

Resolved or Abandoned?

**Irresponsibly lost Transference:
a professionally embarrassed tale**

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“COME IN! ... JUST COME IN!!” My head is crowned with shampoo-lather and I shout through a haze of rising steam. I hoped that the open door would transmit my hollered voice to the front door that I had deliberately left ajar. I was expecting my teenaged stepson: he did not have keys.

The shrill ringing of the doorbell paused, then resumed. Flustered and irritated, I boomed my imperative message even louder through the bathroom steam. Surely, now he could hear.

Again, the high pitch of the doorbell drills the air. Why does he not let himself in? Realising now that direct action was needed to resolve this ambiguity, I clambered, hurried and harried, from my bath. I wrapped the closest, but small, towel round my nether regions, and, dripping and squinting, descended the twilit staircase to the half-open front door. The pattered trail of bath water was joined by thin, grey rivulets of shampoo from my mid-washed hair.

I pulled with angry impatience at the front door, to open it fully. Shouted banter at my stepson, attributing impaired hearing and intelligence, completed my unsighted greeting.

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On the other side of the door was not my stepson. It was Elizabeth.

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We both stared and blinked: a hiatus of dislocated incredulity. I, for forgetting (or ‘forgetting’) the unusual appointment time she had requested; I had agreed to this, as a ‘one-off’. She, for now seeing this previously contained and impeccably professional young man in such feral and primitive disarray.

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Elizabeth was a refined, intelligent, insightful, but painfully inhibited woman. Twenty years older than I, she had almost entirely negative memories of her Edwardian father: remote, humourless, austere, rigid, inexpressive. His barren, dark influence shadowed her life for sixty years. I, too, became an extension of that shadow. Despite my best efforts to bridge the gap, she remained ill at ease. My proffered utterances may have clarified, but did not console. She came assiduously, but I had to imagine beyond her carapace.

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Both Elizabeth and I were struck immobile for several seconds: time to adjust our eyes, then our minds, to our respective shocks. The door had been opened: views had changed, forever.

My reaction was the more predictable: I attempted to rapidly cluster sincere apology, embryonic explanation, reassurance and a pragmatic, emergency plan – for her to return in thirty minutes, when I would be suitably attired and prepared. I improvised a pitch of tone, between professional gravitas and friendly-fallible.

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Elizabeth's reaction was less predictable, and certainly more interesting. She laughed. First with discrete softness, but soon with raucous warmth. It was not the harsh, abrasive laughter of triumph or mockery, but the peeling, joyous, contagious laughter of shared realisation, relief and release. The laughter of unanticipated enlightenment. For her, my chaos had humanised us both. For me, her laughter had freed us both.

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This perilously comic error had serious, yet benign, consequences. Elizabeth's dense and massive father-transference had been blown away, with a speed and finality that were probably impossible with careful, systematic therapy.

The changes spread far beyond the therapy room, too. She reported a blessed shock-wave re-configuring all her important relationships.

Some months later she and I recalled these events and their surprising evolution. She drew on her background in literature and offered me an oblique observation of GK Chesterton: "Humour can get under the door while seriousness is still scrabbling at the lock."

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This transformative comedy of errors occurred more than thirty years ago. How did it change me? On a superficial level, I check my diary more carefully: I am more vigilant to possible error. More deeply, and complexly, it opened my mind to the (often) paradoxical nature of human difficulty, struggle and change. Experience is not just a living process: it is an evolving one, too – it develops new and unpredictable forms. Hence, there is little science of the individual's metabolism of meaning.

Would I try it again, now, as a procedure? Certainly not: I am far too orthodox...

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An edited version is included in *The Business of Therapy: How to Run a Successful Private Practice* by Pauline Hodson (2012), Open University Press, McGraw Hill

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