed up for a two year course in credit management. My sleep had not been great since I’d become unwell, so I was an early riser. I studied ninety minutes a day, every morning, before going to work. I was surprised by how difficult this course was. It involved business law, business environment, credit management, and accountancy. My study books stood about two feet tall when stacked on each other, and I had to learn every page to be sure to pass the exams. It stretched me greatly and became the focus of my life.

I had my eye firmly focussed on the prize of a respectable qualification. That was why I did it. What I did not anticipate though, was just how significant this undertaking would become in my healing process. Over the next two years it completely transformed my sense of my public self. I was becoming a “somebody”. My existing job already went some way to giving me a sense of importance in the World. I was a “go to” guy for the sales force, and I held a fair bit of responsibility in my role. I was a decision maker. I never abused the power I held, but the fact that I had it
meant that people had faith in me, and subconsciously that counted for a huge amount. My recognition of this fact though, really emerged more clearly for me once I moved closer to my qualification.

After visiting a TV studio as a member of the audience I had decided quite early on in life that I wanted to work as a TV cameraman. When I was fifteen I spent a week on work experience working with a TV crew on location around London. I secured this position myself, so I must have meant business. I loved it. I’m very mindful that I don’t want to paint my parents in a bad light, but I do remember receiving the message from somewhere that I wasn’t academically bright enough to be accepted into the industry. I was told you’d need A-levels and University degrees for it. I remember just knowing without question that this would be out of reach for me. To the best of my memory, it was never discussed again. I hated school. Inner city schools in the early 1980’s were rough places to exist. Political correctness didn’t exist yet, corporal punishment was centrally sanctioned, the teachers were sadistic, and some of the attendees made Lord Of The Flies look like a summer picnic. I am exaggerating slightly, but beatings and bullying were regular from peers, and the teachers weren’t above physical and mental bullying either. When I came home from school one day with a huge welt across my back because a P.E teacher had deliberately whipped me with a plastic tube on my way out of the changing rooms, my Dad complained to the school. I received an apology from the teacher but that was all. He kept his job. I wouldn’t have wanted him fired. He was sort of playing at the time, but that was the World then. Teachers threw blackboard rubbers at you! You had to be seen as tough, or you were fodder. For me and all my mates it was survival, and not much more. Most people schooled before the ‘90’s in London will confirm they were dark places. I actually do not personally know anyone from my early years who went on to University from my school. I’m sure there were some, but nobody from my friend group did. It was nothing personal. The encouragement simply wasn’t there, and it just seemed like something that only rich and clever people did. So I abandoned my cameraman dream and got a job in a local factory like everyone else. It wasn’t a choice. Good things came of that though. I rekindled an old friendship when I re-discovered an old school friend
working there too. We are friends who would do anything for each other to this day. I can’t conceive of life without him in it. We made other friends there too.

Until I had decided to undertake this qualification, I don’t think I’d ever really considered how much that inherited self-image of being incapable of upward mobility had hindered me. Instead, I had decided that there were two classes of people, Gentry and Commoners. I was the latter, and that was my place. Now, I was realising for the first time in my life that maybe I was capable of more, and it did wonders for my sense of self. This was a process which occurred over the two year period that I was studying. It wasn’t immediate, but it was important to share here. It’s an observation of psychology that learning is great anti-depression medicine, though I didn’t know that at the time. I can only concur.
Meanwhile, despite taking this important positive step, I was still struggling. It had been a long year of dizziness, nausea, dissociation, emotional struggle, hopelessness, joylessness, social withdrawal and practical teetotalism. I was stressed. So Kati and I decided to get away. You’d have thought that I’d have learned by now, especially with my latest revelation that surrender is smart, that waiting for the next great thing to arrive that was going to magically cure me of my ills was a fool’s mission, but I couldn’t help myself. How could hope be wrong?! I awaited our trip to Cornwall with huge hopes that a week in the countryside would be a salve for my soul. This would be green fields, nice beaches, and peace and quiet. We boarded the train at Bristol, and had to change trains at Exeter. I had sweaty palms and anxious guts but I was hopeful that once we were in a field overlooking the sea I would finally breathe a sigh of relief and find some calm. I knew that caffeine was a potential trigger for my anxiety. Sometimes it made me a bit edgy but I wasn’t hypersensitive, so I reasoned I was on holiday now, and ordered a filtered coffee as a treat. Big mistake! Half an hour later I was deeply uncomfortable with rocket-fuelled anxiety.

We arrived at Looe campsite in the rain. We were off to a bad start. We quickly pitched our tiny tent and went to the campsite bar for a pint. I drank my one pint, hoping it would take the edge off my caffeine-amped fear but I just felt worse. The resulting panic made me conclude that booze was definitely off the menu for me. I only remember snapshots from the week away. I remember walking a lot, and that it rained a lot, and that the countryside should have been beautiful, except it wasn’t, because I couldn’t see it. I was in a state of severe detachment. This state of unreality had been with me for years. It’s a common symptom with anxiety and depression to feel like you’re not fully present or otherwise spaced out, but this feeling now became so pronounced that I felt like I was viewing my life from thirty feet above myself. This continued relentlessly.
On one of our days, about halfway through the week, we took a long walk, during which I quietly fretted, until we arrived down by the coast. We walked down to the beach which should have been exquisite, but as I looked out to sea I felt nothing but an intense sense of desolation. There was a pub there. Kati went to buy herself a pint, and as I watched her drink it and comment on how beautiful the surroundings were I felt myself just die inside. My heart was completely broken. Here I was with the woman I loved, in a perfect setting, on a sunny day (there was some sun!), supposedly having “us time”, and all I could feel was utter misery. I couldn’t even have a pint of beer on my holiday because it would unquestionably send my body into further panic. I remembered my new lesson. Surrender....surrender.....but the strength just wasn’t there. I was on holiday now. This should be different. I desperately wanted to smile with her and hold her hand, but there was nothing left. I felt like such a failure. I felt sick. Actually, I felt violent disgust; a deep endless self-hatred. Where my guts should have been was a devastating hollow ache. It wasn’t just about me though. It was about Kati. I had let her down. This was supposed to be her relaxation time, and I couldn’t even pretend. It was the lowest moment of my life. I can’t even begin to describe it. It’s odd. I don’t remember crying. I must have blanked it out from my memory, but discussing this with Kati recently she said I sobbed for hours that day.

I do remember that I decided that was it. There was absolutely no point in going on. I’d tried desperately for years, and I was worse now than I’d ever been. I would have to end it. Screw the consequences. I couldn’t go on. I had played the game of life, and I had lost. I just had to face up to that fact. I did what I could to keep smiling for her sake, but it was over for me. The pain had become unbearable. I’d plan it fully later. I was desperately sorry that I was going to have to do it. I didn’t want it to be this way, but I was out of options. For now, it was enough to know that the decision had been made. I didn’t make much effort to pretend after that. I decided it was easier to let her hate me, and my memory.

When Kati and I had first met, she had given me a book, which she had inscribed on the inside cover with a lots of love message. On my way out
of the door for the trip I had thrown it into my bag as I’d never gotten around to reading it. As the rain battered our tiny tent, with nothing else to occupy my attention, I started reading. The Road Less Travelled is a classic in psychology, but I knew nothing of it until I opened the cover that day. The book opens with the words “Life is difficult. This is a great truth, one of the greatest truths. It is a great truth because once we truly see this truth, we transcend it”. He goes on to discuss meeting this recognition with love, discipline, balance, and willingness. I read the whole book, and it was a massive turning point. As a psychiatrist, the author Dr Scott-Peck put great emphasis on the importance of psychotherapy as a means of achieving mental wellbeing and healing. I had, until now, discounted counselling or psychotherapy as relevant to me because I had a distorted image of what that would entail. I simply didn’t see the link at the time between my own difficulties and sitting in a room talking to someone. I thought that was just for people who had “issues”, and I didn’t see myself in that light. I wasn’t screwed up (or so I thought!), I was just ill. Looking back of course, I can see that this was a ridiculously distorted perception, but I had until this point considered my illness to be a spiritual difficulty, not a mental illness. The Road Less Travelled changed my viewpoint on this entirely, as Scott-Peck explained exactly how and why they are really one and the same thing!

By the time I’d finished the book, I had some hope again. Sure, I felt wretched, broken, lost, and deeply unwell, but maybe there was a way out that I hadn’t yet explored? The Road Less Travelled gave me a good talking to. It helped me to meet my misery with a bit of proper fight. I realised that I had been guilty of feeling sorry for myself, and failing to come up with the commitment it was going to take to make myself well. I’d been searching for someone or something to fix me. My efforts had been valiant, but in the final analysis, they’d still been misguided. I’d worked on just about everything, except ME! Now, I realised without question that I had to fix myself. This wasn’t an entirely new message for me. I had been trying to do that for a long time, but Scott-Peck spelled out exactly what that meant, and it wasn’t what I’d been doing. It helped me to shift my perspective away from the idea that life should be a daily miracle of wonder and joy towards understanding that so much of my
suffering was a result of my ever deepening rage against my own loss of innocence and carefree disposition. My recent “surrender” experience had already primed me to receive this message. I was carrying the perception that I had been wronged by life, that what had happened was unfair, and freakish. I started to recognise that actually, sometimes then, life is truly difficult, and unfair, and that if I could stop raging against the perceived injustice of that, I might find a little peace. Intuitively, I got it. He was right. I needed to stop wishing that things had been different, stop being a victim, and somehow take control of my destiny with determination, and an immovable willingness to do the work. I thought I’d given it everything, but I hadn’t. Not yet. It was here that I felt those important words. Dear Anxiety...I Choose To Live.

So when my mind presented the thought “You can’t afford psychotherapy”, I was quick to remind myself that this was just the usual doubt, resistance, apathy, and fear of failure talking. If I was willing to go to the trouble of killing myself, surely I could figure out some way to get a loan!? I mean it couldn’t get any worse from here. At worst I’d be in debt. Big deal! I blasted through my own resistance to taking some meaningful action. I really had nothing left to lose. This was important. No excuses anymore. I was ready. I would give it everything I had. I didn’t care what it would cost or how long it would take. I’d find the money and the energy somehow. I was done waiting for miracles. I would dig deep and do whatever it took. I knew that I couldn’t go on with things the way they were. I’d literally reached the end of the road. Only by giving myself entirely and wholly to making this healing the number one priority above everything else could I truly know for sure whether I really was a hopeless case or not? I would either succeed, or I would die. I owed it to myself to make sure that I had exhausted all of my options before I considered ending it all. I’ve said it before, but having nothing left to lose can be a powerful motivator indeed!

The morning of the day we were due to leave to catch the train home, we awoke to biblical rain. I peeked out of the tent, and saw that we were actually camped in a shallow lake, and the water was rising fast! Our tent was dripping from above as literally buckets of water fell on the top of it.
It was almost up to the top of our built-in groundsheet. We hurriedly stuffed all our belongings into the rucksacks, and I instructed Kati to make a run for it with our bags to the campsite reception area. I packed up the tent in six inches of water, wearing nothing but a pair of shorts. It had been a rough week, but this final insult managed to bring an ironic smile to my cheeks. Yeah, life IS difficult. It was definitely time to go home!

UNFORGIVEN

The first meeting with my new therapist at the end of that summer (2001), was initially disappointing. One of the reasons I’d chosen Frances was that his advert had claimed something along the lines of (I’m paraphrasing) “Most people think that change has to be hard work. In my experience change can come surprisingly quickly and painlessly”. I thought, well, I hope he knows something I don’t?! He was well qualified. I’d spoken with him, and I felt reasonably reassured that he knew what he was doing. In our first session he jumped straight in with some good old fashioned NLP. I didn't really know that those techniques were NLP at the time, but of course later I would learn to use them myself. They were, in this situation anyway, useless.

Before I go any further I’d like to clarify my intention in making such a statement. Some NLP techniques are quite brilliant therapeutic tools. In my experience though, you have to bring them into the right situation at the right time. In other words, you need to properly understand the strengths and limitations of each technique, and know when to apply it, with whom, and under what circumstances. If you try to use a simple technique with somebody suffering with a severe and entrenched difficulty on your first meeting you’re going to be highly likely to fail miserably. These techniques are brilliant for changing the way the brain processes incoming sensory information. Where the difficulty is highly localised, as in a very specific simple phobia such as fear of flying, these techniques will do amazing things most of the time, often in a single session. These are the exceptions, but severe difficulties will not yield to a bit of quick mental re-processing. These techniques can be used as part
of an overall therapeutic plan, and they will have value, but they just won’t resolve problems with multiple roots and branches to them, at least not in one go. Many may claim they can, but having been both the recipient and the facilitator I can tell you that that I have never seen evidence that this is so, either personally, or professionally.

I therefore left my first session feeling unimpressed and uncertain. I thought maybe I’d hired a therapist with big ideas about quick fixes and God knows I’d had enough of those. I’d committed to giving it a proper go though, so I returned for my next session. This time I was asked to close my eyes, focus on the sensations of discomfort in my body, and describe what I experienced. I’d been meditating for years as part of my recovery plan, but always the focus had been on the breath and emptying the mind. This of course has value, but this focus on bodily sensations was a new way of approaching things for me. He explained to me that by giving full undivided attention to the sensations in the body, these uncomfortable “feelings” could then be deeply witnessed and processed. I’m going to stop short of repeating here what I have already written about in great detail in my first book, You Can Fix Your Anxiety, but suffice to say, something actually started happening. With my eyes closed, I focussed on the continued tension in my solar plexus. I gave it a shape, a colour, a texture, a size, a weight, a temperature, and I was encouraged to move more deeply into the feelings, to allow myself to experience it more fully than I’d ever dared to do before. What I discovered was illuminating. I learned that when I gave my undivided attention to the feeling willingly, the feeling actually became less intense. It diminished. This was entirely contradictory to my expectation. Until this point, I had believed that if I’d gone anywhere near these feelings, they would obliterate me. They were so overwhelming from a distance that the idea of deliberately moving closer to them seemed like the stupidest suggestion in the World, but I felt safe with Frances, so I did it anyway, and the results were jaw-dropping.

I’d been expecting that psychotherapy would involve a lot of talk that could lead me to realise nothing I didn’t already know. I’d been self-analysing my whole life. In my first session I’d been a little disappointed
that it didn’t seem like I was even going to get to test my hypothesis, but now I was glad we weren’t just talking. This had a lot more substance to it. The implications of what I was learning here were not lost on me. In fact it registered powerfully. I had been partly primed to receive this transmission by the Scott-Peck book I had just read. He quotes:

“Emotional sickness is avoiding reality at any cost. Emotional health is facing reality at any cost.”

&

“As Benjamin Franklin said, 'Those things that hurt, instruct.' It is for this reason that wise people learn not to dread but actually to welcome problems and actually to welcome the pain of problems.”

I now understood what I had been doing wrong. Everything I had done in an effort to get well had involved, in some way or another, an attempt to get away from my pain. I had been trying to put distance between myself and my pain. Even just allowing the passage of time in the hope that one day I’d simply get well was another form of this distancing. It was never going to work. I knew that now. Only by going INTO this pain, could I hope to pass THROUGH it. All the running away from it was simply delaying this process.

The sessions continued on this way for a while, lots of sitting with feelings, and moving through different emotions. I was learning too then that what was experienced simply as “fear” or “tension” actually contained multiple layers of discomforting emotions. So I would feel into fear and sit with it, and then it would begin to reveal a deeper level of itself. I would find grief, or anger, or sadness inside the tension, and bit by bit we’d work on just releasing this, there and then. It was starting to make a difference. I could feel my stress levels reducing each week, and I looked forward to my next sessions. There wasn’t a huge amount of variety going on in terms of technique, but it was helping, and that was good enough for me. So, what happened at the sixth session or so was a bit of a surprise to say the least!

I was doing the usual, feeling into the feelings with my eyes closed,
describing, sitting, processing, when suddenly I became aware of a really huge feeling gathering in my body. I tuned into it, and as it came into focus, it was vast. It was coming at me like a tidal wave. I could either chicken out, or I could meet it. I was committed to whatever it would take so I chose the latter. It was like an explosion. As I moved into the feeling I started physically shaking as I described what was happening. It was a terrible, terrible feeling. It was the deepest existential shame I could possibly imagine. In my mind’s eye I saw myself look down at my hands, and they were covered in blood. It was a desert scene, it felt like Egypt, and there were large rocks around me. Someone was looking at me in horror, and close to my feet there was a body in a pool of blood, and a knife on the floor. I somehow understood that this was a love triangle. The person looking at me in horror was my partner, and the dead man on the floor was her lover. Evidently, I had killed the lover in a fit of jealous rage. I shook uncontrollably as this huge release of energy moved through my body and I started sobbing. There were words in my head. “What have I done? This is unforgiveable. This is unforgiveable. This is unforgiveable”. Frances was looking a little alarmed. He could see this was huge. I started to explain through the sobs what was happening. I told him I deserved everything I got. It all made sense now. I’d been punishing myself. I explained that no amount of punishment could ever be enough for what I’d done. I didn’t say this to be dramatic. I meant it. I was unforgivable. It WAS unforgivable. Well that was it then. I would suffer forever. It was fair enough. I deserved it.

He stopped me here. What he did next was quite brilliant. He asked the question “Are you sorry?” Am I sorry? I am beside myself with remorse. I can’t even begin to express the level of regret I have about what has happened here. He suggested that I call into my mind the souls of the people involved in the incident. I felt so deeply ashamed of myself that I didn’t want to do it, but instinctively I knew that I had to. I OWED this to them. Immediately, they were before me. Without prompting I got down on my knees before them. “I am sorry…I am sorry…I am SO sorry!” I repeated over and over. I didn’t ask for forgiveness. I didn’t want it. I didn’t deserve it. The murdered man looked at me softly. He said “There is no forgiveness necessary here. I gave you my life as a gift”. I was
utterly puzzled. He went on “It is necessary to experience what it means to take another’s life. We have been alive together for many lifetimes. This was my gift to you. It was agreed long ago.” It stopped me in my tracks. This was not what I was expecting to hear. I told Frances what was happening. I needed help with this. He explained that if I decided to continue to hold myself unforgivable, I would never be able to make reparations for my crimes, if indeed that was what I wanted to do. He explained that I would remain locked into a vicious cycle of bitterness and pain which would cause me to go on to do more damage to myself and others, if not in this lifetime, then in others. If I chose to remain unforgiven, I would also not be honouring his gift. My choice was to accept this forgiveness graciously, or become more of the very thing I was so heartbroken to discover I’d been. It took every bit of strength I had in me to agree to accept that I HAD to forgive myself. How many lifetimes had I done this to myself? I knew this was an opportunity of a lifetime, possibly of many lifetimes. There was little left to be said. I delivered the most heartfelt thank you to my victim. Intuitively, I knew I had done, or would do, the same for him. There was an understanding.

It took me weeks to fully process this experience. I would feel the old wounding flare up almost out of habit, and then I would remind myself that I had agreed to be forgiven. I was not to be punished any more. It would lead only to bad things. If I wanted to honour the good in the World, it was my job, my duty, to work at this. Only by honouring his sacrifice and my subsequent learning could I use this terrible event as a catalyst for light. That was my choice, and bit by bit, I started to forgive myself.

So, what happened here? Was this a real past life regression? Initially, I took it at face value. You’ll remember I had a very open mind, and ultimately who can say? It could have been literal, but nowadays I look for more grounded explanations, and I have a theory which can explain it. The unconscious mind, we know, is deeply symbolic. I have already explained that I felt deeply guilty about the pursuits, interests, and decisions which had led me to this point. In hindsight I could see that messing with what I didn’t really understand had been foolhardy. I also
felt deeply guilty about the impact that my illness had had on my wife Kati, and I had fallen out of trust with myself. Could it have been that this past life experience was actually a metaphor for that dynamic? In some way, as I have expressed, a part of me had died as a result of this illness. My innocent and carefree self was represented by the dead man on the floor. The witness to this was my partner who looked on horrified. Blood on my hands represented both guilt, and the ongoing horror of the focus on my hand-related problems, both from the original psychosis, and the subsequent skin disorder. Jung would have had a field day with me. It was text book really. Still, regardless of what is to be made of it, I had begun a new phase of healing. A huge unrecognised pain had been faced, and I definitely felt the positive impact of this experience. I was making progress, and being more forgiving towards myself every single day. I have to give massive thanks to Frances for handling the situation with great wisdom and extraordinary insight. This would have been tricky for any therapist to resolve well. He did his job with flying colours that day. There was still more to do yet though.

One In A Million

I suspect this session may have led Frances to the conclusion that I was a client who might require input above and beyond the call of usual duty because it wasn’t long after this that he mentioned that he knew a lady who was “really quite amazing and perceptive” who might be able to take me further in my recovery than he could.

When I walked into Clare’s therapy room for the first time she greeted me with a tone that suggested to me that we’d been old friends, which I found simultaneously reassuring and unnerving. I sat on a small sofa, and she pulled up a chair and sat close to me, maybe just two feet away. She crossed her legs in the chair, bare foot, leaned forwards, and looked me right in the eyes. “So….how can I help?” It should have felt invasive. She was definitely not observing usual protocol here in terms of personal space. She was practically on top of me, but somehow it was okay, a little intense maybe, but okay. As I started to tell my story I could tell she was doing more than just listening with her ears to what I was saying. She
seemed to be drilling down into my being as I spoke. It was a little disconcerting at first, but I didn't know her yet! When I’d finished, she said “Okay, well the first thing we’ve got to do is get you back into your body. When I look at you, it looks like you have no neck. You’re a neckless wonder!” I was embarrassed. What do you say to that? She said “I can see this huge mass of energy blockage all around your neck and throat that’s totally screwing up your entire energy field. We're going to dissolve it. I’m going to work on it and you are going to help me. So here’s what we’re going to do. I want you to go into the place in yourself where you feel love, and when I tell you to do so I want you to start sending that love into this blockage in your neck. I want you to use every single bit of your intention to do this, okay?” Obviously, my plan to find a serious psychotherapist who would help me work clinically and steadily through my neuroses wasn’t working out too well. I was back in the company of the cosmic! Still, she came highly recommended. All Frances had said was that he had seen her do and say some amazing things, so I did as I was instructed. She closed her eyes and went to work. I had no idea what she was doing, but I felt a strong sense of being really deeply cared for, and then she said “Okay….send love…..send love……that’s it.....keep going....keep going....it’s dissolving....give yourself permission to access pure love.....keep sending it....it’s dissolving....it’s clearing....” She was so enthusiastic that I couldn’t help but be swept into a full immersion in this moment and I gave it my all. I imagined the purest love I could ever know flowing into this big ugly mass of crappy energy, and whether I could really see it, or was only imagining it, I did get a sense that this terrible darkness was dissolving, which she continued to confirm as we worked together. We stayed with this for about five minutes before she opened her eyes, and looked with soft gaze at me again. “Ah...that looks much better” she said. The really weird thing was I DID feel better. Loads better!

When I got home, I said to Kati. “I think this lady might really be able to help me”. I couldn’t really understand it though. I was sure I had tried every visualisation imaginable. You know, put your roots down into the Earth and let all your negative energy drain away. Imagine a beam of light made of pure love coming through your head and down into your
heart. Imagine a big bubble of love around you like a protective shield through which only the positive can pass. I’m not saying that none of that stuff had ever helped me to feel a little stronger, or more grounded, or more positive. It had. But, it had only ever been an immediate sticking plaster in a maelstrom of unpleasantness which would hold me for a while, until the inevitable darkness crashed back in. This was different. This was a palpable and significant shift in wellbeing. It felt more permanent. I felt lighter, brighter, and altogether more present. I actually did feel like I was more in my body than I had been in a long time.

So, why was this different? I could only reason that it was her at first, and she was a powerhouse for sure, but there was more to this story, which I came to understand more deeply in the following years. It was LOVE that was present in that room, and somehow she managed to wrap me up in it like no-one had ever done before. I had walked into her consulting room with a sense of shame and guardedness. Despite my recent self-forgiveness crisis with Frances, I was still feeling deeply ashamed of the mess I’d become, and I was expecting to be judged. While no other therapists had made me feel judged particularly, it was apparent that Clare was different, special. She had a penetrating gaze which made me feel totally naked. I couldn’t hide anything from this Woman. She could see it all. This was deeply challenging. I didn’t even let myself see that deeply into me, never mind anyone else. And yet, despite it being painfully obvious that I was laid bare for her to see, she didn’t focus on my ugliness for a single second. She saw it, but it wasn’t what she was looking for. Instead, she kept moving past these layers of dysfunction, probing, pushing, like someone clearing clothes out of a drawer to get to their favourite t-shirt, and then Bam!...there was a connection. I felt our souls meet as we locked eyes, and I knew that she could see me. I mean really see me. It was deeply intimate, and really quite challenging. I also knew then that she was going to help me. In fact, it would be much more accurate to say that she had come to show me how to help myself. This was what was different. I opened my being to her. I let her in, and she was ready to walk in. It’s a rare person who is willing to do that, at least to the level she accessed, one in a million actually.
I've been physically naked in public quite a few times in my life as an adult in mixed situations. Most of us have been naked in changing rooms, or at school showers, but it’s different when you’re actually in public with members of the opposite sex present. I’d done it a number of times as part of my shamanic training, and I’ve been naked at a few festivals in different situations. I’m no naturist. I’m as shy as the next person and I don’t have a chiseled body either, but in my experience, being naked in public is actually a surprisingly freeing experience, and one I’m glad to have had. We’ve all had the dreams where we realise with horror that we’ve left the house without clothes on, but being actually naked in public, for me anyway is quite different from the dreams. I don’t relish the thought exactly, but it’s liberating when you do it. Why is this? I think it’s probably about having nothing left to hide. I mean, our original creation story tells us that we need fig leaves to cover our “shame”. Psychotherapy has a long tradition of recognizing that shame is toxic. Getting naked is symbolic of sticking two fingers up to shame, and it’s a rare experience for us not to feel like we have something to hide. My therapy sessions with Clare largely took place in a state of emotional nakedness. This wasn’t for everyone, but like I said, I was ready to do whatever it took.

As my sessions with Clare continued, this theme of meeting what I considered to be the most ugly and unacceptable parts of myself with absolute compassion became central to the work we did together.

I knew that I could safely explore the dark and shameful areas within myself in the absolute certainty that no matter how horrible I found myself to be, she would be right there, without judgement, reminding me that this ugliness was a product of pain, and not who I really am.

To my mind, to this day, this is the most important ingredient for good therapy. It was absolutely and incontrovertibly why this therapy helped where so many others had failed. I’d had seven years of pills, potions, essences, shamanism, crystals, needles, books, talks, healings, seminars, groups, spiritual study, chanting, shiatsu, breathing exercises, meditation, ceremony, massage, colour therapy, kombucha, psychic
readings, tarot, herbs, diets, change, despair, and wishing. Now I realised why none of that had really helped. It was suddenly obvious. The one thing that none of those therapies had supplied was the understanding that I was the jailer with the keys to the cell! Yes. Me! I finally understood why my illness had been so resistant to treatment. There was a part of me that had been sabotaging everything I did.

You will probably now be wondering...Why? As far as I was aware consciously I was absolutely desperate for resolution. Just a few months back I was ready to go to my grave rather than endure this hopeless situation indefinitely. Surely, the instinct is for survival? Well yes, it is, unless you’re carrying around some kind of screwed up idea that you’re not fit to live, and no amount of punishment can ever be enough. What I have to stress here is that in my case, this was not conscious. I was not a neurotic mess. I didn’t display behaviours which would suggest that any such agenda was present within me. All I knew was that I was ill, and unable to heal. I was aware that I’d felt guilty about the choices I had made which had led me into illness, but I’d had no idea until then that some part of me actually wanted me dead. As I continued with my therapy, I started to understand more clearly how this situation had come about.

**Love Heals**

Once, when I was about seventeen, I’d had the hots for the girl next door. She was sixteen, and we’d been friends for years, but as our personalities developed towards adulthood I developed a crush. Though she was a lovely person, I think it was really just that she was there rather than any great “meant to be” bond. Still, as I became aware of my feelings for her, I started to fret, and it took me forever to work up the courage to ask her out. In the meantime, I’d told another friend how I was feeling about her, and the trouble I was having in letting her know how I felt. One summer evening I finally decided to do it. I spilled it, and she was a sweetheart as she let me down as gently as possible. It transpired then that the friend I had confided in had already been seeing her romantically, despite knowing how I felt about her.
I walked to the local park and laid down in the manicured gardens there as the sun set, and looking up at the sky it felt like a dam had broken within me as these huge intense waves of feelings swept through my being. Initially I felt betrayed, but there was something much larger than that present too. It was as if I had been building up this enormous mass of love for her which because it had not been expressed, had remained dammed. Now, it was suddenly free to flow, and it felt amazing. It actually didn’t matter to me that my romantic advances had been rebuffed. All that love was still valid. Instead of it turning to hate and bitterness, it simply transformed into love for a friend, and I felt wave after wave of the purest love crashing through my being, not just for her, but for everyone. Despite the element of betrayal from my other friend, somehow this was much bigger than the invitation to have a drama. As the love flowed through me, I started to feel a huge amount of forgiveness for my other friend too. I wondered how guilty he had been feeling. Somehow I knew it wasn’t his intention to hurt me. He’d just been too weak to resist an offer. I wanted to tell him “It’s okay! You’re better suited anyway!” This wasn’t just a rationalisation to avoid my real feelings. I really felt it. I knew that this wasn’t really about my neighbour. This was about the love I needed to express. It could have been for anyone. She just happened to be there, and she became a focal point. I realised I didn’t have to be romantically involved to express it. I could express it all the time, with everyone. We would still love each other anyway, but we’d be friends, not lovers.

I had an image in my mind as I experienced this incredible outpouring of love and relief. I saw a river of love which seemed to be flowing through everything, everywhere, always. Somehow, I’d managed to make a connection with this infinite wonder, and I knew that I should always remember that it’s there. On that night, in those gardens, I was fully plugged in to this incredible source. I’d give just about anything to feel that feeling again. Alas, now, it is as much a mystery to me as it may sound to you. I still believe it is there, and occasionally, perhaps when I’m meditating, I can connect with some echo of it, but that night I was fully immersed. It was wonderful.
If I had learned when I was seventeen that there is a force in this world called Love which feels better than any other feeling, I was now learning that it not only felt wonderful, but that it had rather miraculous properties too. Evidently, I was discovering, through Clare’s guidance, that love, focussed like a laser beam, could melt hardness and hate like boiling water on ice. Clare taught me to move with my mind deep into the places in my body where I was “holding” tension, fear, shame, sadness, anger etc, and to bring an unconditional compassion to witness these frozen places within me without judgement, and love them without expectation or limit. When we were successful, it was amazing to see. I would focus on an angry feeling for example. As I brought more and more kindness and attention to it, the anger would start to dissolve, and then it would reveal sadness, and then behind the wall of sadness I’d see an aspect of myself, perhaps a ten year old boy, and together we’d dialogue. We’d find out what the problem was, and what he needed to be happy again. Nine times out of ten, it was simply a case of extending unconditional caring. He just needed to be seen, to tell his story, to have his feelings validated and acknowledged. Sometimes he'd need some reassurance about something. Sometimes, we’d have to correct a misunderstanding. Bit by bit, I was getting to know myself, and as the months went by I experienced a massive release of tension from my being as we seemed to be unwinding a tightly coiled spring, just one kink at a time. My relief was tremendous. I was starting to live fully again.

A FATHER’S TEARS

“What do you want to work on today?” Clare asked. “Well, it’s been a really weird week. I’ve had this sense of deep shame hanging around, and even when I sit with it, I just can’t place what it’s about”, I replied. “Okay...let’s check into it then”. With my eyes closed and my mind focussed, I started to feel into the feeling that had been troubling me all week, and it slowly began to reveal itself. “It’s weird” I said “It’s a feeling of being shamed for something but I can’t remember anything in my life that ever made me feel this particular flavour of shame?” Then Clare asked me to ask what seemed like a really strange question at the time. She told me to ask the feeling whether it belonged to me. I was surprised
when I received an immediate “No”. She then said “So, now ask then who does it belong to?” I watched quietly in my mind and it was like the curtains in the theatre opening onto the stage, and there was my Dad, except he was just a boy. I was fascinated. “How old is he?” Clare asked. I said I thought he was about twelve or thirteen. She concentrated with her eyes closed, and she said “No...he’s eleven”. I’d seen Clare access information that seemed to be beyond my reach before, but this was quite a specific assertion. I didn’t think too much of it. Ok. He’s eleven then. I looked at his face and he looked absolutely bereft. “This is my Dad’s shame” I said, and as I said it, there was a sudden connection with this truth as it left my mouth, unleashing the full force of the emotion. It was as if the recognition of the feeling’s source caused an electrical circuit to connect and for the current to flow. I was suddenly and inexplicably sobbing, not just sobbing, but almost howling in pain and sorrow as my body shook with the release. But, here’s the weirdest thing of all, and I report this with no intention to embellish the tale for extra points. It was my Father who was crying these tears, not me. I don’t mean this metaphorically, I mean that I was actually sobbing differently than I ever had before, and they just simply were not my tears. My sobs literally sounded like they were in my Dads voice, and as I sobbed I could hear and feel the words “I’ll never be good enough for him”. That was actually the emotion which was pouring through my body into every tear. After maybe forty five seconds, the sobbing started to calm, and my mind was spinning. It was an awful feeling. The words I was left with were “He was crushed...absolutely crushed”. What the heck was going on here? This was plain weird! How could I actually be crying my Dads tears?

When I’d stopped sobbing, Clare asked me whether this shame had a “form”. As I tuned into it, I decided it was like an ugly slimy alien creature with tentacles which ran the length of my spine. I imagined uncoiling the tentacles and freeing it, until I was holding this sack of misery out in front of me. She said “Ask your Dad if it belongs to him”. When I held it up to him, I was confused when he said “No”. I mean, clearly these were his tears. “Ask him then who it DOES belong to” she continued. I asked and suddenly another man appeared. I’d never met this man, but I knew
it was my Dad’s father. He had died before I was born. I said to him “Is this yours?” and although he didn’t actually swear, it felt to me like he said “F*** Off”, such was his disgust at being presented with this thing (which did look like something out of the Alien movie), and the vehemence of his refusal to look at what was being presented to him. He clearly had no intention of taking ownership of it. All the pieces were falling into place, and I questioned in my mind what his story might be to make him so angry and hostile. Although I didn’t strictly see his Mother in my mind’s eye, I somehow received a download of information which told me that his Mother had not wanted him at all. I understood that this was from a time when there was no contraception, and he was one of many children, where resources were close to non-existent. He was quite literally another mouth to feed, in a time and place where food was scarce. He was resented as such, and he felt that strongly.

Initially, when I’d held this creature up to him expecting him to admit his wrongdoing I’d felt quite certain that he needed to face up to what he’d done, but now all of that melted. I understood that even he had somehow inherited this shame, which had been passed all the way down the family line. There was nobody to blame. Even his Mother had been a product of the time. Who knows what hardship she had gone through with her daily battle to survive and feed the family? Who could blame her for feeling resentful about her latest pregnancy? Maybe she hadn’t consented to the consummation? There was just a story of great hardship which had never been resolved.

Clare and I discussed what we should do next. We agreed that we should work on “healing” this toxic shame which had been in the family line all these years. I gathered my Dad, and his Dad together, and I explained to them that we were going to send love to this foul creature. I placed it on the grass in front of us. It was writhing and wriggling like some Star Trek monster, and together, with Clare, we all started to send the purest love we could imagine, bathing it in compassion, while understanding that it was no-ones fault. It, like all other nastiness, was born from pain. At first it seemed to hiss and writhe angrily, but we kept going, just staying with the moment, and soon its form started to melt into a substance that
looked to be somewhere between a gas and a liquid which suddenly and dramatically reconfigured itself into a huge beautiful glowing butterfly before fluttering away quite beautifully into the distance. It was as if a curse had been lifted. Then Clare and I worked on sending focussed love to both my Dad and his Dad until they too were looking much brighter, with the intention that it should flow all the way back along the ancestral line. It was done.

Now, I will be the first to say that this sounds like a load of fairy-world nonsense, but it’s just the way it happened. I’ve worked with many of these “imaginative” exercises over the years and come away from them with little except a momentary sense of wellbeing. This was different. It took place in a state of deep connection, and the sobbing which took place prior to our healing work left me in no doubt that something truly profound had happened. As we closed the session, my mind was still processing. Everything made sense now. I had great memories of my Dad from my early years, but in my teenage years our relationship had deteriorated quite badly. I thought he was neurotic and intolerant, and he thought I was ignorant and insensitive, which was probably true. We weren’t good housemates. I now recognise that this is par for the course with many teenagers. It is part of the process of healthy detachment from one’s parents, but this experience brought about a profound understanding for me of why my Dad was the way he was. I felt overwhelming sympathy for him. I understood completely his pain, and though I’d been let down plenty of times in my life, no-one had ever made me feel so completely crushed as his Father had made him feel. It was a truly awful feeling. No wonder he lacked a bit of “get up and go” sometimes. That had been squashed out of him many years ago.

Cue Twilight Zone music. When I arrived home after the session, I picked up the phone and called my Dad. “Dad….what happened to you when you were eleven that made you feel absolutely crushed? Something to do with your Dad?” He was gobsmacked. “How can you know about that?” he said. “Well because I’ve just been crying your tears”, I replied. I proceeded to explain what had just occurred, and then he told me the story. His Mother and Father were both teachers, and they were joint
Head Master/Mistress at the school he attended. He never got along very well with his Dad anyway, but he was keen to please them, as are most children. He had studied hard for his eleven plus exam, but when he took it, he failed it. This was considered a huge embarrassment by his Father and a massive row had erupted in the household. He and his Father never recovered from that. Now I understood what the crushed feeling was all about, and why those words “I’ll never be good enough for him” had been flowing through those tears. I understood then also why my Dad had been quite hands-off with me while I was growing up. He never pressured me to be academically brilliant, or to be a high achiever. He just let me find my way. This made sense now. He didn’t want to do to me what his Dad had done to him. Clare had been spot on too. He was eleven!

I believe to this day that this experience has huge implications. At face value, it would be easy to chalk it up to evidence of the spiritual or psychic at work, and if you want to think of it that way, you’re welcome to. We may well discover that the spiritual and the scientific are one and the same thing once we know enough to link the experiences. Mobile phones would have seemed like spiritual wizardry to people of five hundred years ago, telepathy in action, but now we understand the science behind them we are less amazed. We still have a lot to learn.

My own feeling though is that my experience here demonstrates something else, namely that experience, probably only significant experience, is recorded within the genes and/or DNA of the experiencer. We already know that the brain stores snapshots of traumatic events as a record of what needs to be avoided in future for individuals, but here we’re looking at emotional memory being recorded into the genome itself, and then passed down the family line. It makes sense to me that this experience happened to my Dad as a boy, and the emotional content, which was never purged or deleted was then passed on to me or at least shared with me, at conception. I believe that the work we did that day gave us an accurate read out of the experience itself, the stored emotion and the detailing of the family line experience. By “healing” the wounding we effectively deleted that record from the DNA within me. My proposal
is that were I to have a child, that particular brand of “shame” would not be present within his or her body from my side of the family line. Certainly I have never felt that feeling in my body again since that session.

This has got me thinking over the years. I have worked extensively with people troubled with OCD, and I have been wondering for a long time that since so many OCD fears don’t seem to have a localised cause, whether some of the anxieties people feel with OCD actually root back to recent traumatic ancestral experiences? It seems self-evident to me that instinctual fears such as fear of spiders, snakes, and heights are automatically present in (some) human beings at birth as a result of thousands of generations of humans witnessing deaths by bites or falling. This would be written into the brain/genetic information as a kind of permanent aversion instinct, in the same way that a turtle will hatch on the beach and then know that they need to head for the sea immediately to avoid becoming food for birds. This might explain why OCD runs in family lines. If any of my readers have any thoughts or experiences to share on the matter of family line wounding which manifests itself in subsequent generations, please do get in touch. I’d love to hear about your experiences and I may research this further at a later date for another book. My experience would suggest that DNA records trauma much more quickly and locally than current science recognises, and I’m sure we will find plenty of anecdotal evidence which will confirm this notion when we look for it. What a thing it would be if we could access these recordings reliably and alter them with precision. Good therapy may already be doing that, but if we could understand the mechanisms more fully, the implications for the mental and emotional health of future generations could be huge indeed. In the meantime it’s worth considering that some of our “issues” may have less to do with us as individuals than we may have assumed. It also makes the importance of making sure that we each do our own personal healing of great import to the future of the Human Race.
CHAPTER SIX – SACRED VOWS

After the first few weekly sessions, Clare and I were meeting about once every three weeks, which went by quickly. Not every session contained a major revelation, or an extraordinary happening. Therapy isn’t like that. There are natural ebbs and flows. Sometimes therapy is simply support and education.

It was in these sessions that I learned much from Clare about the true nature of being. She would often talk with me about her own struggles to highlight the okay-ness of not having everything be perfect. I found this hugely comforting. She was extremely wise, gifted, committed, perceptive, and powerful, and yet despite all of this, she would talk to me about the places within herself that were still deeply fearful and fiercely resistant to change. I learned from her that this is not a failing, or a weakness. It all depends on how deep you’re willing to go with yourself as to how challenging the self-development journey could become. The goal of actualising your full authentic responsible self is an ongoing process. She recognised that human beings carry many wounds, some of them collective, and that the willingness to meet these wounds on their own turf is an act of huge courage. She was also intensely aware that we fear our own true power, and that there are active forces within us which will do just about anything to make sure we don’t claim it! The lightbulb moment occurred for me when I relayed a dream to her.

I’d dreamt that I was tied up in a chair in a dungeon. I could hear the roar of a chainsaw, and as the sadist approached me slowly, I knew it was going to be a long and painful death, definitely one finger at a time. I relayed my terror. She said “If you could have switched the lights on and seen the scene without the theatrics, what you would have seen is a raging eight year old version of yourself standing on a wooden box threatening you with an egg whisk”. This single sentence did more for my understanding of the true nature of dysfunction than ten years of study. She was totally right. This bogeyman was an aspect of myself, namely a wounded child aspect. His sole intention in life was to keep me afraid,
intimidated and powerless. Why? Well, it’s like this. Every time we receive a deep wounding, a little piece of our being becomes distorted. It twists itself into an untrue image of self. Innocence is crushed and it is replaced with a representation of the wound instead. So, let’s suppose that a “part” of me constantly received the repeated message that I’m not good enough. That part is not strong enough to resist the message indefinitely and eventually comes to believe the message, taking on a form which matches that belief. So, now that part of me distorts into an ugly version of himself. His original sweetness is abandoned in favour of a hard protective identity. He is filled with bitterness because he is not wanted. He comes to know himself as only that, unlovable, an outcast. Now, as if this wasn’t bad enough, this distorted self-image becomes so pervasive for so long that he forgets his true nature. He perceives that any attempt to transform him into anything other than what he now knows himself to be is an attempt to destroy him. He has become a self-protective ego.

Naturally, he is ready and waiting to actively resist all attempts at transformation, with force if necessary. He also knows that attack is the best form of defence, and he may actively attack the more fortunate aspects of the psyche in order to make sure that they are too weak to seek him out and start their meddling! He will do this with relish because somewhere within him he is also intensely jealous of their good fortune. They are happy. He is bitter. He hates them because they are not wounded, and the sight of their happiness and sweetness reminds him of what is not available to him. He wants them to become wounded too so that they will not remind him of what he cannot have, and he works within the psyche to lead them into situations which will cause wounding to occur. This is how dysfunction operates, and this is why it is difficult to heal.

**Transformation**

These processes run deep. This is why I’m no fan of quick fix methods. For me anyway, it was only by understanding this dynamic that I found myself enabled to heal fully. I understood what I was actually up against,
and in so doing, I knew what was necessary to create transformation. I came to understand that it was not possible to destroy the ugliness within my being. Instead, the challenge was to return it to its original state of innocence. Like energy, it cannot be destroyed, only transformed.

Special conditions are necessary for this to occur. Firstly, we must not allow the distorted part of self to bully us. By knowing that it may try to do so, we are forearmed. We must remember that the man with the chainsaw in the dungeon is actually a wounded eight year old with access to horror make up, BBC sound effect tapes, and an egg whisk. Then, we need to understand that he is hurt. He has given up all hope of being found, recognised, or cared for. His actions are malicious, but that is not his true nature. That is only his **distorted** sense of self. He does not remember what he was. He does not yet know that he can be transformed. He believes that when you come to him and offer healing, what you are really saying is “I am going to destroy you” and he responds accordingly. He expects hostility. It is all he has ever known. We should expect resistance, and expect distrust. As far he’s concerned, you are his enemy.

There is an image from the 1993 film Little Buddha which sticks in my mind. Buddha is sitting under the Bodhi tree in his confrontation with the demons of his mind. First there are fireballs, storms, and wild seas. He remains composed. Then an army of thousands appear on the horizon. They take aim with fire-tipped arrows and as the flaming arrows arc across the sky towards him, they transform into beautiful petals which fall all around him like confetti. It’s cheesy, but it’s symbolically similar to the position we are aiming to cultivate. Somehow, we must remain unperturbed by the resistance we will inevitably meet as we approach these wounded parts of self, and know that the power of love is ultimately capable of transforming even the most threatening attacks.

We create a space which is truly safe within ourselves, and we invite our wounded parts to enter. Then we can say to the wounded parts “I remember who you really are, I know you have been hurt, I will not judge you, I want to help you to remember who you really are, I can show
you how things went wrong, and I will care for you always, no matter what. You are wanted. You are valued. I’m sorry you didn’t receive that message. You should have.” This is how the transformation occurs. Then it is safe enough for the wounded part to let the guard down, and it’s then that the remembering happens, and the transformation follows.

This process cannot be insincere. These parts of self are literally that – self. We cannot be insincere with ourselves and expect it to go un-noticed. Insincerity will create further estrangement. Some people will find it difficult to access any love. Then we simply change our position from one of promising love to showing positive intention. Then the message may be “I see you. I want to help. I am still learning how to help. I’m working on it. I am on your side. I am willing to be here for you to the best of my ability”. It’s the acknowledgement and reaching out which starts the healing ball rolling.

It was through this ongoing process of working with layers of myself that our therapy continued, and with every part of myself that I successfully recovered, my wellbeing improved. It seemed for a while like there might be an endless flow of layers, but at some point I reached a layer of self-hatred which had been waiting a long time to be met. I had (as you now know) suffered terribly for many years. I saw this suffering, rightly or wrongly, as a result of the choices I had made. I had no intention consciously of beating myself to death over some mistakes. I had reasoned for a long time that it wasn’t the crime of the century to be curious and adventurous. Indeed I’d raged at life itself for the punishment being so much more severe than the crime. Sure, I’d had some weird pursuits but so did lots of other people, and they didn’t get a lifetime of suffering as a result. Still, my deeper self apparently still held me responsible for the outcomes of my decisions and had been living in abject fear that I was going to do it all again. This was an illuminating moment. My position consciously had been that LIFE was punishing me for my mistakes. Now, I understood that actually it was a vulnerable part of myself, now twisted beyond recognition, who was punishing me for my mistakes. It wasn’t entirely malicious though. What I discovered was that his wounding was terror, not rejection. He had been so frightened by
the psychosis I’d experienced years prior that in addition to going into terror himself, he had also engineered an ongoing crisis of illness to ensure that I would be too weak to repeat the circumstances which had led to the psychosis. Remaining ill had become a protective strategy. Well, it had certainly worked to keep me away from messing with the fabric of reality, but he could have just asked me! Unfortunately, the subconscious mind often creates symptoms which are far worse than the original trauma they are intended to avoid. Call it a design fault!

THE PROMISE

We opened a dialogue with this part of me. Clare asked him what he needed to let me have my life back. He was very clear. He said “I need to be certain that you will NEVER allow a repeat of the circumstances which led to Armageddon Day”. I had to think about this very carefully. I knew that if I was going to be able to promise this faithfully it was going to require a lifetime commitment. I explained to him that many of the circumstances which had led to the original explosion of anxiety had been beyond my control. He accepted that. He was specific then. He said that he didn’t want me penetrating into the unseen realms of physical reality. It was dangerous for me, and he couldn’t cope with the obliteration of safety that came with it. I agreed. I’d had about all I could stand of invisible realities. Clearly, I was here to live a life and be productive, not mess around with forces I couldn’t understand. Even shamanism had taught me that “your vision is useless if it doesn’t grow corn”. It was time to get practical. I gave him my solemn word that I would never knowingly or willfully engage with such unseen forces I didn’t understand ever again. I meant it. It was a sacred vow, and I have carried it, unbroken, to this day. After that things got much better. I knew that I had my own back, right down to the core of my being. I also knew that I had to keep that promise if I wanted to remain well.

I remember my (almost) last session with Clare. I walked into the room, exchanged greetings, sat down on the sofa, and she asked me what I wanted to work on today. I shut my eyes and felt into my body. My mind was still. There was nothing. We sat in silence for about thirty minutes. It
was powerful. We both just meditated. It wasn’t at all awkward. The silence spoke volumes. There was nothing more to do. I thanked her for all her hard work. She said that working with me had been amazing. She said I’d made her go to “places” that no one else ever had. She told me she knew I would become a healer. We hugged. I paid her for the session gladly, and I left. The door wasn’t closed. I knew where she was if I needed her, but for now, she had delivered her message to me and I was ready to walk alone. The whole process of therapy with Clare had taken about a year.
CHAPTER SEVEN – ALIVE AGAIN

It was a proud day for me when I opened the envelope that contained my qualification certificates. I’d come a very long way in just two years. I was now healthier than I’d been in seven or eight years, and I had professional experience and a decent qualification with which to build a new life. I’m quite sure that the process of studying and passing exams had contributed significantly to my continually improving wellbeing. I could see a future. I had no reason to leave my job. I could have made more money somewhere else, but I liked where I was, and my qualification made me feel more accepted as an equal in a team of highly qualified professionals. It was the first time in my life that I actually understood that work could be something more than simply a means to pay the bills. I don’t want to rose-tint it. It was still work with all of the usual stresses but as jobs go it was the best I’d ever had.

We’d recently moved to a new home too. It was in a decent neighbourhood, it had a garden, and it didn’t smell of damp! It had been a long old road, but we were finally getting somewhere. Life bounced along just fine for a while. We made some wonderful friends in Bristol and our social life was much better. I was genuinely enjoying going out again, and our marriage was stronger than ever as a result. It was a wonderful feeling to be able to give Kati the kind of life I hoped she had anticipated when she’d come to England all those years ago. Guilt and shame was replaced with pride and adventure. I was glad that I’d persevered.

One of the great surprises in this journey was our forced relocation from London to Bristol. I have always referred to myself as an escapee. London is an incredible city for a thousand reasons. Nowadays I love to visit regularly to catch up with friends and behave like a tourist, but visiting and living are two entirely different things. Life in London is frenetic and competitive. There are some beautiful parks and spaces which can give you the illusion of escape to a different pace, but you really don’t quite get away from London until you’re outside of the M25 motorway. When we’d first moved to Bristol it had been under duress.
We knew we couldn’t go back to London, and Bristol was just there so we gave it a shot expecting that it would be stressful, like London. It didn’t take long though for the realisation to dawn on both of us that this place had a nice feel about it. There’s definitely a rough edge to some places in Bristol. It has its fair share of problems like any city, but overall it has an atmosphere of softness, and a much slower pace. It is surrounded by countryside and it doesn’t sprawl endlessly to the horizon. If you stand at a high point in the city you can usually see fields in the distance. You can escape easily if you need to get away. Bristol is a city which remains connected to real life. It remembers that there are hills and sheep over there. At some point, not long after we moved here we fell in love with it, and that love has only matured and deepened with the passing of time. I don’t merely like where I live. I love it with a passion. I could live anywhere on the planet and I would miss this place like crazy. It means a huge amount to like where you live. Having Bristol become my home was one of the great gifts that anxiety gave me. If I hadn’t become unwell I’m quite certain that I would not have ended up here, and that’s just about unthinkable. Silver linings eh?

A “Blip”

So, life was great...for a while. I don’t remember exactly what caused it to happen but at some point over the next year I had a short term anxiety relapse. I do remember being completely perplexed as to what had happened. For some inexplicable reason I found myself absolutely terrified about nothing in particular. I remember very clearly the words “raw fear is coursing through my veins”. It was like that. It didn’t really seem to relate to anything at all. It was just pure fear unleashed. That didn’t stop me from going crazy with thinking in an effort to try to work it all out. I was making that major mistake of trying to use logic to find THE answer. The reasoning is, if I can just find out why I’ve become so anxious then I’ll be able to stop it! This rarely works. The net effect is that we simply increase our thinking rate, and this just stirs up more of the very thing we are trying to reduce. I didn’t yet have a working model for this phenomenon though, and so I was easily led into the lion’s den.
I waited maybe a week or so before I decided that I would have to go back to see Clare. I was less alarmed by what was happening than I would have been years before because I had absolute faith that one way or another we'd get this sorted out. We'd done it before, so we could do it again. I was soon at Clare's and we sat down to get to work as we'd done many times before. The session was uneventful. I returned home still feeling extremely anxious. I fretted for a while. What did this mean? What do I do now? Why isn't the Clare magic working? I thought about phoning to make another appointment. As I went to pick up the phone, it hit me. If I booked this appointment, what was going to happen that was any different from what had already happened? I knew what I must do. I had the tools. I knew this landscape. I could do this myself. No I HAD to do this myself. This wasn't a crisis. It was a blip, and it was about time I took full responsibility for myself.

That, I believe, was the moment my “healing” work completed. I felt a surge of certainty pour into me. I could handle this. **I would** handle this. Clare had nothing left to give me. I had the message. It was now up to me to claim it, and own it, and use it. It took a while, but I applied every single thing I’d learned; tolerance, patience, compassion, perspective, understanding and application. Within the week, the anxiety subsided and the blip had passed. I had successfully calmed myself down and cleared my mind. I knew that I could handle whatever life would throw at me. I hadn’t raged, I hadn’t freaked out, I hadn’t become distraught. It had been a deeply uncomfortable fortnight but I had handled it gracefully, and willingly. It was a major breakthrough. From that moment forwards I knew that I was going to be alright. No matter what, I would cope. There would be more tough times. I knew that. My body would do this from time to time, seemingly often for no good reason, but I had everything I needed. It was about another year, during which I was solid and well, before I decided that I wanted therapy to become my life.

**A FLEDGLING THERAPIST**

My decision to become a therapist was an easy one. After floundering
around in a pit of misery, not knowing which way to turn for all those years, Clare had done more for me in one year than all of the other nine combined. It was very simple. I didn’t want anyone else to have to go through what I went through for any longer than they had to. If I could assist in making that happen, then I would be a happy man. I was also acutely aware that if I didn’t put what I’d learned from my experience to good use in the World, it would be a terrible waste.

The word “hypnosis” had never once been mentioned in the work I did with Clare. She probably wouldn’t have thought of her work in that way either, but I recognised that the act of sitting quietly with eyes closed while moving into the inner world of thoughts, feelings, and sensations was essentially a trance. I researched many different therapeutic courses, but the one that felt most relevant to my own experience was hypnotherapy. The qualification would also include training and recognition in the field of psychotherapy, and this covered all the bases for the methods I wanted to use. I signed up for training and by 2003 I was hypnotising people!

At the beginning of my training I knew about as much about hypnotherapy as most people do, but I was excited to learn, and we were instructed to call upon friends to become guinea pigs. To the uninitiated this may sound rather irresponsible, and I do remember feeling that exact emotion at the time, but initially things are kept very straightforward, and despite some peoples’ reservations about the idea of hypnosis, you quickly learn when you’re working with it that it’s not at all difficult to use safely. In fact, it’s mainly about deep relaxation at first, and that’s a wonderful experience for most people. In training you have your client close their eyes while you play some soothing music in the background, and then you read from a script in the most soothing voice you can muster. I really didn’t expect much to happen, but my goodness, the results were surprising. I had found a few willing subjects and they all reported an amazing state of relaxation during the sessions, followed over the next week by a noticeable improvement in their sense of calm and wellbeing. One young lady had been amazed to learn that anytime she felt her stress levels rising she could just close her eyes and picture
herself beside the lake I had described to her during our hypnosis sessions, and she would feel instantly calm again. I almost didn’t believe it. Well, this was new. Then we were encouraged to make some recordings and listen to them ourselves. Again, the results were surprising. I wasn’t all that comfortable with the idea of listening to my own voice, but interestingly it didn’t seem to matter. I was at times astounded by the depth of relaxation I was able to achieve. I’d never experienced relaxation like it before.

The training was thorough. Out of twelve who started the course, only five of us finished it. It was demanding, and our teacher’s style was, shall we say, robust! Those not up to the job quickly became aware that they were going to be out of their depth, and withdrew or postponed. I won’t bore you with a list of what we did, but it was essentially everything you needed to know to become a professional therapist and work with paying clients. I loved it. I worked with anxious people from day one until I was qualified, in the beginning using scripts, but soon learning enough about hypnotic language to dispense with written scripts and deliver tailored sessions on the spot.

Towards the end of my training we were offered the opportunity to have one to one analytical hypnotherapy sessions at the training centre with one of the trainers. I didn’t really feel that I needed any more therapy at this point, but I thought it could only be a good thing as far as my knowledge was concerned. It was important that I had a full experience of an analytical therapy if I was ever going to be proficient in delivering it to others. I found it to be a thoroughly fascinating experience. Though there was much that was strictly therapeutic about the seven or so sessions I had, there are two memories which stick out particularly, mainly because they gave me an amazing insight into the potential power of hypnosis as a tool for using the mind in a more focussed way. It was the evening time, perhaps seven pm, and while I was lying on the couch in my deeply relaxed state, I noticed (in my mind) that I appeared to be floating in space. As I looked around myself I knew where I was. These were the hallways from a section of my old secondary school. The really spooky thing though was that there was nobody there. It was
evening and the last of an evening light lit the scene just enough to see. At first I expected that this was just a memory replaying in my mind, though I couldn’t remember having ever been in the school under these circumstances. I then decided to move around and sure enough where I sent my will I went. I floated down the hallway and peered through the small windows into the rooms. Yes, there’s the old metalworking rooms, and a bit further down one of the chemistry labs. It was incredible. I seemed to be actually in the building. It dawned on me that this might not actually be a memory but could be right now. The therapist’s voice jarred me out of my reverie with a well-intended prompt and I lost the focus and returned to my therapy session.

On another day I had a similar experience, except this one clearly was a memory. I found myself looking into the very first classroom I had ever attended at the age of five. This in itself is not remarkable, but what was remarkable was the incredible detail I could see in. I looked on the floor and saw a waterwheel toy with sand in it. I’d completely forgotten that thing had ever existed. I could see the small hooks on the wall upon which we all would hang our jackets, and I could even read the names which were written on stickers beneath the pegs. I noticed the crossed pattern on the flooring. I knew it was a memory, but the detail was mind-blowing. It was nothing I could have achieved consciously. Who knows whether I really did have a remote viewing experience of my old secondary school? It certainly felt like it was, but there’s every chance it was a creation of my mind. Whatever the explanation, it was all startling in its clarity, and left me with a true sense of wonder. Nothing of great therapeutic significance emerged in my other sessions, but that was probably because I’d already done so much work with Clare. There really wasn’t much left to do. Still, I knew what it was like to be on the analysts couch, and I understood the potential power of hypnosis to harness extraordinary states of access to the unconscious mind, and both of these factors gave me great faith in my practice going forwards.

Wounded Healers

Yes, I know it’s a cliché, but it’s also a truth. Most people are wounded.
Maybe all of us are to some degree? Famously, it is said that the Shaman is one who has healed himself and must continue to heal others in order to remain healed. Most healers and therapists have passed through a “dark night of the soul” experience before finding their vocation in life. Many have survived truly life threatening physical and mental illnesses. As a younger man I found this archetype of the all-wise-healed-one rather romantic, but actually living through a hellish ten years does tend to rather put this into proper perspective! It doesn’t come without cost, and you don’t arrive at a place of pure peace with a halo around your head. It’s much messier than that.

Therapists don’t arrive to their vocation fully formed. Training to become a therapist IS a therapy in itself. Our teacher put a lot of emphasis on the fact that you needed to have your own stuff together, and you were expected to show personal development as part of your training. He would actively challenge students’ weaknesses and expose them for public group scrutiny. It was never my style as a therapist to be overly challenging, but I know he helped a lot of students to overcome their insecurities with his no-nonsense approach. It’s one way to get things done. His catchphrase is famously “Well, we’ve just got to get on with it haven’t we?!” He taught discipline, backbone, action, and fearlessness. These were good qualities for me to learn. I needed them sometimes as a therapist. They weren’t my first-line tools, but I could access them when I needed to.

Beyond this however, a whole new world of understanding was opening up to me. His instruction was primarily in Solution Focussed Therapy. He didn’t have much love for the analytical styles of therapy, and has gone on to become rather scathing about them. I now have almost as much experience in these matters as he did when he was my teacher, and on this point, we disagree, but I suspect our interpretations of what analytical hypnotherapy should entail are also hugely different. Nonetheless, in those days we were trained in both analytical and solution focussed hypnotherapy, and as a practitioner I wouldn’t have wanted to be without either of these disciplines. They are different tools for different jobs.
I share much of what I learned in those early days in my book “You Can Fix Your Anxiety” but the point I wish to illustrate is that I was given an entirely new way of thinking about anxiety and depression which had never been explained to me before, despite my avid reading habit. I guess I was reading the wrong books! This new information was centred around neuroscience, brain chemistry, lifestyle, willfulness, thinking habits, expectations, stress levels, explanatory style, self-beliefs, control levels, and of course the all-important role that the subconscious mind plays in regulating wellbeing. As a result of this new information I was learning to approach myself from an entirely new angle. Until this point the emphasis had always been on “self” in a spiritual sense, but the models I now inherited highlighted many considerations which I had never thought entirely relevant before. “Self” must include environment, physical constitution, brain chemistry, interactions, genetics, skills, resources, learning, and understanding. It was hugely illuminating. I continued to apply what I learned in my new training to my own life with great success. This gave me the unswerving confidence to know that I was serving up real help in the consulting room. It was all grounded, scientific, and self-evident stuff, once understood. Despite many years of having an interest in the strange and esoteric side of life, I was massively in favour of making sure that what I delivered in the consulting room was grounded in science. Credibility was always of utmost importance to me. If I couldn’t explain it, it didn’t make it in to anyone’s sessions.

BAD THERAPY

One of the most important lessons I learned over the years was how NOT to do therapy. Over the years I tried many therapies and most of them were, to put it bluntly, useless. Some of them however were worse than useless; they were actually damaging. Now, if there’s one message I want this book to promote, it’s the message that with the right form of support and understanding, sufferers of mental and emotional distress can heal and live fully again. Therapy saved my life, and I believe it will continue to save lives over and over again. I also think that if you can’t say anything nice then don’t say anything at all is a good principle to live by, and under different circumstances I would have omitted these
cautionary tales, but I thought it important to include these experiences here to highlight how therapy can be delivered badly. Let me be clear that the vast majority of therapists and healers have the very best intentions, and most experienced practitioners will help you, not hinder you!

I wouldn’t have chosen homeopathy as a therapy myself, but someone strongly recommended that I see a particular female practitioner explaining that she was quite brilliant. Ever hopeful, I made the appointment. I found her a bit strange on our first meeting but she listened dutifully to my tale and sent me away with a few homeopathic pills. We re-booked a follow up session for two weeks ahead. I took the pills. Despite being open to the concept of homeopathy, nothing really happened, except that I developed a small rash on one wrist. This may have been relevant, but it may also have been coincidence. My body frequently erupted in weirdness during this time. I was still unwell. Who can say for sure? When I arrived for my second session at the allotted time, I rang the doorbell and she half opened the door and put her head around it as though shielding something from sight. She looked at me in puzzlement and said nothing. I just stood there waiting. I wondered if she even recognised me. Her face appeared to be saying “What do you want? You’ve disturbed me!” The awkward silence continued. “Er, we’re booked for an appointment?” I said as my cheerful smile moved to raised eyebrows. Seemingly, with no comprehension of the fact that the error was hers she said “Well, I’m just with someone at the moment. Could you come back in about half an hour?” I reluctantly agreed, hiding my irritation, and went and sat on a small patch of grass nearby and twiddled my thumbs for a long thirty minutes. When I returned, there was a muttered eye-contact-less apology. I was willing to let it go. I just wanted to be helped. She pulled out her file on me. I showed her the rash. This she took as proof that the homeopathy was working and I was in the room for literally five minutes (if that) before she concluded the session by saying “Yes, everything is going as expected. You don’t need any further remedies on this occasion, I’ll see you again in three weeks” I handed over my forty pounds, and we booked the next date in. I was being my usual gracious self. It had all happened so fast that I hadn’t had
time to think it through. Before I knew it, I was out of the door. I returned home, and I couldn't shake the feeling that I'd just been robbed.

Something that all healers, helpers, and therapists really need to understand is this. When you are feeling very unwell and disempowered your therapy sessions are anticipated with great hope. For me, being hungry for health, I would literally count the days leading up to a session with a sense of excitement that maybe this session would be the one which finally delivered some relief. I sometimes travelled long distances at great expense to see people who I thought might have the magic I needed. For the client there is a lot of preparation and investment. It’s considered important. It’s a therapist’s job to honour that investment by at the very least actually trying to help sincerely. I never minded if a therapy was unsuccessful, as long as I felt like the person actually cared or tried. On this occasion, that was definitely not my impression!

That night, I couldn’t sleep as I turned the meeting over in my mind. I became increasingly livid. In the end I jumped out of bed in the middle of the night and wrote an email to her detailing why I was so angry. I had no choice. If I didn’t get this off my chest immediately, I would simply get no sleep. I was so wound up. It had appeared to me that she had basically screwed up her diary, didn’t recognise me, made me wait anyway, deliberately pretended to give me her time when she was only squeezing me in to cover her mistake and make sure she could meet her next client on time. Then she had the cheek to take my money, giving me absolutely nothing in return for it, not even her time! I put this to her in the email, and I asked for my money back. I expected at the very least an apology for keeping me waiting but what I received was a four page email of defensive monologue explaining that she had spent many hours in the background researching my case (I doubt it!) and how she couldn’t return my payment because my request was tantamount to a client testing the therapist’s boundaries! I wrote back explaining that none of that was correct, and she dug her heals in further. I gave up. She never took responsibility for her errors, and I ended up having therapy with someone else to help me lighten myself of the anger I couldn’t let go of towards her! I could have forgiven her for making a mistake in her
planning, but this was deceit at worst and a blind spot at best and her attempts at justification were the final insult. Needless to say I cancelled our next appointment.

I had already become a hypnotherapist myself when the next one occurred. To tell you the truth, I went to this appointment with curiosity and education in mind rather than being genuinely in need of healing. I wanted to explore Past Life Regression Hypnotherapy for myself as research for the job, and I wanted to do that with someone who was experienced in practicing it. I arrived, she seemed nice, the practice space was inviting. I didn’t tell her what I did for a job because I didn’t want that to influence the session. I wanted to receive the same treatment everyone else did. The process was explained to me and I was instructed to lie down on a yoga mat on the floor. There was the briefest hint of a hypnotic induction lasting all of about one minute before I was being asked to describe the shoes I was wearing in my “past life”. I knew enough about hypnosis to know that I wasn’t in a hypnotic state yet, but that if I engaged with the process my state would deepen naturally, so I imagined some shoes and went along for the ride. I was asked what else I was wearing, who was around me, what were the circumstances etc. I allowed my mind the freedom to construct a story initially knowing that this could very well evolve into something more as my state deepened. Her manner though was somewhat jarring. She meant well I’m sure, but she was issuing demands which were designed to be authoritative hypnotic commands such as “When I count to three you will IMMEDIATELY remember where you are!” but they just sounded like pushy barks since she hadn’t bothered to hypnotise me properly in the first place. Her timing wasn’t good either. She wasn’t giving me time to process. Her urgency to make something happen was simply piling pressure into the session and hurrying me along. I wasn’t being difficult. I went with the purest of intention of putting ALL of my knowledge to one side and allowing this lady to show me how to work the magic, but it soon became painfully obvious that she and I weren’t in any kind of communion. I went along with the session hoping that my “imagined” experience may at some point deepen into something more profound, but it didn’t. I finished the session knowing unquestionably that
everything I’d just said was pure fiction and imagination. She asked me how I thought the session went and I gracefully told the truth, but she wasn’t having that. No, she countered. What the session had shown was that I have unresolved issues from past lives. She started to issue warnings then. If you don’t deal with these issues now, you will be doomed to live an unhappy life, and you may be plagued with them for many lifetimes to come. I protested that she was misunderstanding the situation, and she insisted that I make another appointment with her immediately so that we could get to the bottom of my issues. She was literally still haranguing me as I said for the fourth time that I’d leave it for now, backing away from her to escape through the front door.

Now, I took this all in my stride. I felt like I’d just wasted £70 (yes, it was expensive too) but I was otherwise unharmed. I had enough experience at this point to know what’s what, but I did leave the session feeling invaded. What really disturbed me about this experience though was the potential damage that could be done to somebody who was truly vulnerable. She didn’t know that I wasn’t particularly vulnerable and as it happened I had the power to rebuff her “suggestions”. Yet, as a person in a position of power, and particularly with reference to her hypnotherapy credentials she should have been the first to know that clients, especially those in pain, are likely to be highly suggestible. To leave someone with the suggestion that unless they get more therapy from you, they will almost certainly remain ill is the height of therapeutic irresponsibility, however well intended that message may be. When the suggested route to wellness is diagnosed as existing solely in “past lives”, this puts the possibility of healing out of reach by any other methods too, potentially leaving that person hugely confused and disempowered if they don’t wish to return.

Let me make it clear that if you ever meet a therapist who does this, run a mile, and disregard everything they say to you! I don’t believe that either of these healers had malicious intent. I believe that they were both too wounded to be healers, and hugely unaware of the potential to project their own needs and/or wounding onto their clientele, if not in theory, then in practice. No healers are perfect, but there are some things
you just don’t do, and it’s the therapist’s job to be informed about how not to make people’s lives worse! I take no pleasure in speaking poorly of anyone, but these are important examples of how to recognise poor treatment. Such experiences are definitely the exception and not the rule. There are many great therapists out there, but as with all professions, there are a few around who are probably best avoided.

**First Steps**

In early 2004 I quit my full time job and took a fairly awful part time credit control position at a small local company so that I could receive my first paying clients in the afternoons and evenings. There was one local small business team who were notoriously bad at settling their bills. It was my job to be firm with them, and as much as I was always as gracious as one can be in telling someone that if they didn’t pay their bills, their account would be closed and the debt still chased, I knew that they dreaded my phone calls. I dreaded making them! It was a strange irony that I was hassling people in the mornings and helping others in the afternoons and evenings. Credit control isn’t the nicest job in the world. It’s much easier in large companies where it’s hugely impersonal, but this job involved small local businesses and that meant that our calls were rarely welcome because cash-flow tended to be tight for them. It wasn’t my preference, but it was what I knew, and I did what I had to do to survive. Some years later the couple who owned the notorious business walked into my consulting room for therapy. How strange I thought, that at one point in their lives I had been THE thorn in their side, and now I was helping them. I knew where I’d rather be. I never told them about our secret history! Thankfully, I was able to conclude my business as a credit controller within six months of opening my practice, and within a year I had more therapeutic custom than I knew what to do with.

It was a steep learning curve, but regular monthly professional supervision sessions ensured that we had formal support and guidance as we each found our way out into the World as real therapists. I found that I was really helping people, and despite the fact that I always gave
110% in my sessions I remained continually surprised by how successful our outcomes were. I was learning that a little bit of help could go a long way for most people. My initial concerns that I might be ineffective evaporated quickly.

I had a practice established in Bristol, and a smaller one in Bath too. My hired consulting rooms were professional enough, but they lacked an atmosphere I might have called “homely”. One day I received an email from somebody explaining that they were opening a new therapy centre in the middle of Bristol, so I went to see the rooms and what I found there was truly magical. The lovely couple who were running the centre were therapists themselves, but part of the reason for opening the centre was to establish a small Shingon Buddhist Temple on the top floor of the three storey building. I’d had a fringe association with Buddhism over the years, and I’d been to a few centres here and there, but the temple they built here was truly extraordinary. I have found many temples to be quite austere, solemn, and often a bit cold. This was a space of luxurious and palpable wellbeing and peace. On the central altar was seated a giant golden Buddha about three feet high which served as a beautiful focal point to the supporting architecture of flowers, candles, and incense, along with mandala pictures and sacred scriptures. Even though we were in the middle of the city and some noise could be heard from outside there was a really wonderful sense of exquisite peace in this room. You knew you were walking into somewhere special, and you weren’t just imagining it, you could feel it. Everyone who visited agreed. It was as if the outside World didn’t extend into here. It was quite beautiful.

I hired a therapy room downstairs immediately. Similar attention to detail had been extended to make the downstairs therapy rooms just as lovely as they could be. Nice lighting, great colours, and an all-round soothing atmosphere. I was extremely happy working there. I felt truly blessed to have been invited, but even more importantly, I loved the owners, Bill and Lin. Bill was an ordained Shingon Buddhist priest, having spent time in Japan with the head temple, and was essentially the head UK emissary for the Shingon branch of Buddhism. He also happened to be one of the nicest people I’ve ever known. What I loved
most about him was his ability to switch roles. He could be Bill, or he could be Tenjo. When the robes were on, he could hold a room full of people with grace, and when he was in his jeans and t-shirts he was just like anyone else. None of it was forced or faked. He was simply a very full person. He has one of the biggest hearts I know, and we have been friends ever since. Sadly for me as I loved working there, the centre closed after about two years for financial reasons but he has gone on to re-establish his work at numerous places and he currently lives near Gloucester where the work continues.

There is a reason that I am recounting this to you. We joined Tenjo (Bill) frequently for evening meditation sessions in the temple. If this sounds hokey to any readers, let me assure you it wasn’t. It was a space of pure peace in which we were guided into stillness. The silence was quite beautiful. No doctrine, no dogma, no pressure, just a giving space in which to be reminded of how to connect with peace. I would often leave those meditation sessions feeling about as good as it is possible to feel. As an aside to these sessions Tenjo also offered one to one healing sessions known as “Kaji”. This was essentially a blessing ceremony where the intention was to connect the patient to the healing power of the Shingon tradition. I had a Kaji healing myself, really just to say that I’d done it, and see what it was all about. It was nice, but fairly uneventful. I didn’t feel any different, but I hadn’t expected to either. I thought little more about it. Hold this thought. I’ll get to the point in a moment.

Kati and I had been saving our pennies and in late 2005 we finally had enough money to book a three week trip to Mexico. The plan was to fly into Oaxaca (Wa-ha-ka), then take the bus to Huatalco on the Pacific Coast, then San Cristobal De La Casas in the mountains, Palenque in the jungle, and finally a week in Cancun. It was to be the trip of a lifetime. Our budget was small, but we were willing to backpack it and we did our research and planned sensibly. It was an experience I wouldn’t have wanted to miss for the World, and there were moments during those three weeks that I felt more alive than I had in living memory. Take note. There can be life after illness! We made it to all of our destinations except
Cancun. Hurricane Wilma, the most powerful hurricane ever recorded, arrived in the Gulf of Mexico the day we were due to travel to Cancun. We stayed in Palenque for a further week, and took some trips out locally which turned out to be a truly wonderful experience in itself, and we had a lucky escape. Cancun was a warzone after the storm and many holidaymakers were stuck in sports halls for days and then stranded in Mexico well beyond their planned return dates. We’d been able to rebook our flight from Villahermosa in Tabasco.

Since I’d been a therapist I hadn’t completely withdrawn from my sessions with Clare. I just checked in with her if I needed her, but it wasn’t for deep healing any more. I just saw her literally once in a blue moon to talk over anything which was bothering me at the time. She’d helped me with the stress and practicalities of setting up my new business as a therapist in particular. I don’t remember exactly why I had gone to visit her on this day, but I know I had recently returned from Mexico. I sat down and she looked at me with her penetrating gaze. I had told her nothing about my travels or my new practice location at this point. I hadn’t seen her in ages. “You look different!” she said “Something has happened to you?” I beamed. “Yep...I’ve just got back from an amazing three weeks in Mexico!” I was sure that if she could see changes in me it was definitely down to the profound visits I’d made to the sacred temples in Palenque and other places in Mexico. My shamanic interests and a particular fondness for all things Mayan had made a visit to these areas a dream come true for me. She looked again “No...it’s not Mexican. I can see a huge red sun behind you. It’s really powerful. I’m getting the feeling that you’ve been connected to a line of people somehow.” Still I was thinking, she is mistaken, that would be about Mexico. I protested. She persisted. It looks Japanese. It’s like that big red sun on their flag. I had no idea what she was talking about. I’d been to MEXICO! She continued “This is as if you have been brought into the protection of a group...a lineage...and it has some connection to Japan.” Then the penny dropped. Tenjo! The meditation! The Kaji. I was truly impressed. I explained the connection and she confirmed it. Did she secretly look me up while I was in her absence? She could have done, but it would have been quite a piece of detective work to connect all the dots and then plan
to deliver some amazing piece of fake psychic wizardry. It also wasn't the first time I'd seen her access information that she could have no other logical way of knowing, and I really don't think it was her style. She's just about the most authentic individual I've ever known. I was rather impressed at many levels. When I asked Tenjo about it, he said that it was traditionally believed that once a person had received the Kaji blessing they were brought under the wing and protection of the Shingon lineage forevermore. I had no religious affiliation with the tradition, but it was a nice thought. Maybe it was also true?!
I was doing great. Life was good. I woke up needing the loo one morning, jumped up out of bed and literally fell over. What the hell was going on? I picked myself up and tried to stand up and I was on a ship in stormy seas. The room was spinning and rocking from side to side. Most people know what this feeling is like. If you’ve ever drunk more alcohol than you should have, or got off the Waltzer at the fairground then you’ll know what I’m describing, except, I hadn’t been drinking or riding spinning fairground attractions. Intense nausea followed. I was frightened. This was not right at all. I managed to stand, but the room was spinning and shifting violently. It’s making me dizzy thinking about it. I felt like crying. It was a bit of a shock. I went to see the doctor and he confirmed that there was some soreness in my ears and a course of antibiotics was prescribed to deal with any inner ear infections. I took the antibiotics but there was no improvement. It took me a few weeks then to get an appointment at the specialist unit at the hospital. There they confirmed that I had otitis externa (inflamed ear canal) but could find nothing else wrong. They treated me and I hoped that things would get better, but they actually got worse. Eventually, after numerous increasingly desperate visits without an answer, I was diagnosed with viral labyrinthitis.

Here’s the NHS’s description of Labyrinthitis: -

**Labyrinthitis is caused by inflammation of part of the inner ear known as the labyrinth. This is caused by an infection.**

The fluid-filled channels of the labyrinth are known as the vestibular system and they are connected at different angles. This fluid moves when you move your head, telling your brain how far, fast and in what direction your head is moving. This allows your body to balance properly.

The vestibular system works in a similar way to a stereo, with your left and
right ears sending separate signals to your brain. If one ear becomes infected, these signals become out of sync, which confuses your brain and triggers symptoms such as dizziness and loss of balance.

The labyrinth also contains a small, spiral-shaped cavity called the cochlea. It sends sound waves to the language processing areas of the brain. Inflammation can disrupt this function, leading to hearing loss.

The brain devotes a large proportion of its resources to the balancing mechanism. It’s something most of us take for granted, but it involves a huge number of brain processes which must all operate coherently for balance to be maintained, and boy do you know about it when it stops working! There are a number of serious problems which accompany labyrinthitis. The first of these is exhaustion. As described above, the brain is trying to use the signals from the ear to show us a steady picture of the world, but because the signals themselves are disrupted, the brain allocates extra resources to try to put the problem right. It’s working with corrupted data so it continually fails, and exhaustion is the result. Labyrinthitis also has an extremely weird effect upon vision. The brain uses incoming visual data to calibrate the picture with the data from the ears. When the data from the ears and the eyes don’t match it causes the brain to attempt to adjust vision too resulting in visual exhaustion, a strong sense of being “spaced out”, and a degree of involuntary eye movement. Trying to focus on anything is tiring and disconcerting. There is also a degree of mismatch with your tactile sensation. As you walk, the signals from your feet aren’t synced with your brain and the ground beneath you feels bouncy and distorted, a bit like when you miss a step going upstairs. I could go on, but in essence the condition is extremely exhausting. It is also intensely unpleasant. If you move your head suddenly you might experience a 360 degree head over heels sensation which is literally no different from being on a fairground ride. If you happen to be walking at the time, you can easily fall over. Lying down with labyrinthitis is rather horrible too until you’ve remained still for ten minutes. The nausea never goes away. In addition to this I had a constant rumbling inside my left ear, quite similar to the rumbling which occurs in the ear when you scrunch your face up. It’s unquestionably the worst
physical illness I’ve ever suffered. It was literally debilitating. The first three weeks were the worst. Either the infection receded to some degree, or my brain started to figure out how to make something approximate to an upright picture. The constant spinning receded but I was left extremely sensitive to movement, sound, light, and stimulation. In short, being as still and quiet as possible was the only way to be even remotely comfortable, but of course, that was not an option. I was self-employed for a start.

Now, the good news is that labyrinthitis is usually short lived. Most people will recover within one to eight weeks or so, but for some unlucky souls the condition continues. Life it seems was not going to be very kind to me. As I hit the three month mark I realised that I was going to be one of them. The problem with viral labyrinthitis is that there is apparently restricted lymph flow to the labyrinth chamber in the ear which means that the body’s own healing antibodies can struggle to deal with the infection fully. Science and medicine didn’t have a cure either. Only the body’s own defences can fix a viral infection. Even once the original infection has been dealt with, the ear and brain have spent so long being out of balance with each other that there can be a long rehabilitation period which follows while the brain continues to recalibrate with the now healthy signals. It was impossible to say whether the infection was resolved or not. Over the next year, my life wasn’t really my own. I managed to get to the consulting rooms, muster every last bit of energy I had, serve my clients (which wasn’t so bad because I could sit relatively still) and then collapse for the rest of the week recovering. It took well over a year for my ears to recover to something like complete balance, and I remained mildly dizzy for literally years afterwards. Even now, I am unusually susceptible to dizziness. I am also slightly deaf in my left ear as a result of this illness. Whether it was coincidence of timing or central to the resolution, I started to recover finally after taking a course of Echinacea and Goldenseal herbs, recognised for their anti-viral properties.

One of the well-known side effects of balance-related disorders is anxiety. It’s pretty difficult not to be stressed about something which
debilitates one so viciously, particularly when there’s no way of telling whether it will ever end (much like anxiety itself!). One’s quality of life is severely diminished. I was already tired. I had just been through over ten years of anxiety and I was finally making a life that was worth living. It was a cruel blow, but my many years of practice with quiet acceptance of difficulty became an unbelievably useful asset. I had moments where I felt distraught. The phrase “I am sick of being sick!” (and feeling constantly nauseous) was one which hung around during this period, but despite the odd moment of woeful self-pity I always knew what I had to do; remain positive, keep trying new solutions, and accept deeply where I was at this time. Once again, my quality of life was limited, but I could continue to serve my clients, and that, pretty much was what I was most concerned about. Certainly I had the odd touch of anxiety here and there, but I learned a hugely important lesson here. If I could weather an illness of this scale without collapsing into psychosis, anxiety, or depression, then there could be no doubt that I had come an awfully long way! It was confirmation of two things. Firstly, the therapeutic work I’d undertaken in my healing journey was most definitely not merely a placebo or a sticking plaster. There had been an alchemical transformation. I was literally made of different stuff now. Secondly, the tools and understanding I had available to me now were powerful enough to weather even severe storms. I knew then without doubt that true transformation is possible for even the most broken of people.

Once I’d recovered from labyrinthitis, the next two or three years were super. Kati and I were living a really full life again. We were enjoying summers packed full of weekend camping trips, social gatherings, and being outdoors at every available opportunity. I was by now fully the husband to Kati that I had always wished I could be. That was intensely satisfying. I continued to take my own medicine, but the focus was much more now on applying the real life skills for wellbeing I had learned as a hypnotherapist rather than pursuing any great spiritual achievement or profound self-development. I’d had a lifetime of that already, and I had little interest in it any more. Whatever wasn’t done by now could remain undone. I was busy growing corn now.
My hypnotherapy practice was hugely successful. I had established myself as an anxiety specialist with additional qualifications and I more or less always had a full diary. I received almost half of my business from word of mouth referrals which was extremely flattering, and though it did take it out of me on occasion, I truly loved my work with a passion. It was what I was born to do.

**COULD IT GET ANY WORSE?**

The next big test arrived around 2007. My Grandmother, Lucy, who I was very close to, became increasingly unwell with Alzheimer’s disease. She lived alone in West Sussex, as my Grandfather had passed away shortly after my Mum around fifteen years previously. She had suffered with some quite severe anxiety and depression over the years as a result of thyroid dysfunction coupled with the emotional impact of losing my Mum and Grandad, which she never really recovered from. Despite these burdens she had always remained graceful, house proud, tidy, brave, and extremely dignified. Her decline into dementia was hard to watch and I’ll spare you the details of what I helplessly witnessed in her final months because it’s too grim for easy reading, but it was enough to leave me in absolutely no doubt that the laws around terminal illness need revision. You wouldn’t let your dog go through even half of what they made her go through in the interests of preserving life at all costs. She told me many months before she passed that she wanted to die now. That would have been so much kinder. It was awful.

Before she was finally released from her suffering at the end of 2008 my life was once again about to become a battleground. The next two years were going to be the most testing circumstances I’d ever been faced with. The first problem for me was the distance. Lucy was three and a half hours drive from my home in Bristol. Kati and I used to visit quite regularly, but now she was in hospital it became imperative that she had company as often as possible, which meant practically that I now visited every weekend. Though Kati did come once or twice, I generally went alone. I now know every inch of the M4 motorway. Thankfully, Lucy still had some wonderful friends and a couple of sisters who visited and gave
her regular company. That, at least, gave me some comfort.

In the meantime I was solely charged with the duty of dealing with all of the practical matters. Welcome to the world of insane bureaucracy! It became a full time job. The first obstacle was obtaining power of attorney. I was able to secure the forms, obtain the relevant signatures, witnesses and authorities, and send it off for processing. This in itself was quite a headache, but I was then told that there was an unusually long backlog at the Office of the Public Guardian which is responsible for processing the applications. The main problem for me was that I had about a thousand pounds to my name. This was simply insufficient funds to cover everything that needed to be sorted out so it was imperative that I got access to Lucy’s funds to cover all her outstanding bills. I was paying all I could from my own money, but with travel costs of £60 per week I was running out of cash fast. Chasing the OPG became a daily chore, and it was stressful to know that government incompetence was making my life hell. It took about three months to finally get the power of attorney delivered and my bank account was empty at that point. I had a pile of bills stamped DUE in red. I spent most of my life on the phone and writing explanatory letters to service providers of one sort or another trying to keep the house supplied with utilities. Once I had the POA, I was able to tidy the financial matters up at last, but it had been a stressful time.

Lucy stayed in the hospital for about three months. Her hearing aids weren’t working and the hospital either didn’t care enough to help, or couldn’t. I booked her in at Brighton hospital and took her there to have her earpieces re-molded. It made no difference. Her dementia meant it was impossible for her to operate her hearing aids correctly, and neither family nor hospital staff could work out why she couldn’t hear. Every visit was eventually in silence with a pen and paper as I wrote her little notes. She would read and nod. Conversation was understandably stilted. Somehow Lucy’s sisters decided that this hearing difficulty was my fault, and they started to complain that I wasn’t doing enough to help her. Initially it had been really nice to see my extended family again. It had been a while, and I felt like I had some allies in this warzone, but it didn’t
last. They clearly had no comprehension of the fact that every waking moment of my life was being completely consumed by the situation, and they had decided that I could be doing more. They quickly went from being friendly faces to making bitter accusative phone calls asking what I was going to do to make Lucy hear again. I took her hearing aids to a hearing centre in Haywards Heath. They tested them and they were working fine! What more could I do? We wondered whether Lucy was only pretending not to be able to hear so she didn’t have to engage. I suspect that may have been part of it. I started to get jumpy when the phone rang, bracing for another earful, and I’d feel the adrenaline kicking in. Not only was I hurt by their continued attacks upon me but I was also really angry. I didn’t know if I could hold my temper with them. They weren’t helping, and I was trying not to fall out with them. When I met them at the hospital, they just grumbled about everything. It was a real test of my grace and I was saddened by their lack of recognition of my efforts.

Eventually the hospital stabilised her condition enough that she could come home. I took her home and a care worker was assigned to come in three times a day after I left. I stayed with her for the few days I had available between clients and it was looking hopeful. She was glad to be home but she was still disoriented. I left for Bristol hopeful that she might be able to manage at home with help. Just a day later I received the call to say that she had been taken back into hospital. She had been found wandering around confused in her nightgown in the street in the middle of the night.

We simply couldn’t care for her in Bristol. We would have been removing the ongoing support of local friends and her sisters who could get to West Sussex, but not to Bristol. It would be unfamiliar, and she was frightened by everything as it was. Our house was small at the best of times and we had stairs. She wasn’t safe at night and would need 24 hour care. Money was tight anyway. We couldn’t afford to leave our jobs. It broke my heart to consider a care home but the hospital told us that we’d have to find one immediately. I visited every care home in West Sussex and eventually I found one that was really a lovely environment, at least
as far as a care home can be. It had great staff, nice food, soothing décor, daily activities, and a number of brilliant resident characters. Her room was really comfortable, a garden view, a nice bed. I took her there and she hated it. Then she hated me. It wasn’t the place. It was the indignity, and the dementia made it difficult for her to understand that there were no other options. It hurt like crazy to know she hated me and she thought that I’d chosen to make her leave her home, but I knew I had done the best I could for her under the circumstances.

The care home fees were £800 per week, and the house would need to be sold to pay the ever mounting bill. I went every weekend to visit Lucy and then spent three days each week renovating the house. The work needed was considerable, and most of Lucy’s savings were now spent. Most of what was left went on making the house sale ready. This was a particularly exhausting period. I was working on the house and then dashing back to Bristol to see clients and so on. Rest was not available. Thankfully my best friend Stuart came and helped me. His physical support was amazing, but his moral support was more valuable to me than I can ever say, and we did have some laughs. After many months, the house was looking good; not perfect, but presentable. It had been a lot of work.

Then we hit a brick wall. The house had a shared driveway. Many years previously my grandfather had a gentleman’s agreement with the owner of the house next door that they would remove the walls separating the boundaries and create a shared corner driveway which both could use to park their cars as there was no on-road parking available. This arrangement worked and was peaceful. The new neighbour was now claiming sole ownership of the driveway. I had the house deeds and photographs of the original wall showing very clearly that more than half of the land belonged to Lucy’s house. He erected a fence which made it impossible to use the driveway on Lucy’s side. I pleaded with him to be reasonable. I explained the situation with regards to the care home fees and my urgency to sell the house to pay them and asked him to come to an arrangement with me. He said he was in debt and couldn’t “afford” to do so! Evidently, some years previously, he had re-drawn the deeds
(don’t ask me how this is legal?) and informed my grandmother of what he had done, who then should then have disputed them. A family friend told me that she had been too anxious (and elderly) to take action at the time, despite visiting a solicitor who told her she must. I then learned that he had visited her and intimidated her at this time, and she had become too afraid of him to dispute the matter. He had effectively stolen the land. I was informed that we could go to court but it may cost as much to do so as the house was worth. He made it literally impossible for us to sell the house. Nobody would buy a house with a driveway they couldn’t use in this area, and certainly not one with an ongoing boundary dispute. When I found out he’d bullied her too, I considered murder as a solution. Of course, good sense prevailed, but it was a deeply unfair and frustrating situation.

I was driving home from Sussex one Sunday when I suddenly had the most alarming thought. It occurred to me that my grandmothers insurance might not be valid on the house. I checked and I was correct! I immediately took out specialist unoccupied property insurance on the house. It had been a massive oversight on my part, but I think an angel was on my shoulder that day. Two weeks later I received a phone call from the neighbour. The house has flooded! A freeze-thaw situation had caused the main water inlet in the loft to fail. The ceilings have come down, the walls and floors are soaked and there is three inches of water everywhere. All our hard work! It cost over £30,000 to repair the damage. The dry out costs alone were £12,000. There was no cash available, so the dry out had to go on credit while I made the insurance claim. The claim was agreed but no money came. It took a full year to get my claim paid. I was again phoning the loss adjusters who had been given sole responsibility for settling the claim every few days, but they never answered their phones. I just left message after message. I wrote letters of complaint to the head office and received nothing. In the meantime I was receiving increasingly unpleasant letters from the dry out contractors and the builders doing the reconstruction work. The electricity company also had a bill of over a thousand pounds pending for the electricity used to power the heaters to dry the house. It was only when I sent the insurers the court summons I had received for non-
payment that they finally paid up, and even then it was a few thousand pounds short.

During that year Lucy was taken back into hospital, but this time it wasn’t the elderly care wing, but to an intensive support ward. She had been refusing to eat and had weakened. She died within three months of arriving in hospital but that seemed like a very long time. Before she died she told me that she had been visited by her Mum and my Grandad and that she would be going soon. She had a beautiful and very well attended funeral and was laid to rest next to my Mum and my Grandad. I was glad she wasn’t suffering any more.

So, now the house looked like new, but the neighbour had still not changed his position. I could not see how the matter would ever be resolved. My frustration was off the scale. I had tried everything I could think of to do so, but he just would not yield. It all seemed so utterly pointless too. He didn’t “need” the drive space, so what was it all about? There was a huge bill to be paid to the care home, and their letters were now becoming increasingly threatening too. Then, one day I had a call from the good neighbour the other side saying a For Sale sign had gone up outside his house! Hallelujah! Maybe now there was a way? Within a couple of months a developer came in and bought both Lucy’s house and the awkward neighbour’s house together to combine and develop the garden space for new buildings. He could draw up the deeds however he wished. It was a solution I could not have anticipated; the nightmare was finally over!

**SERVICE**

Life got back to normal. Despite the enormous stress of those last couple of years, I was proud of myself for having tolerated such difficult circumstances. I had managed to keep my practice running without interruption, and my clients would never have known what I was juggling behind the scenes. Being a therapist is much like being in showbiz. The show must go on. It wasn’t an act though. I really was keeping myself afloat emotionally by taking my own medicine. I stuck
entirely with the solution focussed program of regular relaxation sessions, positive hypnotic self-suggestion, exercising, attending to my needs wherever possible, using CBT to keep my thinking flexible and positive, being forgiving with myself, and letting go of what I couldn’t change or control. I’m not saying I wasn’t stressed. I had at least a hundred days in those two years where I didn’t know quite how I was going to hold it all together, but the preventative medicine I was using, I am quite sure, was what kept me from going under. In almost every conceivable way, considering the circumstances, it was a triumph. If I could cope with this kind of prolonged stress without crashing mentally or emotionally, then I could consider myself truly recovered. I would never have chosen such stressful circumstances, but they were thrust upon me, and I delivered admirably.

I was working hard with my clients and really enjoying it. People used to say to me “Don’t you get tired of being around people’s problems all day?” or “Don’t you find that you bring your work home with you?” Fortunately, my training had been very thorough with regards to avoiding that kind of burnout. One of my colleagues summed this up by saying “Either you hypnotise your client or they’ll hypnotise you!” meaning that you either bring people up into your world of hope and forward movement, or they’ll drag you down into their world of pain. So, for the most part I left the consulting rooms at night feeling pretty good about having successfully lifted people out of the funk. I knew of course that they might not remain lifted indefinitely, but bit by bit we’d get there. When you know you are helping people, and you have complete faith that they will recover, then there’s really no need to feel miserable about hearing problems all day. It actually has the opposite effect from dragging you down. Instead, you are forced as the therapist to go into the problem solving area of your own brain. The net effect of this is that you learn to work problem solving out like a muscle and it grows stronger with use.

When I’d started out in my therapeutic practice, I was well enough to help others, but there was still room for improvement. Now, some six or seven years on, I was feeling robust and experienced. I had complete
faith in my tools because they had held me afloat during a time which was close to as stressful as it gets. Now, everything I had learned and practiced became a source of great strength and understanding in the consulting room. I remained rightly aware that my clients were not me, and that one rule doesn’t fit all, but nonetheless my experience gave me an unswerving belief that people can recover from even severe mental and emotional illness, and since I had chosen to specialise in anxiety resolution I did tend to attract quite severely unwell people. I didn’t mind that. I had walked that path fully. I knew what it looked like and felt like. This gave me a deep and profound insight into the problems that people arrived at my door with. I think many expected that they wouldn’t be understood by a therapist, so they were pleased to recognise that they had found someone to work with who really got it. I did. I knew the cracks and crevices. I understood the traps and dark alleyways. I knew what it was to be stuck in quicksand, and I knew how to show people how to extricate themselves. They wouldn’t need to flounder around desperately as I had for all those years. I could cut the confusion for them and get straight down to business. It was a sincere pleasure to be that pillar of unshakeable support and guidance. I wasn’t pretending. I meant it. When someone walked through the door, no matter how anxious they were, I was steady in my conviction that they could, and would recover.

It was never easy though. I think it was Scott Peck who said “If you’re going to save someone who is drowning, you’re going to have to get wet yourself”. Therapists are counselled to stop short of actually carrying someone’s pain for them, and for the most part I was able to maintain that position. Just occasionally though it would become evident that someone would not recover without some extra attention. I got paid for what I did, and that was how I made my living, but I regularly gladly went well beyond the call of duty. I wanted to make sure that my clients left their sessions better than they came in. Sometimes that required extra time. If I had it, they got it. I also happily did a lot of extra work for people outside of the consulting room. I considered this my community service.

Many times, clients’ recoveries were a great battle. John Lennon said
“Life is what happens while you’re busy making other plans”. Well therapy is what happens while you’re busy doing life! My teacher gave me a great pearl of wisdom many years ago. He said therapy is thirty percent client, thirty percent therapist, thirty percent model, and ten percent luck. I agree. It’s the ten percent luck which is the most troublesome part of the process. As a therapist, you can be doing the right things with the right client using the right models and have something come along which just undermines the whole process. That can take the form of a disturbing event in the client’s life, a highly influential person interfering in some way, or just circumstances which conspire against your efforts fuelling high stress or anxiety. I called this firefighting. Then the sessions I would have liked to be used to help that person move forwards would often be used just helping them recover from the immediate crisis. Not that there was anything wrong with doing that, but it added to the pressure of making therapy effective, and timely.

Then, you would have good old-fashioned resistance to healing. I would be fighting for my clients’ wellness and their illness would be fighting to remain ill. This was never conscious on the part of the client. It was the doing of their anxiety or depression which would throw up resistance after resistance to our attempts to intervene. This often required that I dig in really deep, because there were often layers of fear and doubt which would need to be worked through. Anxiety and depression feed on doubt. This doubt will test a therapist thoroughly to see whether there are any weaknesses. Before someone’s subconscious mind is willing to trust that your guidance is valuable it first needs to be sure that you’re worth listening to. This testing takes many forms, and being a great therapist requires that you have a mercurial mind. There’s an old cliché in therapy that the client has all the answers, and that if you ask the right questions and listen properly they’ll tell you what they need to get better. This is true to a point, but you also need to have an inner Sherlock Holmes. Resolving complicated multi-layered emotional difficulties requires a laser beam focus on the relevant areas. It was not for the faint hearted, and I don’t mind sharing that on occasion it could be truly exhausting, but the thrill of successfully resolving an intractable difficulty is second to none!
In some ways the job became much easier. I was by now a true professional. I wasn’t a new kid anymore. I’d treated just about every possible permutation of anxiety related disorder, and I was watertight in my understanding of how to approach each problem, complete with multiple approaches to ensure that I could I find the best fit for the problem and the person. My mind had matured into a lean mean healing machine. It could cut through all the irrelevances and get quickly straight down to the roots of problems. I no longer had any nerves about my position. This was a wonderful accomplishment, and it felt great to have certainty. In other ways though, the longer I did the job, the harder it became. Mainly, the better I became at helping people, the more I expected from myself. It was never a God complex. I recognised that there were some clients who, for whatever reason, were beyond my reach, but I would never give up without fighting like mad for that person’s wellbeing with everything I had, and for those who I couldn’t help, I was always had faith that a different therapist would be able to, and tried to direct them to an alternative resource. It’s certainly not healthy as a position, but I’m afraid, to me, it was all-in or nothing. I just wasn’t willing to do it any other way. The vast majority of my clients left my care with their problems resolved to a satisfactory level when they’d completed the therapy. Sadly, the reality of being a therapist is that you don’t resolve every difficulty completely, a fact which pained me greatly, but it goes with the territory. You won’t find an honest therapist anywhere who will tell you any differently. To balance this though I only worked three days a week. They were full days, and I’d leave most evenings just about cross eyed with exhaustion, but it worked as a strategy. I’d have a couple of days to recover my energy and do other things and then a weekend for family. This was how life went on for quite a few years, and life was good.
In almost every respect I had been a picture of emotional and mental good health for years. There was however one nagging problem which raised its head in very specific circumstances. This was my fear of drugs. I had no other fears. I’d be up for just about anything without hesitation, but being around drugs made me anxious. If the root to this isn’t obvious already I’d like to clarify. I understood through my shamanic studies that certain drugs are used to intensely alter one’s consciousness. My logic was simple. I had experienced a long period of extreme and terrifying altered consciousness without drugs, so I deeply feared the ingestion of mind bending drugs because I knew that it was highly likely that they might trigger those perceptions again. It would be fair to say then that while I suffered from no other specific fears I was now essentially drug-phobic. This caused me no problems for 99% of the time, but if I went to festivals and people were smoking strong weed in an enclosed space around me I would feel very anxious indeed because I knew I would probably be inhaling it too, and I simply didn’t want my consciousness altered in that way. Still, never one to give in to anxiety and being a music lover I used to go anyway, sometimes to two or three a year. It was not at all uncommon to have ten teenagers in the tent next door nattering on about which drugs they were taking today and I often had the nagging paranoia that some kid might think it would be a good idea to “turn on a few more people” by spiking the water supply, or even a bottle of water left in our tent. This IS paranoia, I know, but drug spiking has been known to happen, and the possibility of it made me nervous because the outcome for me could be not only a bad night, but possibly a long haul back to wellness. I really didn’t feel like I had the energy to go through another round of that hell. My fear wasn’t entirely irrational. However unlikely it was, since I’d heard that someone spiked the tea tent at Glastonbury festival with liquid LSD (probably a modern myth!) I couldn’t never quite relax when drugs were around me.

I’d never managed to fully convince myself that what I’d been through in those early years was just a hallucination or “psychosis”. It was the one
area in which I was still extremely vulnerable. I hated that I had this phobia hanging around. I had of course attempted to work on it therapeutically, but although I was an expert at helping people to overcome irrational or overblown fears, this depended on proving to the unconscious mind that there had been an error in assessment. My case seemed different. I couldn’t see how it could ever be possible to convince myself fully of something I just could not un-see! I couldn’t pretend it hadn’t happened, and much as I desperately wanted to accept that it had been a case of simple psychosis caused by stress overload, my unconscious mind would simply not accept that as a full explanation. Instead, I had learned to live with it as a “mystery” and as the years had gone by I had learned to pay it no attention and it had faded. Or so I thought.

In the week preceding the one day festival which Kati and I were due to attend at the weekend we were invited out for two other engagements. Usually, we had a rule of only drinking alcohol one night a week. I can’t remember what these engagements were but we deemed them important enough to break the rules this week. I remember feeling nervous about the Saturday because it always took me a few days to fully recover from drinking despite not drinking to excess, and I felt like I was pushing my luck by drinking three times in one week. Still, the tickets were paid for and we went as planned. It was a fantastic day and evening, but I remember having a thumping headache on the way home that night. I had some water and went to bed. It was a late night, and I tend, like most people, to not sleep too well after drinking alcohol so I awoke quite early feeling less than my best. Mostly though, I was fine. I made tea, had a slice of toast, and returned to bed. I looked down at the pale blue bedsheet, and in the half-light which was trickling through the gaps in the curtains I noticed some crumbs on the bedsheets. I assumed they were from the toast. I brushed them off for vacuuming later and then looked again to see more. My heart skipped a beat. I looked again at the clear surface and saw tiny specks of crumb like material forming and then disappearing. I could already feel the panic rising. I brushed these away and more appeared to form. It was happening again. I literally jumped out of the bed. I felt my hands become hot and prickly, and I did
everything within my power to just take a moment to calm down, but it was too late, the floodgates had already opened and the chemical deluge of adrenaline had been unleashed. My heart was beating literally as hard as if I’d just run a hundred metre sprint. It was running at about a hundred and thirty beats a minute and thumping audibly. In essence I was having a full blown panic attack. What was on my mind though was that my worst fear had come to pass. I had the thought “What if I’d been spiked yesterday and hadn’t noticed and then fell asleep?” Even as I thought it, I tried to delete the thought, but again the panic simply increased, despite me knowing it was a false assumption. I was truly frightened. My Achilles heel had been fully exposed.

Within about half an hour I had managed to bring my mind back to some semblance of balance. I still felt intense fear. It will be okay. I have weathered storms. I have the tools. I will be able to put this right. It may take time, but I will find a way. A lack of sleep and overdoing it with the partying has caused a temporary imbalance in brain chemistry. I know enough. Eventually the initial rush of adrenaline subsided and I went from panic to just extremely anxious. It seemed so ridiculous. I made a conscious effort to make sure I didn’t involve my hands in this drama, and I chose not to look at them. Mercifully I wasn’t feeling the crumbs on my hands this time, although they were prickly and heat filled. I could just see these dots of material appearing and disappearing on every surface in their threatening way.

This was Sunday morning. On Monday morning I would be driving to my practice to see my regular clients. This was a huge dilemma, and it was one of the first things on my mind. Firstly, how would I cope? From an ethical position, should I even try to? My teacher had instilled into me the importance of delivering, no matter what. He had told us how he had attended his mother’s funeral in the morning and seen clients in the afternoon. Not everyone would agree that this is healthy, but this way of being had served me well over the years. I’d always been able to compartmentalise my own stuff and be completely available for my clients. It was a state of mind, and I knew the space well. I’d had plenty of practice while dealing with my Grandmother’s care. Continuity is
important in anyone’s treatment, and I never cancelled an appointment unless I was literally bed bound with flu. Somehow, I found a way to continue. I wasn’t happy about it, but I was able to get through my working week, and I don’t think anyone noticed I wasn’t quite myself. This episode was not as bad as the first time around, but the anxiety was still severe. I remember arriving to my practice rooms and having to ignore the tiny spots appearing and disappearing all over the walls, the carpets, and the couch. I had no idea how I was going to make this stop but I’d done it once, I could do it again! I think once I was focussed on clients I was somehow able to put it all to one side for a few hours. It was waiting for me afterwards of course. I spent the rest of the week throwing every bit of therapeutic understanding I had at myself. I meditated. I listened to relaxation recordings. I worked with CBT exercises. I sat with the fear in acceptance. It all helped momentarily, but as soon as I went back to normal service the waves of panic and awfulness would wash relentlessly through my nervous system. I was still faced with this one major problem. To my perception, there were still crumbs threatening to materialise out of the quantum field of possibility before my very eyes and this was enough to keep me in a state which was something like a constant panic attack. It wasn’t that I was handling the situation poorly. I wasn’t catastrophising with my thoughts. My thoughts were “You’ll be fine. We can get through this. This will pass. Nothing will actually happen. You’ve been through worse and survived”. It was a simple case of visual phenomenon hardwiring itself straight into my amygdala which then threw up waves of intense panic one after another. In other words the fear was completely automatic, and physical. Nowhere was safe. If I closed my eyes I knew they were there (being stalked), and if I opened them, I saw it! This time they weren’t actually forming into solid form which was good, but they were close enough to scare the hell out of my brain anyway.

So, I thought carefully about this. I became determined that I would prove to myself that this was a perceptive error, a hallucination, and nothing more! My life was a completely different place to the one I was living almost two decades ago. I decided to truly face it. I sat in front of a white wall and willed myself to watch fearlessly. I had the will to do it,
and I had the courage to do it, but there was a huge problem with the strategy. When I did that, I experienced massive awful waves of panic, not mentally, but physically. I wasn’t going to be afraid of this damn thing anymore, but evidently my limbic system was still going to have a catastrophic negative reaction to it regardless of what I did or didn’t do! So that didn’t work. The more I looked, the more panic was unleashed, and knowing what I knew about how the limbic system overfills the anxiety bucket I recognised that this was not leading me in the right direction. I tried many times, but every time it was the same. This was unwelcome and unexpected, but it was not without reason, and this would become clearer only with the passing of time.

My advice to people I worked with who were in this extreme state of anxiety was always simple. Surrender, and wait. In my experience, there is a threshold of anxiety where anxiety-relief tools simply don’t help very much. The reason for this is that the limbic system brain has become so negatively aroused that it’s operating on emergency rules. That means that pretty much all positive input is over-ruled in favour of staying on high alert. In this state the brain becomes hypervigilant to all negative possibilities, and is highly reactive to even the slightest perception of anything threatening. When in this state, the correct course of action is to stop searching frantically for relief. The frantic search for relief is read by the limbic system as further evidence that something is terribly wrong, which only creates further negative arousal. What we need instead is to cultivate stillness. By remaining internally still and just waiting it out, as you would in a hurricane, the limbic system will slowly de-sensitise, and the storm will eventually pass. Then therapeutic techniques will become effective again. It’s not at all easy, but this is what I did.

Erased!

Rather inconveniently we had a three day festival booked for the weekend following the epicentre of this new crisis. I was the only driver, and I was taking three people who I didn’t want to let down, so never one to give in to fear anyway I agreed to go, fear and all. We arrived in typical British style in the pouring rain on the Thursday evening and set up
camp. By that evening I had severe diarrhoea which is no fun at a festival with compost loos! That night I developed a fever, and woke up in a sleeping bag soaked in sweat. That morning I went home alone and left them all there with my instructions to pick them up on Monday morning. I was pleased to be home but I had quite a nasty stomach bug (undoubtedly a side effect of an anxiety weakened immune system), and I remember that night being in bed in a real mess. It was an almost comical pickle. I was so sick with the bug that I had literally soaked the bedding with sweat. It was a really severe fever. I was shaking with weakness, and at the same time I was shaking with fear too. I remember lying in bed in the fetal position with my eyes squeezed closed and realising that whatever I did, fear was the only outcome possible. If I kept my eyes closed I was terrified because I “knew” the crumbs were there even if I didn’t look at them, and if I opened my eyes I’d see them! Either way it was generating fear in my body at a ridiculous level. I laughed at the ridiculousness of my position. Life eh? Jeez! The fever was intense and by Saturday morning it had passed. I was feeling physically much better. I washed the bedclothes which were literally soaked and decided that staying home would feel too much like being ill and decided that being out in the fresh air would be better for me. The fever had definitely dispatched the flu bug so I returned to the festival to a warm reception. That evening there was a band playing who I particularly loved. I knew that it was probably foolish under the circumstances but I drank a large glass of Jack and Coke before the show. I figured I might be pleasantly surprised. Maybe I’d get a warm glow, have a nice evening, and squeeze a little bit of fun out of the festival still? I knew that I had the next week booked off from clients as Kati had booked time off for the festival too so I figured it wouldn’t make things much worse even if it didn’t work out, and I’d have time to recover. The worst had already happened! I have to say that what did happen was a very interesting experience. I pray that I never experience it again though.

The band started playing, and the Jack and Coke started to warm my insides with a fluffy glow for all of about ten minutes before the alcohol actually hit my brain. I immediately became unsettled. This was not a nice feeling. It felt like all of the enzymes which might normally protect
one from the toxicity of alcohol were not functioning, which was probably exactly right. I had just had a severe fever. My vision seemed to quickly close in on itself into a tunnel giving me migraine vision, and as I watched the band on the stage I started to hear messages in their lyrics which were only for me. They were saying “That’s it! You’ve done it now! That was your last chance and you just blew it. In a few minutes you will be taken from the Earth plane. Your existence will end and you will be returned to the cosmic recycling bin.” Of course, in the real world they weren’t saying that at all, but that’s how my brain was interpreting their lyrics. The suggestion wasn’t merely that I might die, but that my existence would somehow be erased from the record. I know how crazy that sounds. The perception was that life was really a dream or a simulation…a test maybe. I had failed the test and so there was no point in the simulation continuing. The weirdest thing of all was that I completely believed it. Now I was just waiting to be recalled, and presumably disassembled and recycled, whatever that meant?! The shame kicked in. How disrespectful had I been to myself to drink alcohol after all I had been through and less than twelve hours after recovering from a virus? I was to be “erased!” This perception lasted for about twenty minutes until the initial thrust of the alcohol diminished and I started to come back very slowly to reality, completely dazed and befuddled. The World ceased to be a simulation and I knew then that I wasn’t being recalled.

I’m not proud to tell this story. It was reckless and I should have known better, but you know…I’m human. I screw up sometimes too. So shoot me for trying to squeeze a little joy out of a crappy situation. It was nonetheless a hugely interesting insight into what true paranoid schizophrenic perception must be like. I have never experienced anything remotely like it before or since. It was mercifully a one off, and I’m not worried that it would ever occur again. I believe it was the culmination of an anxiety crisis, three days of virus, depleted enzymes and alcohol induced temporary system overload. I’m sure there’s a chemical explanation, but in essence I was temporarily poisoned. Within an hour it was almost as if it had never happened, except I was shaken and stirred. I got the message though. No booze for a while. I wouldn’t
touch a drop of alcohol again for the next nine months.

**Coming Home**

After the festival and another week or so of continuing extreme anxiety I phoned my supervisor. I was embarrassed. I shouldn’t have been. That’s what supervision is for. Admitting that I might need help was a gigantic slice of humble pie for someone in my position though. He didn’t have much immediate actionable advice for me. I underplayed it slightly and we agreed that I’d get back to him if things didn’t improve shortly. Clare was no longer a therapist so she couldn’t help, and I knew that my colleagues didn’t know anything I didn’t already know myself about how to approach a resolution, so I felt very much on my own again, at least until I could find help, or solve it myself. Somehow I managed to continue to see clients, but I was wearing a front. Inside I was in turmoil. I was seriously considering that I might have to stop being a therapist, but I remained hopeful that it would calm down and I’d get back to normal and I didn’t want to close my practice prematurely and then find that it all cleared up a week later. That wouldn’t only have consequences for me. It would do a huge dis-service to my clients as well, and I was keen to avoid such drastic action unless it was absolutely necessary. I wasn’t at my best but I was so well practiced in the art of helping people that I was functioning okay. I was just very uncomfortable privately.

I knew that this crisis was really only about one specific difficulty. In all other respects I was healthy, but this was always going to be the most difficult subconscious template to heal for me. That was exactly why it had been so treatment resistant over the years. It was the initial trauma of Armageddon Day surfacing for healing and resolution. I had worked on just about every other aspect of myself over the years, but despite numerous efforts to reach and resolve that initial trauma, my subconscious mind had refused to make it available to work with. It was almost inevitable that it would surface at some point. Apparently, now it was time. As with all illness, there’s never a convenient time.

As I reached the third week I realised that things were not getting better.
In fact, they were getting worse. I did start to feel a little desperate, so I found a therapist with over thirty years of experience and started sessions. She said she could work spiritually or clinically. Since I didn’t really know what I was going to need this seemed like a good way to hedge my bets. As it turned out, she was mostly spiritually focussed, which disappointed me slightly, and before we knew it I was back into past lives etc. She was a lovely lady, smart, perceptive, and well-intended, and I have no doubt that she helps many, but after three sessions I realised I was on a path to nowhere even though I did feel temporarily much better after one of our sessions. I’d done years of this stuff. No, I needed practical advice and grounded professional understanding and support. I continued to research my options.

Then, one day, I had a brainwave - Shamanism! It had been many years since I had used shamanic practices in any form but I had training in shamanic journeying, and though traditionally you should have someone else journey for you for soul retrieval work rather than doing it yourself, I figured I had nothing to lose by trying. I honestly thought though that there was about a one percent chance it might help. It was almost a formality. Just do it and tick it off the list.

I made very little ceremony for it. I began my imaginary journey. I closed my eyes, entered the Earth through my known power spot, down through the cave and out into the Underworld. I called my power animal who promptly arrived. I jumped on his back and the next thing I knew we were travelling across the mythical archetypal landscapes of the shamanic lower worlds. Now we were flying way further than my power animal had ever taken me before, over forests and deserts before we eventually arrived at a sea which went on for miles. I was thinking “where the heck is he taking me?” Suddenly he crashed down through the surface of the sea and swam with me hanging on for dear life through a series of cave systems (which I marvelled at…I’d never been under the sea in this place before) before surfacing into a cavern. I looked over into the corner of the cavern (somehow containing air – it’s a mythological landscape), and there, locked behind a giant spider web was a twenty something year old version of myself. I was aware that there was a
creature of some sort off to my left but I didn’t want to even look. I “sensed” that it was some kind of giant spider, a mythical creature and I asked whether I could retrieve this soul part. The answer came as a feeling “Yes, he’s free to go. He’s done his time.” I quickly pulled the web net away from the wall and grabbed him by the hand. We both mounted the power animal and made the journey back. I thanked my power animal and returned up through the Earth with my younger self. As we re-entered the real world I imagined him melting into my body and welcomed him home. The whole journey took about ten minutes. I got up from my chair and went about my day. Nothing was different. I wrote the journey off as nothing but the product of a wishful mind clutching at imaginary straws in desperation. It was worth a try, but I deemed it as useless as everything else. The anxiety continued unabated. I really didn’t know what I was going to do other than just remain still and wait it out. It was a crushing blow to learn that my tools weren’t going to cut it this time around. I was becoming tired, and there in the background the desperation was mounting, which I knew was not a good thing!

I woke up the next morning and looked at the wall with my usual steely determination that I had to convince my mind that this was not real, and a thrill of excitement went through me. I could still “see” the phenomenon, but the waves of panic which usually accompanied this forced viewing were almost completely absent! It was a monumental change. There was nothing subtle about it. Yesterday, and for perhaps sixty days before that this forced viewing would have caused huge waves of physical panic. Today, nothing! I could hardly believe it! That was it then. I knew I was going to be well again, and this time I wouldn’t only distance myself from this, I would actually heal it. I wasn’t going to be scared any more. I didn’t care whether it was some weird spiritual quantum-thing, or a good old fashioned clinical psychosis, it just ceased to be something to be terrified of. It’s hard to describe exactly how or why, but I truly knew in that moment that my relationship to that “psychosis” had been permanently altered. It couldn’t or wouldn’t claim me in the same way anymore. I’m still not sure which?

This latest round of anxiety had been truly humbling. I had never been
cocky about my own recovery. It had been deeply challenging and I’d needed help to achieve it, but now I’d had a brand new taste of what it was to feel truly stuck. Whilst I had always had utmost empathy for all my clients, I had always maintained that they could recover - no matter what. I’m afraid my faith in that position had taken a knock in this period, but maybe that’s the way life continues to challenge us? I had as much knowledge about how to deal with anxiety as anyone I knew of and I had still been stuck, and that had troubled me greatly. As it happened, it appeared that a shamanic intervention had done the trick on this occasion! Had that not have helped, I’m quite sure I would have found a way.

I’m aware as I write this that it may alarm sufferers to hear this part of my story, but I think this particular tale needs to be understood in the proper context. My story is somewhat unusual but not unique. This one particular template of fear was so bizarre that no amount of “standard” therapy was likely to heal it. It wasn’t about my mother, my lifestyle, my thinking patterns, or any of the usual stuff. It was firmly rooted in some kind of mythical archetypal theme with an otherworldly focus. I had always hoped that someday I would get to the bottom of it, but in truth I had no idea how. Although it had not caused me any significant problems in many years, I had tried to investigate it therapeutically through many different means, but it had been like a door closed tight. In the end, it came to a head when it was ready to do so!

From a shamanic perspective the story would be that some wounds will only reveal themselves for healing when the person is strong enough in themselves to deal with it. I don’t say that this is what happened, but it is strange that it came up when it did, at a time when I was robust, and not before. Who can know? My preferred position is to know that while I’m entitled to my theories, in the end, I can’t know for sure. Your guess, in this instance at least, is as good as mine! I think the important thing to note though is that I DID solve the problem with persistence, and that’s the stuff we need to heal ourselves!

I wanted to make sure that I did everything I could to capitalise on this momentous step forward into fearlessness and I decided to do some
research. I knew that my subconscious mind was now willing to accept the possibility that I had experienced a gigantic cerebral breakdown in my twenties and that it would now be possible to convince myself of that much more fully if I could find supporting evidence which I could digest consciously too. I found a book by Oliver Sacks, a neurologist who is most famous for his book “The man who mistook his wife for a hat”, an intriguing title for sure. He had written a brand new book entitled “Hallucinations”, which covers the title subject in full detail, exploring many cases of neurological dysfunctions which can cause these hallucinatory experiences. It was an extremely useful read for me. In particular, it covered the phenomenon of multi-sensory hallucination. For me, one of the great convincers that my experience had been something more than simple “psychosis” was the fact that not only had I been able to see the crumbs materialising but also that I had been able to feel them so clearly as well. I just hadn’t been able to reconcile that as something the mind could create so convincingly. I’d never really fully considered the possibility that hallucinations could be multi-sensory and synchronized. That just seemed like too much. I could see how one sense could be fooled, but multiple senses at the same time? Well, apparently, they can be, and it’s not entirely uncommon. This book helped me to understand much more fully the possible mechanics by which such experiences can occur and that in turn helped me to cement the “belief” in my mind that these happenings were no threat to me. With my subconscious mind now willing to accept new information on the matter I soon became massively more relaxed about the whole idea. Months previously it had been my biggest fear in life. Now I had certainty that even if this phenomenon were to repeat at some time in my life, I would treat it as neurological noise and nothing more. Most importantly that wasn’t just something I hoped I might be able to convince myself of, it was now something which I truly believed.

In therapeutic terms, what you believe is the most powerful indicator of how you will feel. In terms of fear generation this took my anxiety on the matter from a ten to a one! I also learned something else in this period of investigation. I learned that my eyes were letting me down generally. Now middle-aged, I realised that I need glasses to see small writing. I
recognised that my blurry vision on tiny objects was compounding the problem of seeing things that weren't there. My brain was much more likely to interpret the blurry data according to expectation instead of seeing clearly. When I wore reading glasses and looked at a white wall, the effect of the dots appearing and disappearing reduced significantly. The rest, I reasoned was just visual/interpretational static which had been seized upon by my over-zealous fear responses and blown up to the size of a giant. In fact, it was now just static which could be, and more importantly should be ignored. I still see tiny static spots coming and going on clear surfaces. Maybe we all do? Most of us don’t notice it because we’re not looking, just as we don’t notice the noise our ears receive in silence. I recommend you keep it that way. These statics are truly a matter of insignificance to me now, just visual “noise”, and cause pretty much zero anxious response. I’m not saying that was all it had been twenty years previously. It had been most definite then, but now I believe I was healing just the fear and trauma, an echo of sorts, which had been kicking around in the background. In any case, it was done. I have not had even a sniff of a recurrence to this day, and I fully expect it to remain that way. I don’t know if I can find the words to adequately express the degree of freedom I now feel from that lifelong fear. It is truly absent. Festivals are a lot easier!
Oh, if only I could put my hand on my heart and say that my story ended there. I could emerge victorious with my Olympian pose, but alas, although the healing crisis was done, there was still one final hurdle, and it wasn’t a small one either. Over the next few months any residual anxiety diminished steadily until I was eventually back to a state of relative normality. I was pleased that I hadn’t closed my practice because that would have been a new mess to clear up. I’d not been at all happy to be more anxious than the clients I was treating for a while there. That made me feel fraudulent, but it would have been seriously premature to just close up shop without giving myself a chance to recover first. I also had a responsibility to my many clients. To have suddenly pulled the shutters down overnight would have left them stranded, and that was not something I was willing to consider without a fight at that point. Unfortunately the circumstances were what they were. This moment was going to come at some point in my life. It was the last of my anxiety demons. I’d made the right decision though to tough it out and considering the scale of the crisis, I was proud of the swift recovery I’d made! After the festival I’d made the decision to quit drinking alcohol completely, not that it had been a problem area for me generally, but clearly I needed to pay extra special attention to nurturing myself now.

Mentally and emotionally I was finding my way back to being my chirpy old self. Physically however I was starting to notice a creeping exhaustion setting in. Over the last few years I had been impeccable in my exercise regime. I would swim a thousand metres four times a week, walk whenever possible, cycle regularly, and I welcomed any other opportunities for exercise which came my way. Now however, I was noticing a deep fatigue after exercise. At first I thought it was just a phase. Energy is better at some times than at others. That’s life. I kept pushing through it. I know that usually you have more energy when you use more energy, so I figured if I just kept going the phase would pass. It didn’t. The fatigue became more and more pronounced. My arms and legs ached constantly. This went on for a while and eventually I was
forced to decrease the level of exercise I did. Forcing it just wasn’t working. As an expert now in listening to what my body needed I responded and gave myself permission to rest. Clearly, this recent crisis, while reaching a successful conclusion, had taken it out of me. I was tired. There was no doubt that I had suffered some adrenal fatigue from that prolonged spell of extreme fear, and I reasoned that I would probably need to give my body some time to rebalance. I did what I could to stay fit, but otherwise I just relaxed about where I was at. As the weeks passed though, even with rest, the fatigue became exhaustion. I was really struggling. I was unable to keep my eyes open past 8.00pm and then I was waking at stupid o’clock because I’d fallen asleep so early. Everything was becoming a real effort. I decided that something was definitely not right. I felt ill. The real kicker came when I got on the scales. I had gained over twenty pounds in less than six months! I absolutely could not believe it! I knew I’d gained weight, but this was crazy! I had been exercising less but I hadn’t changed my diet. If anything, even though previously I only ever drank once a week, being alcohol free I was consuming fewer calories. This really perplexed me. Something was seriously wrong here. I knew there had been thyroid dysfunction in my Mum and her Mum, and my symptoms matched those of thyroid dysfunction perfectly so I went for tests. They came back normal. I researched some more and discovered that thyroid dysfunction is notoriously difficult to diagnose and treat, but it was the only thing that made sense. It would account for the exhaustion and the incredible weight gain. I asked for more tests. Again they came back normal. I researched more and found that you could order private tests which would look more closely at the results and learned that there are thyroid results which are often overlooked by general practice which can correctly identify the problem. It was expensive and it was often inconclusive, and even if you did correctly identify the problem, doctors were often reluctant to accept the test results and offer treatment. The treatment itself can be hit and miss even if you receive it. It sounded like a long process with no certainty so I shelved it for the time being. With each week that passed I was feeling more and more unwell. Now I really was wondering how I would carry on if things continued in this direction. In addition to the exhaustion I was also feeling dizzy and
nauseous almost constantly. What the hell was going on? I was happy. I was feeling contented with my life. I loved my work. I had great friends. My social life was full despite my teetotalism. I wasn’t feeling at all anxious. Yes, I’d just been through a tough time, but I’d overcome that last obstacle to complete psychological freedom and that felt great. It had to be something physical.

Next then, I looked at my diet. I tried cutting out any sources of artificial sweeteners, gluten, dairy, meats and sugars. I took supplements. Nothing! Still the sickness and exhaustion continued. I was at a loss. Ever the professional, my clients knew nothing of it, but I knew I didn’t have much left in the tank. Over the summer that year I continued to pretend to live the normal life, but I was becoming increasingly miserable. Waking up feeling exhausted and nauseous every day with absolutely no idea why is a pretty miserable existence. I kept visiting the doctor, and they had no ideas, except that maybe I was depressed? I said to the doc “Yes, I’m starting to get depressed because I feel so damn ill, but when I started feeling ill I was really happy, so that can’t be it. I have nothing to be depressed about!” He accepted my point. I saw numerous therapists in the vague hope that someone could help me to diagnose the problem. I went for Kinesiology and was told that I needed ginger and lemon tea. I doubted that would help but followed the instructions given without result. Another person told me that I had gall stones, and I was prescribed a “liver detox”. I researched this dubious business about drinking olive oil with epsom salts, a practice allegedly debunked as quackery, and decided there was no way I was having any part of that. Instead, I bought a nutrition book and did the liver detox diet, supplements and all. After the tenth day of drinking green sludge I felt worse than ever and ditched that. Here, the nutritionists may tell me that I should have continued, that I was feeling awful because the toxins were being purged, but I’m afraid, having experimented with detoxes through my life that I never felt any different, and most doctors agree that the liver is perfectly capable of detoxing naturally. I wasn’t drinking alcohol or eating badly so that didn’t fit. I trusted my intuition. The liver detox diet was itself making me feel depressed!
At this point I’m afraid I’d had enough quackery in my life to take it all with a pinch of salt. I saw a five element acupuncturist. She told me my pulses showed I was unhappy and that I should try to smile a bit more! Tell me something I don’t know. Of course I’m low. I have been living with chronic nausea and exhaustion. I became very helpless, and started losing hope. Nobody had any answers. It was a mystery illness. I was also becoming extremely worn down, and my mind started to obsess about how ill I felt. I started to think of little else. It wasn’t voluntary. It was automatic and intrusive. I felt myself sinking into a hole which seemed to become increasingly inescapable. It had now been close to a year that I had been feeling this way. I was struggling with my weight. The nausea I was feeling was only ever mildly helped by eating something, so there was a constant battle between wanting to eat to relieve the nausea and knowing that my body was doubling the calorie content of every morsel because my metabolism had by now slowed to the point where a slug would beat it in a race. It really was as if everything was just slowing down to almost a stop, and any attempts to blast through it with goodwill, positivity, or sheer determination just resulted in deeper fatigue. I felt wretched.

I was by now seriously questioning my work. What if it was being a therapist that was causing this? Maybe the years of accumulated stress of handling people in crisis was finally taking its toll? What if I was just lonely? It’s a solitary profession. Maybe I should just get another job? I reduced my days to two days working a week to see if that made a difference but it made none at all. I went to work gladly. I still loved my work with a passion, and though I know that many will balk at the fact that I continued to work, I managed to continue to serve my clients well. I still wasn’t ready to admit defeat, but I continued to feel sick no matter what I did. Some days were better than others, so I don’t want to paint myself as an utter wreck. I was functioning externally. I just felt ill while I was doing it which sucked all the joy out of living. I questioned every aspect of my life. Maybe my life wasn’t full enough? Perhaps I should volunteer? I considered all of this, but in my heart of hearts I knew it was all futile grasping. In the end, I was physically unwell and I didn’t know why. I considered therapy seriously but it honestly just felt like a
complete waste of time. I had nothing I wanted or needed to resolve. I literally had nothing to talk about. The only thing troubling me in any way was this constant exhaustion, and it wasn’t about anything. Life circumstances were genuinely fine, were it not for this relentless exhaustion, dizziness, and nausea. I wondered whether it was anything to do with my abstinence from alcohol. Maybe I wasn’t having enough fun? I knew that was sort of ridiculous but at this point I wanted to explore every single permutation of possibility. So I tried having a few drinks. All that did was make me feel lower than ever, almost instantly! The next day after alcohol I would feel deeply miserable and worse than ever. Now, here was a clue! I remained almost completely abstinent from alcohol, but interestingly, it was alcohol which eventually brought about a resolution.

ANTI-DEPRESSANTS

I went to see a friend I hadn’t seen for a while and I hadn’t drunk any alcohol for a while so I thought I’d give it another go. While I was with him I drank a few beers. The evening was pleasant enough under the circumstances. I was wearing my brave face. It would take an hour to walk home and as I began my journey, it started raining. As I trudged through the cold wet mist I was swamped with dark feelings, and came to an inescapable conclusion. I started to concoct a plan to end my life. I wasn’t really thinking straight. There’s no doubt that the depressive effects of the alcohol were having an input, but I was serious. I just could not see any other way to end the suffering. It seemed to me at this point that nobody could help, and there would be no end to it. I had reached the end. After all the fighting, the trying, the hoping, the caring, the wishing, and the endless work to do the right thing, age was catching up with me, and all I could see ahead were more endless days of misery. I’d done everything I knew how to do, and now this mysterious illness was going to fully rob me of any joy whatsoever. I felt so ill, and I was worn down. I couldn’t bear the daily misery any longer. There was no future. I could not be of any use to anyone now. I would only be a burden. There was only one way out. It was awful. It was unthinkable. It was terrifying, and it was disgustingly shameful, but it was the only way. It knew that
nobody would understand. If they could spend a week in my shoes, they would feel the same way. It was more than anyone should be asked to bear. I would do it. I would definitely do it. I just didn’t see that I had a choice.

When I woke up the next morning I reviewed my shocking conclusions from the night before. I’d been suicidal before in desperation, but this had an altogether different quality about it. This time I had been quite sure that I was actually going to (have to) do it. I’d started to plan it on that walk home. After a night of sleep I was less certain that I would actually do it, but it was definitely still a possibility. Just out of curiosity I started researching methods. Evidently, it’s not as easy as you’d think. Many attempts fail, often with catastrophic consequences. Let’s spare the details, but the possibility of botching it made for grim reading. I really didn’t want to do it, but if I was going to have to do it at some future point I wanted to make sure I did it right. I would think about it for a while. So I continued my research over the next week or so and while doing so I came across an article which probably saved my life. The article described a young lady who had only realised she had become depressed when she had found herself standing on a bridge about to jump. She described how she had been feeling ill, exhausted, nauseous, and desperate and didn’t know why, but had reasoned with herself that she had no cause to be depressed. Like me, she had a nice home, a great partner, liked her job, and just felt that she could be a bit irritable at times with the odd low moments here and there. Only when she was about to take her own life did she finally recognise that something was seriously wrong. Rather than jump she decided to seek treatment, and she was prescribed an anti-depressant alongside therapy. She said it more than saved her life. She had found true happiness again. The parallel with my own life was striking.

Was it possible then that I wasn’t feeling depressed because I felt sick and ill but that in fact I had become sick and ill because I was suffering with depression? Could these symptoms really be the result of recognised depression? I had been seriously depressed before in my life and although there were some similarities, it had been nothing like
this at all. This was all physical, or had been for a long time initially anyway. It seemed highly unlikely. I’d had nothing to be depressed about when this sickness had started, but this lady’s story woke me up to the fact that it was worth considering!

Twenty years earlier, as you may remember, I’d been very distrustful of the orthodox position that all psychological illness should be medicated. In my many years as a therapist though, my position had softened considerably in this regard. I had seen first-hand how useful anti-depressants had been for many of my clients. They were certainly not a cure-all, but they definitely helped many, and often gave us the foot-up we needed for people to be able to make the therapy really work for them. Medication was not something I was ever permitted to comment on as a non-medical practitioner and my advice to clients therefore was that it was a matter to be discussed with their doctor/psychiatrist. Privately however, I had seen the studies which suggested that anti-depressant medications were often no more effective than placebo, so I didn’t personally hold a great deal of faith in them. I wasn’t against them, but I wasn’t a great advocate either. I’d also never used them personally, so I knew I didn’t have a right to an opinion really. In the end, my position was neutral. If some people found them helpful that was great. That’s speaking generally. The idea that I might actually use them myself though was just never on my radar, partly because of my ongoing concerns about messing with my brain chemistry. Now I’d healed that particular fear, the idea was much less worrying.

I’d done all my healing organically through hard work and determination and after so many years of remaining well with the organic practice of looking after myself, the idea that I might now consider using medication seemed like a discomforting step backwards. It was also a huge slice of humble pie. How could I be a therapist and be on anti-depressants myself? Wouldn’t that be a massive hypocrisy? Everything was thrown into question. I concluded though that if I had found myself at the point where I felt so ill that I no longer wanted to exist, then something had to be done, and the article I read gave me some hope. My life had to come first. If my career had to end, then it would have to end. This was now life
and death serious. I would need to think the unthinkable and do the undoable. I needed to get better. I’d work the rest out later.

I went back to see my Doctor and explained (more humble pie) that perhaps he was right. Maybe I was depressed? I asked for Citalopram and knowing the history of my “mystery” illness, he provided it. I took my first 20mg pill, and I have to say I was rather surprised at the strength of the medication. I thought it might be subtle. It certainly wasn’t that! It was a bit like drinking two cups of strong filter coffee. Not the most comfortable thing in the world, but manageable. Despite the physical discomfort though, I felt almost instantly better! I was with friends and we were out in the countryside so I had no pressing concerns and it turned out to be an “interesting” day. The next day I was a bit frightened to take the next dose. I could still feel the effects of yesterday’s pill quite strongly and I was concerned that if the next dose doubled the intensity, it might be really uncomfortable, but I was determined to stay with it. It was okay. It didn’t actually double the intensity at all. I felt it strongly but it was just a continuation of the same. I still felt better. It started to dawn on me that this might actually work! The next two or three weeks were bumpy. As the body adjusts to the side effects of the medication there are some unpleasant symptoms to go through including some marked increase in anxiety levels but this was nothing I couldn’t handle. I’d learned what to expect over the first few weeks through online education (I ignored the horror stories) and I knew it would pass, and it did. Now, my anxiety tolerance skills were put to good use and I sailed through those anxious days without any trouble. The main thing was, the sickness was receding and it was better every day. After about three to four weeks I started to feel really good. The anxiety reduced and the real lift started to kick in. I cannot begin to describe how relieved I was. I wasn’t going to have to die. As far as I’m concerned anti-depressant medication saved my life.

People joke that anti-depressants are “happy pills”. They’re really not. People’s experiences differ, and there are people who have had a terrible time with psychiatric medication for one reason or another. There are side effects, and these are more troublesome for some than others. I have
been one of the lucky ones. The first medication I tried worked for me, and although I did experience some unpleasant side effects such as sweating, headaches, and increased physical anxiety when I began the medication, these slowly faded and were almost completely absent after about eight weeks. To my mind they were a small price to pay for the benefits I received. SSRI medications do cause difficulty for some people with sexual function, mainly an inability to reach orgasm. Again, although I noticed some change, for me there were no lasting problems, and possibly even some enhancements! My experience was simply that over time I felt more and more like my old self. I stopped feeling tearful. The nausea and dizziness disappeared. My aching limbs started to feel right again. My energy came back. After a few months I felt normal again.

It could be argued that the drug is giving a false reading of happiness, but any successful user of these medications will confirm that this is not the case. In my experience anyway medication does not make one numb or immune to stress. If something was genuinely sad or upsetting I could feel it fully, and I could laugh and joke again normally when something was fun. Difficult circumstances were still difficult circumstances. One is not lulling around on a cloud of bliss in la-la land. Life simply returns to “normal”. That’s all. For me, medication didn’t dampen my ability to feel good feelings either. Some people report this, but it wasn’t my experience. The usual ups and downs still occur, but you recover from the downs like any normal person would.

When depression is clinical, you don’t bounce back as you should. Every knock reverberates ten times as deep and for ten times as long, and as soon as you’ve dealt with one wave of bad feeling another is upon you before you’ve had a chance to take a breath. It is involuntary. It is physical. It has nothing to do with not trying. Normal strategies for recovery simply don’t have the same “pick yourself up and be positive” power. That’s why telling a depressed person to just be more positive is not helpful.

So there it was. After eight or nine years of being a professional therapist helping people to recover from depression, usually successfully, I suddenly realised that I myself had been technically clinically depressed!
I wasn’t happy about it. I now had a major dilemma. Should I continue to be a therapist while I was using anti-depressant medication myself?

Understandably, some people will conclude in short order that such practice is hypocrisy but here’s the thing – I promised in my introduction to tell the whole story, and that includes revealing my vulnerabilities. As I explained, when the great gurus in Jack Kornfield’s “After the ecstasy, the laundry” revealed facts like “I still can’t deal with parental figures” and “I have a hard time speaking to the opposite sex”, it was for me a hugely illuminating experience. The main premise is that no matter what our roles are in life, **nobody** is exempt from illness and frailty, whatever form that may take. That comes with being human. There are enlightened moments in life, and if we’re lucky, there are prolonged periods of great health and happiness, but no matter who you are, or what you do, there will be obstacles and challenges, darkness, illness, and doubts which will come when they come, no matter what we do to avoid them.

You know those famous trainers who do personal growth seminars for thousands of people, the ones that have it all completely together? Guess what? They too will have private moments where they feel weak. They too will become ill on occasion. We all do. How do I know this? Well, thirteen years as a therapist gives you a pretty good insight into what goes on inside people. I’ve worked with many highly successful people - top executives, best-selling authors, doctors, policemen, professors, TV stars, seminar leaders, and other therapists, and they are just as prone to un-wellness as the rest of us.

So, I’m acutely aware that there may be a long line of people ready to stand in judgement of my choice to continue practicing, and on paper I could be one of them! I remain passionate about people in receipt of therapy receiving the very best standard of care possible, and I too would be concerned about any therapist who was unfit for duty, but in the end I had to trust my own judgement on the matter. Could I now put my hand on my heart and say that I was fit to practice? The answer was a resounding “yes”. I can promise that if I had remained ill, there’s no doubt that I would have closed my practice as the ethical thing to do. But,
it wasn’t until the medication had worked its magic that I’d even known I was “depressed”. Up to that point I was fully convinced that I had a thyroid condition or some other mysterious physical illness which would never be diagnosed, and was therefore untreatable. It wasn’t as if I hadn’t tried. I was genuinely surprised that the medication did what it did for me. Of course I understood the stigma, but it seemed wholly illogical now that I was feeling so much better, to withdraw from service on what now seemed to be merely a moral technicality. What did it matter if I took a small oval pill in the morning while everything else remained fully functional? From my perspective, it may as well have been a thyroid condition. I took a medicine. I got well. As long as I continued to deliver high quality care to my clients, it was almost irrelevant on anything other than moral grounds. The picture on the ground was exactly the same as it had always been. I didn’t suddenly forget how to do my job or become incapable of helping others. It was quite the opposite in fact. My energy was back online. I had plenty in the tank for others, and my brain was functioning again as it was supposed to. So, I ditched the guilt and uncertainty about my moral position and got on with the job of helping people. Apart from taking the tiny pill in the morning everything returned to normal just as it had been for almost a decade before. After a while I literally didn’t even feel the anti-depressant. I took the medication for a year or so, and then with my doctor’s help we reduced the dose incrementally over the next six months until I was medication free. There were a few bumps in the withdrawal process, but nothing I couldn’t handle. I’ve been fine ever since.
CHAPTER ELEVEN – SUPER HEROES

When I first became a therapist back in 1993 I had more understanding than most in these areas, but it was still incomplete. I had learned about reactive depression, meaning depression which is caused by specific events. This is easy to understand. Prolonged stress or overwhelming circumstances lead to an overload in hopelessness and helplessness which activates the evolutionary protective “famine - withdraw and conserve energy” response. There is no doubt in my mind that this remains true. In order to lift such depression, it is necessary to tackle the roots of helplessness and hopelessness whether they are circumstantial or psychological, and take appropriate action to convince the limbic system brain that the crisis has passed.

I learned then that generally speaking it IS possible to recover from depression organically with hard work and determination, coupled with the right kind of help and action. I still believe this to be true, and indeed I have helped many people over the years to fully recover using this solution-focussed model, but my understanding has since matured to become more inclusive. I learned from my most recent experience that depression can be more insidious, trickster-like and stubborn than even I, a trained practicing therapist and experienced sufferer had supposed. I usually approached depression resolution from the perspective that there was an underlying reason or trigger for the onset of the condition, even if that was as simple as poor lifestyle, or unmet needs.

If I was looking for a reason for my own recent episode it would obviously have been the stress which I’d been through in my final healing crisis. Although the crisis had resolved fully and positively I believe it left me depleted. We’d also had dangerous violent criminal neighbours for a while (now thankfully gone!) who were a constantly threatening presence. Their poor treatment of their animals and our subsequent powerlessness to intervene (we did try..it’s a complicated story) also caused my wife and I much upset. I have no doubt that both of these factors played a part, but otherwise life was good so it was puzzling that
the symptoms of the depressive illness came on months after my anxiety resolved, and the symptoms I experienced were almost entirely physical. I was also leading a very healthy lifestyle - no alcohol or other bad habits, eating healthy food, and exercising regularly. I wasn’t sitting around negatively ruminating. I was leading a healthy life. I was over the recent healing crisis and apart from the neighbour situation circumstances were good at the time of onset. I may well have underestimated the stress that our powerlessness to help those poor animals had caused though.

It was only after feeling so dreadful for so long that I even started to experience the mental symptoms of depression such as worry and rumination as I became worn down with the daily grind of nausea and exhaustion. Even then the rumination was almost entirely about how unwell I felt, not some other “issue”. That’s the simple truth of it. At the time that I started to feel ill I was doing just fine in every other respect. When the doctor had suggested to me that I might be depressed, it wasn’t only pride and position that made me disregard the notion, it just didn’t register as a remote possibility for me. I didn’t feel “depressed”. I just felt ill!

I have had to revise my knowledge of depression to include the understanding that depression can be an almost entirely physical illness. I have, during my career, explained to countless people that depression is nature’s “withdraw and conserve energy” response to impossible conditions, and I always ensured that people understood that physical symptoms would be included as part of that response pattern. What caught me out here though was the complete absence of any mental or emotional difficulties. I don’t think I ever really understood that depression could be purely physical. In addition to this I’ve also had to update my thinking to include the fact that people really can experience depression quite randomly. Something as simple as a bout of flu might trigger it. Indeed, in many ways it’s this point which really defines depression. It can be present with little reason to be so. It has taken me a long time to recognise this, and I believe it is not commonly understood. Everybody has difficulties to deal with in life. Not everyone becomes
depressed as a result, and it seems that people can have periods in life where they are under tremendous stress without any depression setting in, and then can become depressed with far less going on at another time.

Depression can also be present in the most successful of lives. Google “famous people who suffer with depression and anxiety”, and you’ll find no shortage of examples! There’s even a name for this – “success depression”, which can affect high flyers who achieve their wildest dreams, and perceive that they have nothing left to shoot for. Clearly, money, achievement, fame, success, and status are not sufficient to immunise people. What do you do when you’ve done it all- philanthropy maybe? There’s a lot of work going on right now to raise public awareness on these matters. Depression has often historically been thought of as mental laziness, weakness of will, voluntary negativity, or lack of spirit. Though some depression may be caused by these factors, it’s clearly not the case for everyone.

Dr Tim Cantopher’s famous book “Depressive Illness: The Curse Of The Strong” says everything you need to know in the title. There are aggressive, lazy, unprincipled human beings in the World who may never suffer a moment of depression in their lives. So it’s clearly not a moral issue. If it was all down to mental strength, then why do ex SAS soldiers, tested and selected for their incredible mental resilience, go on to put a gun in their mouth and pull the trigger? As Dr Cantopher suggests, it appears that the strongest among us may be most at risk. Here’s some interesting information. Though it’s apparently impossible to be completely accurate, a list created from data drawn from the National Institute For Occupational Safety And Health (NIOSH) tells us that the professionals most likely to die by suicide are 1) Medical Doctors 2) Dentists 3) Police Officers 4) Veterinarians 5) Financial Services. Do we see a pattern here? The people most likely to suffer with depression resulting in suicide are those with high levels of responsibility. It is the strong, those who carry the most, who are most likely to be affected. We also see that these people are successful in their fields. Nobody could accuse them of laziness of thought or emptiness of spirit. They’re all rigorously trained professionals who are in service to the community. It
appears that depression is linked to high intelligence, particularly emotional intelligence – people who care too much maybe? Ignorance really may be bliss and the road to hell is almost certainly paved with good intentions. Alf Garnett, with all his hate and negativity might well have been depressed, but he was evidently too blinkered to notice!

A NEW SCIENCE?

I had been trained to understand that Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitor (SSRI) medications work by blocking the re-absorption of spent serotonin in the brain thus raising the available levels of neurotransmitters that the brain has to work with. It’s widely recognised however that the full benefits of SSRI use do not become apparent until they have been used for around four weeks. The serotonin reuptake effect however is immediate. So why does it take four weeks to see the real benefits? Researchers have discovered that SSRI’s also have a regenerative effect on brain matter, specifically the hippocampus, which is involved in regulating memory and emotion, including emotional memory itself. Excessive cortisol, the “stress hormone” is known to be neurotoxic in high concentrations, and some patients who have suffered with long-term chronic stress have been found to have a smaller hippocampus than those who have not, sometimes by as much as twenty percent. It appears then that chronic stress degrades brain material and SSRI medications not only raise serotonin, but may also regenerate the brain matter which has atrophied due to the neurotoxic effects of chronic stress.

This makes sense to me. It explains why I felt better on day one that I took the medication, and why I felt really better as time went by. On day one I got the serotonin increase, and as the weeks and months went by my brain matter started to regenerate to normal levels. Evidently the six weeks or so of extreme anxiety that I had endured during my healing crisis had taken quite a toll on my aging brain. I’d had enough spirit to carry me through the next few months, but once the “high” of having recovered from a perilous situation wore off I was left with less brain than I’d had before the crisis. After treatment with the medication my
brain was back to its functioning self again.

The picture is complicated for sure, but one thing I became aware of when I used the medication was that it was only as powerful as the use I was willing to make of it. This may account for why medication may not work for some people. This is only a theory, but it was my experience. Medication doesn’t make you “happy”. It only normalises your ability to function. If a person takes medication but is basically loaded with dysfunctional perceptions and unexamined neuroses then it wouldn’t surprise me in the least that it won’t “work”. It doesn’t change who you are. It doesn’t fix your “issues”. It just gives you space to get back to your normal level of functioning. If your normal level of functioning is negative and neurotic, then it’s probably not enough on its own to make things right. The advice which is given by the medical orthodoxy that for best results medication should be used alongside therapy is to my mind sound and sensible advice, for this reason. If the brain is being re-built, we want to make sure that we’re building it positively!

We must also remember however that depression can affect people who normally function perfectly well. Evidently, it can still affect people who have done huge amounts of personal growth work and lead reasonably virtuous lives. I count myself as one of them. As I hope I’ve explained, depression it seems is not all about psychology. While it usually follows a period of prolonged or severe stress, we also know that it can be insidious, creeping up on a person slowly, almost imperceptibly until it becomes a crisis. Poor diagnosis will merely exacerbate such a situation because it can trick the strong into thinking that nothing’s really wrong, that they are probably just complaining about nothing, and they should just soldier on. Ironically, using this logic, contrary to popular belief that people with depression aren’t trying very hard, it is those who are the least likely to complain who are the most likely to suffer. If this situation doesn’t adjust organically, then the brain simply becomes more atrophied until it’s really not functioning correctly at all. This, I think, is what happened to me.

It’s not difficult to find people who are vehemently opposed to the anti-depressant pharmaceutical industry, and that’s quite understandable.
Some studies have suggested that as many as one in ten people in the USA use anti-depressants, and there are concerns that profit rather than genuine necessity is the main driver for the ongoing increase in usage. In addition to this, state supported access to psychological therapies is very limited and doctors can feel that they have no choice but to prescribe pills. There are also concerns about side effects, and although anti-depressants are not technically recognised as addictive, some people have difficulty with withdrawal due to side-effects and/or recurrence of depression. There are others who claim that anti-depressant use can cause a variety of unwanted long term negative effects after withdrawal.

All of these concerns may be valid, but here’s the simple fact. Anti-depressant medications, when used in crisis situations can, and do, save lives. We should be very careful about demonising them, or focussing only on the potential risks because we run the risk of doing more harm than good, however well-intended our position is. In the final analysis, nobody can really know what’s happening inside another human being, and it’s inaccurate to extrapolate from one’s own experience and apply those beliefs as a blanket rule to govern others. There are those who have successfully beaten their anxiety or depression without medication who may piously decry the use of pills as unnecessary, with unshakeable faith that they are doing the good work. Though they may have an understanding of what is required to beat moderate depression, severe depression is a whole different entity. Medication will often do little to help moderate depression, but can be highly effective with true clinical depression, so the picture is complicated. Those with well-meaning advice may cite some X-factor as THE answer to depression because it worked for them, all with the best of intentions. Most of it is good advice, and it’s often the same advice I would dispense myself – good diet, more social connection, proper rest, positive thinking, challenging negative assumptions, spending time in nature, creating considered goals, finding purpose, reducing or ceasing drug use, losing weight, solving problems, learning self-forgiveness and self-love, resolving traumatic memories, practicing assertiveness, building relationships, worrying less, having your needs met, meditation/mindfulness, taking plenty of exercise etc. In many cases working on these areas will be enough to solve the problem.
But, there will be a proportion of people who will remain unwell despite Herculean efforts to help themselves, who, having done everything they know how to, will be left feeling like they are failures should their anxiety or depression persist. If those people receive the message that anti-depressants should be feared or avoided like the plague, or worse still, that they are a pharmaceutical scam, no more effective than sugar pills, then that might just be the one piece of advice which pushes them over the edge into utter hopelessness, and ultimately suicide. This would be a Shakespearian tragedy, when it might have been the one solution which actually could have worked for them. I count myself one of those people too.

Let’s all take care then to ensure that our personal beliefs or agendas don’t do more harm than good. Yes, we need to recognise that being sad or low isn’t a reason to start popping pills, and before we head off to the GP for a prescription we should examine our lifestyle, diet, and circumstances, agreed. But let’s also understand that depression is a serious and real illness, sometimes fatal, and I’ve learned that in some cases, medical treatment may be the most effective, or maybe even the only solution.
New Beginnings

I now had over ten years of experience working as a therapist, and as glowing health returned, my questions about whether my life was full enough, or whether my job was perhaps having a negative impact on my health all quickly faded - red herrings that they were. Apart from enjoying life again, there’s not a huge amount to tell about the next few years. Life went on smoothly. I passed the thirteen years in service mark, and then this happened...

It was an ordinary Monday morning in November 2015 when I sat down at my work station to prepare for the weeks work and had an almost transpersonal experience for absolutely no apparent reason at all! The decision arrived fully formed without a single moment of uncertainty or regret. It was time to move on. I’d given more than thirteen years of my life in service as a therapist, and it was time. I felt like a bystander as I watched my hands type a letter of resignation to my consulting rooms’ landlords giving notice that I would close my practice at the end of January 2016. I had absolutely no idea what I would do next. It was a very strange experience. I hadn’t been thinking about quitting my role as a one to one therapist. It was a notion I had toyed with occasionally but therapy was my life and passion. For all its stresses and strains it was a job I sincerely loved. I knew one thing though. I was depleted - not unhappy or exhausted, but there was just a sense that I had been giving so deeply for so long that it was time to pull back. I’m not for one moment grumbling about this. I don’t regret a single day of my work, but being a therapist is intense work. It is work where you give from yourself constantly, and sometimes you have to give a little bit of what you should really hold in reserve. As therapists, we’re not supposed to. Strictly speaking, professional boundaries are supposed to be so clearly defined that we’re like Gods in bubbles of psychic protection. Other peoples’ pain should slide off us like an egg on new Teflon, but secretly, behind the scenes, I think most therapists know that it’s not possible to have a
perfect record on this point. The reality of sitting face to face with someone who is desperate to the point of giving up requires more than professional distance on occasion.

Despite the challenges of each day, the job had also become routine, and somewhere in my subconscious mind I knew that I would need to change direction at some point. I’ve come to appreciate that learning is essential to life. When a path ceases to teach us anything new, it’s probably time to move on, and although I learned something new most days, it wasn’t enough to be truly stimulating...just variations on themes. I needed a change of direction. All of this descended upon me in that single moment, and when I looked up from my keyboard, it was done. I would no longer be a practicing therapist. In three months’ time I would be unemployed! I didn’t have many longer term clients. In hypnotherapy the turnover is quick. It’s short-term therapy, so only a few clients would be affected. I ensured that everyone knew of my decision in advance, and found those who wanted continued guidance some alternative support. Then I stopped taking new clients on and over the next few months, I went out with a fizzle, not a fanfare.

The plan then was to have a rest. I had enough savings to see me through a year. I never got that rest. I had drafted my first book over my years as a therapist as a side project, but I had never really seriously considered publishing it. A number of clients who had read this early draft had literally hounded me on the issue, saying you must complete the book and get it published. Now was the perfect time to do that, so I got to work straight away, and the last nine months has been spent here at the workstation working harder than I’ve ever worked in my life! I’ve loved every minute of it, and you are holding in your hands the third book I’ve published this year.

My first published book “You Can Fix Your Anxiety – A Power Guide To Eliminating Stress, Anxiety, And Depression” is my Magnum Opus. It took literally years to write, and the editing process was severe and prolonged, but it’s a book I can be proud of. It’s a one-off. Although it’s difficult to avoid repeating certain concepts and understandings in the writing of subsequent books, that is THE book as far as generalized
anxiety goes. It’s a summation of all of the most important understanding I’ve accrued in over twenty years of anxiety related living and working. One thing I found particularly interesting about writing this book, Dear Anxiety, is the correlation between the experiences I have described here with the content of You Can Fix Your Anxiety. I’ve long been aware that every therapist delivers their content with an unavoidable bias towards their own experience of what’s helped. That’s not a bad thing, but there’s no such thing as unfiltered therapy, no matter how much you stick to the rulebooks. As Ram Dass said “You can be a Gestalt therapist or you can be a shoemaker. In the end it really doesn’t matter, because you transmit your being”. It also explains why people do better with some therapists than others. It’s not that one is necessarily a better therapist than the other. It’s all about the “fit”. It’s been a pleasure here to be able to provide the context for the information provided in my anxiety-help book, and for those who receive my work positively, it should be interesting to read both books. I hope that this one will reinforce many of the points I have made in the other.

**Reflections**

I often wonder what could have been had I received psychiatric treatment at the beginning of this tale? Was this a spiritual crisis or a psychiatric one? Would medication have halted a necessary process of growth and development, or would it have saved me from a decade of misery? I’ll never know. I suspect though that early pharmacological intervention would have been a positive thing in my case, had I been minded to seek it. I understand now a huge amount more than I did then. The darkest recesses of the “mind” remain a mystery to both science and spirituality, but somewhere in the middle they meet. Nobody can accurately define consciousness. Some people believe that consciousness is a product of the brain. Others believe that consciousness is independent (i.e spiritual/energetic) and merely interfaces with the hardware of the brain. Aldous Huxley famously explained that the brain may actually be a filtering mechanism for consciousness. His theory was that consciousness itself is quite literally cosmic in scale. We know for instance that our senses are attuned to only a tiny portion of the
available spectrums of experience. We know that infra-red and ultraviolet exist, and we can use machines to detect those parts of the light spectrum, but we do not perceive them with our eyes. Our ears do not generally hear sounds below twenty hertz or above twenty kilohertz, but other animals can hear well beyond those limits. Bloodhounds have a sense of smell at least forty times more sensitive than our own. The list of examples is endless. The theory is that evolution dictates that only those perceptions which are necessary to the survival of the species are retained in consciousness. Everything else is screened out. We only perceive a small slice of available reality. Science alone confirms that there is a lot more to reality than meets the eye – quite literally. So biology may limit experience rather than create it. If that’s correct, then the mind (consciousness) may have potential beyond those limitations. There are totally viable arguments for both perspectives. Electrical stimulation to certain areas of the brain can cause people to have full blown numinous spiritual and religious experiences. The question of whether biology or consciousness is primary remains unanswered.

Dr John Lilly, a pioneering explorer of inner space, said “In the province of the mind, what the mind believes to be true, either is true or becomes true within certain limits to be found experientially and experimentally. These limits are further beliefs to be transcended. In the mind there are no limits.”

One perspective is that the mind, it seems, can under certain circumstances circumvent the usual evolutionary filtering process and reveal aspects of reality which are otherwise hidden. That’s if you believe that consciousness is primary, and that the brain is a filtering interface. If you believe that the brain is primary and consciousness is the result of having a brain, the outcome is no less mysterious. We must conclude then that reality itself can become distorted when the brain dysfunctions. Either way, ones experience when that happens is that what is being experienced is perceived as “real”. This makes the question of causality almost a moot point. It doesn’t really matter “why” it’s happening. It only matters that it is happening, and what we are then going to do about it?! Evidently the brain affects the mind, and the mind affects the brain. You can’t alter one without altering the other. This can work for better or
worse.

It would seem that my obsession with the hidden dimensions of life and my active efforts to push my mind outside of the usual consensual boundaries of reality definition, coupled with extreme stress and exhaustion in my day to day life, were the precipitating factors in that early collapse into psychotic terror. In those early days of illness my brain was de-stabilised by a mind in hunger for new knowledge at a rate which I was ill-equipped to process at that time. Reality needs boundaries. I was too young and foolish to know that then. I was going all out for indefinite expansion. So goes the saying “Be careful what you ask for”. I have a postcard on my fridge of the Dalai Lama saying “Sometimes, not getting what you want is a wonderful stroke of luck”. Many are the stories of people who have overdone it in the field of spiritual work and unleashed more than they could handle. When at first I had hungered for knowledge, once my brain capsized I was very much a **reluctant** visionary. I may be wiser for all that I’ve been through, but honestly, nothing was worth the kind of pain I experienced. I wouldn’t make the same choices again.

In conclusion, mine was a brain disordered by too willing (and reckless) a spirit. It was a complicated picture and there’s no doubt that even with medications I would still have had to have gone through a fairly deep process of healing and transformation in one way or another. Those beliefs weren’t going to just correct themselves and neither was my history, but I do sincerely believe that my journey was much more protracted and agonising than it needed to be. Had I used medications early on, I suspect they might have soothed the limbic system arousal and psychotic perception enough for me to acquire a proper grip on consensual reality again in those first months. I think the fact that my anxiety was allowed to continue for so long without accurate information on how to resolve the problem obviously exacerbated the situation. Those negative pathways in my brain had ample time to form and cement themselves over years, making ultimate resolution much more difficult. Things may have been very different in the long-term had I managed to locate the correct help earlier. Still, what’s done is done, and
in the end much good has come out of something terrible. I’ve helped countless people over the years as a result, and I almost certainly wouldn’t be here writing these books without those experiences.

My reluctance to seek conventional medical treatment led me to a full exploration of many of the alternatives, and as a result I have a pretty good nose for sniffing out the snake oil, meaning that I’ve avoided offering solutions of dubious content in my work. It also meant that I found my way through the anxiety maze organically and fully experienced the territory on my way out. While this was no picnic to experience, it did stand me in very good stead as a therapist. Very little ever surprised me, and I was almost always able to fully comprehend the dilemma my clients were faced with in their particular difficulties. Perhaps most importantly I was never secretly concerned that anyone was too anxious to recover. This is important. Suppose as a therapist you have only ever experienced moderate anxiety. How can you really believe fully then in your insistence that recovery is possible? I would have been second guessing. “What if this person really is different? What if they really are too anxious to recover?” My personal experience of going right to the edge gave me unshakeable confidence that healing is not out of reach for anyone. Sure, it was tested at times, both personally, and professionally, but in the end these were challenges which were overcome, and that as they say is why the proof of the pudding is in the eating!

With anxiety and depression, it’s all very well to have a clinical overview, but it’s the nuances which people most need help with. It’s understanding how the mind can tie itself up in knots, and being able to point the way out of that with accuracy. I know my clients appreciated that enormously. They really didn’t think anyone would understand them. It was always a great joy to demonstrate that I did, and then demonstrate how they could unpick the tangled birds nest.

**Naked**

Choosing to write and release this book has been personally challenging.
Sharing this story is intensely personal, and it’s not a vanity project for me. I wrote it for two main reasons. The first of those is that I wanted to put something of real value into the hands of people as an introduction to my work. As explained in the opening of this book, I wanted to share my recovery story, warts and all, with fellow sufferers as a real world account of recovery from severe illness. I wanted it to be a true gift. It’s my way of saying “Vulnerability is nothing to be ashamed of. It is human. You’re not alone. Others have survived and flourished. It might not be easy, and there may be low points, but don’t give up. There are people who understand what you’re going through. There are people who really care, and people who can help. This journey can be completed. Many others have done it. Be willing to do the un-doable and think the unthinkable.”

I could have chosen to never tell this story. I could have hidden behind an author name and held myself up as the Oz-like anxiety specialist with all of the answers. That would have been safer for me but I’m making a stand because I am passionate about the fight to de-stigmatize emotional and mental health difficulties. We’ve done Cancer (“The Big C” as we’ve called it in hushed tones for the last two decades). The next decade is mental health’s turn. I weighed this up carefully. What was more important? I decided that if I can’t be brave enough to tell the full story as it is, then I am colluding, at least morally, with those who would have sufferers feel ashamed. So I decided to tell it as it happened because it’s only through a willingness to share our stories that we will bring about a change in attitude. Nobody asks to suffer with mental health problems. It just happens. Sometimes it’s our own doing. We can screw up sometimes, and those mistakes can have consequences. We might make poor decisions which lead us into overwhelming emotional events which trigger the problems, but hindsight is a wonderful thing. Not all decisions are easy, and we often don’t know that we’ve made a poor decision until after the event when it’s too late. We’re all works in progress. Sometimes, equally, illness is the result of circumstances beyond our control, sometimes abuse by others even. Let us be clear then that nobody willfully and knowingly asks to suffer or become unwell. Even poor decisions are usually made with good intentions. I count that as
forgivable.

I am very well today. I have been well for the majority of the last decade plus, and I’ve ridden out some fairly stressful times without incident. The two major blips I have detailed in this book are the exceptions to that. Here today, I have less fear in my bones than I can ever remember having in my life. Most of my days are fully anxiety free. I can have down days. I worry about the World and I’m not immune to stress, but I’m not feeling at all depressed or unwell. I have lots of love, laughs, and fun in my life too. I have skills and understanding for dealing with difficult emotions and mentally challenging events. I remain confident that I will enjoy good mental and emotional health for the foreseeable future and I’m pretty certain that there are no more dormant roots of anxiety waiting to spring up from my psyche to create a new chaos. There is a sense that my unfinished business is finished! All is genuinely well, and I’m fired up and passionate to keep building tools to help people. Let’s hope it stays that way! I believe it will!

Despite all of this though, I cannot say with absolute certainty that I’ll never be affected by a mental health crisis again. There may be some who would say that this position demonstrates therapeutic uncertainty; a job not properly done. I say it demonstrates experience. I will experience deep losses in my life. I will be faced with unprecedented situations. There will be new tests. We can do our best to inoculate ourselves in preparation for those times, and I expect to deal with these moments when they come, but sadly, there are no guarantees in life. I believe that being aware of this while also not worrying about it is a healthy position to take. It’s one I hold with ease.

So, I offer this story as a professional, but I also offer it as a fallible fellow human being. It just so happens that I happened to have a job where you’re “supposed” to be perfect. I have letters after my name, but it wouldn’t matter to me if those letters were HRH or PHD x10. We are not only what we know, what we do, or what we own. In the end, we are born naked without a handbook, and we’re making our way through a mysterious, glorious, and often challenging experience called Life. Whatever we accumulate in our lives will disappear. I’d say that makes
us equal. Status may give us the illusion of greatness, but in our private moments, when the roar of rapturous applause has ended, the only true peace is the one we create in our own beings. My clients would tell you that I never pretended to be anything I’m not. I have always been professional in my work, and they’d confirm that too... just not perfect! I don’t try to be. That’s an impossible goal.

I believe that as much as therapy is there to help people embody their greatness, it’s also important that it helps us to recognise our limitations. I treasure the imperfections in people. They tell me that people are being authentic. Speaking of limitations is not always popular. Our lifestyle gurus tell us we can do it all. Encouragement, inspiration, positivity, determination, confidence, and good old fashioned chutzpah are all great and necessary qualities to embody if we are to succeed in our goals. It concerns me though when that success talk becomes a cultural expectation of all. There are many among us who can embody those qualities with ease, but some can’t, or don’t want to. Some of us are introverts who have no stomach for, or ambitions to be “great”. Some people just want to get along. Where do they fit in? We need an alternative viewpoint which reminds us that we don’t all have to be amazing all the time to be good enough. Respecting our limitations has as much therapeutic value as finding our greatness, maybe more. I also know from my own experience that a failure to recognise limitations can lead to overload and illness for some of us. Personally, I believe we’re putting way too much pressure on ourselves and each other. I vote for a slow-down, but I’m wise enough to know that’s not coming any time soon, and probably never. We must adapt. Those who value slowing down will need to walk that path alone, courageously. It’s rarely applauded, so for what it’s worth, this therapist wants to remind you that you are just fine as you wish to be!

**LOOSE ENDS**

One of the questions on my client intake forms was “Do you practice a religion?” Around fifty percent of people would say “No, not really, but I consider myself spiritual”. I want to ensure that it’s understood that my
experience is not reflective of most peoples’ experience. My psychotic episode twenty plus years ago was the result of prolonged and obsessive preoccupation with all things paranormal. I was fascinated by the weird and I set myself up with a long line of belief systems over many years which when mixed with unusual events and very high stress levels caused my psychic crisis. At the time it occurred, I’d done so much reality contortion in my own mind that I was ready to accept that just about anything was possible. That’s it in a nutshell. I went on afterwards to experience all manner of therapies and healings with almost nothing but soothing experience to report. I do not want my story to suggest in any way that being spiritually minded, or receiving spiritual therapies or intervention poses imminent risk to people. If you’re minded that way, spirituality may bring you much peace, and you probably don’t need me to tell you that. If there are any cautionary notes here I’m sure you can draw your own conclusions.

If you’re not minded that way and think that it’s all mumbo jumbo, I respect that equally. I myself have matured into a much more critical thinker with experience. I’m much more sceptical than I used to be. That’s not to say that I have become closed minded. I’m just a lot more stringent in seeking verification. I’ve also learned that there are often rational explanations for the seemingly miraculous which can be easily overlooked when the correct information is absent. This is why the more you know, the more you realise you don’t know! The mind can be fooled. In my younger days it also didn’t help that there were charlatans, imposters, and illusionists on every corner peddling their cheap tricks as proof of the divine or phenomenal. When you’re a truth seeker, this is noise you could do without, but there was no Youtube in those days to expose the fraud of people like Sai Baba. Looking back, I could feel foolish and gullible for being so trusting of many of my sources of early information, but despite all of the misinformation and delusion I have encountered over the years, I can still put my hand on my heart and say that I have had personal experiences which continue to defy rational explanation, and some of those have given me incredible existential comfort. They may well have been creations of my own brain, but they have been marvelous nonetheless, and proof enough for me that our
existence is mysterious and wondrous, however you frame it. The fact that anything exists at all is an unfathomable miracle in itself. If you’re capable of conceiving the polarity of something versus nothing, then you can arrive at wonder by pondering on that alone.

So, this book reveals what my others do not. I have a spiritual inclination at heart but I’m also very much a rationalist, and I hold this seemingly contradictory position simply by keeping an open mind whilst having unswerving belief in very little! If life has taught me anything, it’s that we keep learning, and we should remain prepared to be surprised by new understandings as they arrive!

As my story has revealed, I’ve had a certain amount of success myself using spiritually focussed therapies, but in the final analysis, I would have to say that for me, personally, the real movement happened when I sought more conventional means of integrative psychotherapy based treatment. Were my successes with spiritual therapies merely placebo? Possibly! But, what is interesting is that the things I really strongly believed were going to help didn’t, and the things I held little expectation about often did! I’ve done a bunch of soul retrieval work in my time with huge expectations which provided no discernible healing. Then, in an almost careless format, with no expectation whatsoever that it would help, I managed to resolve a major healing crisis with a ten minute imaginary journey! I have no idea why that worked, but it did. If those successes were mere placebo, then it certainly had nothing whatsoever to do with conscious expectation or belief. Psychosomatic illness, by its very nature remains hidden from the conscious mind. Placebo, it seems, is more complex than simply choosing to believe consciously in something. Subconscious agreement is also necessary. That’s the hard part.

I’ve come to appreciate over many years of experience that there is a place where most therapies meet. Shamanism isn’t that different from psychotherapy, and any therapy may be helpful providing that the essential components of healing are present, including those which are disproven by science. There are certain complementary therapeutic treatments which allegedly show no agreeable scientific evidence that
supports their efficacy. Yet, there are many who say that such treatments have helped them. There is clearly more to any therapy than just the model. Two or more people come together with an agenda to heal. Care is demonstrated. Expertise is practiced. Belief is changed, thinking is altered, feelings are soothed, hope is re-established, approaches are reconfigured, wounds are examined, lifestyle is addressed, and healing follows. Most therapies do all of this. Placebo is almost certainly present to a degree in all of them, but it may be that the most important aspect of any therapy is the therapeutic alliance which is formed by the therapist and the client.

I want to clarify here that my work as a therapist, author and teacher is essentially grounded in evidence-based clinical understanding and modern psychology and that’s been my preference when delivering help for others. I have absolutely nothing against spiritual perspectives or other therapies. If people have a subjective experience of being helped, no matter what the method, then that is all good with me. But, these approaches are not something which enter my therapeutic practices in any significant way. This book alone is the only book of mine which covers these matters. With one exception – Love.

Love, though technically “unscientific”, and impossible to measure, remains for me an essential component of a successful healing process, and here I suppose science and spirituality do meet. Science may propose that love is an evolutionary chemical event which promotes bonding for the preservation of the species, and spirituality will say that love is the primary divine force. Regardless of what your beliefs are, we arrive at the same place. Love is safe. Love protects. Love furthers preservation. Love cares. Love builds. Love fights. Love is pro-life. Love is anti-anxiety and anti-depression medicine. Does it matter what its origins are? Love, properly applied, heals, and that is an indisputable fact.

Who knows what I may write in the future, but for now do rest assured that if you have an interest in my other works, you will expect to find them grounded, practical, and applicable. No beliefs necessary! One thing you can be sure of though is that everything I do will be offered with
love! I want to see a better World. This is my offering towards making that happen.

So here, my recovery story itself ends. Yesterday, I turned forty five years old. I’m beginning again. I may well return to one to one practice in some form at some point. Though I’ve worked solidly writing and building my readers platform over the last nine months, it’s been a different type of energy that I’ve used. My depleted reserves have had a chance to recharge, and phase two has been a tremendous journey of growth. I’ve been connecting with some amazing people and learning many new skills. My passion is at an all-time high as I continue to build my offerings to the World. My Mother always said “A change is as good as a rest”, and I think I agree. I have many projects to manifest. These books are merely an introduction to the next phase of my work. Courses are in the pipeline. I’ll refrain from boring you with all my plans, but I intend to go on helping people in new and evolving formats. I sincerely hope that you’ll choose to join me on this journey. Please do sign up for my readers group via the following pages if you haven’t already, and I’ll keep you updated with all the new projects and books, as well as supplying some nice free soothing anxiety reduction tools!

Thanks for reading. I hope it’s been super-useful for you, and if you’ve been struggling yourself lately, I sincerely hope that you’ll find your way back to love, health, and joy very soon. It can be done!

❤

Over And Out.

John

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**One Last Thing**

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I also have a blog full of thoughtful musings at: -

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This book is also available in Paperback from Amazon.

If you’d like to get in touch, you can contact me at john@hypnotherapyforlife.co.uk

Thank you for supporting my work!
Is stress, anxiety, or depression ruining your life? Do you believe that there are no answers? Are those "quick fix" approaches failing to deliver results?

That may well be because you're much more like a garden than you are an electrical appliance! Healing anxiety is an organic process, not just nuts and bolts!

* Please note. This book was previously released under the title "You
Can Fix Your Anxiety"*

Anxiety Relief is a warm, compassionate, and expert book to help anxious, panicky, or stressed people, written from both sides of the therapeutic couch!

If you're suffering, and you don't know how to gain relief from your anxiety, then this book is for you. It's wide in scope but laser-focussed on ensuring that you get results! The tools and understanding presented here are the same proven tools that John has been using to help anxious people successfully recover for many years.

Inside "Anxiety Relief" you'll discover:-

- How to create the correct mindset for full and permanent recovery from (even severe) anxiety.
- How to fully understand the brain’s evolutionary role in creating stress, anxiety, depression, panic and negative thinking, and how to use that understanding to take back control.
- Why self-love, the right resources, and appropriate skills are essential components for recovery when anxiety attacks!
- Why just throwing random “techniques” at an anxiety problem won't resolve the core of the problem, and what to do instead.
- How compassionate connection with your most vulnerable self will turbo-charge your recovery time and offer long-term stability, and how to do it!
- Why your subconscious mind keeps you locked in anxiety, and how to work WITH that mind to stop the internal war!
- How to avoid soul-destroying, resource-sucking wrong turns!
- And much, much more!

Anxiety Relief is written with sparkling clarity to provide an expert step by step anxiety recovery system which any anxiety sufferer can understand and put into immediate use. This book goes well beyond the usual “Do this and you’ll feel better” formula however. It will
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   UK: http://amzn.to/2vjgrLS

   USA: http://a.co/5Myd8vd

You can also go the website at www.youcanfixyouranxiety.com if you’d like to learn more about the books or contact me directly on john@hypnotherapyforlife.co.uk
Is anger wrecking your relationships, your work, or your self-esteem? Are you ready to take your life back? You’re almost certainly not a bad person, and it doesn’t have to be this way!

"Cool It - Anger Management For Otherwise Awesome People" offers seasoned professional guidance to understand the causes of chronic anger, and what you can do to put an end to it, once and for all!

Previously entitled "You Can Fix Your Anger" and re-launched in May 2017, Cool It offers "straight to the point" expertise which can be easily understood and quickly put into practice, so that you can get back to
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**You will learn:**

- Why the brain creates angry responses when we feel threatened, and what you can do to soothe it.
- How to recognise where your personal anger stems from, and how to heal it.
- Why anger can feel good, but become an addiction.
- The brain chemistry! Understand what you're up against!
- Why "controlling" behaviour will drive those you love away, and how to invite them closer instead.
- How to “use” anger appropriately to have people help you instead of hate you!
- Why softness controls hardness, and how to implement that understanding in your life.
- The incredible power of words, asking for what you need, and why "sorry" is the most powerful word in the English language.
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*Also included in the book is a full professional anger management hypnosis session available for free download.*

This clear and insightful book could help you change your life. If you're angry, and you don't know why, then don't be without it.

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You can find this book at these links:

UK: - [http://amzn.to/2tISMjc](http://amzn.to/2tISMjc)

USA: - [http://a.co/cCWQjjM](http://a.co/cCWQjjM)
WHAT PEOPLE SAY ABOUT MY WORK

I never used testimonials on my therapy website as they were discouraged by my professional associations. When I closed my practice however I contacted a small number of ex-clients and asked whether they would be willing to provide me with some feedback on my work for my new career. I have to say that I was stunned by the responses, and on a personal level they made all my hard work with people worth every single moment!

Full names are withheld to protect confidentiality.

TESTIMONIALS

I was so fortunate to find John when I needed urgent help for my teenage daughter. She had been locked into a frightening cycle of depression and suicidal thoughts that the adolescent mental health services had been unable to release her from. She didn’t fit the standard diagnoses or patterns of expected behaviour and was falling through the gaps as a result. In just two sessions, John took my daughter on a safe journey back to the source of her pain and enabled her to accept what had happened and move on from it. It was astounding. He released something that has changed her life. A year on and she is completely transformed. She is able to deal with life and look forward in ways that seemed impossible to her not long ago. John has real integrity and understanding.

Sonia – Bath

I approached John at two very low ebbs in my life - once in Bristol and later on in 2014. Put simply, his therapy - in many ways - saved my life. He provided a service that the NHS or other providers just did not have the abilities to do. He was very understanding about cost issues and I don't know what I would have done to face my demons without him. It is still a struggle - one day at a time. But without John's service, it would have been a lot worse. For severe mental health issues - suicidal thoughts, clinical depression and anxiety - the NHS does not provide the
instant service John did. For this I will be forever grateful.

Anonymous

I needed to make changes in my life to save my relationship with my partner. After two years of unsuccessfully trying to do this alone it was time to get some help. John was recommended to me by a trusted friend and as soon as I met him I knew I was in good hands. It was clear that he is an expert in his field and was drawing on his knowledge and experience to provide a tailored style of therapy to help me reach my goal. I also instinctively knew that he was challenging the status quo in the work that we were doing - that this was his own unique way - and I felt very lucky to have found someone with the courage to do this for the benefit of the people he was helping. I found John to be very honest, open and human, and I felt confident and comfortable sharing personal information with him. After four sessions, I had to return overseas so John ensured I left armed with exercises that would allow me to build on the work we had done. And now? After two years of frustration, my partner and I have never been happier. Thank you to John for the time and care he invested in me. He genuinely helped me turn my life around and opened the door for me to enjoy the fruitful relationship I so longed for. I would strongly recommend John to any individual or business that wants to see real results.

Caroline - Bath.

I have had a big fear of public speaking ever since I was a child. I have spent my time in education and work always trying to avoid having to give presentations or speeches to large crowds. One thing I could not avoid was one of my friends asking me to be his best man at his very large and very grand wedding. The thought of giving a speech to 130 people made me worry about the wedding on a daily basis. It was then I decided to try hypnotherapy in an attempt to improve my anxieties, to help me enjoy my friend’s wedding and to stop the worrying affecting my life in the run up to the big day. This decision was one of the best ones I have made! After contacting John about organising a therapy session he was extremely prompt, professional and helpful in his reply. He initially
spoke to me on the phone for 30 minutes to talk to me about my anxieties and explained the process of the therapy. When I met John for the first therapy session he was very friendly, helpful, knowledgeable, and quickly put me at ease in a situation I truthfully thought might be a bit awkward. The sessions were all great and John provided me with a lot of resources and information to take home after each session. With John's help I enjoyed my friend’s wedding, was not overcome with crippling nerves before the speeches and delivered a speech that everyone said was great. I even enjoyed giving the speech, something that seemed impossible before the hypnotherapy!

*DT - Bristol*

I came to John after a long battle with Anxiety and negative thoughts. It felt like I would never get out of the pattern. I instantly warmed to John. His calm and professional approach made me feel at ease and I felt I could truly relax in his company. John went out of his way to understand me, and really helped bring me out of a negative cycle. These days I’m now more positive and counteract a negative thought with a positive one. Onwards and upwards.

*Sarah - Bristol*

After years of struggling with bouts of severe Clinical Depression, Suicidal thoughts, self-hate, some self-harm, and a great deal of anger, I knew that I needed to deal with things head on, as I did not want to carry on how I was, and I certainly didn't want the way I was to keep impacting on my children. I looked for help. Something about John drew me in. It was his written piece online for the practice he was working at. Something about his gentle features, you know when you just get that gut feeling that someone is right to help you. Before I saw John, I had listened to a couple of relaxation cd's, ones with peoples voices telling me to relax, and this just wound me up even more! It gave me an unhelpful idea of using these cd’s for the future. However, with John's cd I had been able to deeply relax for the first time in my life! The Hypnotherapy part of each session was just so enjoyable. It was time out just for me, away from everyone else and everything else. As a busy Mum I relished these
times. There was one particular session that was my breakthrough moment. Whilst deeply relaxed, John led me through my mind back to my childhood. He allowed me to be able to sit with my 10 year old self and comfort the hurt child in me. I visualised myself sitting on my bedroom floor of my family home. I saw how sad and hurt I was. Through John's suggestions in my relaxed state I was able to identify the very core of my problem. I didn't even know, until that very point, why I had so much anger and hatred towards myself. I am not going to divulge all of the details but it was something that my Mother had "joked" about with myself and my siblings that clearly, as a small child, I did not deem as a joke, and I had no idea how that had eaten away at my very being, had knocked my confidence right away and had deeply affected my own parenting skills. I thought my issues were due to my very controlling Father and his physical punishment towards me whilst growing up. Guess what though, it was not even to do with him! Outward anger and "wrath" from my Father was so very less destructive than something said/joked about by my Mother. Since that crucial breakthrough I have never been the same person (in a good way) and I have NEVER looked back! I am a confident Mother. I no longer drive my car like a maniac at 90mph thinking only of smashing into a wall head on with so much anger in my soul. I have not had another episode of severe depression since.

My OCD and Anxiety is minimal. I learned so, so, much from John through his handout material explaining how anxiety works and the overload scenario that I still use this knowledge frequently and often pass these vital tools onto friends and family. I have referred friends to John and also one of my Daughters who were all helped tremendously. If anyone ever doubts the power of understanding of the human mind and overload system, deep relaxation and the art of Hypnotherapy then I have one word for you and that is "don’t". John is a very special, gentle soul, and he "get's it" because of personal experience. No-one can truly understand another in this way unless, as we say, "you have walked in their shoes". For someone who had never experienced Hypnotherapy before; John made me feel 100% comfortable, and totally at ease. His sessions were actually quite addictive but there was no need for many sessions as John rooted out the core of my emotional "verruca" so very quickly, and for that I am eternally grateful. To finalise, I can say that
hand on my heart, I spend each day and night with a freed up mind and
the ability to look in the mirror and smile at myself. My experience with
John was literally life-changing.

Angela - Bath

I would be happy to commend you as the service I received from you was
first class. I cannot recommend John highly enough. I had no experience
of hypnotherapy before I saw him. I was thoroughly impressed by his
thoughtful, considerate and highly professional approach

Mike - Bristol

I worked with John for around a year and a half during the most difficult
time in my life. He was able to teach me tools that I use every day with
ease. When I began therapy with him I was nervous that I would not be
the right candidate for the work and that I was too anxious or stuck in
my ways to benefit from it but I have found the opposite to be true. John
patiently went over and over the same ways of reframing feelings and
experiences that I had become totally stuck in to a serious degree. I have
been able to pass on some of the tools John taught me to my friends and
they have also benefitted greatly from them. John deliberately helped me
feel safe and sane at a time when I was terrified that I was the opposite.
It was instrumental in my recovery from anxiety. Aside from the fore-
mentioned benefits of the work I did in my sessions I also found John to
be kind and pleasant company and very skilled at empathy. He had
treated hundreds of people with anxiety before me but he was still able
to see me as new and individual which is hard for people in any
profession.

Mary – Bristol

Wanted to drop you a line and let you know that the presenting is going
really well. Since Our last session I've not had a bad presentation and feel
confident in front of people I know and / or don’t know.

R – Bristol
Just to say, I did it! Was pretty scary but I actually managed to relax into the flight at most points (something I thought would never happen), and if not, I went and sat with the stewardesses and chatted with them to keep my mind off of things. So, all was ok in the end. Hong Kong is great and I'm so happy to be here! Thanks very much for all your help!

H -Bristol

I was telling a friend about the work you do and it made me think I'd send you a quick email. Hope you're well and your work is keeping you busy! So, it's been over 18 months and a lot has happened. I am very, very pleased to say that I feel like my old self again most of the time....only I guess, maybe even a bit better for the experience....maybe! The work I did with you was the best thing I could have done. I've had very short periods of time where I've felt almost like I was slipping back again but I've been able to see the bigger picture and it's not lasted long and I've soon felt ok again - sometimes I have to draw on the exercises you taught me, but normally I don't really have to do much but slow down. I got married last year and even have a baby now - she's 9 months old. That's a test on anxiety, with crazy hormones and a total lack of sleep, I can tell you! I guess I wanted to say thanks again and let you know that I'm still on track thanks to the sessions. I dread to think what I'd have been like now without them.

L - Bath

Thank you so much for the very helpful telephone session you gave me and for forwarding the link to these downloads to me. In truth I didn't get the opportunity to look at these exercises before the birth of my son as I went into labour later the same day and my son was born at lunchtime at home. I would like to thank you for your wonderful help as there is no doubt in my mind that the session in the morning triggered labour later that day and let me have my baby at home without any induction or any other intervention. Thank you so much. It all made a lot of sense - the whole session - from explanations and background to the exercises - and was very sympathetically offered. I am certain that hypnotherapy would be helpful to me in the future with all sorts of
'blocks' I have surrounding other areas of my life and I am sure I will be in touch with you again. Right now though every moment of my time is pretty much accounted for so I'll have to leave that for the moment! Thank you very much again for your empathetic help and I look forward to speaking to you again in the future.

R – Bristol

I run my own company and went to see John several times in preparation for big work events like public speaking or tough HR issues. The sessions were really valuable in helping me to prepare mentally, stay calm and perform to my best. John has a very practical outcome focused methodology and is insightful and thorough.

HT – Bristol

I came to see John for help with my fear of flying. Throughout my sessions John helped me to effectively resolve not only my fear, but also deeper running issues that I had been suffering from. I found him to be extremely professional, friendly and focused, and he totally put me at ease every time we met. I would certainly return to see him if the need ever came up again.”

Bella - Bath

I did some work with John after a period of high stress when the convergence of pressure of the sale of my technology company, my mother's death, and a serious health issue led to me being unable to cope both mentally and physically. John's kindness of heart, wealth of personal experience and direct, honest manner helped me through the storm and restored a balanced perspective to my life. His ability to use his life experiences and subsequent life learning and apply them to the problems of others in very different situations sets him apart from others who have only read the books and not lived the life.

Mark – Bristol

It was just more than a year ago that I decided to go and see John, after
suffering from lack of and disrupted sleep. At the time, I felt stretched and close to the point of breaking, and that's when I knew I needed to seek professional help. I arranged a first meeting with John and straight away I felt very comfortable talking about my personal issues with him and he was very open and accepting of what I had to say. Throughout the weeks, our sessions gradually helped me overcome my disrupted sleep and in the end, he taught me a genuine life lesson, which I still use today. One of the great things about John’s sessions was that he confidently explained what was going on in my brain and in my body. Of course, John’s speciality as a hypnotherapist was always a very daunting prospect to start with, but I assure you, it is an amazing craft in assisting others to realise and understand complex and troubling emotions. He certainly helped me in a time of need and I can never repay him for that. He is a professional, genuine, caring person and I would certainly recommend him to someone who needed help with any troubling issues."

*Peter – Bristol*

When I consulted John Crawford in Bath I had gained nearly three stones in weight following a period of sustained stress and was really keen to 'repair the damage'. I had tried hypnotherapy previously but although I liked the therapy and had gained some insight into my problem, the results had been disappointing and I felt my conscious and unconscious minds were in a state of virtual warfare! I was unable to lose any appreciable weight and felt I was suffering from an addiction. John's sympathetic and sensitive manner helped me to recover my self-esteem and the analytical sessions we had together gave me a new perspective on my problem. I learnt that my unconscious mind was not my enemy and could become my friend and ally in my quest! At all times John proved to be not only a skilled therapist but someone who was willing to listen to my concerns and was generous with his time. I have now shed 22 pounds in weight and feel confident I shall reach my goal - I do not think I could have achieved this without the insight I received as a result of my therapy with John. I would not hesitate to recommend John as a sensitive, caring and completely genuine therapist with a pleasant,
understanding approach that increased my confidence and motivated me to take myself in hand. I wish him every success in his new venture. Under his guidance I gained a great deal of insight and was helped to overcome a situation which had made me miserable for a long while. I cannot thank him sufficiently.

Jill – Bath

John helped me when I was at a very low point and another hypnotherapist had given up on me! He was both very kind and compassionate as well as being professional and knowledgeable. I still use his hypnotherapy recordings.

Pam - Bath

I met John via the internet. I was at my wits end struggling with the symptoms of vertigo. I had this for years and no one could come up with an answer as to why I kept having these attacks. I nearly flew to America for help I was that distraught. After meeting with John and having explained how the brain works it was all made clear, something maybe Doctors should take a closer look at. I never realised that the human brain could send out, (if you like) messages, symptoms like vertigo in response to periods of anxiety. Why this happens I will never know, but after two meetings with John it helped me get through the last 5 years or so. I wish him all the best for the future, and remember life is too short for stress and anxiety.

Paul – Cornwall

John is a highly professional, perceptive and experienced therapist. He provided me with the tools to help get rid of habits and ways of thinking that held me back in achieving the best I can both in my job and for my wider goals in life. I wouldn't hesitate to recommend him.

Simon – Bristol

I worked with a John for several years on and off and he was hugely important in helping me to deal with my anxiety issues and low mood.
He used a number of evidence based techniques to help empower me to become more successful in coping with my issues. Together we addressed and questioned a number of dysfunctional thought processes and cognitive habits that I had developed and worked out ways to re-frame these. The therapy he gave me ultimately resulted in a massive improvement to my mental health and sense of wellbeing. He is hugely knowledgeable on the subject of stress and anxiety and I would have no hesitation whatsoever in recommending and endorsing John's work.

Owen - Bristol

During a low time in my life I started getting anxiety and panic attacks. I had no idea what they were and it scared me tremendously. John was incredibly helpful with helping me get through this rough time. He made me feel safe, comfortable, and fully supported. During my sessions he created a safe place for me to hone into my anxious feelings and work with them - something I wasn't particularly comfortable with. John showed me different ways and methods to look at my worries and I have found them most useful. Most of all, he was a caring therapist which is really important.

L - Bath

I came across John by chance. As my husband was so impressed he had suggested I give his sessions a go. It soon became apparent how perceptive and experienced he was, but also how easily I felt I could trust him on a personal level. He dealt with my issues in an extremely sensitive but insightful manner, maintaining a professional approach at all times. If I had to sum his qualities up in a few words I would say: "Wise, intuitive, resourceful, and not afraid of a challenge". Thank you for your immense help.

C.C - Bristol

I came to John as a hypnotherapist by recommendation to help me to unravel some things that I knew were lurking beneath the surface that, after 52 years I felt I should deal with. John gave me expert care and was always professional, kind, knowledgeable and helpful. He guided me
through some deep and stormy waters, and I finished a short course of hypnotherapy with him feeling that I had permission to let some things go. I have been able to move on and manage areas of my life that before had felt inaccessible, and I am a much more contented person as a result. Thank you John.

TW – Bristol

John has been an excellent hypnotherapist. Whilst working with him he was always willing to provide me with additional support when required in addition to our normal sessions. I now feel able to manage much better as a result of working with him, I would highly recommend him.

Simon – Bristol

I have only recently been a client of John. I was initially a bit cynical of hypnotherapy and particularly hypnotherapists but from the first session I felt trust in him. He has taught me a lot about myself and my problems and how to deal with them. Although I still feel a long way from being "recovered", John has taught me how to work patiently towards this. I am a lot more positive and a lot less hard on myself than before. I certainly miss my sessions with him. Whenever I worry about something now or don't know how to deal with a problem my husband says "What would John say?"

Margaret – Bristol

My therapy with John was very efficient. He quickly saw what was disturbing me and what we would need to work on. He helped put things into perspective, and see problems from a different angle. In particular he gave me the courage to confront these problems. I also learned techniques from him to cope with anxiety and prepare for stressful events so I now feel less nervous in many situations. I felt a lot better after each session and I think I made a lot of progress regarding anxiety, self-esteem, and managing expectations. This was my first time seeing a therapist and I had some apprehension, but John was able to make me feel comfortable during these sessions while focusing on my issues and looking for solutions. I am very grateful to have met John. Thank you
again for your help John, I wish you a lot of success in your new career!

*Anonymous - Bath*

I first met John as the result of reading an article on the Internet where John talked about anxiety and depression. Up until this point I had always thought that anxiety and depression were a battle against my "nature" and experiences "nurture" and that I could never escape what was part of me. John explained that this was not the case and that he could teach his patients coping mechanisms. I subsequently had two periods of therapy with John. I found him to be a deeply caring and kind man, who demonstrated huge empathy for the feelings I was experiencing. As a result, I have learnt that my depression and anxiety were in my control, that there is always things I can do and that by using John's hypnotherapy tapes I can calm myself and take control again of my life. I am now free of depression and anxiety is something that I can manage in periods of stress. I unequivocally recommend John and have sent several friends to John for equally successful treatment.

*Ron – Somerset*

I came to John for support in working through long standing anxiety, and to prepare myself for my future work as a health care practitioner. John focused on giving me practical and accessible tools for working with my anxiety, with an emphasis on a logical and clear understanding of what anxiety is and how it manifests. Through the use of deep relaxation and hypnotherapy techniques John supported me in understanding my personal experience of anxiety and where it stems from. I came away from the sessions with numerous methods for managing my anxiety and a stronger foundation for my future career. I found John's approach practical, down to earth and well-focused on accessible solutions to the task in hand. Considering the deep and sensitive nature of the work, I found John's light, warm and professional approach very welcome. I would certainly recommend John to individuals or groups wishing to find practical solutions to working with anxiety and also to those wishing to further develop skills as therapists and healthcare professionals.
A.A – Bath
ABOUT JOHN CRAWFORD

John Crawford is truly qualified to share expertise on how to overcome anger, anxiety, OCD, and depression. Not only has he been a professional therapist for more than thirteen years, he was himself held hostage by severe anxiety and depression for many years in his twenties. His understanding of the field is therefore more than purely intellectual. It’s deeply personal and committed.

John ran his own thriving business as a one to one hypnotherapist/psychotherapist specialising in the treatment of anxiety, depression, and OCD from 2003-2016 before taking a year out to focus on writing. He quickly gained a solid professional reputation in the Bristol and Bath area of the UK for anxiety-related difficulties. He has over seven thousand hours of clinical experience in helping people to overcome their emotional and mental health challenges. He returned to work as a therapist in 2017 and is happily continuing to help troubled folks to find their peace again! www.hypnotherapyforlife.co.uk

He is a significant contributor of sections of the training materials used by Clifton Practice Hypnotherapy Training (CPHT), a now international Hypnotherapy Training Centre with twelve branches in the United Kingdom. CPHT is recognised for its outstanding Solution-Focussed Brief Therapy training.

John has spoken professionally for the Association for Professional Hypnosis and Psychotherapy, Clifton Practice Hypnotherapy Training, OCD Action (the largest national OCD charity in the UK), as well as regularly at smaller supervisory events for local practitioners. He has also written for the highly respected online anxiety sufferers' resource, No More Panic. He was a registered and accredited member of three leading therapeutic organisations - Association for Professional Hypnosis & Psychotherapy, National Hypnotherapy Society, and National Council of Psychotherapists, up until 2016 when he closed his one to one practice to focus on writing and teaching. His main qualifications include:-
Diploma in Hypnotherapy and Psychotherapy - Clifton Practice Training (formerly EICH)

Hypnotherapy Practitioner Diploma - National externally (NCFE) accredited to NVQ 4.

Diploma in Cognitive Behavioural Hypnotherapy - Externally (NCFE) accredited to NVQ4.

Anxiety Disorders Specialist Certification - The Minnesota Institute of Advanced Communication Skills.

He lives happily in Bristol (UK) with his wife and cat, and produces music in his spare time.
DISCLAIMER

I am a fully-qualified experienced hypno/psychotherapist. I am not a medically trained Doctor or Psychiatrist. I have taken every care to ensure that the information presented in this book is both ethical and responsible, and the information and techniques within this have been safely used with my clients during my career.

However, if you have been diagnosed with, or believe you may be suffering from any form of psychiatric condition, you should seek professional help, and you should not use this book without the consent and blessing of your qualified formal medical healthcare provider. To all readers, please ensure that you read, understand, and agree to the following disclaimer before proceeding:-

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Dear Anxiety. This Is MY Life

A Real Life Recovery Story

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