



THE LIES WE TELL OURSELVES

& other defence against changing our lives

by Julia Noakes

A DEFENCE IS something one uses to hide something else. During these heavy monsoon downpours in the City our best 'defence' is a hardy umbrella, or to stay indoors and watch the lashing rains from the comfort of an air-conditioned apartment. A 'defence', in the law courts, is merely that which one stands-by, to argue one's position: "M'Lord, my client was indeed not exposing himself in the Borivali Park, he was merely perusing the zip of his trousers when they fell down, just as the woman happened to be walking close-by." A psychological 'defence' is that which we use to protect ourselves (another umbrella if you like) unconsciously, to ward off reality. For example, I am warding off feeling that I think I am being an idiot for choosing a particular course of action, but I manifest this by saying that other people think I am an idiot (projection).

Deciding what is true in the psychological consulting room is a process of detection, not unlike the court perhaps, in that it often involves finding ways through games of distortion, elaboration and walls of defences. To bribe a judge in the courts of India is the ultimate, if dubious defence: "Here your Honour, I hope this 5 Lakh of rupees will help you arrive at an expedient decision in my favour." Other than bribery in the form say of impression-management, 'I will charm you, so that I hope you will say nice things about me to my boss', more overt hints at transactions are rare in the consulting room. Although I did once encounter a client, who asked me, "Perhaps you would like me furnish you with a larger consulting room?" after regretting sharing with me his involvement in a corruption scandal.

What psychoanalysis can do is expose us to the lies we tell ourselves. It also reminds us that in the court, probably nobody is telling the 'whole truth and nothing but the truth', through the existence of the ever-present unconscious that makes the 'whole truth' unknowable. In the law court, you have an adversary, a person on the "other side", who is against you. It's a game of for and against, winners and losers. On Freud's couch however, the adversary is not some opponent with his strong defence and thick folder of justification, but a part of you - the complainant, the applicant, the respondent - all representing different parts and edicts of your mind. This is what we will explore today, through an in-depth illustration with a client, of the defences we all have that prevent us from becoming who we claim we want to be.

All clients come to session because there is something they don't know and at least appear to want to know. A client, let's call him, Atul, he tells me he is feeling flat and has long bouts of apathy. Atul is a Hindu although he tells me he is a somewhat reluctant temple-goer. In his early forties, well dressed in his expensive suit, and highly polished shoes, I learn that he had an arranged marriage some 15 years ago, his parents having approved their joint astrological chart and he has two children. Educated in India, he has not had much in the way of international work experience, other than working with some foreigners in the office. He tells me that he is struggling to motivate the team he leads, and engage them fully. During the first few sessions we discuss his difficulty with making clear decisions, avoiding any real sense of closeness with people at work and what sort of effect they have on the people around him and the success of his business. Despite my sense early it seemed as



though he would like me to write a prescription that would make his problems go away in a painlessly, this early dialogue is fairly straightforward. The room was imbued with a gentle convivial sort of ambience.

His character, his idiom if you like, is revealed more over time, not only in what he says, but in other mannerism, patterns of arriving (always on time), his being (upright, neat, not a hair out of place, sitting very still in the chair) and leaving the sessions (always being shocked when the session comes to an end). His speaking, after beginning to feel more at ease with me, as I encourage him to say anything that comes up, is often a stream of attacks between different parts of his mind, which goes roughly something like this:

“I think it’s rude to make people speak if they don’t want to.
I suppose you think I’m being a coward.
You know xx person. I don’t want to be rude like him.
He’s a complete bully, he’s shameless, ruthless, doesn’t care about anyone’s feelings.
You think I want to be like him? You want to turn me into him?
Maybe I shouldn’t be in banking.
I know I’m useless at this job.
You think I’m useless don’t you..
I don’t believe people should be so selfish the way they treat people in this industry.
I just don’t know what I am doing.
I don’t know why I am doing this job – I hate it most of the time.
These guys get paid a lot you know, they should take responsibility for their businesses.
I want to run a business that is caring about people.
But my guys are a lazy bunch, they don’t take any responsibility.
They don’t tell me what they are doing so how the hell can I fix things when they blow-up.”

Beginning to explore how his personal history has shaping his way of living now, evoked a deep resistance in him. Statements such as “Look, I don’t believe in looking back. My father was a hard-working man,” were common. At times, he would withdraw, becoming silent, like a small child in a man’s suit, attempting to shut out the threats of the world around him. Or there were times when I asked him, “what sort of feelings do you think evoke in the guys in your team?” he would reply with an abrupt, “I don’t know, why does this matter.” Such was his defence.

As we began to develop a stronger working relationship, he slowly revealed that his father was a distant figure, with somewhat sadistic characteristics. He would ruthlessly express his regular dissatisfaction with Atul as a young boy, bombarding him with instructions of not only how the boy should think, but what exactly he should think about. To explore how Atul’s own mind was turned against Atul, and attacking him in the same way as his father did, was a frightening element of himself to face. This endless ‘mental interference’ exhausted him. What we were able to explore, was how deeply rooted is his disgust at his father’s aggression and Atul’s unwillingness to take any assertive leadership position. Being direct as a leader in Atul’s mind, meant only one thing: to be horribly aggressive just as his father had been. These feelings were painful for him to connect with. They evoked a strong defense, a force that “prevents a return to memory. The patient’s not knowing is really a not wanting to know.”



So the psychologist's role is to "overcome this resistance." And help the client build a more rational assessment of himself and the things that have shaped him. How does this happen? Let's turn to Freud:

"What means have we at our disposal for overcoming this continual resistance? Few, but they include almost all those by which one man can ordinarily exert a psychical influence on another. In the first place, we must (1) reflect that is a psychical resistance, especially one that has been in force for a long time, can only be resolved slowly and by degrees, and we must wait patiently. In the next place, we may reckon on the (2) intellectual interest which the patient begins to feel after working for a short time. But lastly – and this remains the strongest lever – we must endeavour, after we have discovered the (3) motives for his defence, to deprive them of their value or even to replace them by more powerful ones."

Fortunately, Atul was intellectually engaged in exploring own psychology and 'what made him tick' as he put it. This made our engagement from the early days very satisfying for both of us. The clients who rarely last the course of their development journey, lack such intellectual inquiry and often seek comfort and solace in a narrative that simply, unreflectively blames others. Not only that, Atul boss had demonstrated openly commitments to his own leadership development, thus providing him with a substitute elder figure, perhaps in a sense, a more solid father-figure. Being the father of two young sons, gave him further incentive to avoid the distant fathering that had hurt him so very deeply. The beauty of course, is that in allowing himself to express his love for his boys more deeply, and to give them the room to think for themselves was a deeply reparative and healing experience for him. In our relationship, he experienced good attention that he wasn't used to, learning that it was safe and in fact enjoyable to share more of himself. This richer dialogue enabled Atul to get to know himself more deeply and to choose thoughtfully, rather than reactively, how close or distant he wanted to be from others in any given moment.

Clients who honour us, by allowing us to be alongside them on this profound journey, live forever in our heart. I continue to wonder how they are, many years after they have left the consulting room. I remember Atul as an extremely brave man, for in his heart, is a deep desire to be decent man, to be more loving and less shut off from life. His inquiry into himself was a gift that enriched all the relationships in his life. He was able to begin to connect with how his resistance, particularly how his extreme level of work-aholism served to disconnect him from painful memories, which when faced, rather than endlessly held at bay or acted-out, weren't in fact so difficult to face at all. He shocked himself by finding that he procrastinated less and felt less afraid to risk standing out from the crowd and taking a strong position. Of course, what was the hardest to face, was he was burying awareness of his own aggression that shared many common features of his father. At one point, screaming a series of abuses at me, he tested my tolerance to stick with him, whatever he did and learned some important lessons about reparation and recovery.

Sadly, not everyone makes it through this journey of defences in the way Atul does. In a world of increasing addictions to busy-ness, consumer spending, drugs and alcohol we seem to be collectively building up more and more defences against experiencing ourselves. I find it extremely sad, as I write this, the extraordinarily talented British singer Amy Winehouse, died at just 27 years old, from what appears to be drug addiction. Her album "Back-to-Black," is an astonishing musical achievement. She will now write no more news words, there will be no more new music.

It is as though her 'defence' against health, was made of stone. Perhaps she was like the writer Ernest Hemingway, who shortly before he committed suicide, told his friend Htochner, "If I can't exist



on my own terms, then existence is impossible. That is how I have lived, and that is now how I must live – or not live.”

Amy was Camden, in London’s very own star. My daughter Emily is just 4 years younger than her, working in Camden and used to see Amy from time to time in the local pub, who she described as a warm, friendly and down-to-earth. Thank God, my daughter is alive and well, working in her job at the Camden, no-doubt with her neatly packed lunchbox on her desk. She contributes, with a profound dedication, to making the lives of people with learning difficulties richer and more fulfilling. I won’t shield myself by hiding behind a defence that says “It’s fine, I’ll see her soon.” I wish we were in the same room, in the same country right now. I allow myself to connect with that feeling, beneath any defence, even though it is painful.