

# Chapter 8

## Frieda's Peace

Jonathan was born with a penchant for colic, snakes, and the computer. The colic caused his mother to become somewhat irrational with regard to his health, while the non-poisonous snakes in his room taught her to be merciful towards a growing boy with unusual interests. His ability on the computer however began to fill her with a sense of relief, since there was little else that was remotely scholarly her child was interested in. When Jonathan decided to study computer science Frieda began to breathe lighter. She was relieved that the period of fretting over finding a suitable career path for Jonathan was over. Besides that, she was in the middle of ill-timed divorce proceedings. Ill-timed in the sense that her youngest child was still at high school and Jonathan had just embarked on a course in computer science. Psychologically both were in need of a stable environment in order to excel, which is what Frieda wanted most for her children. As the divorce was more difficult than she had anticipated, and incoming money from her meager income was immediately drained into taxes and overheads from a bygone era of affluence, her stress levels were constantly rising. Her mind was crowded with thoughts of survival and doing the best for her children. On the one hand she was the bread winner in a household drowning in high expenses, and on the other hand she was the nurturing mother she had always been. The extra burden of a jobless husband who chose to ignore their reality by insisting on functioning the way he was used to function for the past 25 years, was taking its toll on her mental strength, and was draining her emotional resources. It was

therefore not surprising that she began to worry about Jonathan's emotional well-being when his offer to help ease the family burden was rebuked by his father.

The social function of intellect has often been expounded from the ethological perspective, expressing the subject of social intelligence in primitive societies by addressing the highly rational structures of myth, religion, and kinship. In social transactions man seems to be socially constrained by definite conventions of response, but when humans are placed into transactional situations, in which their desired goals can only be achieved by adapting their strategies to the continually changing conditions, we get a glimpse of high-level intelligence. When Frieda had communicated her assessment of the family's financial situation, Jonathan demonstrated one kind of high-level intelligence, by asking to assess the distribution of his father's investments. He immediately recognized that help was indeed needed, and saw the implications for himself and his family. Seeing himself and the family as a connected social entity, he creatively offered his concrete assistance, by asking how he could help. None of his behaviours prescribe to the social norm of a 17 year old, but the situation he was faced with made him project possible outcomes for the future regarding himself, as well as his family. By responding with social constraints according to definite conventions of response, his father lost his temper. We do not know whether he caught a glimpse of Jonathan's high-level intelligence, or whether he simply responded to the stereotype view of himself as the head of the household. What we do know is that he certainly did not want his son to think about situations that he considered to be none of his concern. His thinking was directed by his underlying belief system, which is based on a patriarchal structure, prescribing to a view of himself as the head of the household, the decision-maker, the breadwinner, and the problem-solver. This belief system precludes sharing responsibilities with children, accepting assistance with solving problems, and receiving assistance in connection with earning an income for the family. Jonathan's father was mentally caught up in a thought pattern that worked for most men in the past and lasted until the recent past. In the last 20 years however individuals in this world have been confronted with major changes and transformations with regard to organizational and family structures. By insisting on the adherence to worn out

patterns of thought and behaviour when life requires us to change, can result in getting stuck, and being stuck is usually very stressful, for oneself as well as others. The facilitation process for forgiving Frieda's ex husband involves the practice of NLP, which will follow now. The dialog between Frieda and myself, and the NLP intervention strategies that were employed for changing her thoughts, feelings, and her behaviour, will be documented. The actual therapeutic conversation is presented in *italic print* when Frieda speaks, and in upright print when I speak. It is thus documented as it occurred in reality during the storytelling / interviewing / action research situation. After the presentation of the therapeutic intervention, the relevant explanation, and/or demonstration of the intervention strategy will be presented. The data gathering process, and the facilitation process sometimes occur simultaneously in the real situation, but in the documentation of the whole process, telling the story and documenting the interventions are separated for a coherent understanding of the story.

Frieda's story of being stuck in a patriarchal time warp while her family's needs required creative problem solving strategies within a democratic social system demonstrates the dilemma we are faced with when unequal positive change amongst family members occurs. Frieda was aiming to attain a better life for herself and her children when she decided to divorce her change resistant husband. Maintaining the status quo of an authoritarian family was less desirable for her than facilitating the development of creativity and emotional flexibility in her children.

Frieda arrived in a flurry of things to do. After she divorced her husband she was burdened with an aging, ill mother. She subsequently had little time for social chit chat. The responsibility of putting her children through university, the decision to rent out her large house in order to generate an extra income, and the will to succeed resulted in a demonstration of highly effective behaviour. She had hardly sat down at my little café table, when she began telling me her story.

## Frieda's Story

*There is one thing in my life I cannot forgive. It was approximately three to four years ago, when I realised my husband was in financial difficulties. I told my children that we would have to move, since I could not afford to pay the expensive rates and taxes of our very large property. My son immediately asked in which way he could help, and he went to my husband, asking him about the family's financial situation. He was only 17 years old at the time, and wanted to help in a concrete way, by assessing the distribution of his father's investments. Ignoring Jonathan's concern, my husband retaliated with the words: "It's none of your f--- business what I do with my money!" Jonathan reeled under those words, and retorted: "But it is my life that is affected by it." His father hurled more abuse at the sensitive child, cutting him down to size. Jonathan recoiled and withdrew, and he has remained in this state ever since that day. What worries me is the fact that he responds without compassion to stories his grandmother tells about others who have been hurt, and his replies are marked by a lack of sensitivity. I am afraid that Jonathan has been damaged for life. He has also been exposed to an arrogant, harsh and insensitive role model in the shape of his own father, and I fear that he may have learnt and adopted negative patterns of behaviour towards women.*

*Last year I finally divorced my husband, and Jonathan moved in with his maternal grandmother, while my daughter shares a tiny house with me. Since the rebuttal from his father, Jonathan refused to listen to or talk about stories concerning the divorce. He also refused to make contact with his father. In the mean time he has finished his studies and holds down a full time job. When he was a teenager, he began to collect snakes, which he kept in his bedroom as pets. A few weeks ago, however, he sold his snakes, and strangely enough began to respond positively towards his father's overtures towards reconciling with his son. However, I still feel he may have been irreparably damaged, because he has*

*become too cynical for his age.*

## NLP Interventions

Frieda was in a hurry, which made me decide to choose the shortest intervention. She could always return for a second session if that was needed, and I therefore immediately began to address the main problem of being unable to forgive her husband.

B Did you say this happened to you approximately four years ago?

F Yes

B During this time, did you try to forgive your husband for what he did to Jonathan?

F *Yes, but I did not manage to do it. You see, now that Jonathan is beginning to respond more positively towards his father's overtures to reconcile with him, I think I should also try to forgive him.*

B You are right in your thinking. Forgiving someone is always beneficial for both parties, and you will find that having forgiven will release you from a whole lot of stress and unnecessary mental and emotional involvement with your ex husband.

You know, it was very difficult for him to change, because he was brought up to believe his sole responsibility is to bring home an income. His whole belief system would have to be turned upside down to make him see himself as someone who does other things too.

F *But he should have seen that he could not do it on his own. I am still angry with him that he did not begin to work at something else to earn some extra money. He is very good at fixing things around the house, and I repeatedly told him to do odd jobs for single people, like fixing the gutters, but that kind of work is beneath him! He still saw himself as the big executive, even though he was sitting at home watching TV all*

*day, waiting for me to come home and cook a meal for him.*

B Well, he still **is** the big executive as long as he does nothing except wait for others to do things for **him**?

F **(Laughs)** Yah, that's a good way of describing it!

B Did he ever help you with anything?

F *No, never. Mind you, he was very good with the children. When they were small, he always helped me bath them and feed them.*

B Does Jonathan help in the house?

F *Yes he does, and now that my mother is ill, he is doing things for her all the time. I think it's quite hard to work and look after a terminally ill grandmother. But he seems to be the only one who can handle her in her agonising pain. I am just very worried about him having no compassion. He is too young to be like that.*

B If he helps around the house and helps your mother, he is definitely not modeling his behaviour on your husband's behaviour. If he had, he would spend his time in front of the TV.

F *Yah, I suppose so. But what about having no compassion?*

B When does he have no compassion?

F *He showed no compassion when my mother told us how someone else got hijacked. He just replied: Its her own fault if she parks in front of the house, leaving her car unlocked.*

B His answer corresponds to the facts. When he offered you and his father help, his offer included compassion and pro-social behaviour. Both were rebuked by his father. He now only offers rational, factual responses.

F *Yes, that is what worries me.*

B Jonathan is an intelligent young man, why don't you talk to him about his remarks? And ask him about his response to other people getting hurt.

F *Hmmm*

B And you could also ask your husband to speak to him about the money incident, and

urge him to apologize for his negative response. After all, it is something that happened between father and son, and the best place to begin is for your husband to apologize.

F *I don't know if he'll do that.*

B Well, there is no harm in trying, particularly, since he does seem to want to make contact with Jonathan.

F *Hmmm*

B I don't think you need to worry too much about Jonathan. The fact that he cares for his grandmother since she has become ill, is a sign that he has not become callous.

F *Hmmm*

B When are you going to see or speak to your ex husband again?

F *This weekend.*

B When you see him or speak to him, remember to ask him to apologize to Jonathan.

F *Ya, I'll do that, I hope I remember.*

B What do you need to remind you to remember?

F *Ugh, it's OK, I'll remember.*

B OK, is there anything else you need or want me to do?

F *No, ugh, I must run. I still have to go to the bank.*

B Then you must run, I'll give you a ring to schedule our next meeting. See you.

F *See you, bye.*

### **Three weeks later**

B Hi Frieda, how are you?

F Fine thanks, and you?

B Well, thank you. How is Johnathan?

F He's fine. I can't complain, except my mom, she's getting worse.

## Six months later

Frieda's mother passed away peacefully after a long, difficult sickbed , and Jonathan made contact with his father. What happened between them Frieda does not know, but since then Jonathan has emerged from his self-imposed silence and communicates with his father on a regular basis. He recently mentioned that he feels sorry for his father because he seems to be very lonely. Frieda shares that view. She has admitted to having forgiven him, and wishes that he will find work soon. She finds it hard to bear seeing him so lonely and depressed. She wishes he would find someone to share his life with, and she sometimes gives him the money he asks for, because she feels sorry for him.

The intervention is complete, because Frieda has attained her goal of forgiving her ex husband.

## NLP Strategies and Comments

By zooming in on the benefits of forgiving someone as always being beneficial for both parties, and by stating categorically that the outcome of having forgiven will release Frieda from stress and mental and emotional involvement with her ex husband, I clearly restated Frieda's positive goal as well as the benefits of having reached that positive goal. Frieda was thus fully aware of what she was going to move towards.

Since she had told me in a particular way that she had tried to forgive but was unable to do so, I suspected that information was missing on one of the logical levels that comprise her life. (When she saw that Jonathan was responding in a positive way to his father's overtures to reconcile, she *thought* she should also try to forgive him. Frieda's use of the word *thought*



suggests to me that her inability to forgive lies on one of the levels of thinking i.e. one of the logical levels.) Suspecting a logical error, I spoke to her on the level of understanding her husband. “You know, it was very difficult for him to change, because he was brought up to believe his sole responsibility is to bring home an income. His whole belief system would have to be turned upside down to make him see himself as someone who does other things too.” By using the past tense when I describe her husband's response to changing circumstances within the context of his upbringing, I place his past behaviour into the realm of things we cannot change. The static unchanging picture I painted from her husband's past, immediately elicits a response from Frieda that provides me with the insight of her inability to understand his behaviour. The fact that she said *“He should have seen that he could not do it on his own. I am still angry with him that he did not begin to work at something else to earn some extra money.”* tells me that she places her husband onto the same level of personal flexibility as herself. It also tells me that her anger is rooted in her belief that her husband is as flexible as she is but did not display his flexibility by doing what she had suggested, such as *“fixing things around the house, to do odd jobs for single people, like fixing the gutters”*. She also informed me what she believed about him and the behaviour he displayed at home by saying *“but that kind of work is beneath him! He still saw himself as the big executive, even though he was sitting at home watching TV all day, waiting for me to come home and cook a meal for him.”*

Frieda had provided me with enough information to understand that she was reasoning on one logical level (the flexible *behavioural* level) while her husband was behaving on another logical level (the level of *being* the big executive). In order to align her thinking with the thinking of her husband, I emphasise the present reality (which is changeable) that “he still **is** the big executive as long as he does nothing except wait for others to do things for **him**?” This reality being presented in the present tense implies that it can be changed. It also implies that her husband's beliefs and his behaviour are congruent. It also uncovers the fact that Frieda's thinking differs from her husband's thinking, which is the reason for their arguments.

When Frieda responds with a laugh, I know she has had an aha experience. She has caught a glimpse of her logical error. The logical error being her expectation of her husband to behave appropriately in a situation that requires flexibility, in the face of his belief in being the big executive and waiting for things to be done for him.

Now that the root of her inability to forgive has been unearthed, the way is clear for identifying the areas of her life in which things can be changed in the present.

By asking her whether her husband helps her around the house, it becomes clear to her that he only helped with the children when they were little. (This reinforces the veracity of her observation of him as the big executive.)

When Frieda tells me that Jonathan is the only one who can handle her ill mother, and that he is the one who is looking after her most of the time, I address her fear of Jonathan becoming uncompassionate by comparing his selfless helping behaviour to her husband's uninvolved behaviour. I also dispel her fear by reinforcing that observation on a deeper level by stating that her son obviously does not model his own behaviour on his father's behaviour.

Frieda is still not convinced that Jonathan will not lose his compassion.

That tells me that it is very important for her that her son should be compassionate. I therefore ask her for a specific incident when he showed no compassion. Her answer, "*He showed no compassion when my mother told us how someone else got highjacked. He just replied: Its her own fault if she parks in front of the house, leaving her car unlocked.*" shows me that his behaviour may have or may not have changed from his past behaviours, but that he did answer factually in the context of a social family situation.

My suggestions to Frieda make her pensive. She listens and thinks. While Frieda is thinking about my suggestions I end off our conversation by recapping her implicit homework. That facilitates her remembering her priorities when she will speak to her ex husband again, and

what she needs to discuss with Jonathan.

Frieda's path towards forgiving her ex husband has been cleared by removing the incongruence between her thinking and her husband's beliefs about himself within his context. The implicit homework was presented with the aim of restoring the whole system of which Frieda, her ex husband and Jonathan are a part. Even though Jonathan and his father were not present at the time of the intervention, Frieda's new understanding of the whole situation, and the suggested homework with Jonathan and his father contains the possibility of effecting healing within the whole system.

Six months later, the follow-up session indicates that my facilitation had been successful. Frieda reports that Jonathan made contact with his father and communicates with him on a regular basis. He recently mentioned that he feels sorry for his father because he seems to be very lonely. That statement is a demonstration of compassion towards his father. It also indicates that Jonathan has maintained the compassion Frieda was afraid he had lost.

Frieda admits to having forgiven her ex-husband for the negative feedback to their son's attempt at demonstrating pro-social behaviour. Her wish that he will find work soon, and her anguish at seeing him so lonely and depressed indicates that she has forgiven him completely. Her wish that he may find someone to share his life with, and her acts of kindness towards him by providing him with the money he asks for, because she feels sorry for him, are both indications that she wishes him well and that she has compassion for him.

Besides forgiving her ex husband and experiencing her son's compassion towards his father, Frieda has attained a level of compassion for her ex husband that is unusual for a divorced woman. The experience has provided her with a tremendous growth spurt on the spiritual level that has enabled her to provide him with the money he needs. This is particularly remarkable since her reason for the divorce was a lack of money, together with her husband's disinterest in generating money for the family.

An analysis of Frieda's story will be presented now to conclude this chapter. Discourse analysis is used as a means to think with the story, and to link the events from the story with the theory that explains the situation. The thoughts, feelings, behaviour, beliefs, values, and meanings that Frieda attributes to her husband's obstinate behaviour inform her behavioural and ultimately her life choices. These choices assist her in filing for divorce and enable her to forgive her ex husband.

## **Discourse Analysis of Frieda's Story**

Frieda is a good mother. She has done her utmost to bring up her children in a well rounded and balanced way, equipping both with the necessary life skills. Being faced with her husband's indolent behaviour at a time when the family was running out of resources, she finds herself in a situation in which she has lost her belief in her own ability to forgive her ex husband (Lazarus, 1966; Andreas and Andreas, 1994; Selye, 1956; Travis, 1989). The worry that resulted from her husband's rebuttal towards their well-meaning son had engaged her in constantly thinking about the possible damage that could have occurred in Jonathan's psyche (Salovey, Bedell, Detweiler, Mayer, 2000; Lewis and Haviland-Jones, 2000; Huang and Enright, 2000; Horowitz, 1989; Lévi-Strauss, 1962; Loevinger, 1976; Siddique and D'Arcy, 1984). Being the kind of mother who desires no harm to befall her children, this incident weighed heavily on her heart and mind (Bennett-Goleman, 2001). She closely observed Jonathan's behaviour and comments, making mental notes of his responses (Keltner and Ekman, 2000; Lazarus, 1982; Lazarus, Averill and Opton, Jr. 1970; Mussen, Conger, Kagan and Huston, 1984). She concluded that he lacked sensitivity and compassion, while she continued to recall the incident when Jonathan's father had retaliated with harsh words towards their son (Miller, 1980 ; Kohlberg, 1969). She also recalled her sensitive child recoiling, and withdrawing and having remained in that state since that day (Lazarus, Averill

and Opton, 1970; Lazarus, 1966). Having experienced the harshness, insensitivity, and arrogance of his father, Frieda feared for Jonathan's mental health, and that permanent damage may have ensued from such a role model (Saarni, 2000; Lazarus, 1966). The fact that he was busy with his studies, was looking after his ill grandmother, but reacted in uncompassionate ways to stories of other peoples' trauma's only served to increase Frieda's worries (Saarni, 2000; Lazarus, 1982; Jasnoski, 1984; Lazarus, 1966).

An unexpected change occurred when Jonathan began to sell the snakes he had collected as a teenager, and began to respond to his father's overtures towards reconciling with him (Rende, 2000; Keeney, 1990; Enright, Santos and Al-Mabuk, 1989; Enright and the Human Development Study Group, 1991; Stone, 1977). This change confronted Frieda with her own feelings towards her ex husband, and particularly towards her past inability to forgive him for his behaviour towards their teenage son (Willi, 1992; Kelly, 1955; Jackson, 1989; Johnson-Laird and Oatley, 2000). She reasoned that if Jonathan forgives his father and reconciles with him, she should also forgive her ex husband (Kramer, 1995; Johnson-Laird and Oatley, 2000). She did however not know that the reason for being unable to forgive her ex husband lay on a level she was completely unaware of (Parrott and Spackman, 2000; Keeney, 1984; Trainer, 1981). That is why she said she was unable to forgive (McCullough and Worthington, 1994b).

During the intervention Frieda was able to locate the part of herself that was unable to forgive, which did enable her to find a way to forgive and unexpectedly transform her into a very caring and compassionate ex spouse (Zukav and Francis, 2001; Tutu, 1999; Robbins, 1992 ; McCullough, Sandage and Worthington, 1997; Krebs, 1975; Stone, 1977; Keeney, 1984; Jackson, 1989; Johnson-Laird and Oatley, 2000; Estés, 1992).