

Liverpool supporter and anti-Fear person

By David Epston



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Abstract

This is a story about a young man who was beset with childhood fears. The story tells of his struggle to overcome these fears through participation, with his parents, in a several narrative therapy conversations. Selections from several therapeutic letters are included in the story. These record and attest to the development of a significant counter story of bravery.

Keywords: narrative therapy, family therapy, childhood fears, therapeutic letter writing, counter story

According to his mum, Kathy, and his dad, Ray, Simon, aged 13, had always been fearful but, ever since his only friendship had dissolved some eighteen months ago, he had gone in to exile in his own home and no longer wished to attend school. He had begun experiencing 'panic attacks' when his parents wished to leave him behind. In order to prevent this from happening, he would throw himself bodily in front of their car in their driveway. His fears were having him encourage his younger sister, Joanna, also aged ten, to keep him company in his fearing. His parents strongly opposed Joanna going in to exile with him.

We met on December 23 and summer holidays were looming on the horizon. The fact that we would very likely not be able to meet again for well over a month explains the urgency with which this conversation was conducted.

At the beginning of our meeting, Simon was unable to audibly tell me his name and appealed to his father to speak up on his behalf. We all soon came to the conclusion that Fears were giving Simon a pretty hard time and had tricked him in to believing that his parents should do his 'bravery' for him. Externalising Fears allowed for quite a different reading of events than had previously been the case. We were able to conclude that the Fears had led everyone, and in particular, Simon to the inescapable conclusion that he was inadequate to the task of living his life but instead required others to be adequate for him.

*'It is clear from what you told me that Simon is becoming increasingly Fear driven. His Fear driven life style has pushed him in to retreat and a form of self-exile. His Fears are like terrorists terrorising him. His desperation is such that he has come to believe, much to the satisfaction of his Fears, that he should turn more and more to his parents to do his bravery for him. By doing so, is Simon unwittingly co-operating with his Fears by going on to their side and weakening his side? By inviting his parents to do his bravery for him and his sister to join him in a Fear lifestyle, is he turning the clock back on his growing up and instead could he very well be growing downwards?'*¹

Before we had got very far in this discussion, his parents ashamedly and somewhat reluctantly offered themselves as culpable for the Fear Problems. Both parents had had 'panic attacks' ten years previously whenever they had tried to leave their home in the first few months after they had immigrated to New Zealand and were literally 'finding their feet'. As both were now successfully employed in workplaces outside their home, it was clear to all concerned that they both had overcome this problem. We co-researched the history of this struggle and arrived at what we came to refer to as their 'bravery knowledge', a knowledge they were only too willing to share with their children.²

Questions such as these were discussed at some length:

- Who was the first one to refuse to allow the Fears to tell you where and how far you could drive in your car?
- Or did you, alongside one another, reject the Fears?
- If you had surrendered fully to the Fears, would that have turned your decision to make a new home for your family in New Zealand in to a humiliating repatriation?
- Did the fact that you and your family had supported the Liverpool Football Team for over three generations and had witnessed remarkable come-backs on both their home ground and when they were playing away have anything to do with your bravery come-back?

- By any chance, when the going got tough and you wondered if you could go the distance, did you sing 'You'll never walk alone' to yourself or one another?³
- Simon, does it matter much for you to know that your mum and your dad had pioneered their own bravery here in Auckland when you were a pre-schooler?
- Does it make it easier for you to take up your own bravery when all you have to do is ask your parents to tell you their stories about their bravery know-how?
- Kathy and Ray, can you recall who would have passed this bravery knowledge on to you both?
- Or did you have to make it up from scratch?
- Can either of you see any reason why Simon shouldn't receive it in his turn from his parents' generation?
- Do you think thirteen is the right age for his initiation into his family's tradition of bravery?

'However, Simon is extremely fortunate to have the parents he has. They know only too well the misery Fears can make of a person's life. You both have escaped a Fear-driven life and you both struck me as very grateful you did. If you hadn't, you mentioned your lives would have been 'a shared prison' with your Fears as 'our gaolers'. Kathy, somehow or other, you must have realised that Fears were taking you over and you decided to stand up against them. Going to 'that counsellor' was what you referred to as 'a major step' and one that has seemed to have been a turning point in your life and the life of your family. Ray, you observed what Kathy was doing and started following suit. Together, you made your stand against Fearing and because you were not divided, you could not fall. You told us that when you both confronted these Fears, they could not withstand your combined strength of purpose and more or less dissolved in front of your very eyes. It is well known that Fears operate best when you turn your back on them or run away from them. You both have set a fine example for your children and possess an extensive 'bravery knowledge'. And I am quite sure there is a lot more to it than the relatively brief discussion we had in the time available to us.'

I raised questions with Simon as to his readiness and proposed several trainings which I vaguely dubbed 'mental karate training' that he might undertake merely to increase his preparedness and 'strengthen his will', should he wish to proceed with his own bravery developments. Simon seemed to have made up his mind, as he laughed off my offer of preparatory trainings as beneath his newfound dignity. Little did I know what he had up his sleeve, so I was very tentative about him taking the Fears head-on.

'Simon, from everything your parents have told me about you and the families they came from, you have the capacity to "grow into" your own bravery despite what the Fears have to say about you. But the question I have – and your mum, dad, and sister have too is this – "Are you ready?" You have announced you are ready, but do you think you are ready enough? Or would you prefer to undergo some trainings to get your readiness really ready so as not to take the Fears head on right away?'

The trainings I proposed involved some bravery forays – not much more than that – with his mother, father and sister providing 'back-up' in case he 'cut off more bravery than he could chew'. I reiterated that given that the Fears had driven him into exile in his own home over the past year and a half and was threatening his school attendance and according to his mum and dad had 'weakened Simon's will', why shouldn't his mum, dad and sister provide 'back up'? He smiled knowingly but I had to wait until we met again to find out what his smile meant.

'I look forward to meeting you all again to see how much more ready you are, Simon, to stand up to your Fears, rather than them running you around. I have no doubt that the rest of you – Joanna, Kathy and Ray – are very ready. And Ray and Kathy, you have indisputable evidence that you are bravery able.'

As it turned out, we met exactly a month later. Simon, instead of merely preparing himself, announced to me, with his parents and sister as his witnesses, that he was now an 'anti-Fear person'. I was frankly surprised by such a redefinition of himself. For that reason, I sought how he might substantiate such an identity claim.

'Simon, I met you merely a month ago and you and your parents and sister confided in me that you were leading a Fear-driven lifestyle to the extent that you were growing backwards instead of forwards. I do not wish to appear to you to be a doubting Thomas. That is why I asked you for your justification in calling yourself an 'anti-Fear person'?

Your reply left no doubt in my mind: "I have defeated every one of my Fears".'

That summary just about sewed everything up for me. I admit to some incredulity in response to Simon's self-assured utterance but I tried to hide it. I looked over to his parents but they were beaming with pride and confirming his redefinition of himself. And according to them, the only encouragement he required to enact his own bravery was a copy of the letter, which he carried with him on his person at all times in each and every one of what he referred to as 'my anti-Fear operations'.

The next excerpt from my letter following this meeting candidly indicates how surprised I was by this turn of events. And I try to make amends for underestimating him and the legacy of his family's Bravery knowledges.

'Simon, I feel that I was totally taken in by your Fears and failed to get to know you enough as your own person. I wasn't at all sure you were ready to take the Fears head-on but you certainly proved me wrong and I am only too happy to admit it. From what your parents told me, Simon, December 23rd was a turning-point in your life and in the life of your Fears. From that day on, you appear to have kick-started yourself in to a Bravery lifestyle, much like that of your parents and sister.

This suggests to me that you must have been fed up with a Fear lifestyle. I can only guess you saw through your Fears' tricks and could see that they were trying to turn your parents, especially your dad, into your ventriloquists. However, from December 23rd onwards, from all accounts, you have been outsmarting the Fears. As your dad said, "December 23rd was his D-day!"

Everyone confided in me that you just went home after we met and single-handedly embarked upon a bravery direction for your life, using the 'letter', which arrived next day, as 'back up'. Let me catalogue all the evidence of your rebellion against a Fear-driven life ...'

The list included twelve distinct items, all of which had previously been under the control of his Fears, including arranging to stay away from home overnight at his cousin's home and even going so far to invite his parents to go out and leave him and Joanna at home alone. Both occurrences were without precedent in his life. Given how Simon was so far ahead of me, we all agreed that from hereon in, he would take over the function of note-taking in preparation for the next summary letter. He welcomed such an endeavour, although we all contributed some questions around matters that we willingly admitted to him still mystified us.

Here is a sample of my queries:

- Simon, since we weren't inside your mind, we can't possibly know what went on inside there. Did you do some bravery thinking that paved the way for your 'anti-fear operations'?
- Or did you strengthen your resolve to stand up to the Fears, which obviously backed down pretty smartly?
- Simon, if I were to meet a twelve-year-old who was Fear-driven like you had been Fear-driven and didn't have parents who had bravery know-how like yours, what would you warn him about surrendering to a Fear-driven life style?
- What would you like him to know that would give him hope that he too could become an 'anti-Fear person' and follow in your footsteps and your mum and dads' footsteps?
- By the way, Simon, could a Chelsea or Manchester United supporter do as well or is bravery limited to Liverpool supporters?

They returned in another month's time as agreed. This time, Simon led his family into my room and then requested them to be seated. He was proudly brandishing some sheets of paper in his handwriting. He took centre stage in the room, with all of us becoming an enraptured audience, wondering what in the world he was going to come up with. His parents had told me he had refused any help from them, as well as forbidding them to know what he was writing. He drew himself up to his full five foot and two inches, smiled at his family and began to read in a resounding voice. His parents, justifiably, looked upon their son with their family's dignity restored, as did his younger sister.

The following is the document he donated for me to pass on to any others who were being Fear-driven that I might meet in the future. When you read it, try to imagine that at the beginning of the first meeting he had been inaudible.

I knew that I was going to live a Fear-driven life for the rest of my life. It felt like I was locked up in a cage and was not allowed out. My Fears were like terrorists terrorising me. I felt I couldn't get a proper grip on myself and I was getting weaker and weaker within myself. I couldn't go anywhere and do anything but that was the way I felt I wanted to be.

My Fears were like a menu: some very small things, which really hurt the most, and some very big things. My Fears were staying the night with my friends, cousins, and so on, and going to the hot pools with them, scared when my parents went out, going to the movies, going to town, and so on. These Fears were very hard to cope with. It is very hard when your Fears take you over, because you can't go anywhere with your friends, and after a while, they get sick of you and go off you because you don't go anywhere.

I found it very important for me to find out about my mother and father having lots of knowledge about bravery. It helped me to realise what great parents I really had and that they had been through the same things as me. I felt in myself that I was ready after the first time I visited The Family Therapy Centre, which gave me extra support inside of myself. In my mind, I knew when my Fears were tricking me and weakening me. I didn't feel the same person when I was filled with Fears and I can tell you it is not a nice feeling at all. I finally beat my Fears by doing all the things I wanted to do, and NOT letting them beat me at all. Now I have many methods to overcome them. I am finding my life a lot easier NOW! My methods mean that I out-trick my Fears and it works.

This was a major victory. It helped me do more things, like going to people's houses, going to the city, the pools, the movies, and other places. These were my victories and from that I

have no interest in a Fear-driven life style such as I had. I am willing to help anyone who has trouble with a Fear-driven life style.

Simon James,

Liverpool supporter and anti-Fear person.'

Simon returned to report many more 'victories' in the months that followed, including taking an active role in his education, especially remedial reading, extending his social network, and widening the range of his activities. His parents were so reassured about his 'bravery' that in due course, they were able to travel overseas for the first time since they had immigrated to New Zealand, leaving Simon and Joanna in the care of friends. Several Fears revisited Simon when he became complacent but they never lasted very long.

Notes

1. This is excerpted from a longer letter sent to all concerned immediately after the meeting in order to reach them before the Christmas/summer break. This letter takes the form of a canonical Anglo-western narrative with the young person engaged as a problem-solver in regard to his and his family's plight, which has come to be known as a 'Fear-driven life style'. The two questions above appended to the account queries the direction everyone's lives might go, should Simon decide against assuming the role of the problem's protagonist. See Klapproth (2004).
2. See Epston (2007).
3. I had learned that the Jameses had come from Liverpool in the United Kingdom and furthermore that they and their families had supported the Liverpool United football team. Loyalties such as these are remarkably significant. The song 'You'll never walk alone' is sung by Liverpool supporters to a struggling team to buoy their spirits. Can you imagine what it might be like as a player when 70 000 or more supporters sing to you in earnest?

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