



"Appreciating One's Piers"
Bournemouth Pier, Dorset (was Hampshire)

Chapter 14

"Learning to 'Let go'"

Discouragement spurned as vanity

Sam and The Feather resumed where they had left off just a few days previously. The Feather had refused to sponsor Sam; nevertheless, Sam already knew that self-pity could not be harnessed usefully in this strange but promising province. He had summoned the courage to ask Stocky instead (as The Feather gently seemed to have intended), and everything had gone swimmingly. Only little did Sam realise what a vast inheritance of spiritual riches he was absorbing – simply for having abandoned his pointless and self-centred seafaring adventures. Sam knew something was afoot in the way of personal psychological transformation, but he had no idea of the scale on which it shifted.

Stocky said that I must never permit myself hopelessness, prompted the still green, but ever-keen pilgrim.

Yes. It is a chronic condition of ours, answered The Feather as obligingly as ever. It is, of course, an impostor. Under its spell we consider ourselves victimised. Actually it is a self-indulgence.

A nagging emptiness that can turn bitterly painful to the point of excruciation – especially if we mismanage it? invited Sam.

Very much so, agreed The Feather. It may feel like a deep sense of pointlessness or futility – some say nihilism – that seems to want our demise or self-destruction as its only means of satiation. But really it is we who sulk – or object belligerently to the way things actually are – so deeply that we can barely see our own incapacity for perceiving things reasonably objectively. Another seahorse, if sufficiently brave, may point out our foibles to us; but we are far more likely to snap than to suddenly confess our own shortcomings.

Sam recognised the truth of The Feather's words instantly. Yes, I have felt just that way often, although I have never cared to admit or show it. I have strived for self-reliance; but I can see that the very striving was a reflection of the underlying reality that I lacked such independence. By trying to convince myself and other seahorses that I was OK, I was battling the spectre of hopelessness uselessly. I can see now that fear of that gaping futility was the fundamental drive beneath all my vain efforts. Any seahorse who had established an authentic way of dealing with the same feelings would have been able to discern my old besieged existence quite readily.

The Feather challenged Sam: Was battling? Old besieged existence?

Sam paused. Well, he said, we shall see. And The Feather was happy to accept Sam's assertiveness about whether his problems had expired.

Keep your perspective, said The Feather. Each of us suffers from it. It is a very significant part of the seahorse condition. Goodness knows how it got to be so, or what in our make-up accounts for it. Perhaps it has to do with the capacity we have for communicating with each other so imaginatively, so intensely and with such a sense of purpose. Perhaps we are electrified with a-hundred-and-one expectations which, of their very selves, bestow upon us false hope. All that seems to matter now is that we accept that it may touch us – rather than fight it frantically before it arrives. We know that we have each other to rely on, and that we possess each in our own right an appreciation of all those spiritual principles upon which we may draw should ever we find ourselves uneasy, displaced, upset or awry.

Growing into intuition

Stocky and I had a long conversation about the program, reported Sam.

I can imagine! replied The Feather, attaching one of his warm smiles.

Whilst we all may labour under a common condition, we all must grow up too; at least, if we wish to acquire a worthwhile personal sanity.

The Feather firmly agreed: *Quite so!*

After all, we all were hatched merely as eggs once! said Sam in flow.

Agreed! quipped The Feather.

And - by definition - were immature then!

Very juvenile indeed! exclaimed The Feather energetically - seemingly happy to marry Sam's enthusiasm with accelerations of his own.

So, continued Sam, the program is for helping us to grow up - and since "spiritual surrender" is at its beginning absolutely and at its heart in so far as we can bring it to bear - we learn to let go of our infantile handicaps: to relinquish them instead of defend them?

The Feather, quick to discern Sam's need for corroboration, provided it without hesitation: *Yes. All that you say seems correct to me.*

Sam was getting the hang of all this. Right on message he asserted, We started by learning to let go of our seafaring instinct entirely, for we came to accept that it was a road to ruin for us. We had burnt the fuse along its whole length. We had to let go of it completely.

That's right. That applies to Stocky, to me, to you, not forgetting The Driver on that day we attended your wreck. We can't speak for anybody but ourselves. But in relation to our category, apparently, there was no short-circuit. Being obtuse, we learned the hard way.

I'm not sure that I have grasped the remainder of the program the way that you and Stocky have, Sam blinked, rather unthinkingly. I believe that I now understand much intellectually, but I don't seem to have the intuition that you possess. Will I acquire my own with practice?

Yes, you will, The Feather assured Sam. It is a question of carrying on with absolutely everything for just a day at a time - and no more. We don't project into the future like a Grandmaster of chess, for barely one of our rehearsed scenarios²⁴⁴ will ever transpire; besides, it is only fear that wants us to anticipate every awful eventuality.

And already I know the answer to fear: it is transcendent trust. I am learning to rely on a spiritual source - one of my own choosing - out of a free conviction - knowing that, because it is trustworthy, it possesses a better judgement and capacity than do I for taking care of my business. If I am confused about its very nature, or what it wishes for me, or what it requires me to do, I need only ask it - for it has the facility to answer me, and I can expect an answer if I am sufficiently amenable to receiving a response without baulking at it.

The Feather was becoming (just occasionally) rather impressed with Sam's insights in a way that made his washboard of a chest burst with astonishment and satisfaction - lending weight to his own discovered sense of gratitude. To see embedding in another seahorse the wonder that he had once enjoyed for the first time himself was a profoundly significant experience for him. And he wasn't exactly new to it now.

²⁴⁴ "Emotion Control" (see also Chapter 7) including "Rehearsal" is a psychometrically quantifiable phenomenon linked empirically to a variety of health outcomes at both the physiological and psychological levels. The work has been pioneered by Derek Roger formerly at the University of York, UK; latterly at the University of Canterbury, NZ.

Evolving into maturity

How do we get to be so underdeveloped, asked Sam provocatively. It seems we are - as it were - unfit for purpose. Aren't we all the product of billions of years of evolution and natural selection?

Well yes - in so far as we understand all things scientific - which may be to a far more limited extent than many of us would like to believe. We don't know whether science, as we have known it since Copernicus, has the capacity to discover and explain everything - even though some seahorses adhere to science almost as though a personal deity - as vigorously as many adhere to a religious faith. If we are sensible, we will leave room for the unexplained, don't you think? The Feather winked at Sam, but the missile missed its mark. Arguably (he continued), it is our unwitting marginalisation of everything we can't understand in a concrete way that disables us so woefully and - plausibly - infects our culture with the same folly.

If we all agree on the program's principles, why is it that none of the seahorses around here exhort each other to "Grow up"? Sam teased.

The Feather laughed loudly. Quite often and, secretly, we'd like to! he spluttered through his audible mirth. Remember that we keep our side of the street clean - and only our side. We don't take notes on each other unless invited - such as in sponsorship. Anyway, we are all fallible! Exhorting another adult seahorse to "Grow up!" is like insisting that an infant one acts her or his age when what you really want is for them to think and act like you do; i.e., as an adult!

Sam chuckled. But sometimes I feel lousy or rubbish because things are ... kind of ... haunting me - rather than because I want my own way.

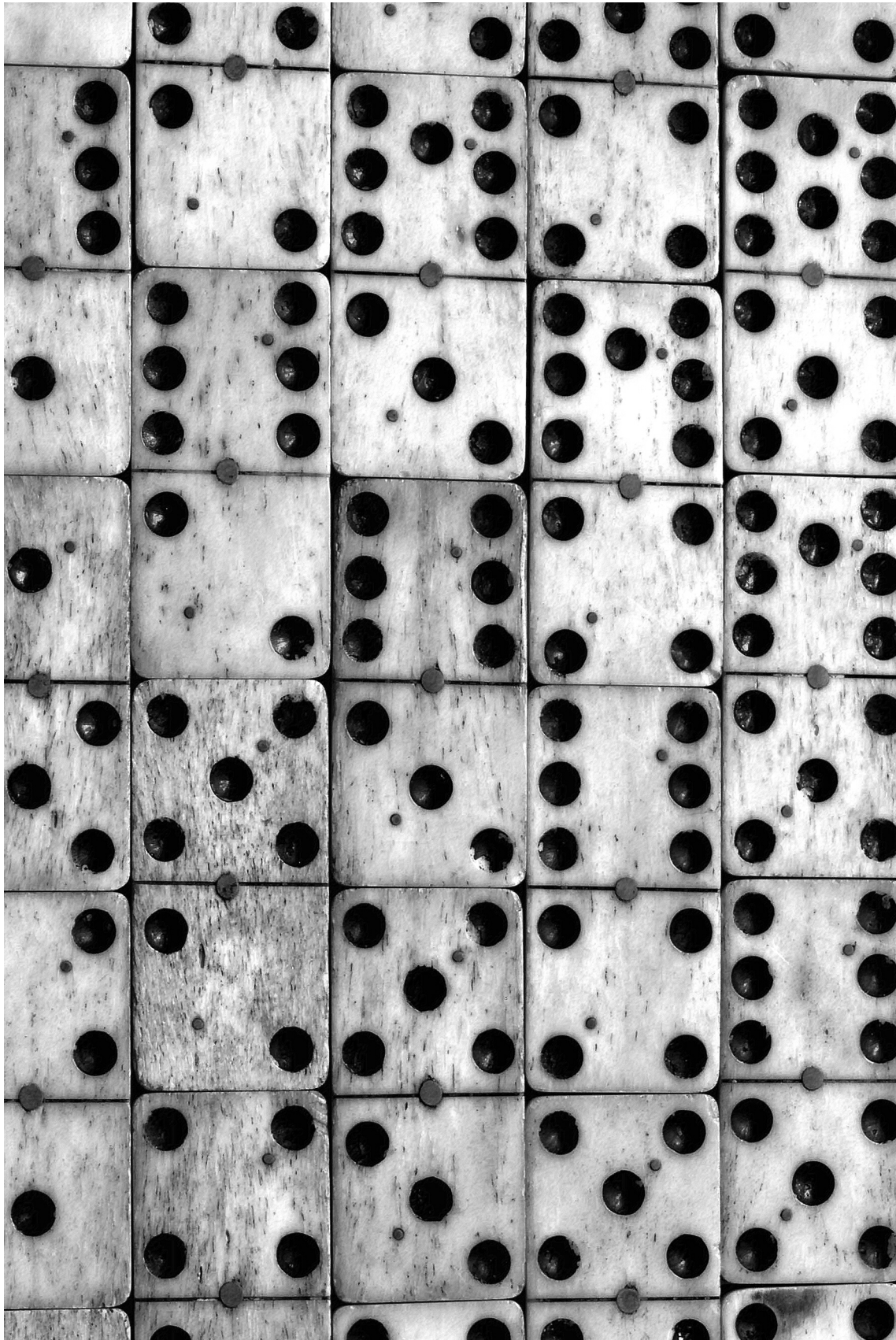
The Feather's mirth evaporated at once as if exposed to proximate stellar combustion. Yes. Me too. And still nowadays. Don't be discouraged. I have not known a dark day since I was a sailor. By "dark" I mean a day where I have felt drowned in toxic hopelessness. I do have difficult days. And on those difficult days I can usually see for the looking that - in the manner of exercising spiritual principles - I am doing something I ought not - or not doing something I ought. Often there is a peculiarly favourable untwisting of events when I bring self-examination, acceptance and trust to bear! Even so, there are times when I can't - for the life of me - fathom the arrival of a murky cloud. Acceptance and trust - whilst always of fundamental avail - don't seem a sufficient mental patch, and I have to resort to waiting for a day to pass (without putting to sea). When that happens, I am well-advised to seek out my own sponsor - for my willingness to do so seems, inevitably, to induce whatever understanding and cheer I lack. Perhaps this is the territory of contemporary psychology as much as it is of spiritual endeavour. I have learned to exhaust my capacity for pursuing the program as a first resort. The experience of many of us confirms that often it turns out to have been the easier way. We were simply unwilling under duress to maintain our commitment to it. Any alternative turns out to have been no solution at all or, at worst, a distraction in disguise. But all of us - justifiably - are entitled to pursue our own arrangements for spiritual and psychological adjustment, for whom with a right mind would divert us from a truly satisfactory remedy?

How do I know what arrangement is right for me - before I try one?

That requires wisdom, replied The Feather quickly.

How do I obtain wisdom? asked Sam, quite unable to predict an answer.

Ask for it Sam! In the spiritual life (as in the pursuit of science) you will find eventually if not sooner just what you're looking for!



"Ancient And Not-So-Ancient Echoes": whale-bone dominoes from a photograph by Dr Hannes Grobe at the Alfred Wegener Institute

The territory of contemporary psychology

What exactly did you mean when you said, "Perhaps this is the territory of contemporary psychology as much as it is of spiritual endeavour", Sam wanted to know.

Well - according to one (and only one) framework for understanding these things, answered The Feather, when we act as if we were children, we are in what is known as a corresponding ego state.

Sam sought clarification: "Ego state"?

Yes. According to this point of view, an ego state is a recognisable mental condition betrayed by characteristic thoughts, feelings and behaviour. We also possess a Parent ego state, and an Adult one. In our Child ego state, we can be bolshy and resistant to parental imperatives, or we may be compliant. It is usually one or the other! In our Parent ego state, we are either nurturing - or we are trying to get someone to toe the line (i.e., we are "controlling" or, more pejoratively, "critical") by inviting compliance from another's Child. You can see that both Parent and Child states are chiefly manipulative processes and, in that sense at least, socially immature amongst adult peers. The Adult ego state is the one in which we are rational and reasonable! Our behaviour is hinged on the here and now.

Do go on, said Sam, confident that there was cause to be interested.

Unlike the Adult ego state, the Child and the Parent ego states are built of ancient and not-so-ancient echoes ...

Pardon? interrupted Sam.

Ancient and not-so-ancient echoes, The Feather repeated.

That's what I thought you said. Please do elucidate.

OK. But do bear in mind that what I am saying here represents an unproven model.

I have that very much in mind, Sam chirped.

But it is a neat and compelling model anyway.

As I am about to discover, no doubt, beeped Sam.

The bottom line is whether it is - so to speak - "real" or "actual" and, fittingly, helpful to us, perhaps on the dark days we discussed.

Then like all good models we can subject it to scrutiny, repeated test-drives, and ruthless exposure as mitigated or unmitigated error.

Quite, said The Feather, feeling almost discouraged, but you did ask.

Do go on, Sam urged, trying to sound heartening.

... before we developed the competent use of our seahorse language, we were looked after intensively by our parents and carers ...

Assuming we were fortunate enough to enjoy such, Sam cut in again.

Agreed; but we couldn't have survived our very early lives at all without constant basic care.

I suppose you are right, answered Sam a little too curtly.

... and during all that time, continued The Feather, for a year or two, we were exposed to a huge repertoire of reinforcement: nice things such as food, warmth, cosiness, physical intimacy and the like but - simultaneously and equally - a vast array of aversive influences: scolds, or even a harsh tone of voice from a carer - anything at all that was unpleasant; moreover, just the very withholding or withdrawal of those mostly pleasurable things that made us feel safe.

Where this is all going

Where is all this going? pressed Sam.

Well, all that reinforcement will have tended to increase or decrease the likelihood that we will behave in particular ways in situations like the ones in which the reinforcement first or regularly occurred.

Even though we were too young to understand language?

Almost because we were too young to understand language! Only later - when we appreciated the power that our own use of language possessed to affect the occurrence of reinforcement - did our learning become significantly more refined: we learned to manipulate the environment.

I see, said Sam, in customary self-obsessed mode, trying to reflect on how all of this might have occurred during his own infancy.

Now, what is more, continued The Feather, *learning that happens because of reinforcement is always accompanied by an affective or an emotional response. If the reinforcer was horrible, the attendant emotion is unpleasant. It may be experienced in a variety of ways. Ultimately it is a fear response that makes us want to avoid things.*

I see, said Sam, although he hadn't quite let it all settle yet.

Look, said The Feather, *if the learning occurred before we used language, the emotional response will be wordless. It won't feel clear. It may seem like a fundamental or core response from our bodies - at least - those parts that help us run away from danger.*

Got it, said Sam, with undue triumph.

Later - when we could use language to pursue what we wanted, the nice things we tried to get, and the nasty things we tried to avoid, had words - and so did the feelings that accompanied their being obtained or avoided. The emotional response may still be physical - but now it is one we can articulate. That makes it feel qualitatively different.

So that later kind of learning is much easier to undo? asked Sam.

Easier to understand and access - that's all. We can talk about it all till the cows come home - or, even, until the chickens come home to roost (said The Feather, a little casual about his metaphors); but undoing that learning may be a lot less easy than we might think.

Why? enquired Sam.

A premature question is forced

The Feather felt compelled to introduce a question to Sam just a little earlier than it was due. Do you understand fully why you set off for sea - personally desperate, unaccompanied, with no chart or guide - and with no resources other than a few stolen provisions?

No, said Sam, glad to be invited to focus on his own story. *Not fully. I have talked about it with Stocky, and he invited me towards certain challenging considerations, but it isn't all clear to me yet.*

Well - part of what drove you may have been undiluted immaturity.

O ... K. Sam was still utterly willing, but didn't like the charge.

And part may have been mistrust of everybody, and no spiritual faith.

Sam remained silent.

And part may have been a wordless harrying from your core - a conditionless desire to burst away from what you saw as your prison - Anything but this!

Yes - that's how it was, pounced Sam. *That much seemed clear to him.*

And you may have begun to believe that you could exercise something that you came to regard as personal will – a perception of control.

Yes ... I can see that too, confirmed the uncomfortable scrutinee.

Now, these two sorts of echoes, explained The Feather, are the fundamental building blocks of your Child ego state. They can be formed whenever reinforcement is encountered – and you may imagine that the number of bricks in your Child ego state is astronomically high – not limitless as in infinity – but verging on countless.

My goodness, answered Sam, genuinely impressed by the mathematics.

Your Child ego state, The Feather continued, is instrumental in terms of its function; i.e., as we have said, it strives to control reinforcement through what looks to the Child like discharge of personal will. Have you ever seen a junior seahorse having a tantrum?

Of course, replied Sam.

Then you can imagine in your mind's eye what I'm getting at.

Indeed I can, said Sam freely. What of this Parent ego state then?

More about vanity

Glad you asked, said The Feather with visible satisfaction. The Parent ego state is functionally like the Child ego state. It is instrumental in that it anticipates favourable outcomes depending on how it sees itself acting. It is as vain as the Child ego state.

"Vain"? Sam seemed surprised at the adjective.

Yes, vain. The perception of control possessed by both the Child and Parent ego states is illusory in the sense that the contingencies that actually prevail between behaviour and result are far less tangible or reliable than ever imagined – even with hindsight. We are constantly rationalising our behaviour to fit justifications for the various types of reinforcement that we seek. Most are in the social sphere – for much of our reinforcement, so we believe, resides in the hands of others. We can be tempted to coercion at times; in fact, the most unscrupulous of us make a habit of harnessing fear to that end.

Yuk! How seedy! spluttered Sam, truly disgusted.

"Yuk" and "seedy" are most apt! echoed The Feather, just as vehement.

Is the Parent ego state made of the same stuff? solicited Sam.

No. The building blocks are similar but appreciatively different. You remember Clipboard Clive, don't you Sam? enquired The Feather.

Why, of course, agreed Sam.

Well he, and all of the busybodies you ever encountered, are stored in your Parent ego state as introjects – or internal representations of individual seahorses. These introjects have many features – just like the real ones. The attributes that are most salient or powerful – in your mind's eye – are those that appeared to signal or predict the best and the worst of all the reinforcement you ever encountered.

So the Parent ego state is also massive – just like Child!

That's right, confirmed The Feather.

I'm not sure that I am comfortable with all those revolting, fishy, axe-grinding characters living rent-free in my head! Sam exclaimed.

Quite so, said The Feather. And you don't have to let them. We shall come to determine how you may evict undesirable tenants presently.

I'm looking forward to that, said Sam. And, truly, he was.

Sam asks an intelligent question

How, enquired Sam, might I determine whether a given unsettled feeling emanates from my Child ego state or my Parent ego state? More technically, how might I know which of the three types of building bricks lies aetiologically beneath it? For, surely, if I answer those questions, I would, at least, know which bothersome organ to excise with my psychological scalpel, divining fairly where to lay the cut.

That's a good question, replied The Feather. The surgical procedure - if you have the time and the inclination - is indicated by interpreting what we know already. Pre-language situation-response (S-R) learning is physical, nebulous and harrying. Post-language response-reinforcer (R-S) learning is guileful. The introjects in Parent generate specific affective responses associated with their attributes. That brick is made of two stimuli forged together - the introject or its attribute - and the reinforcer. It is thereby S-S.

A re-examination of Sam's conscience

If I experience an aversive tension in which a variety of courses of action are vying with each other for prominence, do we not now have to understand quite a hotchpotch of emotional drivers? And if there is such diversity, and one or more drivers are misaligned with the remainder, how am I to select a morally appropriate way of behaving?

Well - there is such a thing as "conscience", replied The Feather, knowing that the brevity of his answer would leave Sam unsatisfied.

Yes. Conscience is the word I was looking for. Conscience has tension incorporated inherently; I mean - if there were no tension, there would be no conscience - no pressure to veer this way versus that.

I suppose so, said The Feather, pleased at Sam's rhetorical waxing (from which The Feather obtained temporary relief from tiring work).

It would be a great ease on our consciences if we could re-write our minds, hinted Sam, honestly hoping for The Feather's co-operation.

Well - we can't re-write the past. On that we may be agreed.

Absolutely, said Sam, secretly fantasising about time machines.

But perhaps we can overwrite or otherwise compensate for elements of our learning that we may regard as illegitimate or bastard.

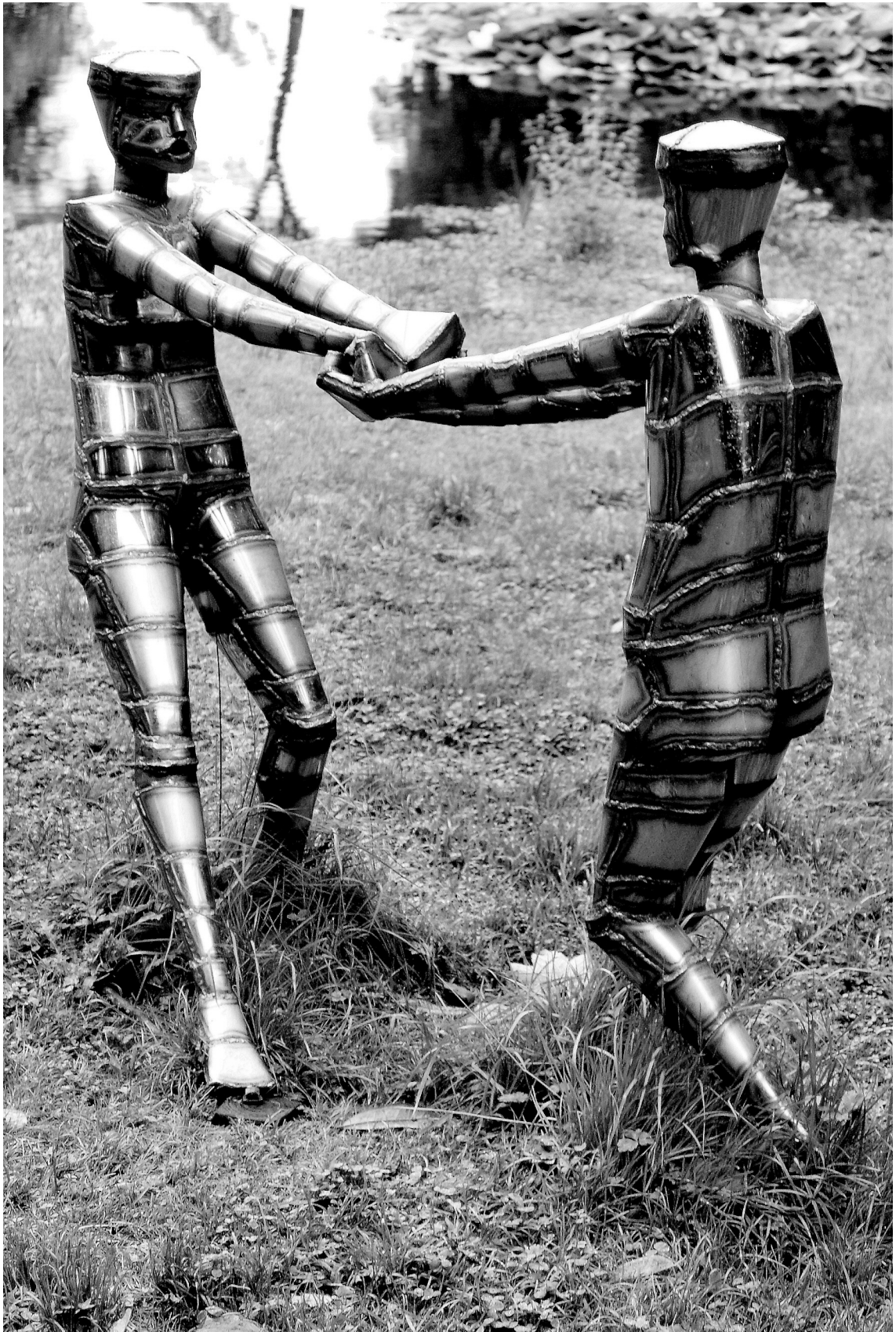
I like that way of describing many of my introjects, agreed Sam.

But I also imagine this to be a slow process that can only begin in earnest following a systematic trawl through our biographic histories. This assumes we can disentangle in a sufficiently coherent manner the three types of ego state building bricks that we have identified. Even then - we must pull up sharp when it comes to ancestral mind-buggery - for we may make too many assumptions about transgenerational transmission; i.e., the precise ways in which learning gets cascaded in families. And perhaps we become tempted to look for scapegoats - to embark on dangerously gleeful witch-hunts.

Why isn't that a simply wonderful idea? taunted the unsavvy Sam.

Because scapegoating is an instance of kidding ourselves. We lapse into "spiritual blindness" - especially if our targets were never truly at fault. What's worse, we only add fuel to the inferno of our personal resentments - feeding the uncomfortable angst we experience when the worst of those sitting tenants amongst our introjects launch themselves into our imaginations spontaneously. And don't they perform such dastardly manoeuvres just when we consider ourselves undistracted? Don't we want to be free of all that inner turmoil?

I should say so, said Sam. And he meant it.



"Vying With Each Other For Prominence"
Original sculpture by Bob Waters at Arlington Court, Devon

Exorcising ghostly apparitions

So you can see, said The Feather, that a re-writing of our minds is far from a straightforward business given the current state of our psychological technology. But actually that doesn't matter terribly! Something far more ancient than science - indeed, by a factor of some 400²⁴⁵ - lies at the tips of our fingers (if not the tips of our tongues). The same "spiritual surrender" that eventually we applied without equivocation to the seafaring disposition (the one we accepted would finish us off without ceremony) can be applied in more diluted measures, if we cannot generate a full-scale capitulation, to any or all of those nasty ghostly apparitions or tenants we no longer wish to entertain in our mental condominiums. We can exorcise them!

"Spiritual surrender" trumps analysis and re-authoring just like a mechanical excavator surpasses manual grave-digging, Sam suggested.

Yes - or, shall we say less morbidly, such surrender is a no-contest facilitator of change compared with more protracted detailed work.

When you said, "We can exorcise them!", I gained an impression in my mind's eye of something quite forceful - quite wilful, said Sam.

Oh no, not at all, replied The Feather with some disdain. Try to regard wilfulness as a close cousin of the acquisitive expectations we siphoned chronically from our Child ego state. They were infantile in so far as they were self-centred, and unrealistic in their disproportional relationship with what actually happens in the world. In this manner, wilfulness is just as illusory as the fear that generates our habitual rehearsal of all those dreamy (and always threatening) future eventualities. There is proportionate fear - much of it unconditioned and which quite reasonably, thanks to mother nature, keeps us out of trouble - and there is the surfeit that we bring to the table ourselves - a dreadful but dispensable habit.

... that we can relinquish rather than banish? Sam inferred hopefully.

Yes. That will do nicely, corroborated The Feather.

If we can relinquish all the fear we don't like at will ... Sam stopped himself - feeling very stupid ... Sorry! Of course ...

Yes ... (The Feather said gently and waited ...)

... and, so, I can't expect to achieve this faculty instantly ...

No

... but I can practice!

Yes! This time, The Feather sounded triumphant (and quite duly so).

Conscience gets a road-test

That means, concluded Sam, that I can't railroad my conscience into submission, but that I can test it with a little patient and loving self-examination, conducted in a spirit of honesty with myself ...

... and your sponsor! This time it was The Feather's turn to interrupt.

Sam was happy not to be trusted to accomplish this work solo: ... yes - with Stocky - and then I can undertake patient practice at letting go of ghostly apparitions, having the confidence that I am not trying to banish - through useless wilfulness - the loving whisper of nature. Given what you say about 24 hour chunks of life, I can persevere with and monitor my progress on a daily basis - never seeking to project more than a day. I can co-test my attachment to reality versus fantasy by sometimes appraising my capacity for acceptance and trust.

²⁴⁵ assuming that homo sapiens can be traced back 200,000 years - and science some 500

Very good, said The Feather.

Then I need to see Stocky, blurted Sam at the beginning of a rush.

Yes - you do. But there's no great hurry. Is there?

I suppose not, agreed Sam.

You need to tell at least one person everything. Don't keep a secret. We all have private material that is best kept that way. You may develop other friends whom you can trust, but air your dirty laundry with much discretion. If ever in doubt, ask Stocky for his thoughts on the matter. Within the seahorse society at large, we share in a far more general way. We share about principles; I repeat, how we are learning about principles. We do not need to resort to specifics in public forums. If something is eating us, we are willing to declare it - even if it makes us feel small; or, should I say especially if it makes us feel small - but we go to a sponsor or trusted confidant. Stocky will not break your confidence because his own sanity depends on treating you with the respect and dignity he requires for himself.

Gosh ... Yes ... Thank you, said Sam - with lots of true appreciation.

If you keep this up - a day at a time - you will change, and you will know you have changed, and you will never look back. I promise you.

Yes ... Thank you

You can feel utterly unchained - no matter what your circumstances.

Sam sensed the truth of The Feather's words (again) through the haze of an uncertain and barely imaginable future. OK, he said.

Your "Inner Child" will become free to express itself without fear!

Wow! (Sam wasn't feeling stunned yet, but knew that he would be ...)

Your Parent ego condition will be moulded peaceful and peace-adoring. It will be liberally nurturing and loving. It will lack forever in your life - and the lives of many future generations of seahorses - the rank, bitter, seahorse-shredding edges of both tongue and sword!

Sam thought that The Feather had over-extended himself, but remained quiet about it.

Sam is rendered terminally and unspeakably grateful

Sam, said The Feather quietly.

Yes

The whisper of nature that we have been talking about ...

Yes

... it is always a simple invitation, and you shouldn't complicate it.

Sam paused. OK

You can become anything you want to become.

Anything? Yes ... OK

But become what you were meant to become, urged The Feather.

Sam!

Yes, Sam said.

I have acquired an intuition - of a certain kind - and you will too.

Oh ... Thank you

Sam was becoming an inexpressibly grateful seahorse. Not even once in the rest of his life did he glance back over his spiritual shoulder.



"No Going Back"