



## “Peeking into the Past, to Get Out from Underneath it”

by Julia Noakes

*“Every historian discloses a new horizon.”*

*George Sand*

HISTORY IS THE STORIES we tell ourselves about the past. In his book *India After Gandhi*, the author Guha, put together a sequence of events to create a narrative of building the nation-state of India since Independence. One of the things I rather like about this book is that as an historian, he is willingly to research into lesser known libraries and characters off the main road of India’s history.

Sitting with a client is not dissimilar to picking up a history book and waiting for the narrative to begin. As I sit with a client we’ll call Neehal, he shares with me a very tight narrative of his life: Cathedral school, a first arranged marriage that ‘failed’ within two months, a second arranged marriage he describes as “failing,” a job in banking. In reporting his most recent history, he tells me he is angry at what he describes as the “unfairness” of being turned down for promotion at work because of he has “anger issues.” Guha’s book is a fat four inches thick, my client’s history of his life is barely one page.

Forming representations of past events, will of course depend not only on our level of intelligence, but the sensitivity we are accustomed to receive in sharing ourselves with others, as well as, bearing some honesty about our role as the creators of our own history. The child, who is force-fed not to feel or what to feel, or how he ‘should’ react, will have enormous problems digesting and figuring out who he is, with his experience disavowed in this way. Cut-off from himself it is likely he will be terribly cut-off from others. History is of course invariably biased, distorted and often self-serving. Ludicrous tales for example, of Indian history, suggest that quite contrary to the evidence, the British simply dreamed up drawing a line across India and created Pakistan and that was that. The implication of this historical view is that Indians must have been a rather passive lot, to be merely victims of the all-powerful British, which of course, they were not. In other words, in every story, there are more deeply embedded narratives and assumptions. How much more difficult it is to ask ‘How did we let this happen?’, or ‘What is my role in this history?’ In the consulting room, we hope that our clients leave us at the end of our time together with a more logical and thoughtful sense of their history, even willing to look at data they may find offensive, so that they can make better adult choices going forward.

As Christopher Bollas puts it, as historians of our own lives, “We must be willing to wander in and out of recovered memories, in particular those which are seemingly trivial.” We are all personal historians. As a historian of my own life, I once wrote a piece that began, “Why use the word nest, just call it empty.” It was a self-reflective article that centred around the history of my daughter leaving home for University. A pair of tweezers sat untouched on a bathroom shelf for months after she left. I hated those tweezers. As a more empirical piece of history, it would read something like: September 2006, daughter leaves home, mother embarks on major renovation project on the house, managing it mostly



from a hotel room at the Intercontinental on Marine Drive, in this city. Gnarl's Barkley's song 'Crazy' was a popular song that year. Yet this simple representation of the tweezers is imbued with more meaning, more resonance than any simple list.

Psychoanalysis approaches history through such seemingly ordinary observations, known as 'screen memories.' Clients may bring us lists, but we are interested in what might be brushed aside, made not list-worthy. Many years ago, a client called Clara came to see me after she had left an abusive relationship. "Did you ever get a sense that he had this side to him?" (A question of history of course) She replied, "Funny you should say that, the first time I saw him I thought of a boy who was the bully when I was at school." So history naturally contains both that which we are willing to turn away from, as well as turn towards.

Many clients come to see a psychologist because they are simply longing for a sensitive conversation about their history. Sifting through the material of the past that Neehal presents, we begin to deconstruct his over-riding historical text, which goes something along the lines of "I was a difficult child, nobody could reign me in, my parents were busy, they were wonderful people, and I deserve what I got." Essentially, at the heart of his feelings about himself, were that he was bad through and through.

But what if the parents are not the perfect angels or terrible villains we claim to recall? Several times in the sessions, when Neehal described some adolescent capper that he got up to, stealing a car, taking his father's watch, I found myself again and again, wondering wherever were his parents? It seemed as though he had grown-up in an environment of material abundance and a sense that he should be 'grateful for being so lucky', yet at the same time, bestowed very little in terms of psychological containment or adequate attention to enable him as a boy to develop the important attributes of being 'grown-up.'

Children, as we know, will of course protest about everything: "I want my toy", or "I'm not going to bed" or "I want granny now" even though perhaps granny has passed away. Each of these moments is a negotiation, an opportunity for tenderness or indeed cruelty towards the child. The psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott coined the term the 'good enough' mother (parent) who more often than not, responds to the child's demands with understanding. The core message Neehal received was that his feelings didn't matter, (therefore in his mind he didn't matter), and in response to his cries for help, was often flooded by his parents self-absorbed narratives about 'what they had to put-up with from him' or 'can't you see I've been working all day.' Each time he received a battering from his father, or verbal insults from his mother, in equal measure, they would fake seductive reparation with the gift of material things, or sudden lavish attention, 'as-if' the abuse had never happened. What terrible confusion for this little boy.

How the parent communicates with the child will help a child digest reality that you can't always get what you want. Digesting is not just about force-feeding children a list of rules of how they should behave. It has to be a conversation, not merely an autocratic colonizer taking over the child's experience and reality. It certainly isn't about teaching children how to abuse by hitting, slapping, pinching and abusing them. Without adequate developmental containment, it is hardly surprising that



Neehal had great difficulty anchoring himself in reality and continues to be prone to regular emotional outbursts. Any efforts to think as a child about what was happening to him were silenced. As a child rarely soothed in his distressed, he inevitably has a hard time learning how to sooth himself. Facing how he was repeating his childhood experience of attachments, he had to visit the abusive side of his himself.

You might say that Neehal started out as a poor historian of his own life. In his historical narrative, there was one villain and it was him. Everyone else was a good guy, end of story. Well perhaps it would have been the end, if he hadn't chosen to come to the consulting room. Towards the end of one session, having shared with me the way his father physically hurt him, I mentioned in passing that in my experience, clients talk about the easiest parent first. The hardest work in the sessions was facing some of the realities of his relationship with his mother.

There is I think, some very deep confusion's about any sort of psychotherapy. Our task with our clients is not to help them feel more, as the popular press likes to suggest. No, they are generally feeling too much already. What we do, is try to help our clients think better. X occurs, Y occurs, why do you draw this particular inference, or interpretation? It is about daring to look a little more deeply with a less emotional perspective. Sometimes, a client will extrapolate "I am bad", because it is just too unbearable to imagine the alternative that he was actually very neglected as a child. What we are seeing here, is the case of a child, whose rage towards his mother, is swallowed and redirected towards himself. To keep the dangerous mother at a distance, he was still as an adult man, keeping her very close. The part of himself he had to meet in our work, was the deep sadness and loneliness he often felt as a child. Over time, we explored the terror he felt whenever he let anyone, particularly women, get close to him. The hardest part of all this work for Neehal, was to connect with the rage he felt towards Mommie Dearest. Yet, he was able to take-in and digest that a part of him that was in fact not furious about the present, but furious about the past, and how it featured in his own repetition of abuse in the here and now.

By reviewing the past in this way, by being better historians, we get to transform it. Any historical narrative that merely suggests we have been colonised by others whether nation or person, forced to conform, held-back, abused, is a denial of individual or collective collusion and collaboration in one's own fate. We can either keep living this old interpretation of history, or make a choice now to create a different history for the future.

So rather than merely regurgitate and live from a victim narrative, which merely reduces a nation or a person's confidence to a puddle of inferiority, we try to do something else. Rather like taking the debris of the past in our own hands, we creatively use our psychology to make something else out of it, renewed with vitality and the possibility of making associations between back then and now. Just as historians give birth to new ideas, as historians of our own lives, new insight, new awareness give birth to new futures. Never, is too late to do that, or indeed ever too late have a sensitive conversation with yourself, even if everyone around doesn't know how to listen.