

# Inner Conflict in Traumatic Bereavement

Ricky Emanuel

## Introduction

Jim, aged 6, father abandoned him at the zoo when he was dressed in his cowboy suit, looking at his favourite animals penguins. He never saw him again. Here he is in adolescence.

"There is no question but I've been very sad about things. And I am probably like thousands of teenagers who get depressed. It's almost enough for me to know that someone is there for me and someone is listening. But I had to do something for me. I had to grow up fast when my father left and it is as simple as that. And I miss him and I can't understand why he's gone. Something that simple can mess you up for a long time. When you're six and wearing a cowboy outfit and looking at penguins you shouldn't be made to grow up so fast. But I was. And I tore myself up over it for years and tried to find answers but honestly ... what can a child do. I want my childhood back."  
From Chat-room by Edna Walsh

We all live in at least two different worlds, our own internal worlds of subjective psychic reality and a shared external world. In the course of development we manage to differentiate them, although our perception of each of the worlds is influenced by the other. Traumatic experiences tend to conflate the two worlds, so that it becomes extremely difficult to maintain any differentiation between what goes on in our body/minds and what happens in the external world. Situations of traumatic bereavement are cases in point, where it is difficult for people in the midst of these powerful and overwhelming emotional experiences to hold onto reality as they knew it. They "mess you up for a long time".

I am going to give 4 case examples from my own practice and from literature, of types of bereavement suffered by children and adolescents. These include Sam who suffered the death of a sibling; Jake whose father had a terminal illness then died; Edie whose father committed suicide and Mark who suffered the loss of an expected future and ordinary life having started life as a 25 week old neonate in a special care unit. Mark's loss also included the allotted time of life inside the womb, as well as intrusive medical procedures, experienced as torture which was not mediated nor witnessed by a parent. I will discuss what we understand by trauma and its consequences, and will focus on the effects of emotional dysregulation. I am suggesting that there is an intimate relationship between these dysregulated states and the emergence of severe, punitive super ego structures which are so evident in work with traumatised children. The case examples I have chosen hopefully will illustrate inner conflict between ego and super ego structures, as well as between loving and hating, positive and negative, reactive and proactive and life and death aspects of the person.

## Trauma

There is a large body of literature on the subject of trauma and its consequences from many perspectives, so I am not going to try and summarise this here. However, there are several core elements present in any traumatic situation that I find helpful in defining it as such. Like the word unbearable, we are glib in our usage of this term.

Freud described the essence of trauma as an experience of *helplessness* of the ego, where the level of emotional arousal cannot be processed by the ordinary defence mechanisms usually deployed by the ego in managing anxiety. Trauma thus presupposes the body/mind being flooded or overwhelmed by the emotional and sensory aspects of the experience. Emotions need to be regulated by the mental apparatus responsible for processing them, but if this is overwhelmed or undeveloped, then trauma ensues, and a state of emotional dysregulation is the result. The mental representation of this dysregulated state becomes part of the encoded experience of the trauma. People will do anything they can to avoid re-experiencing states like these which can feel life threatening especially with trauma in infancy. Trauma thus causes acute and then sometimes chronic anxieties of varying sorts.

## **Emotional Regulation**

I have always found Bion's definition of anxiety as *a premonition of emotion*, a very helpful concept. It has strong links to Freud's concept of *signal anxiety* as it refers to the possibility or a signal of an anticipated instinctual tension which can overwhelm the organism. The anxiety is felt as an increase in bodily or mental tension and the signal that the organism receives, allows it the possibility of taking defensive action toward the perceived danger. Freud spoke of "*automatic*" anxiety as underlying signal anxiety. Automatic anxiety relates to a traumatic experience of total disintegration leading to fears of possible annihilation, consequent on being flooded by overwhelming quantities of (bodily based) instinctual tension experienced as helplessness. Freud (1926). The automatic anxiety denotes a spontaneous type of reaction, connected to fear of total dissolution arising from being utterly overwhelmed and it implies no capacity to judge or perceive the origin of the overwhelming stimuli.

The name suggests an automatic reaction to anxiety, a way of coping that seems outside the control of the self. We know from work done on fear pathways in the brain, that there are two routes in the brain for dealing with a fear response. One of these occurs completely outside consciousness in the midbrain structure involving the fear centre of the brain the amygdala. The other route involves the cerebral cortex and can use past experience to evaluate the situation and make choices about how to respond based on this. It is thus less automatic and can override the shorter amygdala based route. Signal anxiety serves as a warning about the potential emergence of automatic anxiety and can be used to mobilise higher brain pathways. Emanuel (2000). The capacity to make judgements in a given situation and use past experience, is a crucial ego function which can be disabled or damaged in traumatic situations and their sequelae. Psychotherapy attempts to repair this function so that the person does not seem so dominated by automatic ways of responding. The capacity to cope with anxiety in a growth enhancing manner depends as we know on whether the anxiety can be contained or regulated. We need others to help regulate anxiety as attachment theory or the theory of container/contained implies. In a situation of stress, we turn to others to regulate this emotional state. In the absence of a containing experience, felt as emotional dysregulation, there is the danger of over arousal which may correspond to the automatic anxiety described above. The attachment system is the basis of this biophysical regulation.. A state of dysregulation is itself an inducer of fear. The possibility of being in a dysregulated state can lead to avoidance behaviour or states of dissociation or freezing as seen in post traumatic stress disorder.

Unmodulated emotion or overload, while fear inducing in itself, seems also to frequently evoke a second order type of fear of a powerful super ego like response. Bion linked the emergence of what he called "super" ego to the introjection of a minus(Y d), a failure of containment, sometimes manifesting as what he termed a "nameless dread". Bion (1967 pa 96-98). Naming is essential for

binding the elements of the experience together to make enable it to be processed or thought about. This super ego finds fault with everything in a morally superior way. It ruthlessly blames and judges and seeks to punish. It is an extremely bad and persecutory object . Perhaps then in some states of emotional dysregulation where there is a failure of containment , a primitive fear emerges which we can recognise as an internal conflict between the ego or self trying to defend itself from the attacks launched against it by this vicious superego.

Before illustrating this process I need to explain one other aspect frequently encountered in traumatic situations.

### **Confusion of external and internal reality**

Normally in life experiences, one's worst violent, envious or jealous phantasies are not confirmed or corroborated by external reality. Confusion arises if what one most fears (and sometimes wishes for) actually happens. It becomes much more difficult to differentiate the essential distinction between one's inner reality or what happens in the inner world of phantasy or dreams and what actually occurs in external or outer reality. For example the normal oedipal conflict between the wish to completely possess one parent and rid yourself of the other, is counterbalanced by an equally strong desire for this to not happen, and for the parents to resist their being split apart; for the couple to be protected and allowed their freedom in mysterious privacy especially behind the bedroom door. Similarly, the violent phantasies associated with the sibling rivalry and the birth of a new baby are counterbalanced by more loving or curious feelings towards the new arrival. However, in situations of traumatic bereavement of a parent or sibling, these more hateful or violent phantasies seem to find corroboration in the external world, and inner reality becomes confounded with external reality and a trauma ensues. There are clear links between this and the fear of punishment or retaliation by superego structures arising from the violent or possessive phantasies.

I want to illustrate these processes by giving some case examples.

### **Sam**

Sam, a 3 year old, lost his 6 year old sister, Emma , through death a few weeks earlier than the session to be presented, from a virulent form of leukemia. A younger sister, Lucy, is 18 months. Sam's parents were understandably devastated by what had befallen their young family in less than 5 months. Mum nursed Emma, usually at home, but also in hospital. Emma regressed and was incontinent at the end, needing 24 hour care like a baby. Mum was "lost" to the other children and continued to be so in her grief. Sam was referred by the community nurse who was looking after the family at home. He had become aggressive and out of control, with a complete change of personality. He had been involved in the funeral and had seen Emma "in her box". The parents had explained to him that Emma had gone to heaven. Sam often looked up to the sky.

When I met the parents soon after Emma's death to discuss assessing Sam, they were barely able to speak but told me how his aggressive behaviour was entirely out of character. He had begun to hit them both and was also becoming aggressive towards Lucy. He had never displayed jealousy of her before. His violence alternated with fear about being left alone. He insisted that one parent be with him, especially at night. He had been close to Emma but she had become hostile to him towards the end of her life, for example, she used to aggressively order him out of her room when he came in to see her as she wanted her mother for herself.

### **The first assessment session**

Sam's Mum asked to see me before the session, explaining that he had been especially angry and destructive at home. She was worried in that he had become anxious when his father dropped him off at his nursery (something he had readily managed before).

Sam asked his Mum to remain with him in the consulting room; he seemed anxious at meeting me. Sam immediately launched into playing with the toys I had provided. He showed no distress when Mum left the room shortly afterwards, saying goodbye, for a session with her therapist and Dad. I assured Sam he could see her whenever he wished but he showed no inclination to do so during the first session. In fact, he was reluctant to leave at the end of our encounter.

He played at a whirlwind pace, focusing first on the "knife" scalpel from the hospital set. He set up a hospital scene but became distracted by a crocodile. He made it attack the baby pig. The crocodile's violence was rampant, Sam clearly identifying with it, breathing heavily, panting loudly and making mouthing and biting noises. The crocodile's targets were the baby and the mother pig, then the human family. He quickly identified a "policeman" (the father) and the rest of the doll family including the mother and other babies were placed around the doll's house table to have a "little talk". The crocodile savagely bit the mother doll, particularly her genitalia, as Sam growled. Sam asked if this was "the hole" babies come from. Yes, it was, I said, and asked what his name was for this hole. Sam did not reply but took glee in tossing the chewed mother into the upstairs section of the doll's house. He then became concerned as to how she could be got down since there were no stairs. He seemed to panic momentarily as the mother seemed lost or "gone". He set about building stairs in order to retrieve her. This idea of an attack on the mother, her loss and then her retrieval preoccupied him. I commented: "The mummy seemed to be all bitten up by the crocodile and then lost. How is she going to be found again?" (I was well aware how his mother must have been lost to him but it would have been premature to interpret this since he was expressing a deep unconscious phantasy about it through the play). It was the policeman's Daddy's job to go up the ladder to get the mother back. When she was rescued she was put into the hospital. However, the crocodile found her there and re-attacked. I commented that there did not seem to be a safe place anywhere.

Sam became preoccupied with guns and wanted to make one from plasticine. He told me he was a soldier who protected people. The gun seemed to have both a violent and a protective function. He told me his Mummy didn't like guns and he wasn't allowed them at home. He moved on to paint guns. The crocodile then began to rampage again, attacking anything it came across, with Sam growling and panting.

I talked about the crocodile's attacks and nobody to stop it. None of the guns, policeman or soldiers could protect anybody. Sam looked at me very seriously, perhaps for the first time, then made the crocodile bite the baby doll. He then rushed over to the plasticine gun and shot the crocodile. He was preoccupied as to whether this violence could be contained, appearing to believe it could only be stopped violently. No one was strong enough to protect Mummy and her babies from the attacks.

It was difficult to get Sam to end. He wanted to take the guns home, perhaps to protect himself. He also wanted to make walkie-talkies since this was also equipment policemen needed. We made them with the plasticine. We communicated with each other although he couldn't maintain a conversation. Guns, walkie-talkies, policemen and the army all seem connected, mostly in relation to quelling the unbridled violence.

What was this all about? It emerged with an urgency and seemed overwhelming. We knew he had become violent at home and was attacking his parents and sister. His attention focused first on

the knife and the hospital; this suggests that he associated hospitals with violence. Emma was diagnosed in the hospital I worked at, and the effect of this devastating day on the parents and family still reverberates in all of them. First, the baby is attacked, then the mother; she becomes "lost" to him. Policemen then enter but are ambiguous in that they rescue the mother but also carry instruments of violence, as do the soldiers. They seem helpless to prevent the violence. His savage attacks on the genitalia of the mother, the place the babies come from, could not have been clearer. Sam's identification with the crocodile suggests that he feels his violence has been responsible for the attacks on mother and her babies, in other words, on Emma, and for her hospitalisation. This violence has also lost him his mother.

His normal feelings of rivalry towards his mother and her new babies, which he apparently had not shown at the time of Lucy's birth, had become confused in his mind with making Emma die. Sibling rivalry customarily leads to aggressive feelings toward the abandoning or betraying mother and to the baby taking its place. Remember that Emma had regressed markedly before she died and that mother was preoccupied with her as if she "she were a new baby. Mum was lost to him as he poignantly showed in his play but he felt it to be his fault. He conceptualises he will be savagely punished for these aggressive feelings since they appear to have come true.

The child is reassured that aggressive phantasies are not omnipotent by dint of the fact that people survive; mother's baby had not. Nor had his mother as he had known her before. Sam was convinced that his violent phantasies actually cause damage. The policeman father would thus be out to get him like with the gun shooting the crocodile. The policeman Daddy was not able to protect the family from death claiming one of its members. This was the anxiety that Sam manifested at night and whenever he was separated as he did not feel he could be protected as one of mother's babies. He also would be the target of retaliation for his own murderous attacks. This would be experienced as a savage superego figure out to annihilate him.

These themes remerged in subsequent sessions. I fed back my understanding to the parents along these lines. Sam couldn't wait to come to his sessions since they provided him with a means to express his intense anxieties. The parents could see how responsible he felt for Emma's death even though they had reassured him he was not and that they would protect him. They knew that surviving children feel anxious about their parents' capacity to keep children well after the death of a sibling. It was essential for the wellbeing of the whole family to talk to them, especially Dad, about stopping Sam's violent attacks on them and Lucy, in a firm manner. Dad needed to show he could be a good policeman who would protect Mummy and her babies. Sam needed such a figure desperately but did not have much faith such an object exists. This leaves him feeling helpless, both at the mercy of the effects of his own violent phantasies but also as one of mother's surviving babies who needed protection.

Over time, the issue of helplessness became the main feature of the work especially in a projected form. He would endlessly want to play armies, hinted at in the first session, where whatever I did or whatever resources I had, his army would defeat me. His superior fire power and guile, meant I was helpless and could do nothing. His assertion of his utter omnipotence gave him transitory illusions of power and potency but this never lasted and would need to be resurrected time and time again. His strength was not based on real experiences of overcoming adversity or mastery over his impulsive behaviour, nor from introjecting strong parental figures with whom he could identify. He did not really believe the latter existed.

I often talked about my helplessness and the hopelessness of my situation and of my army who were relentlessly annihilated. . It never seemed to make any difference and over a long period of

time, I really did feel a chronic sense of helplessness in my attempts to shift him from this position. This counter transference perhaps was an even more accurate projection of his own helplessness than the prior feelings I experienced in the army game of being utterly defeated . This self same dynamic was experienced by the many professionals who attempted to work with his mother. She was wedded to her grief and recriminations against many people who had "failed" the family in different ways.

After about 2 years into the work, the parents had a new baby. This lifted the gloom in the family for a while although Mother found it hard to relate to the baby as her mind was filled with her dead child. She remained "lost" a lot of the time for Sam, the surviving children and for her husband as well.

The wars continued in the sessions after a brief respite when Sam seemed more hopeful due to the fact that the new baby signalled some creative parental functioning. In one session he even made a wedding cake from plasticine which metamorphosed from weaponry he was constructing. However, when the new baby did not lift his mother's spirits for long, he seemed to become tormented a critical internal figure. He seemed downtrodden and depressed. His omnipotence expressed in the army games, gave way to traumatic helplessness and with it the emergence of a vicious, critical superego.

In one session at this time he seemed unable to do anything. He tore up his pictures and cried in frustration when things did not work out in the models he was making with duplo and lego. He said what he was doing was rubbish, he scratched at himself calling himself stupid and useless. He then he asked me to make a tent for him as I had done previously and he had used as an army base, but the way I did it was wrong. Everything was wrong. Everything he did or I did was wrong. I became the object of the relentless criticism as he became angry with me shouting that he hates me. He hates this hospital. He seemed really distressed and was sobbing in a heart rendering manner. After some time of this, I interpreted that the hospital was place that is supposed to make people better. It did not work properly either . It did not make Emma better. I said he felt worried that everything is still so wrong, nothing is right after a long time of coming here when I am supposed to make things better too. That makes me useless as well. He also sees that things are not better with Mummy. She is still so sad and she has been talking to P here and she has not helped either. He was fed up as he thinks nothing can help. All seems broken. He looked at me through his tears but his mood changed. He asked if we could play armies. He had 70000 soldiers and I had 7. The game was flat but the helplessness had been felt, named and thus contained. It meant the virulent superego structure was in abeyance at least for a while.

## **Jake**

In the next case example of 7 year old Jake, an only child, I want to illustrate the internal conflict suffered by a small child whose father contracted terminal cancer and wasted away before his eyes. In this example as well, Jake's mother had become very depressed.

As Jake's father deteriorated, Jake became more aggressive and controlling. He would challenge any boundary that his father set and say things like "I'll kill you" when confronted. He was at the same time clingy to his mother. I saw both parents alone before Father died and tried to help them understand where some of these behaviours were originating from. Father found it difficult to tolerate Jake's "rudeness" like threatening to kill him He was unable to see it as a manifestation of Jake's anxiety in the context of his terminal state as he denied right until the end that he was dying.

The session described took place with Jake and his mother just prior to his father's death. Father had

moved out of the parents' bedroom to sleep upstairs as he could not sleep because of the pain with his refusal to acknowledge it and thus take pain killers. Jake was said to be frightened to go up there now and was doing his best to avoid contact with his father even though they used to be close. Father understandably was finding this extremely painful to tolerate.

Mother started describing Jake's bossiness and controlling behaviour. He would not obey any parental edict and was openly challenging to both of them. We thought at first that it may have been a reaction to him feeling helpless in the face of what was happening, in a similar way to how I have described Sam. However, the quality was different. He showed in the session a callous disregard for any limits and he seemed to be drunk on his own omnipotence having usurped Father's position. When I spoke about feeling he had taken Daddy's place, he proudly announced he was sleeping in mummy's bed. He climbed onto her, laying himself over her and pawing at her, all over her body, even trying to put his hand down the front of her blouse and into the waist band of her trousers. His mother seemed quite limited in stopping this as she seemed so worn out by looking after her dying husband and dealing with her own depression. I asked if Jake was having nightmares and heard that he was although he would not tell me what they were. As we spoke he covered his face with his anorak. I said maybe he was frightened I would tell him off. He did not answer but began to speak about his fear that burglars would get into the house and that his mother did not know how to lock up properly. (A similar theme to a lack of a policeman Daddy with Sam). His mother also told me now that he had been asking whether she would be having any other children. When she asked him if he wanted a brother or sister he said NO WAY! He was to be the only baby. At this point he got off from lying enmeshed with his mother and wandered around the room, looking in the box of toys and found a soft ball. He started asking his mother about the balls they had lost at home, and speaking excitedly about finding a tennis ball in the garden and wondering whose ball it was. He went over to the dolls house in the room and picked up the pushchair in the house and put an adult male figure in it (His father was not in a wheel chair although probably needed one). He enacted a complex scenario with the house.

He put a bed in the upstairs room of the house, reminding us that Father was now sleeping upstairs. He then moved all the beds into the same attic room pushing them all together. I commented that he wanted everyone to be together now. Jake then mentioned that the burglars were going to get in. He got the push chair which originally had housed the man and this became the weapon whereby the burglar would be knocked over and pushed out the window of the house. There followed complicated arrangements to try and ensure the burglar was captured and dispatched. The pushchair would trap the burglar in it then fly to the roof and deposit the burglar on the roof. However this did not work as the burglar would find his way in through the attic windows for the scenario to be repeated. An invisible dog was conjured into existence to shove the pushchair into the burglar. No way of dealing with him could kill him enough or permanently dispatch him. He got in via any of the windows of the house, and the back and front doors. I commented that the problem was that he was the burglar, as he felt he was stealing mummy from daddy. Mummy had told us he had said he wished Daddy would go and die. He also really did not want this, as shown by the beds all pushed together in the room and that he wanted Daddy to be there to protect them. Jake replied that only Daddy knew the combination of the locks and how to lock up the whole house properly. He spoke with his mother pleading with her to learn how to lock up the house, all the doors, front and back and the windows etc. I said he was afraid because Daddy did not seem to be working properly and could not remember the codes. He needed a policeman Daddy to protect him from the burglars, to keep him from stealing mummy and that mummy now had to learn how to do this - to be like a mummy and a daddy for him. I picked up on the theme of loss, the loss of the balls in the house, alluding to the loss of the paternal function which Jake had now usurped. Jake then spoke about how the invisible dog was biting the burglar on the bottom, and then the burglar was attacked by poisonous farts from the dog's bottom. I said it seemed as if the burglars can get in anywhere - through the top of the house, the

attic windows, the bottom of the house, front door or back door, like his mummy was complaining about earlier about him and what he was doing to her. Mother now said that Jake kept touching her bottom, even in public, and insisted on coming into the toilet with her as well as when she was bathing. She seemed defeated in knowing how to stop him. Jake then said in a rather aggrieved way that he had asked for a burglar alarm for Xmas, and as he did so he was building a barricade with the furniture in the front of the house, on each floor and closing all the windows. I pointed this out to his mother, saying Jake was telling us what he needed, even though he also wanted to possess her and control her. She said he asks if the police are awake at night and making sure that she knows how to ring 999 to get help with the burglars if she needed to.

His inner conflict was clear, in that he both wished to get rid of his father, or to reverse the situation by making his father the baby in the push chair and usurp his position. These scenarios created tremendous anxiety about retaliation and punishment. He also he needed the protection of a potent policeman Daddy with balls, who could prevent the intrusion into his mother, as he had enacted in his relationship to her body earlier on, represented by the house in the play. External reality was mirroring the Oedipal crime of murdering his father or rendering him impotent, and totally possessing his mother and her body. This meant he could not adequately work through the distinction between inner and outer reality.

His father died shortly after this session, and we continue to work to try and help mother perform paternal functions and protect herself from his intrusion and be the alarm system he knows he also needs, in order for him to find the right place for himself in the world as a 7 year old boy.

## **Edie**

When a parent suddenly commits suicide, or disappears as with Jim in the quote I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, some of the elements of the conflicts described with Jake are present, but also some different ones. Suicide is so often more closely connected to murder - the murder of some internal object or part of the self or as an act of revenge against other people. The conflict between the grief at the loss of the person is compounded with the rage felt at the act, and adds to the guilt of the survivors. The act of suicide is so effective in projecting guilt into the survivors, when people suffer so much about how they could have prevented it and what they could or should have done. Free reign is given over to the superego to torment the self in a manner described by Freud in *Mourning and Melancholia*. His unique insight in that paper, was to recognise that the self reproaches of the melancholic appear as attacks on the self, but are really attacks on objects with whom the self is identified. The same is true in the misnamed problem of self harm or in suicide. The degree of self loathing indicates the level of rage at the departed or lost object. However, the legacy of a suicide of a parent can have long lasting and sometimes life long consequences for the surviving children.

I want to illustrate this with a fictional character called Edie from Nicci Gerrard's novel *The Things we knew were True*.

Edie 17 was having a passionate first love affair with Ricky to whom she lost her virginity. On one occasion she was in her bedroom with Ricky and her depressed father Vic, walked in as Ricky was fondling her breasts. Her father stared at them in horror, as Edie screamed at him to get out. She called him "Vic" instead of the usual "Daddy" in a cruel hard way. Edie felt mortified afterwards and apologised to her father who in turn apologised to her as he should have knocked before entering. The following day he committed suicide. Edie felt extremely guilty and found she could no longer see Ricky as she saw the staring face of her father whenever she

was with him. The family decided to sell up and move house to another area far away which necessitated a separation from Ricky. Her whole identity changed. "She became someone who was different - She was Edie whose father had killed himself."

This is the extract from their parting.

He was wearing his denim shirt and his old jeans and as she drew closer she saw he had washed his hair and shaved, and she was jolted by love and pity. It would have been so easy to step forward and take him by his hands and kiss his fingers with their bitten nails and fold herself into his familiar smell of sweat and tobacco and let herself be comforted. It was all she had left to want -the feeling of being held in his arms and the way he still looked at her in spite of everything. He looked at her as if he was looking through her, to a person no one had ever seen before or would ever see again. If he had put his arms around her, or if he had broken down and appealed to her - but he didn't. He just waited , looking at her with his brown eyes that reminded her suddenly and horribly, of Vic's. "You look pale" he said.

"Oh well ..". She put her hand up and touched her cheek.

"Are you OK?"

"Kind of. Thanks."

"I've missed you. You have no idea how much, Edie. Every minute of every day."

"Ricky", she said. "Listen. I can't..."

"Like a hole in my heart."

"I just can't anymore."

He looked away from her, down the hill to the town. Silence trembled between them. "I'm so sorry" she said at last. "Nothing's right any more."

"Including me."

"Not you. Us".

"Is it because of that time when he...?"

"No!" she said too quickly. She did not want to think of that now.

Because you can't stop having a life, you know, because your father's dead." His voice was stony in a way that was new to her.

"I know that."

"You should have had more faith."

"What do you mean?"

"Faith in us. I did."

They stared at each other. Now that she was no longer tempted, she put out a hand and laid it on his arm.

"It's no good," she said. "Everything's changed, don't you see". "So that it? Just like that."

"I'm going away on Monday."

"But I love you", he said, laying down his final card.

"I love you too", she said. "I still can't".

He put his hands in his pockets. His face became blank. "Oh", he said.

"I'll go now", said Edie. "I hope...". What did she hope?. "I hope that things go alright for you."

"You hope I have a good life, is that it?"

"I suppose so. It sounds so stupid."

"Very stupid".

"Ricky.."

"Bye then" he said.

"Good bye".

She turned away and started to walk down the lane, back to the house. At the corner she paused. If he was still there, watching her, she would go back to him, because her chest ached and her eyes

hurt and she couldn't bear any more.

She took a deep breath to steady herself and looked back, but the road was empty.

It is so vivid how Vic's intrusion into his daughter's room and sexuality severely disrupts Edie's attempts to resolve her adolescent Oedipal struggles by finding an object who can symbolise the original loved object She just can't. Vic's face is there instead of Ricky's. Her sense of cruel abandonment is projected into Ricky. Her love and desire for this boy, her wish to approach him, is curtailed by the demands of her superego and her ensuing guilt

One can share her struggle so poignantly. The cruel legacy of her father's suicide continues to reverberate in her mind so that it becomes impossible for her to bear to be in a passionate couple and continue to live her life.

In fact Edie's adolescent process is seriously disrupted , she loses this part of her childhood and grows up too quickly. Children I have seen in therapy describe in exactly the same words as Jim, in the quote at the beginning, that they feel enraged that they have lost their childhood and want those lost years back.

If Edie had psychotherapy, one would hope she could find and voice her anger and rage towards her father and his cruel and desperate act in order that she could move on. Guilt and blame, leaves her just having to react to situations. She can no longer be proactive and in control of her own life, judgements and decisions. She is being controlled by the actions of others.

## **Wayne**

Wayne 19 appears to have been adult all of his life, oldest son in a family of four his mother struggled as a single parent most of their lives to bring them up. He appears to have been `raised by the streets' The eldest a Caribbean born sister left home to study as soon as she could and did not return to live with them. Her relationship with their mother has never been good. Wayne has been the dependable one who helped with the younger two, left school(too early) to do warehouse work in order to help out at home. Interestingly, Wayne bought a dog on which he lavished love and attention. He began to steal from work and sold the merchandise in pubs and to friends. After a long time of getting away with it he was caught taken to court for several counts of theft, fined and put on probation. I later learned that he paid his fine as a result of being recruited to sell cannabis and later heroin, his selling skill being evident. Having been a stabilising influence at home with a mother living with mental health problems probation supervision was seen as the best course to follow. His mother both mentally and physically infirm did not have the will or the moral leverage any more to caution her son on his lifestyle. She did not refuse the money that he efficiently provided for housekeeping knowing that he earned by drug dealing. Wayne proved difficult young man to help, being suspicious of an adult Black male. He had been badly beaten by his mother's partner, father of his younger sisters and seemed determined to keep men away from his family. He was now `the man' having more money, a fast car and influence in his community, none of these he pointed out, possessed by his probation officer. It was only after several beatings by rival dealers that Wayne began to fear for his life and worried about his dog, his mother and sisters coping if he was not around.

Both these young men had been born into families where there were difficult relationships, Den not feeling very connected to his family and Wayne feeling attached out of a sense of duty and responsibility instilled in him at an early age. Both were different in their responsiveness to their probation officer, Den at the beginning suspicious and uneasy later being able to talk about the difficulties in his family and the confusion and contradictions that this brought to his life. He received little attention at home and felt that his mother abandoned the family for the church whilst she still lived there and his shouting violent father got too involved with his racist organisation. His

older brother had the pub and his sister tagged along with his very depressed mum to church events. He felt that he had nothing, only his mates' home that he could go to knowing that he was not supposed to be there on account of them being black. Den was what at first might be described avoidant in his attachment patterns, holding back not trusting and hiding himself, unused to attention from caring or facilitating figures. A reconstruction of his early home presented a bleak arid picture. Wayne's early life was chaos. He was born to his mother who was sent for from the Caribbean where she had been left by her parents who left for England in the 1950s. His mother became pregnant as a teenager and was made to leave her daughter in the Caribbean in order to join her parents in the United Kingdom. Wayne's parents married and sent for his older sister. Arriving at fourteen his sister became a carer to Wayne who was two. In the following five years the marriage came to a violent end and Wayne's father left the three of them. He was never to see his father again and later learned that his dad had gone to live in the USA.

Ron Britton in his paper on the suffering of Job, describes how one of the tasks of psychotherapy is to help the patient's ego wrest control of the function of judgement from the superego. He distinguishes between a guilty fear which relates to the ego's fear of the superego compared to a guilty feeling which concerns the ego's feeling towards an object. In many situations where the ego is dominated by the superego, with all the guilty fears and inhibitions I have been describing, the person loses the capacity to judge for themselves what they should or shouldn't feel or be doing. They are purely living a reactive life and being organised by their guilt. Britton suggests that by identifying with the function of the therapist, the person maybe able to gain a "third position", a meta position to observe the relationship between the ego and superego and thus reclaim the function of judgement from the superego. The guilt Edie felt probably did not belong to her but had been projected into her by her father's act. At this point in her life she seems condemned to repeat the cruel abandonment she has suffered, giving rise to yet more guilt. One could still feel that Edie was conflicted in a most painful way which allowed the possibility of further growth to take place. Some children we see appear to be so stuck and reactive to the effects of their traumatic experiences or heritage that there often can seem there is no way to help them.

## **Mark**

Mark was born at 25 weeks and spent 4 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> months in a special care baby unit. His mother found it very difficult to cope with staying with him during this time and would only be able to visit every two days or so. Mark had to have a whole range of intrusive medical procedures, where his body was invaded from every orifice and through his soft skin. His hands are scarred by all the cannulas he had in them. He also had to have heart surgery during that time to correct a congenital defect.

Mark is now 7 and very difficult to manage. He seems stuck in his own world where he cannot bear to not be in control. He is aggressive to other children, if they do not do what they are told, or if they happen to venture into his airspace which is closely monitored and guarded.

He always carries some hard objects in his pockets which he clings onto, giving him the illusion of hardness and invulnerability, in the manner described by Ester Bick as a second skin or Frances Tustin in her description of an autistic object. In the sessions he hardly relates to me. He plays obsessive torture games in the sink, whereby a hard cruel object, usually the crocodile, suspends and tosses other animals into the sink which is filled with dirty water and poison, like a malignant sewer or toilet for them to drown in. They are shown no mercy. The hard skinned elephant is singled out for the most vicious torture. Mark takes some string and ties it to the trunk then hangs the elephant upside down, over the filthy sink making it swing like a pendulum. He then saws away slowly at the suspending string until the elephant plops like a giant piece of faeces into the toilet sink below to drown or be poisoned. When I ask why this is happening to them, Mark replies "don't know" or "no

reason". I usually take the position of the tortured animals, verbalising what they may be feeling, their incomprehension, rage, helplessness and terror. I am acutely aware that they represent the most vulnerable parts of him that felt cruelly tortured for "no reason", not knowing what he had done and at the hands of others who show no mercy. Usually it seems Mark ignores my comments but he is very keen to come to the sessions and become the hardened torturer and have me witness it. My position as a witness is crucial I think as Mark did not feel his experience was witnessed. He bore it alone and now is determined to turn trauma into triumph, to do it to someone else.

Orwell describes this in 1984 in the rat torture, where the protagonist says don't do it to me, do it to him. Mark does not seem to be suffering from any inner conflict in that he is rock hard and will not budge from this position. I often fear he will be become so hardened to emotional vulnerability that he could emerge as a psychopath. The tortured animals by contrast are left in a messy flood of incomprehensibility and rage. The only chink occurs if nightmares are mentioned, as I suspect all these injured and enraged tortured objects come home to roost to get their revenge in his nightmares. He vehemently denies having such nightmares but by the manner he looks at me when I mention them, I suspect he knows what I mean.

However, in a recent session when I was talking about the experiences the tortured animals were having, it suddenly dawned on me that the elephant and the string torture may represent Mark's idea of birth with the cord being cut landing him in an unbearable place. I decided to say this to him and link it to what happened to him as a baby, where he may have felt so soft and unprotected that anyone could do anything to him, whenever they liked and there was nothing he could do. Now he is determined to do it the other way around and be so hard and powerful like the Master of the Universe. Although I had said some of this before, the sight of the elephant having the cord cut seemed to have added resonance. Mark looked at me after I spoke and said very quietly, "I wish it did not happen to me". He then returned to the torture. This was the first sign of a chink of recognition that these parts of himself belong to him and his experience. The first possibility of inner conflict. The conflict was to be externalised though with me as the witness. In the following session when I was quiet as the familiar torture was taking place, Mark spontaneously said, "Talk what the animals are feeling". It is if he needs a wide perspective, with me as the witness, in order to begin to contemplate that all this may have happened to him.

Inner conflict maybe an achievement to be aimed at with him, as it allows more possibility of growth and change from his hardened position. The conflict needs to be externalised at present until such time as he can believe that a container can exist for the mental pain contingent on recognising the vulnerability in himself. He does not seem to realise that his relentless torturing will in of itself create more persecution and fears of retaliation which means he is engaged in a vicious circle of having to be even tougher or more ruthless and omnipotent.

## **Conclusion**

Psychotherapy with traumatised children attempts to help them feel that their most unbearable anxieties stemming from traumatic dysregulated states can be received in the first instance and then named. As Bion said, the What has to proceed the Why or the How of any emotional experience. The name allows thought about why something happened, to enable a coherent narrative to be constructed so that the person is not compelled to merely repeat experience but to grow and develop from them. We have to attempt to reduce the severity of superego structures as these can interfere with thought processes and increase persecution. This takes place through work in a non judgemental atmosphere where the therapist takes an interest in phenomena and is able to

carry the transference of the most unbearable anxieties and forms of relationship. If thought becomes possible in the manner described by Britton, whereby in identification with the psychotherapist, the person is able to observe from a third position the relationships that exist between him and others or between parts of his mind, the judgements and choices can be made. When reality is accepted then losses can be mourned, enabling the lost object to be reinstalled in the internal world and related to there in a more healthy way. We would hope that psychotherapy brings about long term changes in the various functions of the mind and thus enable new brain pathways. Joseph Le Doux, a neuroscientist, has argued that therapy is "another way of creating synaptic (neuronal) potentiation in brain pathways that control the amygdala. The amygdala's emotional memories are indelibly burned into its circuits. The best we can do is regulate their expression. And the way we do this is by getting the cortex to control the amygdala" (Le Doux 1998).

Thus traumatised children can move from a life of pure automatic reaction to traumatic situations to more proactive choices on the side of life.