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# Ongoing Counselling

## Motivator, Facilitator, and Positive Evaluation of My Progress

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**F**riends have on more than a few occasions expressed surprise when I've mentioned that I regularly see a counsellor. I guess it's quite flattering to hear them express the opinion that they've long regarded me as someone who comes across as self-confident and perfectly comfortable in my gender and my relationship with the world in general. On the other hand however, I have to admit that I'm equally surprised when I'm faced with their curiosity.

*... when they ask me if I've done anything creative recently I delight in responding "Open your eyes! Look at me!"*

It seems to me to be based on the assumption that a counsellor's role is solely to provide guidance, advice and solace to those going through major life challenges or upheavals. In our case, as gender-variant clients, these challenges might range from the stresses associated with familial rejection to difficulties of transition.

Don't get me wrong. I've experienced many of those stresses and challenges and I'm grateful to the many individuals, professionals and friends, who've seen me through some very difficult times, but my friends are also right in observing the person I am now.

So, why do I continue to see a counsellor every fortnight or so? Well, to explain, I need first of all to say something about my personality that I think we all have in common. This is a need for approbation from someone important in our lives. Someone we love, admire or respect at whatever level. When we're young children, it would most likely have been a parent or carer. As students it was perhaps a favourite teacher or even a friend. As adolescents maybe a peer group, a boyfriend or girlfriend.

The second point, more specific to myself however, is the fact that I was born with a creative bent that has served me well, especially during the more difficult phases of my life as an artist and a teacher.

Now, although in common with many other artists, I was primarily my own most exacting critic, I would invariably have someone important to me in mind during creation. Someone I needed to impress. I'm not referring to a generous patron. No, it was always someone I loved, a muse if you like or at least someone I really admired.

As well as being the motivation to perform at a high level, this same person would often invest ideas and suggestions for future works and even help me overcome technical difficulties with sound advice and support when I sought it.

Which brings me to another question raised by friends. Knowing something of my background they ask me if I'm still painting and I have to admit that, since losing my studio about two years ago, I have not. And when they ask me if I've done anything creative recently I delight in responding "Open your eyes! Look at me!"

The point being that for the last few years I've been re-creating myself in so many different ways and with varying degrees of success. A creation that's had its ups and downs but would not have been possible had it not been for my good fortune to find a remarkable person to be my muse and my confidante.

I'm speaking of my counsellor; a person who, despite the fact that she's less than half my age has, right from the start, clearly understood her role as motivator and facilitator rather than as a shoulder to cry on. She and I have established what I believe to be a mutual respect that, in my case, has fulfilled a need to have someone whose positive evaluation of my progress motivates me.

I don't go to her with problems, at least nothing I expect her to solve for me. I simply tell her of the day to day things I've been doing since my last visit, including the status of my ongoing social and family relationships, issues of dress and presentation and, quite often, matters totally unrelated to me and my ongoing life. She's always totally engaged with what I have to say.

She listens quietly and then, quite uncannily, will interject with an incisive comment or suggestion that is invariably helpful and, more often than not, helps me to see things more clearly.

She also provides me with materials or contacts that might be useful. As I drive home at the conclusion of an hour or so, I always feel fortified and uplifted.

And, incidentally, if I'm to be honest, my decision to contribute a series of articles to this magazine would not have happened without her encouragement.

That's why I see her. Recently, it was two years, to the day, since the surgery that changed my life. Since that wonderful day, my life, my world has moved so fast and so far that I've often found it difficult to believe that the person I am now could possibly be the same person I see in old photographs, or read about in saved letters.

And the truth, I now sincerely believe, is that I have, in fact become someone quite separate from the person I was before.

Sure, there are physical characteristics that remain as a reminder of my past, and always will, but I've never felt the need to undergo surgical changes to my looks.

Now, I can imagine how a statement like this could cause some confusion for some, especially those who've heard me talk about my journey in terms of "gender alignment". "Surely" they might say, "If your gender was always female, then as now, you're still the same person you always were. More so, perhaps, because your sex and gender are now aligned whereas before they were not".

Perfectly sound reasoning if you discount the profound psychological, emotional and, dare I say, spiritual changes that can, certainly in my experience, have a remarkable effect on one's personality. Some of these effects are, no doubt, the result of drastic hormonal adjustments by way of a variety of pharmaceutical means.

Personally, however, I find it hard to believe that the changes to my psyche, my self-image, my self-confidence, my sociability and my newfound optimism about things in general are simply due to hormones.

But then ... I'm neither a psychiatrist, an endocrinologist or any other kind of expert in these matters. I'm just so happy to be the person I am now, compared to the sad, sad individual I see in those pictures.

Anyway, to get back to my second "re-birthday". I was delighted and, I have to say, quite moved, when some of the many new friends I've made since moving to the Central Coast, almost two years ago now, got together to arrange a "surprise" party for me. I was quite amused by the fact that one or two of them found it impossible to keep the secret and would drop hints to warn me of what was going on.

On the day, we had a lot of laughs and they each went out of their way to make it memorable. It was a lovely afternoon and one I'll remember for as long as memories remain. And it's memory that I want to say something about next. Specifically the effect that ageing is, to only a small, but nevertheless concerning, degree having on my memory.

Now, don't be alarmed if you're a friend reading this. I'm a long way from "losing my marbles" altogether. Although, you could argue, that happened two years ago!

At my age (71), it's not uncommon to become, what I prefer to call "distracted". My G.P. assures me that my occasional short-term memory loss is quite normal and nothing to worry about. I might forget where I left something or, when multi-tasking, I will sometimes omit an important step from a sequence like the recipe for an elaborate dish. Infrequently required names become a problem after a period of time, especially those of people and places.

This can be quite embarrassing at times. I'm told long term memory, on the other hand, will probably be enhanced. Not really something I need, when considered in the context of what I was saying about my earlier life at the beginning of this column!

In a recent conversation with someone, I started to tell about a wonderful weekend away I'd spent with a girlfriend. Problem was, I couldn't, for the life of me, remember the name of the resort. In a combination of frustration and desperation I said: "You know, um, that place in the mountains, you know, that place!"

"What mountains?", my impatient friend asked. "You know ... those mountains ... those mountains around Katoomba!"

"So was it at Katoomba where you spent the weekend?"

"Yeah, that's right! Katoomba! It was quite a memorable weekend!"

Something that has delighted me recently is the number of my friends, all of them over fifty, who are involved in activities that require a degree of spirit and considerable grit. I can't help feeling extraordinarily privileged that such people have accepted me as a friend. Their zest for life is a constant source of inspiration, and it's got me thinking about risk-taking. Why is it that when people of a "certain age" engage in audacious or risky pursuits it's considered to be noteworthy? It seems to me that, at this age, it makes a lot more sense than it does for the young, who still have most of their lives ahead of them and a serious accident could be disastrous. We've less to lose. With that in mind, I'll be testing my own intestinal fortitude on my natal birthday later this month (September) I'll tell you all about it in the next issue.

Finally, I should say something about my quest, as an ageing lesbian, for a meaningful, and hopefully long-term, relationship with another woman. In the April edition of this magazine, I told of my disastrous attempts at finding someone via a lesbian dating site. The bad news is that I eventually gave up. The problem was not so much my gender background as my age. The good news, however, is that I'm now in a wonderful relationship with a lovely lady I've known for some time, but I never dreamed she would be interested in me. How wrong I was!

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