

## A HOUSE IS NOT A HOME

Jennifer is fourteen. She is mature for her age and spreads angst and agitation wherever she goes. She has been expelled from two schools and is having problems at her present school. The headmistress, Mrs. Barker, who referred her to me, said that a Damocles sword was hanging over her and if there were any more problem she would have to go.

She was referred to me to see if I could halt her downward spiral and prevent the next step down in her failing life. Jennifer presented herself as a very confident girl. Everything was the fault of others. She was not to blame for all the complaints that surrounded her.

She explained all the accusations with an attitude of self belief. Butter wouldn't melt in her mouth. The teachers; students; headmistresses were all wrong. She was misunderstood, misinterpreted and blamed for things she did not do.

In spite of all I knew about Jennifer I liked her. She had a spark, a potential hidden below the surface. There was something else going on inside that was not being reflected on the surface. Her history was one I had heard many times before. Her parents had argued continuously before they divorced when she was nine. There had been no love in the family. Jennifer lived with her mother and visited her father every second weekend. Her mother was depressed, spending much of the day in bed. Her father was a busy accountant devoting any spare time to two children from his second marriage.

Jennifer did not fit in anywhere. She did not feel loved or even wanted. She craved attention, lacked confidence and understandably had a very low self esteem. To all her friends and teachers she was the complete opposite—confident, aggressive and full of self importance. To maintain her external persona---preventing others from discovering the real Jennifer—she had a “shell” which was pulled down to stop the outside world seeing a frightened girl inside.

“I feel so vulnerable”, she told me after a number of visits. “I am frightened of other people knowing who I really am. If they knew they wouldn’t like me. I would have no friends”.

Fear was a major component of Jennifer’s life. She was frightened of doing exams in case she failed. To overcome this problem she was late for exams and then had an excuse for her bad results. Confident people have the motto—“Better to enter the race and fail than not to enter the race at all” Jennifer’s was—“Better not to go in the race, and then I can tell myself I didn’t fail.”

Her failure to sit exams, attend detentions, study, behave in class were causing so many more problems than solutions. She was in denial, would not discuss any alternative, and unwilling or unable to face up to the outcome of her actions. My work with Jennifer was not progressing and the Damocles sword was getting closer to falling. I discussed her with Mrs. Baker. She believed there was promise there somewhere, and was loathe to expel her if it was at all possible to help the “real Jennifer” to show herself.

Mrs. Baker was having a difficult time convincing the teachers to cope with Jennifer in the hope that I could perform some magic. One week Jennifer came in with a different aura around. An aura I had not seen before. I would describe her as “radiating warmth”. I commented on the change and she said she had made a discovery. I was really intrigued and said “Please tell me about this remarkable discovery? “I have just realized that Mrs. Baker really likes me. She has been supporting me against the other teachers in spite of all the things I have done. I can’t remember that ever happening before--an adult taking my side when I have been misbehaving.”

She started to cry. I sat quietly for some minutes not wanting to disturb what was happening inside her. “You have also helped me a great deal,” she said through her tears,” you have listened to me without judging. You have pointed out many things I knew but didn’t want to hear. You have helped me face who I am, what I am doing, and where I will end up if I don’t change. Could you help me to change?”

I was a bit stunned. Here was a fourteen year old girl who had spent her life lying, confronting me with the truth and so openly asking for my help.

I thought for a minute or two and had an inspiration. "I believe I can help if you are brave enough to do what I ask." She looked worried and concerned about what she may be agreeing to. She did not speak for a little while then said, "I think I trust you, so yes I will do what you ask if I can."

"Good girl. You will be entering the race. I want us to discuss this shell of yours. I am going to tell you about the hermit crab. Do you know what they are?"

She looked puzzled. I don't think she was expecting that sort of question.

"No", she said cautiously, "what are they?"

Hermit crabs are special. They have no shell of their own so have to use shells that are discarded by other crabs. They have a very sensitive backside that needs protection from creatures in the sea that may eat them. They walk around the seabed looking for a shell that they can fit in. Then they back their sensitive bottom into this shell and wander around safe and happy. After a while the shell becomes too small and tight for them. They feel uncomfortable so they pull themselves out of that shell and crawl into a bigger one that is much more comfortable. They must feel very nervous whilst they are making the change.

"I think it is time to change your shell for a bigger one. I would like you to close your eyes, use your imagination, and imagine you are in this tight, outdated shell, and you are changing it for a larger more comfortable one".

She sat with her eyes closed, concentrating on her inner world for quite a few minutes. Then she opened her eyes, smiled, and said,

"That was amazing. I saw myself squashed in a shell that was too tight for me, it was a spiral shell and there was no room for my friends. I then found a much bigger one with many more rooms. I got inside that and made it really comfortable. I invited some friends in and they really loved it, I felt so good having them there."

We talked about her picture, and she talked about how she needed to be brave and prevent the shell ruining her life. She believed that the new shell would make a great deal of difference. I asked her to spend ten minutes a day thinking about the new bigger shell; take a risk by telling a friend that she was not as confident as she had appeared; to “enter the race” instead of avoiding it; to behave in class even though she may want to gain attention by causing disruptions.

I told her that this was a lot to ask and for her to do her best. When I saw her a week later she was still looking well, but not as glowing as at the previous visit. Things had gone well but she did not succeed in everything I had asked her to do, and was worried I “wouldn’t like her”.

I praised her for the things she had done and asked her about another animal that has a shell—a snail. “Is a snail slow?” I said.

She thought for a while worried in case she made a mistake over such a silly question.

“Yes it is” She replied.

“In fact, Jennifer, it is not slow. It goes at its own pace, and I would like you to go at your own pace. Don’t you think it would be strange to see a snail whizzing across the floor?”

She agreed, and I told her she was doing very well making the changes in her own way.

“An important thing,” I said “is to make mistakes, as it is the main way we learn. As you learn from experiences you become wiser, less frightened and more able to be yourself—your real self, in the best shell and going in the race. It doesn’t matter if you win the race as long as you try, enjoy the experience, and feel good about yourself for doing what you did. Generally change can be difficult. It doesn’t need to be if you go at your own pace.” Jennifer looked overawed by my speech.

“It all looks TOO difficult. There are so many things you are telling me that seem too hard for me to do”.

“I agree, I have talked too much too quickly. That is a mistake I have made. I am going to learn from that mistake. Let’s take it in little stages. Are there any of the things I have said that you CAN do?”

Jennifer thought for quite a while.

“Yes” she said very slowly. “I can spend a little time before I go to bed praising myself for some of the things I have done during the day.”

“Well I am going to praise you for thinking of doing that, because it is a very important thing to do. It will help you to like yourself and gain confidence to go in the race”

Jennifer and I worked together to make improvements to her confidence; self-esteem; ability to be herself with friends, and eventually like herself for who she was. It took many sessions, many hiccups along the way, many tears (and some laughter).

She had great courage to do things differently, to learn, to change, to overcome disappointments when things didn’t go as she (we) hoped.

When we parted company she was like a toddler who had constantly fallen over and was now able to walk in a teetering way with occasional falls. She was able to get up after these falls and continue on her way—bruised but determined to keep going and not resort to her previous method of travelling through life.