

Chapter 1

Breaking the Box: Supervision – A Challenge to Free Ourselves

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A child is having a terrible nightmare.

Isn't our instinct to take it gently in our arms, hold it tenderly and by lovingly talking to it encourage it to wake up?

In this chapter I show how I invite my supervisees to do exactly the same with their clients: rather than to examine their clients' stories and to explore their feelings, I encourage my supervisees to wake up to a bigger reality and, by doing so, help their clients go beyond their own stories. We do not suffer because life is so painful. We suffer because the box we have built around ourselves has become too small. What is needed is not the healing of wounds, but our willingness to break out of our boxes. Passionate supervision offers a way to do this.

I remember my first psychotherapy session many years ago. I was deeply distressed, and I felt pretty hopeless; nothing seemed to work out in my life. For about half an hour I poured out my pain and confusion. I plunged it all in front of my therapist hoping for an analysis and a suggestion how to go about solving these numerous problems.

However, what I received was one sentence delivered in a warm and understanding manner:

My God, Jochen, you are in a pickle!

This sentence threw me. It did not throw me because it would so powerfully help to understand my problems and solve them (because it did not). It was not my mind that got affected. At that time I could not really put words to what had touched me so much. I only could feel a physical response: I observed my stomach muscles relaxing and my diaphragm softly vibrating. A peace started engulfing me from within that I had never experienced before, slowly crawling through my entire body. I had touched a place far deeper than my stories; I had touched what later I would call my soul. An inner smile of recognition appeared from nowhere and if I had allowed it to develop I would most probably have laughed my head off.

Maybe for the first time in my life I had an opportunity to step outside my self-created box – and I did not dare to take it. Instead I stifled that smile! This experience has become the cornerstone for my personal and professional life as a psychotherapist and supervisor, not just because of the smile I had felt so unexpectedly, but also because of my determined effort to stifle it. I pushed it away, because it did not fit into my concept of my self as a suffering and confused young man. Then and there I decided to stick to what I felt familiar and my mind could identify with: 'the story of me as I knew it'. I decided to stay in my box.

Many years I spent trying to understand the 'story of me', 'polishing' my box from inside – and with that making sure I stayed inside. However, I had never forgotten the smile. Often without me noticing it, I was pursuing it.

From time to time I met somebody who reminded me that there is life outside my box. These men and women were like a good parent listening to the sorrow of the child, knowing that

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what seems so difficult and overwhelming in the child's eyes, actually loses its power when viewed from a wider perspective. They were holding a bigger picture, without denying the reality of my experience. They were seeing something I could not see yet. They were seeing my soul, while I insisted on clinging to my stories.

Then a time came when I recognized my own stories and those of others to be what they really are: just stories. Stories are like boxes we build around ourselves to give us structure, identity, security, and familiarity. We are attached to them even when they are traumatic and painful, because they feel so much part of us. Although breaking the box open would give an immense freedom, the resistance is great since outside that box we feel unprotected and so different to who we believe we are, that we desperately keep it intact. However, stories also limit us; if we grow too big they suffocate us, or if the stories grow too big they squash us and prevent us from being who we really are.

Recognizing that we continuously create and repeat stories is an important step toward breaking our boxes. The process of breaking our boxes, however, then only begins. It becomes a never ending process in which more and more of life's events can be appreciated and seen as merely stories unfolding without needing to get drawn into them. The less we get taken over by stories the more a space opens from which we radiate an immense amount of peace, love and inner strength.

Supervisees come to us with powerful stories to tell from their clients. Whether the supervisee is a medical professional, a social worker or a psychotherapist, what every single practitioner in the helping profession has to deal with is a continuous need of clients and patients to be made to feel better. Something is broken, which needs fixing. Something has gone wrong, which needs being put right. Practitioners can easily get drawn into the presented story, the presented problems,

feelings and worries – and with that, stay in the box clients have created for themselves. The more powerful the story and the more painful the feelings, the stronger the box and the more difficult to see anything else.

(I am not suggesting that boxes are all bad. They are there to hold, contain and give a sense of familiarity – at least for a time. Sometimes they even need to be rebuilt when they got shattered too early or too brutally. However, ultimately I suggest even a 'shattered box' is also another story that wants to be left behind.)

Sometimes therapists, social workers, or any other person in the helping profession find themselves in a place of helplessness and hopelessness triggered by powerful stories – maybe a bit similar to that of the medical professional when facing the terminally ill. What do I say to the terminally ill person who knows he will die soon? Words of comfort cannot come any more from the place of hope, the hope that soon things will be better and back to normal. (David Owen has written more about this in Chapter 3.)

When arriving at a place where 'there is nowhere else to go' and accepting it, at that moment life becomes more than just a life that needs fixing. Healing becomes more than saving a body. True support comes from knowing that even 'being terminally ill' is just another story – a powerful one, though. True support comes from knowing that there is more to life than what I experience inside my box.

Obviously it is essential to appreciate the presented story, to deal with the problems, whether it is providing medicine, listening to important life experiences or helping to solve housing or financial problems, etc. Stories are there to be told and listened to. Life is full of them; life is one big story. Stories can be very difficult to bear; they also can be rich, captivating and entertaining. I do not at all want to diminish the impor-

tance of stories. Life without stories would be very dull. Stories can be horrible, beautiful and challenging – and they can open doors.

When supervision provides a space in which stories and problems are seen as a gateway to a new dimension of reality, rather than merely as issues which need solving, for me at that moment it becomes 'passionate supervision'.

I call it passionate supervision because I believe passion is the essential ingredient to breaking through intellectual and emotional resistance. Passion as I see it is not a feeling; it is a force capable of deeply affecting others in a subtle and profound way. Any action, any thought or feeling when fed by passion has a hugely transformative power. Passion is not fanatical. Passion is not noisy. Passion is gentle and patient while at the same time fierce and determined. Passion arises when the essence of one's life has been touched and one starts dealing with the world from that place. For me passionate supervision has become this essence. This work has taken me over and has infiltrated my whole being. It is not something I only earn my living with; it is something that occupies every second of my life.

Let me continue with an analogy. Going beyond the stories is a bit similar to seeing a 3-dimensional picture.

At first glance you only see a flat 2-dimensional picture or a large amount of dots in different colours, until you re-adjust your eyes and suddenly a very clear 3-dimensional image appears where the 2-dimensional picture or meaningless and randomly displayed dots had been. It is by looking through the dots and softening your vision, by basically disregarding the 2-dimensional picture, that you discover the new dimension. It is essential for somebody to be there who knows and passionately insists there is more to that 2-dimensional picture and can show you the different way of looking; to find it you have to do

it by yourself. Once you know how to re-adjust your eyes it becomes as real as the 2-dimensional picture. It is wonderful and rewarding to watch the faces of those who suddenly for the first time can see this new dimension.

Similarly, first you look at life filled with your stories seemingly happening at random without any reasons or connections. Stories are like these randomly displayed dots. They are useful and meaningful, but only if you can allow them to be there as they are without focusing on them. Then by looking through them tenderly suddenly a whole new world opens, a world which will dwarf any story.

Passionate supervision as I see it does not change the outline of a supervision session in obvious ways. The passionate supervisor like in any other form of supervision will talk with the supervisees about their clients. Their stories will be the obvious focus of the work. The dynamics between practitioner and client and the stories will be explored together and other possibilities to intensify and deepen the work will be discussed. This is how traditionally supervision works and this will also happen in passionate supervision.

The new dimension passionate supervision brings into the work comes from the supervisor's presence and passion, not from what actually is talked about in the supervision session.

When I think back of my first experience with the psychotherapist – as mentioned at the beginning of the chapter – it was not what he said or did, but his obvious awareness of and presence in a different space that affected me so deeply.

The passionate supervisor has not merely an intellectual concept of a reality beyond the box, but actually experiences life beyond stories. Similar to a parent he not only knows that life is bigger than what it seems to be, but actually lives in that bigger space. The stories then are merely used similarly to how the randomly placed 2-dimensional dots are used to get to the

3-dimensional picture: they are the starting points to a deeper experience.

In supervision, the stories like the dots are all there are to focus on. They are appreciated. However, by also keeping a loving and determined detachment from the stories the passionate supervisor will create an atmosphere in which the supervisees can slowly disentangle themselves from the involvement in their clients' reality. The passionate supervisor knows that the solution of a given problem cannot be found on the level the problem is presented, and therefore he will not invest much energy in the presented stories. What does this mean?

Imagine you have six matches of equal length and are asked to create four triangles of equal sizes. The solution of this problem cannot be found on the 2-dimensional level. Whatever you do on a flat piece of paper does not lead to the solution. Once you incorporate a 3rd dimension it becomes easy: three matches you leave in a triangle flat on the piece of paper, on top of it you erect a pyramid with the other three matches.

What it means to find a larger context I learnt some years ago when my very close friend became terminally ill. During his last months everybody experienced an immense peace and love radiating from him. He increasingly was less concerned about his illness and future, but became more open to us. Shortly before his death he took me in his arms and said: 'If I had the choice between a healthy body and the love I am surrounded by, I would without a hint of a doubt choose love.' Although this was incomprehensible for my mind at that moment, I could clearly feel this was his reality. He was outside his box. Love and deep feelings of peace and acceptance were holding him on a different level of consciousness. This touched everybody. It was such a powerful experience that even death dwindled in its presence.

The time with him has affected me deeply. Knowing that there is a power in all of us and a level of consciousness, which can make what we have thought of as important totally lose its potency, is indeed a very liberating experience.

Many spiritual traditions point to the importance to stop thinking, to stop the mind's activity. We can try to fight the mind. Or we can find something bigger to take us over and discover how suddenly that what has bothered us loses its power.

The solution of my friend's 'being terminally ill' did not come from having found a cure, but from having discovered something so much more powerful it even dwarfed death. A cure has not been found for him but healing has taken place. He was living his soul, not experiencing life any more through his stories.

There is no tool, no technique to find that peaceful and open place outside the box and beyond the stories. The mind cannot possibly understand or create this place. The mind is always only interested in creating stories. I am not talking about learning something new. I am talking about re-connecting with a place in ourselves, which has always been there, but has been covered up by a huge amount of stories that we have learnt to accept as 'reality'. The passionate supervisor just carefully points to the possibility that stories are just stories, however powerful they may be. This has to be done gently and lovingly; the process itself, though, can be quite fierce, surely challenging, at times painful – and irreversible. That is why I talk about breaking a box, rather than melting or softening it.

In order to explore this a bit further, let us for a moment turn to Aikido, a Japanese Martial Art, which I have been involved with for many years.

Aikido teaches how to use the power of the attacker to one's own advantage. By absorbing the attack one learns to move one's body in such a way that the power of the attack is

turned back towards the attacker. The more powerful the attack the stronger the response then becomes. The strength comes from not resisting so that the attacker loses the sense of somebody actually being there to attack. He falls into an empty space. Aikido talks about 'Zanshin', which means stillness, when it tries to explain what this empty space is about. But it is more than stillness and surely not really empty at all. It is a presence that is soft and open, alert, solid, focused, centred and explosive. It is a presence not disturbed or unbalanced even when physically attacked, or when surrounded by difficult or threatening life issues. Zanshin is there when all the attacks, all the problems, all the stories just pass gently through us.

Aikido cannot be taught theoretically; it is not a mental exercise. Through observation, constant repetition and close contact with the teacher, old acquired patterns slowly dissolve to give way to new and more effective behaviour. Aikido is more than a physical exercise. It shows who we are when we welcome life. If we complain about or fight against what is, if we argue with reality, we always lose. By not resisting, but using whatever life throws at us and turning it into our advantage, we radiate a loving, passionate, fierce and fearless energy – an energy which makes passionate supervision possible.

Here are some thoughts about the process of passionate supervision with an organization I have been working with for some years. This organization consists of eight social workers, and is working with the homeless, especially those who are severely destitute and traumatized.

There are no quick fixes when we deal with deep transformation and change. Passionate supervision is always a long-term process. (See Chapter 5, where Joan Wilmot writes about long-term work.) Obviously passionate supervision needs to take into account the day-to-day problems practitioners are experiencing in their work and has to deal with them,

but at the same time it is also holding a space for a wider transformation.

In my experience, we all go through a process in our lives, which is quite similar to that of dying. I find it at times helpful for containing and understanding long-term therapeutic work to describe this process in five stages: denial, despair/depression, bargaining, anger and acceptance. That process of course does not go smoothly from one step to the other. Often there is a mixture of any of those stages present. Some groups start off with 'denial': 'Why do we need supervision? We are OK!' This particular group I am going to talk about here clearly started off from 'despair/depression' when I first met them.

This group of social workers was particularly bombarded by constant and ever-increasing demands from their clients. The stories the social workers had to listen and respond to were heart wrenching and often difficult to digest, leaving the group in a kind of chronic state of shock. This resulted in many sick leaves, tension in the team, times of depression, hopelessness and helplessness. There was always a drama to respond to, never really time to sit and be with each other as a team. Similar to the clients they were working with, for them life was just surviving, not living, enjoying and creating.

The first breakthrough in our work together I remember was when one of the social workers spontaneously, with tears welling up in her eyes and softly looking at the group said: 'Hi, you'. It was a moment of waking up and from then on the group began to see and acknowledge each other as individuals – and to work together as a team. Suddenly there was an awareness of space and time for each other. Not just tasks and problems to look at and solve, but a time to be. Over many months other stages of the five-step process came up. For instance 'anger' erupted, then 'denial', questioning what we were actually doing here together. Then 'bargaining' happened,

when team members tried to find individual solutions to deal with stress. For instance some withdrew, decided to be less involved, hoping by that to lessen the effect the work has on them. But what we always came back to was this 'Hi, you': recognizing each other, supporting each other, seeing each other. The team became more alive, present and passionate. Passion without stillness and openness leads to fanaticism and ultimately to despair. We discovered how to be still and open even when a war was raging around us. Then the team had to deal with two suicides and one attempted suicide within a week. It was very moving to see them just tenderly holding everybody's feelings and experiences without judging, regretting, criticizing or splitting off. More and more often the team was in the stage of 'acceptance': accepting one's limitations and embracing lovingly the fact that life is so much bigger than we are, that we can never control it, can never really understand it, but we can learn to trust it and gently follow its process. Acceptance is very different to resignation. Resignation is passive. Acceptance is active, alive, taking what comes and embracing it with love and passion, and thereby going beyond the surface story to a deeper level. One team member suggested that she does not see herself any more as a social worker dealing with cases and stories. 'I am a Soulworker, dealing with Souls.' Increasingly the social workers saw less the stories and the pain clients brought to them. They began to see less victims and sufferers, but Souls with their particular and often mysterious journeys.

I am thinking of an experience at Notting Hill Carnival some years ago, where spontaneously I felt this 'acceptance' as mentioned above. It was very crowded and when I left a particular dense spot I discovered my purse had been stolen. Surprisingly the moment of realization was also a moment of total openness and utter peace. There was only a hint of thought, a detached observation: 'Oh, somebody else has got

my purse now'. It was an immensely beautiful moment. I felt totally present and totally still. I instantly knew that this is who I really am, the core of myself not covered up by thoughts or feelings.

I could not hold on to it for long, though – but long enough to recognize it. Suddenly, like a dam which had been holding the water back suddenly bursts, all the usual thoughts came flooding in: 'I have been "robbed", somebody has "stolen" all my money, how stupid of me...!' It became obvious to me that it is not life which creates pain. What create pain are our thoughts about it.

Once at home I recalled the experience of openness and no-thought, and the story of 'being robbed' became at least a positive story, in which I had re-discovered something beautiful.

However, although I turned a bad story into a good one about empowerment, ultimately it does not really matter what kind of story I identify with. Story is story, whether good or bad; they are always created in my mind and never show who I really am. Recalling my experience did not bring back what so deeply had touched me. Recalling the story made me feel good and took away my feeling victimized, but it became just another story of something I had experienced and have lost now (the beautiful moment of total acceptance and openness). My box was still intact, although it may have felt a bit more comfortable – and surely more entertaining.

Breaking the box means more than replacing old well-known stories with new and exciting ones. It is a challenge, especially when one has good, exciting and expanding feelings and experiences to contain, and one must hold them too and not take them so seriously. It does surely not mean we cannot be really sad or really happy any more. Maybe the opposite is

true. However, we become more able to observe tenderly our feelings and thoughts without allowing them to take us over.

Passionate supervision does not help to make boxes more comfortable. It is not interested in helping to survive the one battle. Passionate supervision supports the process of breaking boxes for good.

We do experience many moments when we are outside our box. However, we usually do not give attention to these split seconds, and do not have the presence and awareness for catching them, since we are so focused on and occupied with our thoughts and feelings, and so seduced by our stories.

There is an experiment in which you are shown a short video of two groups of people on either side of the screen throwing balls to each other. Your task is to count the balls. At the end of the video you are asked whether you have seen something unusual. It is highly unlikely you have. But actually a huge gorilla has walked twice from one side of the screen to the other, stopping in the middle and hammering his chest with his fists. You did not see the gorilla because you were too busy counting.

In passionate supervision an atmosphere is created, in which supervisor and supervisee together can deepen their presence and can look and watch without being distracted by preconceived ideas, expectations and stories. 'Looking' and 'not knowing' are intrinsically human qualities. I believe that they are in fact our essence, and exert an enormous power for expansion, transformation and liberation when done in a spirit of alertness, openness, love and passion.

In the following I will write about my experience of working for the Medical Foundation in London in a project called 'Natural Growth Project' (NGP), with refugees and asylum seekers who have survived torture. It does not describe my work as a supervisor as such. Nevertheless it is a good example

of what can happen when we create a space, in which we are not distracted by thoughts and stories. These clients have changed my outlook on what I believe psychotherapy can be about, and have challenged me to look for Soul rather than for stories. This has helped me deepen my own awareness and understanding of passionate supervision.

These clients have come to this country severely traumatized. Most of them hardly speak English. They are living in an intense painful box, in a terrible nightmare. The stories they tell are truly horrific. These stories and the pain they are experiencing need of course to be acknowledged and talked about (we are supported by interpreters at times) and a lot of practical help is required. However, if we only saw the wounding, we merely would strengthen the part in them that feels victimized, pained and in need of support. These clients are far more than their wounds. I believe there is a place in all of us that is far deeper than all our stories, all our thoughts and all our wounds; we are far more than our worst nightmares and fears. This place I have called 'Soul'.

The work of the NGP is about giving space to Soul; it is not about healing wounds. The NGP has two projects run by a group analyst, a gardener/project worker, administrator and myself as a psychotherapist on a part-time basis. They are the Garden Project, which is adjunct to the Medical Foundation in London and the Allotment Project, which I am going to refer to here. In the Allotment Project we have rented about 16 plots of land in two different allotment sites in London. We work with more than 25 individuals, couples and families. Each individual or family can be on the allotment and cultivate whenever and whatever they want. Once a week I, together with the gardener, would meet these clients for a day on the allotment.

Nature is a wonderful aid. Digging the soil, planting the seeds, doing what needs to be done on the allotment and

waiting for things to happen can become so deeply engaging and so wonderfully containing and holding, that it distracts us from our thoughts and stories – even if it is only for a while. When we apply the idea of passionate supervision as discussed above, the psychotherapist's task is to stay open, alert and present. He makes sure not to get seduced by stories and not to get pushed into believing that he is dealing with anything else but powerful Souls. Nothing else really needs to happen.

Souls are like seeds. A seed needs tender care, good soil, some water and light and lots of warmth. It does not need pulling or pushing, or wise words to encourage it to break through the surface. It does not even need constant attention. For its growth it actually does not need the gardener. When the time is right it will show itself. When the time is right, Soul will stir and break through the box.

Here a short report:

The psychiatrist described 'B' as 'severely paranoid depressive', with an inability to make or sustain contact, muteness and a total dependency on support from his family. He is experiencing frequent panic attacks, especially when in closed spaces like buses or even at home, when windows cannot be opened wide enough. He mostly stays in bed at home, and leaves the house only to come to the allotment.

'B' comes for many weeks and just sits on his plot without doing anything. He just sits and I sometimes sit with him. Nothing seems to happen. I am just with him, holding 'his box' without interfering with it, being with him without expectations and working with him without intentions. Then one day he discovers a ladybird. This is the first moment something is acknowledged outside his own body and the first thing he relates to. Some weeks later I observe him chasing birds off his plot. He is protecting his space, which has become slightly bigger again.

And then many months later a moment I will never forget. It is a very hot day. 'B' is watering his garden with a hose. I playfully encourage him to splash my feet. He does it in his usual way: stone-faced, eyes frozen in fear. And suddenly it happens. A spark appears in his eyes – and Soul is shining through. As if somebody has switched the light on. He then turns the hose at me and completely soaks me head to toe, roaring with laughter. I am totally stunned, not comprehending what is happening and deeply moved at the same time. Those who witness it are in tears. What then follows is nearly as touching: 'B' sits with me for more than an hour and talks and talks. I do not understand a word, because he speaks in his language – but it does not matter at all. It feels better like that, since it prevents me from thinking and analysing. It makes it easier to be with him and enjoy the flow of energy, which was stuck inside him for so many years.

Soul can never be reached with our mind; it is far bigger than any story, but always there, like a seed, hidden, yet full of energy, waiting to break through when the time is right. It has an amazing strength. As a seed can open even the hardest surface, Soul can create love even in the darkest places. When Soul shines it seems to touch and awake the Soul in everybody around. It reaches places far deeper than any story. It silences any thoughts. It breaks any box. When Soul shines we seem to contact a realm which is utterly peaceful, a realm where we are connected with each other, with nature and life in a most beautiful and liberating way.

Intense experiences in life, especially traumatic and painful ones, can take over our entire life, colouring every façade of it, hold and imprison us every single day.

They can be like dreams we cannot shake off, or like nightmares persecuting and rattling us night after night. But they only stay powerful as long as we are asleep. The moment we

Soul

wake up dreams lose their impact. We may still feel breathless after a nightmare, may even want to talk about it with somebody, but we can slowly recover from it, because it only has been a bad dream. We can stop identifying with it and confusing it with 'reality'.

Dreams appear totally realistic as long as we stay in them. When we wake up we leave our dreams behind. The same is true for our stories and worries. As long as we stay in our box they appear to be real. When we wake up to Soul, we then can leave them behind and recognize them for what they really are. Then true healing can happen. True healing is the recognition that the wounding we have experienced actually never has occurred. True healing can only happen when we touch Soul. Without the experience of Soul, healing becomes merely an attempt to comfort the dreamer, rather than to wake him up.

Dreams always end. At one point we always leave them behind once we have woken up from them. The same is true for our stories. Sooner or later we leave them behind as well – at the latest when death finally breaks the box and our last story ends.

Is not life's greatest secret to break the box earlier, to wake up to Soul as our true self – and find that death does not exist?

I believe we are living in a time in which it is no longer the privilege of the very few to break their boxes and to set themselves free. All of us can do it now in our individual and unique ways. We do not need to belong to a certain religion, identify with a specific belief system, we do not need to have meditated in remote caves for many years. We only have to look at our own stories – and see them for what they are.

With that passionate supervision becomes something more than what we offer to others or what is being done to us. It becomes an urgent task and an immensely exciting adventure.