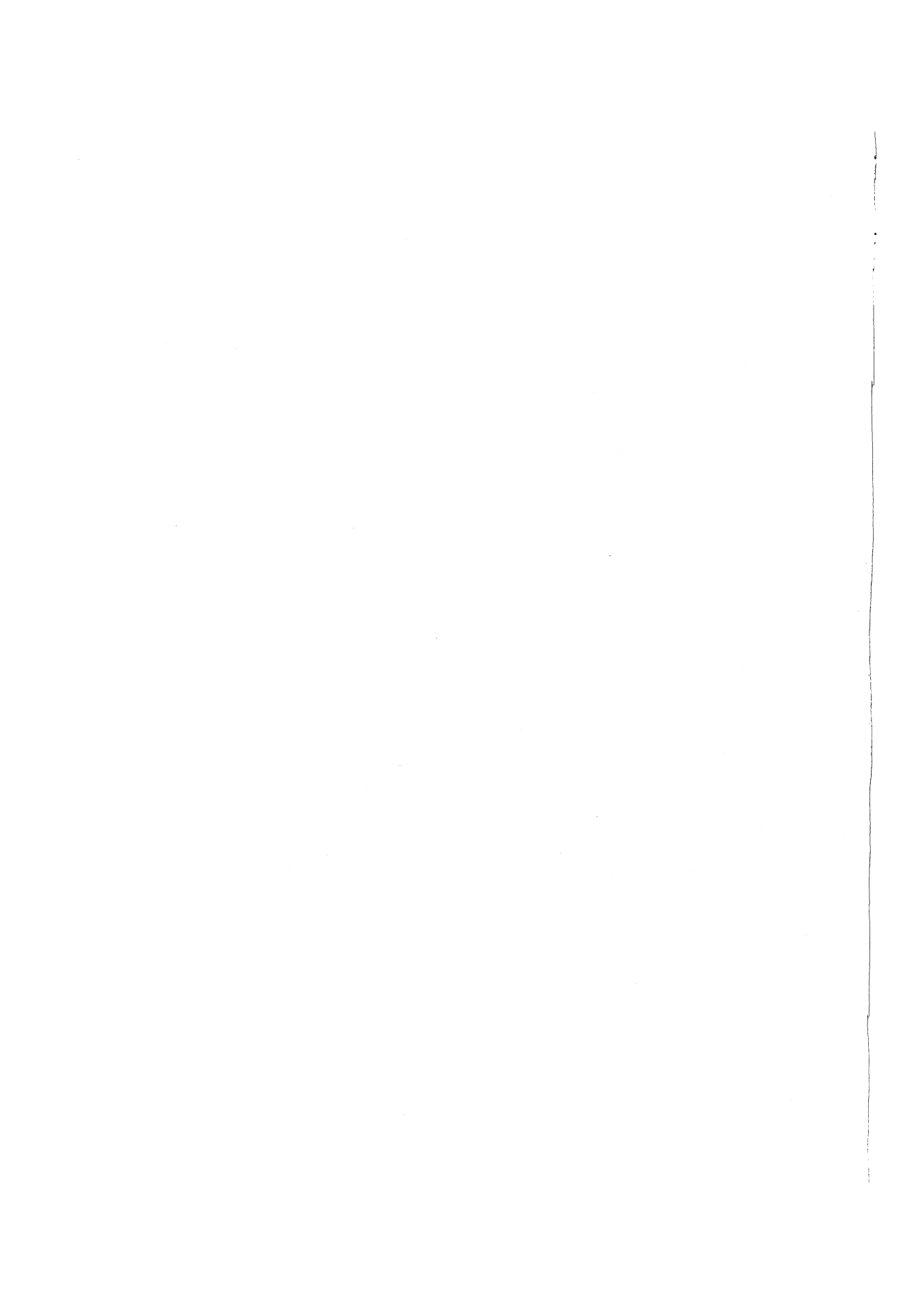


Part five

making the change



10

Writing our life story

By now you have a notebook with lots of writing, some pictures and some ideas of how your life has been so far. You probably feel as if we have been opening a lot of boxes, some of which may have been tightly shut for a long time. You will have been noticing how your internal dialogue operates, both with other people and within yourself. You may be feeling a bit worried about the more painful life issues you were previously unaware of. Do not be alarmed if there seems to be a lot. Trust your own natural self-regulatory processes. Remember what it was that made you pick up this book now and look at your life more closely.

This next stage of the book shows ways in which we will use all that you have been through and put it together in a useful and, hopefully, creative way. You are going to be listening to the different dialogues within yourself and writing out how things have been for you and how you have coped in the only way you knew how. And in your writing you will be nourishing the healthy island within yourself.

Some people protest that they could never write anything about themselves, and are so daunted at the prospect that they don't even begin. It really is amazing how this fear (inbred, I believe, from school, where what we write is always judged) simply melts away when we allow ourselves to play with the images and understandings we already have inside of us and get involved in our own creative process. This next section is for no one but you. You need not show it to anyone. No one will be awarding gold stars or dunce's caps. Once you allow the ideas, images and metaphors to inform you, the sentences will form themselves.

How to start

Get one large sheet of paper or several small index cards. Take your notebooks and flick through, casting your eyes down the pages. Take the words, shapes, images, forms or phrases that leap out at you, or any particular words you seem to have used a great deal. Don't worry about being dramatic or self-conscious. The simpler the phrases you can find to describe something the clearer will be the picture of your life and development, and the more powerfully will the images stay in your mind as you begin the process of change. Some of the phrases that come up in the seven examples of life-story writing that follow are:

Making the change

Sitting on a volcano – Death waiting at my shoulder – Wild Janet and Controlled Janet – Black hole – Ostrich attitude – Can of worms – Stolen child – Busy Lizzie – Child behind the chair – Anxiously skidding away – Puppy dog – ‘What ... little me?’ – On the treadmill – Scared rigid – On automatic – ‘Knew inside’.

Take your own examples and either brainstorm them onto the large sheet of paper, or write each one on a card. When you feel you have enough, begin elaborating upon each phrase or image. For example, ‘I grew up in a family where ...’ or, ‘All my life I have felt that ...’ or, ‘Early on I remember feeling that I was ...’ or, ‘I have few conscious memories of my early life, but having begun to question how things are in my life I can guess that I took on the position of ... early on’. Give as much detail as you can. Facts, memories, realisations.

When you feel you have the important experiences and facts you would like, put on your ‘observer’ hat (or ask your co-counsellor), and analyse what effect your early environment and your attitude to this has had on your thinking about yourself, and on the way you act in the world. The process needs to go something like this: because of ‘a’ and ‘b’ I believed that I had to be ‘x’ and ‘y’. This has led me to having an ‘e’ attitude to others and to behave as if ‘j’, ‘h’ and ‘l’. Your story might then begin something like this:

Most of my life I’ve been afraid of other people thinking I was stupid. This seems to go back to the time when I was very small and the youngest of several brothers who were all very clever. They used to call me ‘dolly dope’ and ‘slow coach’ ... I felt helpless and upset. I tried to keep up by running after them and pleading with them to let me come on their outings, but they only laughed and said they could never have girls around. Both my parents were out at work all day and were too tired to listen. They expected my brothers to take care of me when they weren’t there. I feel these experiences have contributed to a pretty low self-esteem inside me, which I fight by being quite aggressive and macho. I give as good as I get. I play the toughie and tell crude jokes, but inside I am hurt and sad and I wish someone would notice. But things don’t happen by magic and I have to learn a way of being with others, especially men, where I don’t have to appear so tough. I would like to risk taking off my tough mask from time to time and just seeing what came out. It’s a risk, but I’ve got to get something to change how things are or I will remain on my own, the butt of others’ jokes. I drink far more than is good for me, and I know this is related.

Remember to write something about your healthy island, about the things that you feel good about, are drawn toward positively and about parts of your life you can see from observing that actually you have survived well enough.

The final process is to end your story by writing something about what changes you would like to make and how you might begin to achieve them. This will involve changes in self-perception, in ‘faulty’ thinking and in false beliefs. There may be a need to recognise and challenge traps such as avoidance or pleasing, isolation or thinking negatively. All involve facing fear. This might be the only change needed.

In dilemmas, we must change from living lopsidedly to being more balanced, finding a third position from our extremes. In snags and self-sabotage we need to learn to recognise times when we unconsciously arrange to spoil our happiness. Name the reciprocal roles that are most problematic for you and name those reciprocal roles you would like to develop. All change means embracing the things we have learned to fear, and reframing our experience by challenging the 'as ifs' that live on from the past.

You may wish to write your story in prose form, or you may prefer to illustrate it with sketches, drawings, cartoons or colour paintings. Alternatively, you may like to write poetry or in a stream of consciousness. Another way is to use a flow chart or tree, showing the passage of your life from roots to branches, with images or words to illustrate what has happened during growth.

Writing the story of our life is always a powerful experience. It can be very moving. When we write the stories and then read them out loud during a therapy session, something quite special happens. Usually it is the first time we have heard exactly how life has been for us, and how our early formed attitudes to ourselves and others have contributed to our present difficulties. And we begin to understand how, by changing these attitudes, we can move away from what we may have believed were indelible footprints or entrenched habits over which we had no control. It may be the first time we have a glimpse that we can be in control of our life. Writing our story also helps to sort out confusion, and to give us a clear vision of how things are and how they have been, rather than our muddling on any old how and hoping for the wind to blow in another direction.

Seven examples of story-writing

The following are seven different examples of life stories taken, with their permission, from people working in therapy. Names and professions have been changed to protect identities. You will see how varied they are and how completely individual. They may help you to get more ideas about how to write your own story.

SYLVIA

I grew up as the *wide-eyed eldest child*, taking everything in and not always sure that things were right for me. I felt special love from my father – when he was home – and from Grandma – when she was allowed to show it to me. But otherwise I don't remember there being a readily available lap or someone to pick me up when I fell. I felt like *the child behind the chair*. It seems my mother was not very enamoured about having children, and perhaps we were a hindrance.

Because now feeling things deeply is very painful for me, and because I didn't have a safe framework in which to express feelings, I have developed ways of

Making the change

keeping feelings at bay. I do this either by *showing off* intellectually, observing and commentating, often very astutely and with flair, but in the head, or by *controlling things rigidly*. This control also extends to relationships, when I sometimes feel anxious and threatened and prone to angry outbursts unless I am in control. I feel as if something is holding me back from claiming my life fully for myself. Perhaps the *child behind the chair*, who represents my deeper and more painful feelings, is wanting recognition, and I perhaps need to relinquish some of my tactics for keeping feelings at bay, even if experiencing feelings is painful. Then I can be more rounded and integrated as a person and move forwards to claim my life, without *anxiously skidding away* from real feelings.

JANET

I grew up in a lovely family where I was the youngest and felt *special*. We were very close and I feel upset when anything happens to break that closeness. When I broke out to 'do my own thing' it hurt my family and I feel really guilty about it. I feel God is punishing me for it by letting bad things happen to me.

I live now as if I have to keep my *feelings bottled up* and bend over backwards to please people and be a good mother, wife and daughter, so I don't hurt people. I feel that if I make trouble, they might stop talking to me, and that is terrifying for me. It reminds me of when I was seven years old in hospital after I had my tonsils out, and when my sisters weren't allowed to see me. I can remember how lonely and frightening that felt, and perhaps that is why the panic attacks I get now often feel as though something is stuck in my throat (like the pain after the tonsils were removed). Sometimes it is as though anger and strong feelings, which I'm frightened to express, get stuck in my throat too. But I daren't let them out because they would hurt people.

In the past two years a number of things have happened that have threatened the safety of my *special family*: my mum's illness, Mike's [husband] dad's death, and the dog biting Shân [daughter]. This has shaken my security and I feel 'anything could happen', as though I am *sitting on a volcano*, or as though *Death is waiting at my shoulder*. I'm very frightened that something bad might happen and that I might die. This probably causes me to have panic attacks (sometimes sparked off by outside events like the boy getting hurt in the playground). At times I have experienced a sort of *black hole*, feeling there's nothing there, as though the anxiety and fear are so great that it makes me cut off from the world around me.

Perhaps I also have this fear of death because I feel my life is passing by and that I'm missing out. Although I like being a good mum, etc., I don't really do anything for *me*. Perhaps deep down I feel if I do what I want it will hurt others, and that I don't deserve to put myself first. But I also believe that there are parts of Janet that want to come out and express themselves. I have tried to blot out *Wild Janet*, but perhaps I need to feel that it's OK to be my full self, and accept all of me, to like myself and express my feelings. And I need to realise that, by doing these things I won't be hurting people and the world won't come to an end.

STEPHANIE

I was born into a family where I somehow seemed to be carrying the pain of generations. My father was born twenty years after a 'black sheep', his father died when he was eight and his mother died in front of him when he was fourteen. My mother came from a family who avoided conflict. Like my father, she was the only graduate of the siblings, and her older brother and sister died young, so she may have had to make up for them in some way.

In our family, Barry, my brother, and Jennifer, my sister, had special places. Barry is the boy and the oldest and he is like the prodigal son who returned from the threshold of death. Jennifer is special because she is the youngest and there was a belief that everyone must be nice to her because she is fat.

I am in the middle, and it feels as though the bad fairy at my birth wished that, no matter what I did, I would never be good enough. Spilling the orange juice as a very little child is still an unexpiated crime for which I cannot gain forgiveness, no matter how hard I try. I was labelled clumsy when I was six and that label has stuck – as 'exotic', 'difficult', etc. Since then, I have always felt that I'm treading carefully, trying to negotiate a minefield laid by my father. I'm aware of this little bright face, eager to live, eager for approval, always being knocked down, bouncing back, but somehow being left behind. So it feels that I have never been able to flourish: I am the shrivelled bud of my poem, who has never been nurtured or allowed to grow properly.

As a result of this, I have become caught in a trap of 'trying to be perfect'. In order to be acceptable, I aim at perfection. I never feel good enough, but still try to please, and eventually feel let down and out of control, which reinforces my sense of worthlessness. So I try again, even harder.

Another way I have of coping is by taking all the knocks on the chin, trying to bounce back no matter how much I've been knocked down, keeping the face bright, even if bits of me are left behind. But in this cycle, I come – more and more – to expect to be hurt, and I have begun to believe that I don't deserve anything good.

In some ways, this is what happens in my relationships. With men, it seems that I recruit those who fulfil the '*prophecy*' of my never being good enough, of deserving nothing for myself and of expecting to get hurt and abused. Getting herpes is like a physical manifestation of this, an emblem of the transaction where I try to give everything that's good and joyful and get back an increasingly more threatening sexual disease. They leave me, and that's my legacy – so now I feel completely diseased. It's the same feeling as I exposed in the 'letter' to my father: 'I tried to think of an image to describe how it felt to be your daughter. What came to mind was that when I was small, over a period of time you slit me open, placed a box of maggots between my heart and my stomach and slowly and deliberately sewed the scar away. Your living legacy was that I could never again feel peace, goodness, satisfactions; just rotteness at the core ...'

In my relationships with women, it sometimes feels that, in the give-and-take equation, the only part available to me is the giving, and I have learned to interpret this as being as valuable as actually receiving. I have the image of me

Making the change

as a plant that grows legs and moves out of the range of any nurture that may be intended for me – so convinced am I that I don't deserve to receive. Perhaps therapy is an opportunity to change this pattern. With a few women, it feels that they are strong enough to force me to receive, although then I feel controlled and trapped as if medicine were being forced down my throat.

One of the family sayings is, 'Stephanie has only one problem and that's Stephanie.' And I have come to believe it in some way, as though I am eternally snagged in trying to be fully myself. I have the feeling that I have never been heard and that I therefore have never been really connected with someone. Deep down I am still the deprived, needy child craving recognition, warmth and acceptance for who I really am. But I daren't show this neediness, so I try to behave well and please and give, treading carefully and thinking before I speak, terrified that the neediness will seep out and make a dreadful mess and doom me to more verdicts that I am clumsy and impossible. I wanted to star in the play, but ended up being cast as the ugly, grunting troll.

I often intellectualise my feelings – carefully releasing words so that I don't overwhelm people. But I am entitled to experience my feelings fully, even if they are very painful. And I do have some profound self-knowledge, as, for example, expressed in my poetry. There are some good bits on which I can begin to build the full, real, lovely Stephanie: my closeness to Barry; the warm, creative and admirable part of my mother which doesn't seem to judge me and is also close and very special to me; and the newly acquired sense that I have an '*angelic overview*' of the minefield – as an allegorical picture of a Tuscan field, with my father laying mines as I fly above, unseen, blowing raspberries at him!

I need to believe in the shrivelled bud – that it is good and valuable at heart, that it will and can grow, that I am the one who can nurture it and allow it to flower, and that I don't need to find ways of being special other than as the 'fortunate victim'.

I need to start learning to take as well as to give, without feeling I need to spit out the goodness. I need to feel I can stand tall; the little, bright face can become the full, bright Stephanie.

ALISTAIR

I have very few memories of my early life, and it's possible that much of my feelings from that time have been buried under my need for control. I saw my father as a strict authoritarian, a hardworking research scientist who was rarely at home. My mother seemed to spend most of the time in bed depressed, and was always trying to leave. I followed my very clever brother to boarding school and felt the pressure of expectations to continue in his footsteps. Just before boarding school, at eight years old, I had a frightening experience of racing in the school playground with another boy – the fastest boy – and slipping and hitting my head so badly against a brick wall that I was hospitalised for two weeks and at home afterwards for several months. I have no memory of my parents visiting me, only an overwhelming sense of loneliness and fear of being made to go to school. The one positive element was my nanny, who waited to get married until I went away to boarding school so that she could look after me.

I think that probably the early part of my life was quite deprived emotionally, with the feelings of the child I was at the time unexpressed and unexplored. The natural response to *depriving/rejecting* in relation to *deprived/rejected* is feeling hurt, angry, abandoned, and also needy, jealous, vindictive and destructive. There was no place for expressing any of these feelings. I coped by learning to control everything connected with feelings. The only way I hoped to receive anything for myself was through my achievements. I constantly tried to win. Mother said, 'Let feelings out,' but I didn't believe it. Father said, 'Chin up, son.'

I felt in control and good about myself later on at school, because I could do things well and be in charge. Life at home was extremely difficult, because I was trying to keep my parents together during their increased threats to divorce. And again I felt alone and lonely, and took responsibility for the adults, missing out on getting help for myself over the choice of career.

All this has led me to have an *ostrich attitude* to my inner feelings and needs. I feel that I have to strive constantly to win, that if I stop I have failed. And even when I do win I don't feel satisfaction or pleasure, but the despair of feeling I have to go on winning. I have tied my life up in such a way that I have to stay *on the treadmill*. There is little room for self-reflection, for connecting with the imaginative artist in me, or the creative dreamer. This self-deprivation has resulted in my being terrified of illness, loss and death, as if this were a metaphor for my own creative, free life being snuffed out by the desperate need to control my own life and win. I feel that if I let go it will all go wrong, or be a dead end like the brick wall. I was recently intensely moved by a piece of music. I found out it was called 'The Stolen Child'.

I would like to be able slowly to get in touch with some of the pain of my early childhood feelings, allow them space and air, through therapy, talking or through drawing and painting. I would like to make this vulnerable area within me less anxious and afraid, less the *can of worms* I fear it to be. In doing so I realise I may have to face the fear and sadness and lose some of my more controlling side for a while, until a more appropriate balance is restored and I feel freer to make more comfortable choices for myself as a whole. I would like to be brave enough to open the can of worms, rather than spend my life trying to run away from it and putting myself at risk of exhaustion and ill health.

FREDA

I was the elder of two girls in a family who were very keen to get on in the world and achieve both social and material success. My father was an immigrant from South Africa and my mother had a northern background. Both had quite strong accents which made them self-conscious of how they spoke, and each struggled to overcome this. My sister and I were sent to elocution classes when we were six. We had to practise our vowels on every car journey and to practise reading aloud. We were harshly scolded if we got things wrong, and mealtimes are full of bitter memories of being corrected over the way we pronounced things.

In between my sister and me there had been a brother who lived only a few days. I think my mother never got over it and she was always depressed and looked sad.

Making the change

My father often said, 'Oh don't go on about it. What will be, will be,' and she would shut up and tears would roll down her face. I think they both would have liked a boy, and my sister and I reacted to this in different ways. My way was to try to be as pleasing as I could, do what they wanted, be the person they wanted me to be. My sister was actually very clever, but never felt she got the encouragement she needed. She felt they were always expecting her to make up for not being a boy, and although she was clever she always spoiled it somehow. She would go in for the exams and mess them up, and she left college in the middle of her training and went into a job that didn't really satisfy her.

I don't remember Mum losing my brother directly, but I remember a lot of muttering and whispering, and that certain things were never referred to. She drummed it into us that having a baby was the worst pain of all, and always went into big emotional silences whenever someone was expecting. It seems as if, looking back on it, Mum did have the exclusive use of the emotional realm. Somehow I always felt that whatever I felt it could never be as bad as her – losing a baby and all that. So I grew up used to putting the lid on what I felt, and later on not being aware I felt anything really. I did somewhere inside me, but it was very deep.

When I was about seven my sister started her illnesses. She used to be ill most of the time, and no one ever knew what was the matter with her. She got labelled a hypochondriac. When she was fourteen she stopped eating and the school sent for my mum and dad, and we all had to go to see a psychiatrist. It was awful. Mum was crying and saying to Lyn, 'Why do you do this to me?' Dad was saying, 'After all we have done for you!' I think I tried very hard to make things better. I tried to keep the peace, to listen to everyone, and it was around this time I began to be expected to be the one who coped. Until then I had been quite clever too, and good at sports, and much was expected of me, that I would bring honour to the family, but I didn't. One of the reasons for this was that I started to put on a lot of weight because I couldn't stop eating. I was very ashamed and tried diets and running it off, but it just made me eat more. Now my parents had two children they were ashamed of and our holidays were pretty miserable. I tried to escape into books and reading, but was called selfish and ungrateful. My mother really wanted me to sit with her most of the day and entertain her; my father was quite pleased if I did this as I took her off his hands, and he was pleased if I tried to encourage my sister to eat. But other than that he had really given up on me, because I was nothing to be proud of.

What I have realised is that I have never really been a small child. I don't think I've had much freedom or fun. I've always had to be very grown up, and this has left me not really capable of letting go. I appear serious and I'm overconscientious. I take on much more than my share of tasks and become a general dogsbody. I'm beginning to see that I've used eating as a way to fill up the emptiness inside, which is related to feeling basically I'm nothing unless I'm serving or giving out to others. The eating has a tyrannical self-punishing role, because I fill myself up when I'm bothered – usually when I'm cross with my husband or I'm taken for granted by others – and then when I'm full up I feel so guilty and disgusted with myself I go for long runs and also take laxatives to try to get rid of the food.

I married a man who is a mixture of the negatives of both my parents – a depressed bully in other words – whom I try to please and serve and long for a few crumbs of affection. My *puppy dog* attitude brings out the bully in him. I take menial jobs because I haven't dared believe that I can do anything better, or that I'm entitled to, and I often catch myself thinking, 'What ... little me?' in a *martyrish* way, when I really know inside that I could do something better for myself.

I envy others their success and long to be free, but it's as if something pulls me back. I would like to find out what there is inside me that was there before my little brother died, because it feels as if something of me died at the same time. I would like to give up believing I have to please others all the time in order to gain approval and love. I would like to feel the healthy island inside I sort of know about, instead of the groaning emptiness that gets stuffed with food and then punished for it. I would like to free myself from the guilt about not being a boy, about my mother's depression, about my sister's anorexia and at not being able to make these things better. Oh! And I would SO like to be angry sometimes, to actually know what this feels like and find a way of expressing it without being terrified. And I would like to have a good belly laugh.

MARTIN

It seems as if in my early years I was the centre of my mother's life. My parents married late and I was an only child. My father was away travelling for much of my childhood, and when he was around, took little interest in me. He's still a difficult and uncommunicative man. My mother felt he wasn't intellectual enough and often ridiculed what he said and did. It feels as if she looked to me to fulfil her ideals of what a man should be, in her eyes. I was forced to be centre stage, feeling unconsciously that I must conform and be hard-working and good, perhaps to make up for my mother's disappointment in her husband, perhaps to ensure that I was loved and accepted. As a result, I was often lonely and anxious. I couldn't let it show, but I was intensely bored and bit my nails ferociously, both of which made me feel very ashamed. Negative or angry feelings were a no-no, and I learned early on the habit of pushing away anything negative that might come into my head. I learned to be vigilant about all my actions, to judge myself constantly and to fear things that came into my mind that did not conform to the image I believed was mine to live up to and upon which my survival was placed.

It seems as if in some way I have remained on the *treadmill* developed out of my early life through my professional training, repeating the pattern of trying to live up to what I believed was my lot through excessive hard work. I have believed that I must be all things to all people in order to be a good, caring professional. It seems as if I have felt it necessary to provide what is expected of me from others or I will not be recognised and valued.

Since my mother died, the pattern of things in my life has begun to change. The feelings I have never allowed to the surface have made themselves known, and the natural resentment at having to live my life entirely for others in order to be recognised has made its point. I am frightened by my angry and negative feelings; they seem to rock and threaten my entire

Making the change

equilibrium. I find I cannot control my thoughts, which swing from one thing to another. I can understand that many of these feelings are ones which have been repressed since childhood – they are natural and ordinary feelings. But because they were not allowed earlier on, they still carry with them potency and fear. I find I desperately want to gain control of what is happening to me inside. Some days I want a 'magical cure', when I will wake up and it will all be over; other days I feel despairing and hopeless and am plagued with guilt about what is happening to me, and seek reassurance that all will be well.

Some days it is very difficult for me to acknowledge what is happening to me and that I can have an active part in the transition from survival self, which was very restricting, to being more real, saying what I really think both intellectually and emotionally. I need to believe more in my own capacity to make change, to use my own insight, to listen more directly to the voice inside which allows stillness. My religious faith says: 'Be still ... and know ...'. One of my biggest hurdles is to get over feeling bad and guilty when I am angry, envious, cross or impatient with anyone. I would like a more active relationship with everything that is happening to me, so that I may use some freedom of choice and get to know sides of myself previously in eclipse. The reciprocal role of *powerfully controlling* to *guiltily submissive* is the hardest for me to work with. I sometimes take refuge in helplessness and then my controlling rituals begin. I am working on trying to be noticing/accepting/supporting in relation to myself in order to feel accepted and supported for myself as a whole. Warts, feelings, problems and all. I do know that the strength I have is something of my own which is flexible and not dependent on others.

SUSANNAH

Susannah came into therapy because of issues in relationships where she felt merged and lost her own separate identity. This made her feel frustrated and used. She had recently separated from her partner of fifteen years and was feeling the loss of this closeness and the pull to return to the relationship for the wrong reasons – in order not to have to see her ex-partner suffer or because of her loneliness. She felt that her 'bid for freedom' to be herself was a breakthrough, but it meant she had to face many unresolved issues around close relationships with others and patterns from the past. The following are extracts from the reformulation letter we created together:

We have shared some insights into your experiences in relationships and understood a reciprocal role of striving in relation to a conditional 'other'. Also the dilemma of being either close but taken over and losing a sense of yourself; or, free but alone and cut off. You are particularly in touch with the feelings around this dilemma since your separation from Pete [your partner] last June.

Possible roots for these patterns would appear to be in your fairly strict childhood. You were a shy child kept on reins by an anxious mother. There was a sense of keeping your natural self-expression back in order to please her and keep her happy, as well as yourself safe from her withdrawal if you were not as

she wanted you to be for her. This, and the controlling sense of order in the household, may have contributed to a fear of 'making your mark' and 'going over the mark' in your life generally.

The ending of your marriage to John was devastating and the deeply upsetting feelings of hurt and betrayal are still fresh for you, feelings that perhaps you bottle up for fear of mess. The ending of your marriage pressed your fear of 'not being up to the mark' and you seem to have taken more blame and responsibility than is your share. You felt guilty and ashamed at your children not having the secure background you wanted for them.

After your marriage ended you felt vulnerable to your next partner, Pete, and his need to merge and be close was at first comforting. It gave you the 'arms' you longed for and for many years the sense of safety and comfort was welcome and often creative and happy, but you were always aware of the more stifling aspects and your need to be and express yourself differently.

To balance the restricted feeling of needing to please is the need to break free of constraints. Sometimes you recognise 'if I must, then I won't', in relation to joining clubs and networks where conformity is overt. You can be anxious about being 'up to the mark' at work and can envy colleagues who get ahead. Breaking free also carries the fear of hurting others and being seen as mean by those you care about, and it also leaves you with a deep sense of loss and loneliness, and unresolved feelings about your own unmet need in close relationships.

I feel that our work together needs to concentrate upon helping you befriend the anxiety about your own self-expression, your own 'mark' either with others or at work, in order to have a more robust relationship with your own power, self-expression and skills. This will entail recognition of when you restrict or place conditions upon your own response or go along with others' conditions in order to keep the peace.

I feel that the conditional regard for yourself which has led to a restricted striving sense of self needs to be loosened to become unconditional. This may mean experimenting with new responses in order to revise their feeling and impact.

The dream you had early on in the sessions, of you and your manager measuring feet against each other and finding them to be equal, gives us a positive and hopeful image of the authority already present in you. Your description of the qualities of the manager – sharp, open and very nice – can be seen as a reflection of your own robust and lively self that needs permission and space in order to flourish and find her own mark.

At the end of Cognitive Analytic Therapy both therapist and patient exchange goodbye letters that reflect their work over the sixteen sessions. My goodbye letter to Susannah refers to the dream:

Making the change

At the end of the reformulation is the image from the first dream in therapy, of you measuring your feet with the manager and finding them to be equal. We spoke of this dream as containing a positive and hopeful energy, symbolising the robust and lively authority already present in you, and that one of the goals of therapy was to give this authoritative self permission and space, and to experiment, to learn to make her mark and become integrated.

We have shared a lot of sadness connected with the ending of your relationship with Pete. You often connected with this in the few minutes' mindful space at the start of the sessions. There has also been the anxious questioning – 'have I done the right thing?', followed by connecting with your very strong need to 'break free'. There was the sadness at losing the intimacy of the 'arms' followed by the realisation that the arms could at times be 'conditional tentacles'. There was the fear of being seen as 'mean' and seeing Pete suffer, followed by realising you had merged asking for your own needs to be met with being mean or unreasonable.

So the work of therapy has been to recognise your relationship with 'other' and how you can lose a sense of yourself and the reality of your own feeling by disappearing into others' needs. We imagined that this was a pattern of relating learned from your relationship with your anxious mother, for whom you had to make things alright, whose arms were there only if conditions were met. It was hard for you to develop a safe sense of your own needs and voice, or to make your own mark without feeling guilty or selfish. In allowing an understanding of these patterns you have opened to the harshness of the 'stolen ease of being' and begun to allow a kindness to yourself. You could also see that the gap left by unmet need had been filled with an idealisation of how things 'should' be in terms of duty to others, in order to feel alright yourself. From this position you were able to articulate the wisdom that came from the recognition and acceptance of your own feelings. You said: 'Freedom comes from within myself, in accepting the reality of what I feel and seeing things as they are rather than how I feel they "should" be. Right now there is too much anxiety, sadness and longing in me to be comfortable. So I need to wait.'

At session eight you had the dream about the stolen bag. We shared a lot of sadness at the feeling of this dream, of having to plead to have back what was rightfully yours. In the dream you did get back fully what was yours. And this dream was followed by two others that seemed to reflect both your fear of danger and also, like the first dream, a balancing factor. In one, under pressure from others, you were climbing along a ledge over the sea and were frightened. Then after rounding a corner you drop down onto the sand and the feeling was of relief at being finished with danger.

The reciprocal roles of conditional/controlling/merging in relation to restricted with 'stolen sense of ease', and critical bully in relation to hurt victim, have softened and a new psychological position of playfully caring for yourself in relation to meeting your own need joyfully and growing your own 'arms' has been created.

So the post-Pete part of therapy has been about consolidating this new sense of self. We made a new diagram that included 'growing my own arms, supporting my needs separately from others; being mindfully free to make my own mark'. There is the image of your own kingdom, your own path and an ease of being. You are also aware of putting more energy into making your mark at work and making plans to travel next year and deciding what you would most like for yourself.

And last session there was the opportunity to re-explore the way you can experience a 'silenced emptiness' when you fear not knowing what to say and the 'other', me in this instance, is in the position of being judging and demanding. I was glad that we had the time to share this reciprocal role and the understanding that rather than being empty and not knowing what to say, it is when you get hooked into the reciprocal role of being emptied by 'other' that you lose your voice and a hold on your liveliness.

Susannah wrote the following in her 'goodbye' letter:

Two significant dreams brought me in touch with my own desperate longing, indeed, pleading, to reclaim my precious, lost, stolen, self. I liked 'ease of being'. I dreamed of escaping from danger, fear and demands, by 'breaking free' from the narrow ledge above the raging sea by jumping down and experiencing the safe, firm sand under my feet. I went on to see my own vast kingdom in front of me, green, irrigated and open for exploration into the far distance, with no set paths or restrictions. Depicting this marked the reawakening interest in painting.

If I had checked my lung capacity before therapy and again now there must be an increase in volume! I am learning to breathe in as well as out, and to channel the air, nourishing in itself. Getting to the end of therapy made me wonder if I would manage alone and last week heightened how vulnerable I am in relation to questions, demands or expectations of 'the other' and how I can feel anxious and depleted. I know, however, that what I have experienced in therapy cannot be taken away, that the kingdom is all around me and I am walking on ... The concept of Maitri has been important. I have never known the unconditional in my life, let alone the unconditional acceptance of myself – thoughts, emotions, reflexes and behaviour. Some of the time it eludes me, but when I can enter this freeing, caring place I am filled with tears of relief and gratitude. Thank you for this gift. I know it is mine forever and what better way to navigate a new journey – to navigate a change of path.

You will see that everyone's story is quite different, that the images, phrases and what each made of the different experiences was highly individual. **Your story is your own and you need to claim it as your own story and place on the journey so far.** It should contain enough of the essence of what you feel now and something of an understanding of how that has come to pass,

Making the change

even if you have to hypothesise because you cannot know all the facts. (Even when facts are known everyone will make something different even of the same life events.) Include in the story both how you feel things have come to be as they are in your life, and something about what you hope to be relieved of and what you would like in the future.