

Chapter 4

Counselling at Ons Plek Warming the Stone Child¹ – How some souls heal

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This chapter focuses on counselling as a central part of life and work at Ons Plek, by reflecting on the counselling process with two very different girls. It is not written to duplicate the many books on the theory of counselling. The theory is woven into the case interviews presented.

¹ *Warming the Stone Child; myths and stories about abandonment and the unmothered child* is the title of an audio tape by Clarissa Pinkola Estés (n.d., Boulder Colorado: Sounds True).

A bright little spark – burnt out and coming back to life?

A while ago there was a beautiful little girl at Ons Plek. She was always singing and appearing to dance lightly through the house; her life seemed full of light. Her name was Nomhle. I always thought of her as a bright little spark, a spark keen to be involved in everything, eager to relate to everyone. A spark who had hope in her heart that she would one day go home. She related well to her family, but could not stay with them because her family members were either too ill to look after her or too much under the influence of alcohol to protect her on a sustained basis. One night, on a visit home, a family member entered her room while everyone was sleeping, kidnapped our sleeping beauty and committed a terrible act.

The spark in her went out, leaving nothing but a burnt-out shell to return to Ons Plek.



Slowly the Ons Plek staff went about the business of kindling a new light in Nomhle - a light that could warm her soul despite her knowledge of life's cruelties. The transformation of our bright and cheerful spark into a timid, whispering, almost lifeless being was painful to us. The childcare worker and I gathered around Nomhle on that first day of her return, trying gently, ever so gently, to revive some sign of her soul's survival. Throughout it all we used our therapy skills as signposts, as a map to guide us in helping her in a time-tested way. We held our own pain, allowing it to guide us but not overwhelm the therapy so that it became our own therapy, instead of hers.

We sat close to her, near enough to touch and comfort, far away enough to allow her some space. I was aware of a great fragility, as if she was hollow and could break at any moment. We listened to her and sat quietly absorbing the answers, trying to hear the experience as she felt it. We used silence to convey our respect for her feelings and to hold her hurt, fearing to tread too hastily on what was so painful for her to express. We used silence to process what she was saying, to honour it, and then gingerly and tentatively we reflected her experience back to her, using different words to show that we understood and to affirm her experience. At times we asked her directly to describe in detail what had happened. We inched along the route to health, believing that it is healing to relive painful details in a warm and supportive and accepting atmosphere, and yet always trying to go at her pace. While longing to protect her and spare her more pain, I knew from years of working with traumatised people that the pain was already there. Avoiding it does not make it go away. The feelings have to be felt, relieved for them to be reduced - but at the client's pace, not the therapist's. At the same time I believe that denial is a mechanism given to us to enable us to let painful realities in, a bit at a time. The session proceeded, holding these two factors in balance.

Avoiding the experience would have been easier for us, but it could have left Nomhle feeling that what had happened was too shameful to be discussed, too hard for adults to cope with. If a therapist or adult cannot sit and face painful feelings, how can the child be expected to do so? Listening, reflecting and silence model to the client that it is possible to face what has happened. We did not have to jump into action by visiting the District Surgeon or the police, because this had already been done, so we could focus immediately on the counselling itself.

The 'warming of this stone child' was to take many months. Inside her heart other dead spots developed. She had to close off relationships, once dearly held, with some family members who were angry, not with him, the perpetrator, but with her for laying a charge against him. Under these conditions, we prepared her to go to court and to present her evidence logically and clearly, if timidly, under cross-examination.

Writing about her life in life story counselling, expressing her feelings through playing in the social worker's room with a house and dolls, and preparing for the court case helped Nomhle to consolidate her being. Throughout it all her older sister visited and later hosted her in her own home. This relationship was the mainstay of her life. It gave her meaning, and she was never happier than when she was with her sister.

Not long ago a miracle occurred. While shopping one day, our childcare worker Faniswa Muba noticed that the manager's surname was the same as Nomhle's. On impulse she spoke to him and discovered that he is the child's uncle, recently returned from Europe. Nomhle is now living with his family and has frequent contact with her sister.

Sonia barges in

At one point the interview with our bright spark was abruptly interrupted by banging on the door. It was Sonia, home unexpectedly at mid-morning from school. She stomped into the room, expressing anger in every movement, and announced fiercely that she'd been sent home yet again by the teacher, who wanted an apology before Sonia would be allowed back. She announced that she would never go back to school.

Sonia's face was almost perpetually stony, unmoving and expressionless except for anger. When initially brought to Ons Plek by a social worker, she had refused to talk to the staff for the first few days.

Her attitude induced an angry response in some of the staff, who regarded her as impudent and disrespectful. However, noting that she was comfortable with the girls, our hope was that she would gain trust in us as she witnessed our interaction with other girls. This optimism paid off. She began to show a softer side of her nature, and after a few months of adapting to our rules she was ready to go to school. But her anger continued to manifest itself, as had happened with her teacher this morning.

This almost daily pattern of Sonia being rude to adults could easily have been eclipsed by the more visibly traumatic event in Nomhle's life. The easiest and most obvious response would have been to discipline or scold her. Would this have achieved anything, other than to convince Sonia more fully that no one understood her? Her patterns of behaviour prevented her from building the relationships necessary for her to attend school, stay in a family or hold down a job as effectively as Nomhle's trauma could potentially do to her.

When the interview with Nomhle was finished, Sonia and I sat down in two chairs next to each other. Usually I prefer to face my clients and maintain eye contact, to demonstrate that they have my full attention. With this girl I felt this face-to-face contact could be too intense for her, yet I had long sensed that under the fierce pride was a child longing for some comfort and closeness. Sitting next to her allowed both distance and closeness between us.

She stared ahead. I asked, "What happened today?" She replied that the teacher hadn't waited for the girls to get ready in a race at school. She had just fired the gun, before they were properly in position. Sonia had sworn at the teacher and left.

There are so many conventional responses that spring to mind that we think of using to solve the problem quickly, and put the rude child in her place. Messages such as "I'm sure your teacher knows what she is doing." "You go right back and apologise." "Even if you are right, you must learn to hold your tongue."

Social work principles and values hold that being judgemental will not help to solve the client's problems. My own opinion in this situation was that, even if I disagreed with Sonia's behaviour, judging her with a superior attitude would only get her back up. I had not yet heard the full story. It was quite possible that the teacher had been unfair. Having heard Sonia's version of the story, if I later thought that she was being cheeky I could say so, but I would do so with respect for her. In this way I could model to her that she too could disagree with someone's behaviour but still show them respect, which was what I wanted her to do in response to the teacher.

My purpose in the interview was to see this incident from the child's point of view and then, together with her, explore the chain of events that had been set in motion. What was it about this incident that had upset Sonia, I wondered to myself - had she lost her chance to come first in the race, which she usually did? Was it because she was a perfectionist and this lack of procedure had annoyed her? What was the particular trigger that had set off Sonia's temper?

So I reflected the emotions I could hear behind Sonia's words, in the hope that, feeling understood, she would tell me more. By doing so she was exploring and examining what had happened in more detail. As she experienced me hearing her, she was also releasing the emotions which filled her mind and blinded her to other ways of seeing the situation. This would enable us both to see more consciously 'how she ticked' and whether any other choices of response were available to her.

As her story unfolded she repeatedly stated that the teacher was being unfair. From this repeated theme I set my hypothesis for the interview. My impression was that Sonia

thought that life in general was unfair. She believed that she was powerless to change what she regarded as unfair. Her feelings of hurt, as a result of the perceived unfairness, were expressed in her consistently angry attitude. She looked for and expected unfairness in her interactions, particularly from adults. My first aim was to show her that I understood her experience, through reflecting it back at her, and in this way to keep her close to me while we looked at this seemingly unimportant event at school. My second aim was to find out what it was about this child that made her respond to unfairness, perceived or real, in this unconstructive way.

She continued to talk about the unfairness until she was convinced that I understood. Only then could she drop this point and move on to look at the reason for the teacher's action. When I thought the time was right, I moved onto a new subject, but very tentatively, ready to move with her onto any topic she chose. Only if Sonia and I had looked at this topic a few times before, would I consider pointing out to her that she was so caught up in her own feelings that she did not see that the other person might have good reason for her actions.



Our conversation went like this:

Pam: *I wonder what the teacher could be thinking of that she fired the gun so fast?*

I say this very tentatively, because she is so sensitive to any implied criticism that even though I've spent time listening to her side, she may quickly revert to feeling hurt. I want her to think of an explanation for the teacher's behaviour now that she is calmer, then to look at her own behaviour that repeats itself in many angry interactions.

Sonia: *She said we must learn to be quicker. The inter-school competition teachers are quicker.*

I think Sonia knows that the teacher is training them to be quicker for inter-school races, and that she knows she must be able to accept adults training her. I must show her what is happening without trying to explain the teacher's viewpoint to her. My role is to hold a mirror up so that she can see what is happening.

Pam: *She thought she was teaching you something (tentatively put, in question form) and you just felt she was unfair? When you feel it's unfair you get cross? (pause, then she nods, still not looking at me) and then when you talk back, she gets cross? And then you feel she doesn't understand you? (pause) ... and then you walk away - very cross and feeling hurt?*

Sonia: *Yes.*

With this child I know that 'Yes' is a hard and a genuine response for her to make.

Pam: *How did the other kids feel or react?*

Sonia: *They ignored her.*

Pam: *So there are different ways to handle this teacher.*

At this point I just want to draw her attention to this. In subsequent discussions of which there will be many, the same point will surface again and again. In time she will become conscious of it.

I feel I'm getting somewhere in the counselling. She can acknowledge the teacher's point, which is unusual at this stage. She feels understood. What sets her off seems to be the unfair feeling. I decide to explore this further, and confirm that this is so by asking her to describe other times that she has been cross. Each time I listen and show her (by confirming with her my perception of how she felt), that I understand. Each time I confirm that I do not judge her, by describing the process again in the way she has presented it: "You felt hurt and so you spoke angrily and then the other person got upset." I am hoping that she will begin to learn to clarify her pattern of reaction: "I feel A or B is unfair, am I going to play the same game of 'I get cross, they get cross'? Then I feel misunderstood, and I run away again. Can I handle this differently?" Having discussed a few examples of other times she has felt unfairly treated, I again move to broaden the exploration of possible causes.

It's six months since her mother died, and it's some weeks since we last talked about this. Her mother died after suffering for a long time from cancer. Sonia always longed to know that her mother had loved her. Her running away from home was partly to see if her mother cared. Perhaps some of her perception that life is unfair comes from her relationship with her mother.

I ask how she is feeling about her mom's death. Sonia cries.

Pam: *You miss her?*

This may seem a very obvious observation to make. It has the advantage of showing Sonia that I understand. Because it's phrased in question form, it also gives her the opportunity to explain if her tears are tears of frustration and not caused by the fact that she is missing her mother. This prevents the therapist from making obvious but possibly incorrect assumptions, and enables Sonia to talk about what she is feeling.

Sonia: *Yes.*

Each time, before responding, I try to hear the feeling behind what Sonia has said. With a quiet person like her I also pay extra attention to her body language, to give me some guidance as to her feelings.

Pam: *Last time we talked, you were very cross with her that she never looked for you as you hoped she would, when you ran away?*

Sonia: *I'm still cross.*

Sonia then describes several incidents in which her mother had blamed her for things her brother had done. Again I am able to label this as unfair, with her agreement. The unfairness, whether perceived or real, led to hurt, the same emotion that triggered her temper at school this morning. This may be the key to her strong reaction to any perceived unfairness and lack of trust in adults. At this stage this is just a hypothesis, which only further discussion will confirm. Social workers and psychologists label their clients' emotions and make interpretations far too easily. Human beings are very complex, and are affected by many factors; each responds differently to a situation or feeling. To really be of help, one must help the client see for themselves what is happening.

The client (Sonia) will decide how to act in future. I will not be with her every minute of her day. Her emotions, reactions and behaviour will stem from her insight and understanding of a situation. I can help her interpret her behaviour, but I can't force her to accept my interpretation.

From here I lead her to label the emotions, to give them names. We talk about her depression, hurt and anger whenever she thinks of her mother. That's when she won't talk to people, she says. Then I explain the staff reaction of hurt, if she doesn't greet us when we greet everyone in the morning. No one knows the cause of her sudden moodiness and rudeness. Then when others get angry with her, she gets more hurt. I ask if she could just tell us when she feels that she does not want to talk to anyone at the moment. I plan to keep discussing this process in future sessions, until she can recognise it whenever it happens.

We have covered a lot more ground in this counselling session than has been possible previously. Before the interview ends, some discussion of how to handle the teacher must take place.

I ask Sonia how she is feeling towards the teacher now. She is able to acknowledge that the teacher was trying to teach the athletes to speed up their starting procedures, and that this same teacher has helped her with her homework before. Sonia is not ready to apologise to the teacher, and thinks she can just go back to school the next day as if she

was never rude. I remind her that the teacher wants an apology before she can return to the school.

I also tell her that swearing at the teacher is not the best way to solve a problem. How does she want to handle this? Would she like me to be with her when she meets the teacher. Her face lights up at the suggestion.

I send her off to think about what she wants to say to the teacher, while I phone the teacher to prepare her. Fortunately, I know this teacher will listen to her and try to resolve the conflict, while maintaining her standpoint that she does not accept being sworn at. Watching them interact will also enable me to show Sonia more about how she interacts with people.

Later, as I evaluated this session, I thought that healing would be needed with regard to Sonia's strong sense of having been unfairly treated by her mother. The predominant feeling underlying this was hurt, which I had not picked up on sufficiently, and which would take many sessions to heal. Part of the healing was already taking place at Ons Plek, where she was experiencing adults treating her with respect, even when disciplining her, and experiencing our attempts to be fair. I had focused on unfairness, and not sufficiently on the feeling of hurt which underlay everything and which led to her repeated outbursts of anger. Acknowledging the hurt and having someone else hear it could release it in her. It would probably take Sonia several counselling sessions, covering different incidents which showed the same behaviour pattern, before she started to consciously identify the fact that her anger was caused by her sense of being hurt. If she could then say to whoever she was angry with, "I feel hurt when you..."; instead of lashing out in anger, she and the other person might end up talking rather than fighting.

The interview with the teacher took place the next day, and Sonia returned to school. It was not long before another incident occurred that gave rise to the same kind of angry outburst. It was going to take a long time, and many such outbursts. The insight she had gained might not result in an instant change of behaviour. It could be a gradual process of learning to first identify that the pattern was about to begin, and then deciding if she was going to follow it this time or not.

Would Sonia manage to stay the distance, or would she give up hope before the process was complete?

Sonia stayed at school till the end of that year. Halfway through the following year she decided she had had enough of trying. Her face wore the stony, angry expression less often, and she showed the very soft, vulnerable side of herself more frequently.

She left Ons Plek to stay with an older cousin, and got a job as a waitress. Today Sonia is a single mother. She visits us occasionally when she is in town, and sometimes discusses her difficulties in parenting her child. She says she still flies off the handle, but has learnt to come back afterwards and talk things through. We were very disappointed when she left school, but it consoles us to know that the counselling she received at Ons Plek helped to make it possible for her to relate better to people.

