



Chapter 10

Limbo

Sorry, this is not a very positive, uplifting chapter. You are welcome to jump over the hole I now slipped in to. This chapter will describe my spiral down the dark hole to sadness and rage and the struggle back out again. All the previous chapters generally begin, with me locating myself in a particular place or geography. Here I was very much inside my own head and in this way disconnected to the world around me. It felt like I had no place. I was losing connection.

Sadness

I had turned my back on 10 years of very hard work with a clear future which was mapped out before me. A future with status, income and the freedom to pursue my theorizing, but unfortunately a future which also seemed to hold so much anxiety and misery for me. It felt like there was a huge inconsistency with the person who I was becoming, and the person I wanted to be. I felt a congruence when I was in the Red Hill worker co-ops. I was at this point slowly becoming part of the machine and despite whatever idealistic theories I might espouse in my teaching, I was behaving just like any other agent in the system, training and deciding who would be able to progress in the social work system. I was a gatekeeper whether I liked it or not.





There was some relief in having decided to leave Uni, and then after another 6 months to have been finally allowed to. I would no longer need to worry about all the scary things that I thought were going to be part of my future, like flying, talking to big crowds, defending my ideas with groups of ambitious competitive people. But now a depression started to slowly develop. I was sad that I would no longer be able to do the things I enjoyed at Uni. I would miss the student contact. I felt bad about not finishing the projects I was working on, my practice textbook, a postmodern critique, my network theory and my emerging ideas about bodily and emotional knowledge. I felt bad I would not be able to continue to help the PhD students I was working with. I was depressed with the confirmation of my failing to cope at Uni and the absence of any alternative plan. I had failed to effect any real change there and instead I tried to alter myself to fit in and then beat myself up for doing so.



After leaving Uni I did not want social contact. I had really withdrawn in to myself and found it hard to see beyond my own current emotional experience. I was in a very dark place. Less anxious but very depressed. I was not jumping of a rickety old carriage to a better future. I was jumping off a luxury carriage headed for exciting destinations, in to the dark, to an unknown future and with a very damaged self-esteem and confidence. I wondered if I would ever recover and if it would get worse.





I was not sure what direction to head in. There were many things half-finished I would like to have completed. I told myself when leaving that I would still keep doing and finish some writing tasks but this never happened. I thought if it was important I would keep going, but now had no energy for reading or writing. What was the point of writing now I was out of the loop? Who would be interested?



Up to this point in my life I had always felt some connection to place. I liked to have somewhere I felt safe, where I had some freedoms. I have often spent a lot of time looking out to a yard or a paddock and wondering how I could enhance it. Now it felt like my gaze was only a few inches in front of me. My world had shrunk and I was mainly in my head, full of bad memories and what if moments. I was not looking to the distance, to the horizon, I was completely inwardly, self-focused, and not enjoying what I was seeing. I had abstracted myself from my physical surroundings and was focused on my emotions a lot of the time. I had lost my grounding. My heaviness was directed inward and not down to the earth.



I was still functioning as a parent and husband but I had to make a conscious effort to stay engaged and to avoid burdening Michelle and the kids. I really felt like just running away, but there was no escape from my emotions. It may have been better for me if I had externalized some of my feelings but this is not my nature and it would have been unfair on my family. I was quiet and more distant even though I was actually more physically present. I would often be distracted, going over and over





historical incidents working out better ways I could have handled the situation or ways were I could have more bravely spoken my mind.

My depression was a very private and secret affair. I kept playing soccer, tennis and golf with friends which was a nice distraction but even then I could mid game start focussing on these unwanted emotions and negative thoughts. I put on a brave face and did not share these desperate feelings with friends, not wanting to be a burden and not wanting to risk them withdrawing from the friendship. I felt very alone with my despair.

It was comforting to have Michelle and my parents trying to look after me at this time. I was lucky to have this support to keep me going, but I did not share my experience very much at all. I did not want to be a burden, but moreover I was worried sharing would diminish me in their eyes.

Rage

Later I began to fill with a rage about what had happened. My rage would often get personalized on to particular individuals. Typically it was individuals who seemed self-focused on their own careers and ambitions. I would imagine things I could have said or should have said to these people at the time instead of being polite and cooperative. I had bit my tongue on many occasions to support the department, when more senior people visited and other outsiders. I wished I had spoken up and shared my misgivings, when I had the chance rather than pretending to support the dominant departmental line. I know this would have led to my marginalization but at least I would have felt more congruent and consistent. Ironically I feared being marginalized in a department who had adopted a mission to counter marginalization in society. This was not an abstract fear as I had seen many others marginalized, one actually being kicked out of the department.



I also recognized the very controlling self-interested, ambitious aspects of my own character, and I hate these aspects of myself. So part of my rage was self-directed, I saw a bit of myself in my bosses and I could see how I could have perhaps ended up being more like them. This realization helped to not blame



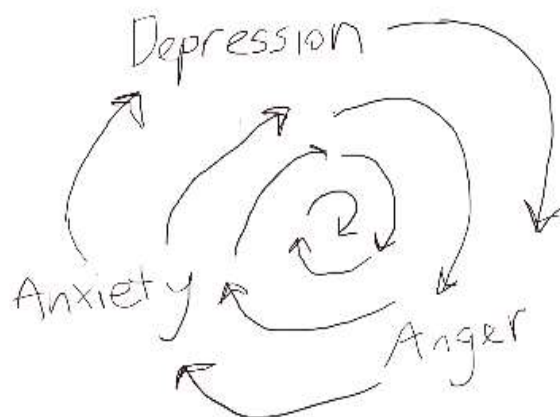


others so personally for a while, but it was also easy to make excuses for myself and to return to my rage at particular others.

My rage should have more accurately been directed at the whole system, but it was hard not to blame particular personalities who were often the epitome of the things that disturbed me. It was also hard not to blame myself for not being able to cope with this system and for my utter failings in being able to change this place. I was left feeling powerless and angry, depressed and still anxious.

I was angry at the uni and social work staff for not being able to help me. I was angry at those individuals who seemed to want to inflict more misery on me. I was angry at myself for not being able to cope and change my situation and my emotional reactions. I was angry at myself for not being able to reach out for help and instead internalizing all these feelings. I was angry at myself for not wanting to look weak and for assuming others would not be kind and willing to help. All this anger was almost entirely played out internally. I did not vent fully the extent of my anger to others, fearing it would scare and alienate them. My anger conceptually was directed at others but it was still being internalized within my own body. No one else knew, I was the one suffering because of my anger. I was actually beating myself up with this rage.

I was also fearful that my time at Uni had permanently damaged me. It seemed like my anxiety was never going to go away. It had become a generalized anxiety not necessarily related to anything in particular. I would just carry this feeling of a sort of pre-panic from when I woke in the morning to bed time. I would move often from anxiety, to depression, to anger in a cycle through the day. I was still angry in my sleep grinding my teeth throughout the night. There was no rest from the feelings. They were running my life





Anyone reading this would conclude I was not very well, I was sick, I was disturbed. At the time part of me did not want to see myself as being sick. I have been to see a psychiatrist for a few visits but I did not find this useful. I was very resistant to any chemical treatments which seemed to be his dominant treatment option. It seemed to annoy him that I ruled this out. I felt very uncomfortable about sharing with him, particularly as I was annoyed at the opulence of his Wickham terrace office. He was doing very well out of talking to miserable people like myself. I did not feel a connection or empathy with my sense of the problem, part of me was angry at the system, I felt like I was a symptom of a sick system. It seemed like this part of my experience was being ignored. But in discussions I felt like it kept getting dragged back to just me alone. There was no societal analysis of my situation. After a few unproductive visits, I started to think the psychiatrist was just part of the broader problem. He certainly was not an agent for systemic change. I felt like the whole problem was seen as being within me, and up to me to change and to get back to work. It was purely my own fault.



While all my misery and anger engulfed me I did feel closer to Michelle who now had a better idea about the depths of my despair and who was not running away from me (as I feared) but was actively supporting and caring for me. I also felt good about my parents who did not talk about it much but who made clear they were there to support at any time. My friend Morrie in a phone call connected my experience to the experience of others and blamed bad work structures. This helped to lift my sadness and guilt that it was my fault and so gave me some hope.





Slowly I moved from the depression and anger to wondering what I would do now. There was a bit of a vacuum, I had not looked too far ahead. I was still struggling with my emotions and my leaving behind something I had totally invested myself in to. I began to try to work out what was actually important to me. I started to lift my head and look further to the horizon and to get my head up above the pack of poo I had found myself in. I have always loved digging holes, I was now having trouble getting out of one.



Perspective

I knew I could apply for a social work position in a community or government agency but I was really in no fit state to take on this work, but moreover, I was also now very uncertain and critical of the whole social work enterprise. Being surrounded by 20 social workers at Uni did not seem to assist me much. My anger at the Uni, flowed over to the profession. My criticism of the inconsistencies also applied there. Being paid a big salary to help poor people would have been an inconsistency I could not have coped with at this point in time.



I could have taken any old job for an income. My brother in law who was a federal politician suggested I work in his office. It was a nice offer but I was not sure I was up to it and again I felt like I would find inconsistencies. I did not want





to be a problem for him, particularly as he had been so generous in this way. I needed to work out something that I knew was undeniably a good thing to do, something that was absolutely necessary and not open to being undermined by my own constant critical analysis. I started to think back to times when I felt congruent. I think the lack of congruence was a big part of my depression.

I knew growing food was good. We had to eat. Growing organically for me was also undeniably good for all sorts of reasons. I did not want to be dependent on multinational companies for fertilizers and pesticides. I knew first hand, the health problems of farmers using artificial pesticides. I could go on. I had always grown and been interested in growing food. I really enjoyed working the backyard at Thomas St. I really liked caring for Ropeley and working on my relatives farms. I felt at home helping out at Northery st city farm. If I could get back in to growing food I could at least support a basic need of my family. For most of human history the principle task of the day has been about food gathering. I needed to get back to these basics.



Mum and dad had a five acre block in The Gap and they agreed to me fencing off an areas to have a small market garden. This immediately felt like a good direction or at least something good to do for a few months while I recovered my confidence. This turned out to be a four year project which I will look at in the next chapter.

Insights

I want now to see what insights can be gleaned from looking back down in to the hole into this period of limbo where I lost my place and sense of direction. In the previous chapter I described how anxiety and depression can be passed down through the chains of controlling relationships to those at the bottom end, with the most powerless carrying much more of these emotions than their fair share.

Externalization





I can see from this chapter that certain people like myself who are internalizers of emotions rather than externalizers are particularly vulnerable. Stress and anxiety I think are more likely to accumulate in people like me who are quiet, and not very demanding of others. Externalizers act out their emotions which helps separate their feeling from their body and to act them out in their relationships. This means intentionally or unintentionally these feelings can be passed to those around them, particularly people who they have some control over. For example, a boss who is starting to feel like he is failing and could be blamed by his superiors, can relieve himself of this some of this burden by making those he is charge of, take on his feelings. He can blame them, and make them responsible for the failure. Putting pressure on all below, to lift their game. As his staff take s on this blame, he will feel somewhat relieved. Blame is shifted down the work hierarchy.

This transfer of blame can also bubble out of the business, and in to the family. One partner's stress, anxiety and feelings of guilt from the criticism at work can be transferred to their spouse or children, making them feel a failure in some way. Someone abused and put down in their work place, can pass these feelings on to their partner at home. I do not know if there has been much research on the extent to which domestic violence a product of abuse in the workplace? Maybe it is time to see it not as just a product of what is happening at home.

Feminism recognizes the impact of our patriarchal culture on the domestic arena. It would be good if some more focus was placed on the perpetrators of this abusive structure not just on the perpetrators at the bottom of the system. I find it bewildering and frustrating to see our federal politicians in unison condemn domestic violence and then it the very next minute seeking to belittle their political opponents in the most disparaging ways. They need to be self-reflexive enough to recognize how their aggressive behaviour is a direct contributor to a patriarchal structure which allows and even legitimates violence.

Self interest

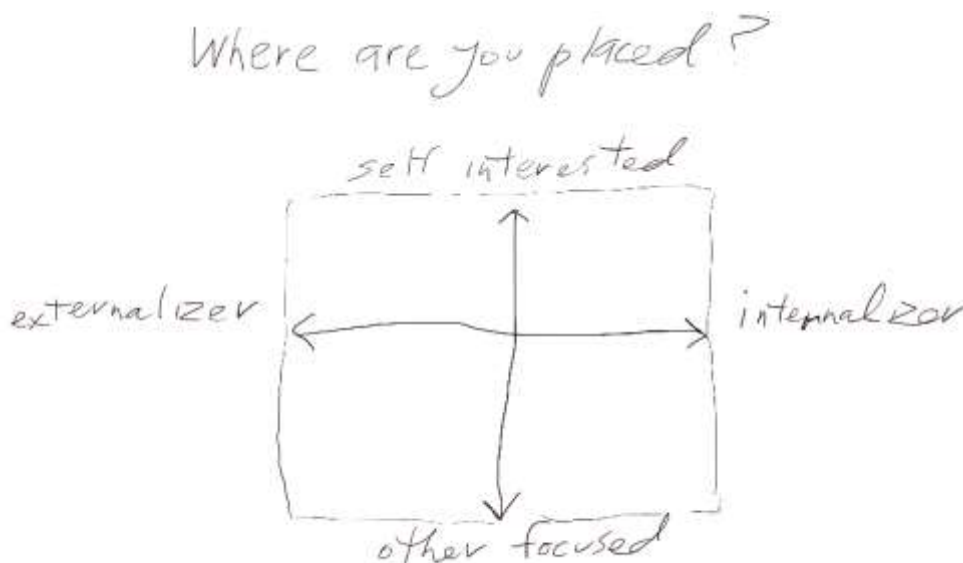
Another personality difference is also relevant to this discussion. I think self-interest and individualism as opposed to concern for others and connection, is another dynamism of this emotional transfer. The selfish person is relatively immune from bad feelings passed down the hierarchy, as they are less effected by the concerns and emotions of others. If you see yourself as more interdependent and or concerned about others, you are more likely to be worried for others and to feel their pain to some extent. Their pain is your pain. If





someone is blaming you, you are more likely to be open to the ways in which you are to perhaps blame. This is opposite for the self-interested individual who can quickly deflect any responsibility. “It’s their problem”

The self-interested externalizer is perhaps the archetypal description of an ambitious controlling boss. The caring internalizer is the person that looks after everyone in the team, the supportive empathic person. The picture below captures the options. You might like to consider where you would locate yourself on these dimensions, or your perhaps your friends, work mates and your bosses. We could explore the nature of selfish internalizers, and caring externalizers just to make the specific dynamics of these interpersonal emotional transfers more complex. But to simplifying things, at this point let us look just at the first two opposites, self-interested externalizers and other focused internalizers.



Hierarchy creates a drainage system where negative feelings can be disposed of by the self-interested externalizers, passing them down to those below. These unwanted feelings can be passed on down the levels till they collect at the bottom. In a good work place these transfers will be minimised but where there is a lot of buck passing at all levels of the work place there will be more depression and anxiety the lower in the hierarchy you go and there will be a lot of turnover in this toxic type of work place. President Trump’s administration is an example of a very toxic hierarchy with a very extreme self-interested externalizer at the helm.

However, it is not only those at the bottom that suffer. People like myself, somewhere in the middle of the hierarchy are only too willing to feel responsible for someone else’s emotions, can end up carrying some of their emotional burden





and internalize this, rather than passing it down. So not all bad feelings are transferred down. Individuals and small groups anywhere in the hierarchy can be a sponge to soak up some of the unwanted feelings. Others around them are very happy for these people to take on these unwanted feelings. The difficulty and unhappiness generated by doing so encourages these people to gravitate to the margins of the structure and they are more likely to leave the hierarchy. Unfortunately this slowly means the system becomes more populated by the externalizers.

Fortunately not all bosses or leaders are uncaring, individualistic externalizers. Even people at the top of the hierarchy may take on the stress and anxiety of those around them and genuinely feel responsible for people who they have charge of. In this way it is possible unwanted feelings can also move up the hierarchy. I was very fortunate in my early years at Uni to have some very good superiors around me, who were caring internalizers, who would feel responsible if things were not good for me, not blame me if things were not good for them. I liked this sort of boss, and I think these are exactly the sort of people our society needs. These leaders create happy work places where people feel valued and included, where everyone is able to learn from their mistakes

Unfortunately these people are often not fully appreciated as they tend to promote the work of those they are responsible for, and not to blow their own trumpet. If the big bosses are individualistic externalizers, I don't think they see or recognize the contribution of these leaders and so they are more likely to fall by the way side. This is why our national leadership at the political economic and social levels is so important. It sets up a culture which can permeate down the system.

Unfortunately the culture of economic rationalism and self-interested capitalism favours the externalizing leadership style and over time this has become a more and more dominant style as business and bureaucracies have grown bigger. Even if there are a lot of good leaders in a system there will still be enough bad ones to mean the overall pattern is for bad emotions to be pushed down the hierarchy. This trend is further supported over time, in that those that feel responsible in an emotional way will perhaps be more likely to get stressed and anxious and to leave their position at some point. Whereas at the other extreme self-interested people like socio paths will not be weighed down by these emotions and will be more likely to be promoted in these capitalist hierarchies where self-interest and individualism is explicitly valued as a virtue. I think over time with the increasing strength of capitalism, the selfish externalizer behaviour has become more and





more a dominant leadership style, not only in business, but also increasingly it is the way in politics, the public service, the church and other societal institutions. The caring, internalizing leader is becoming scarce and under threat. This means the process where emotions are getting funnelled down the system is becoming stronger.

So a hierarchy not only leads to inequitable distributions of wealth and resources it also leads to inequitable distribution of negative emotions like anxiety and depression. In many ways this inequality is far more devastating than material inequality. When we look at people at the bottom of the hierarchy in our society like for example many First Nations peoples and the homeless we will find much higher rates of depression, anxiety and suicide.

To extend the analysis further we can look at the internal hierarchy within these poor powerless communities. Those who have more power in the communities can pass on the unwanted feeling coming from above to those below them. It will be children, teenagers, unemployed, and old people who are the most powerless within these communities that are most at risk of serious anxiety depression and suicide.

Typically the traditional response to these issues is to fund (underfund) services which target them as a group seeking to change them in some way via better education, skills training or therapy. Implicit in this approach is the assumption that there is some deficit or problem within this community that people from outside with their expertise can fix. The response in effect creates a new hierarchy for these communities with welfare taking over the control of people's lives. The intervention in Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory in response to claims of sexual abuse is an extreme example. What is actually required is the opposite. All the evidence shows that when communities are given the power to self-manage and develop their own responses to problems the success is far greater.

What I am saying is the focus should be not so much on the individual or the poor community but on the hierarchy and trying to flatten out our society not just to create more material equality but also to create more emotional equality where the downward push of anxiety and depression is resisted. If controlling behaviour is the source of the problem then adding more control will just make things worse. In relation to my own personal depression, I did not want the outside control of medication, I wanted a solution from within. I did not want to be dependent on an expert or a drug.





Thinking about emotions being transferred in this way reminds me of a Marxist analysis of the distribution of wealth. Marx believed that the material poverty for working people in contradiction to the affluence of the rich would lead to a revolution. He believed workers would develop a critical analysis of their own exploitation and would rise up. However if we think not only about the material exploitation of the workers where wealth moves up the system, to see the emotional exploitation where unwanted feelings are passed down, we can see how the most powerless are weakened emotionally by the depression and anxiety passed down the hierarchy, limiting their capacity for resistance and revolution.

Unfortunately because Marxism misses the dangers of hierarchy, it has meant that while revolutions may have led to greater material equality they often introduce even greater hierarchical controls leading to greater emotional misery for the powerless in these systems. Perhaps a Marxist scholar may like to reformulate dialectical materialism to include dialectical emotionalism.

In the Russian revolution the Marxist and Anarchist fought alongside each other but after the revolution the Marxists then annihilated the anarchists. The history of the 20th century could have been radically different if they had instead embraced Anarchist ideas and instead of building a totalitarian state they had lived up to the Communist badge and established a society based on flatter system of interdependent locally based communes. Maybe they would have been able to establish a more appealing ideal society that may have actually been able to counter the rise of capitalism more effectively. We need an alternative to the total hierarchical control sought by Capitalism and Communism over the population and to the misery generated.

One of the great successes of Marxist marketing was the idea that revolution was inevitable. It encouraged people to want to be on the right (left) side of history and gave hope that their actions would lead to a better world and also a justification for the use of violence to achieve it. Violence being an ultimate form of externalization.

Postmodernism which has replaced Marxism (in academic circles) as the main challenger to Capitalism and the dominant forces in society lacks any kick to action. Instead it leaves exponents in a relativist malaise where everything can be criticized and undermined including any attempts to make things better. Its relativism prohibits a clear direction or vision for the future.

Maybe the analysis I am developing about the redistribution of emotions could offer a kick. What if we stopped seeing depression and anxiety as a problem or



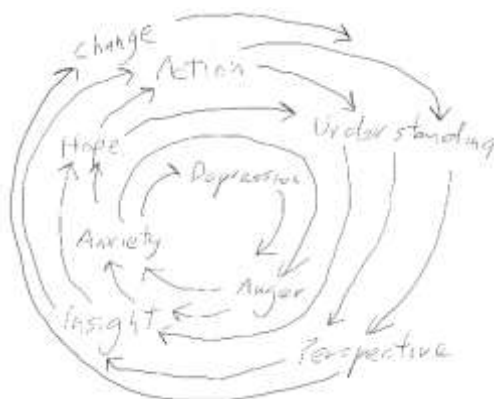


illness that needs to be fixed so that people can resume their role in supporting the hierarchy, to seeing them as symptoms of a sick malevolent system that is actually destructive to everyone not just those at the bottom? What if we saw depression and anxiety not as something to be overcome but as the energy (the kick start) for change to begin? What if these emotions were considered as canaries, as an early warning system that things needed to change? Do we not all want a society where everyone can feel safe and happy? If we focused not on material wealth or even material equality but rather on happiness and community would not everyone move in a different direction?

Conclusion

My emergent understanding of how emotions could be transferred through the system to people like myself (who too readily felt responsible for others feelings) helped me to not spiral further into more anxiety and depression. I could see how the hierarchical control structures were at least in part a contributor to my sadness. By looking to my own feelings I now had an extra way to make sense of society and to better work out what change was required.

Once you experience this sort of limbo state there is always a fear that you could return to this despair. I think you continue to always carry a bit of the experience with you. While over the next few decades there have been many ups and downs, the more I understood myself and my emotions as part of society rather than as just a personal private experience, the better I have been able to look up and out of any hole I have found myself in and to find a way to scramble out. It has also enabled me to warn others about these holes and to be aware of those powerful externalizers who are actively digging them for the unwary.



Vs



