



Sitting with Jason

Thom Garfat

I don't know why I'm thinking about this. After all, it happened over 25 years ago. But then perhaps that's what twilight reflections are all about – looking back in time and drawing whatever learning there is from old events. Eking out the value in memories stored deep. Building the future on learning from the past. 'Extended reflective practice' one might say – well, only if they were trying to make a joke.

So anyway, I am remembering sitting beside Jason, on the side of his bed. It was a small crowded room and as we sat on the bed the wall was right in front of us, no more than a foot or two away. As we sat there, every few minutes Jason would explode, lean forward and smash his fists in to the wall. We had been there a while and the wall was starting to look like a block of Swiss cheese, it had so

many fresh holes in it. His fists, especially the knuckles, were starting to look like ground meat. But he was no where near stopping it seemed. He was following some internal process of his own.

This was Jason's room. It was in the basement of his parents' home. Tiny and tucked away in the corner of the basement, but it was his – at least that's what he liked to say when he was feeling like talking, which wasn't often. Most of the time he just acted out his feelings, like he was doing now. Not always this dramatically, of course. Sometimes it was just a silent storming. Or a dark withdrawal from contact. Or disappearance.

I had tried everything I could think of over the past hour or so to bring him down (as I thought of it then), to help him regain control

(I thought that was important back then), to stop and move on from this intense rage he seemed to be experiencing (God knows, that's sure what I wanted us to do). But nothing I had done, or was doing, made any difference. The rage just burned on. The only slowing was those moments between explosions when he seemed to simmer on high. I felt like I was sitting on the edge of a volcano and yes, I was nervous – okay, I was scared, too. But I was also determined to hang in with him through this – whatever it was. And I sure didn't know what it was. Lorne had taught me that – hanging in even when you are unsure about what is going on. "Don't run fearfully from your own ignorance", he used to imply.

I was there because that was what I did back then – visited young people in their homes and

communities trying to help them find what I thought of as “better ways”; better ways to live with others, better ways to live with themselves, better ways to get on with it. I was with Jason because he was messing up in school, had been arrested a few times and now was facing a sentencing hearing which, we all knew, was going to result in him being sent away for a while – to a “school”, as they were euphemistically called back then. We had been talking about the upcoming hearing – scheduled for the next day – when he started this explosive reaction. One minute we were talking, then there was a silence, and then the first explosion.

I call it a reaction because I thought he must be reacting to something. I had gone through all my own projections: that he was reacting to going away, that he realized how he had led himself to this point, how he regretted what he had done ... But none of that had connected with him and now I realized that was all about me. I had no idea what he was reacting to at all. I was lost. “When you are lost, sit still”, my grandpa used to say.

So, I was just sitting there. Doing nothing. Being with him as he went through the cycle of explosions and the simmering. Waiting. It didn’t seem like there was much else to do. Well, really, it was just that I couldn’t think of anything to do except leave or sit there. So there I sat.

And then I wondered whether I should leave.

So I asked him, “Jason, would you prefer me to leave?”

He smashed the wall a few

times: left, left, right, smash, smash.

“No.”

And that was it. Just “No.” No “do whatever you want.” No “I don’t care.” None of his customary responses. Just “no.”

So I stayed.

Well, I won’t drag it out here – let me just say it went on for some time. So I just sat there and after a while I seemed to enter into an almost trance like state – slightly disconnected and differently present – as if I was a little outside myself, or deeper in there.

And in that state it seemed to me that I could sense his rhythm. The swelling and receding. The rage and the simmer. The out and the in. After a while, I found myself leaning forward towards the wall at the exact moment he exploded in to it, and then leaning back as his strength was expended. As if I was connected somehow to whatever was going on in him. Attached in the experience.

Forward, smash, release, back. Forward, smash, release, back. A rhythm of pain and destruction. A dam building up pressure and then releasing, only to build up again.

And after a while, as simply as it started, it was done. One final release and then rest. Drained. Exhausted. Finished. Over.

Jason sat there for a minute and then said, “Thanks.” That was it. No explanation. No discussion. Just “thanks” and then he got up quietly and left his room. I followed.

We walked upstairs to where his parents were sitting in the

“I had no idea what he was reacting to at all. I was lost. ‘When you are lost, sit still,’ my grandpa used to say.”

living room. I could see by the white drained faces turned towards us that they had been worried. The father looked to Jason and then to me. I had nothing to give him so he just waited.

Jason looked at his father and spoke. “I’ve ruined my wall again,” he said. “I’d like to fix it before I go away tomorrow. Will you help me?”

Now Jason never asked for anything, never said he had done anything wrong, and certainly never asked for help. His father looked momentarily stunned – but, I must confess, no more than I, for sure. His mother looked on, worried it seemed.

His father responded calmly, tentatively. “Sure, but it’s not really necessary. I can do it.”

“I’d rather do it,” Jason replied. “And I would like to do it now.”

“No, really,” his father said.

“Yes, really,” Jason responded.

“Okay,” his father answered. “I got the stuff in the basement. I’ll go get it.”

“I’ll come with you,” Jason said.

In case you are wondering, me, I was just standing there watching this go on. I had never seen Jason



and his father do anything but fight – yell, stomp, hurt, retreat.

Jason’s mother spoke up. “Let me fix your hands, Jason.”

“Not right now, Mom. Maybe later.”

“But you can’t work on the wall with your hands like that.”

“Oh, I think I can,” he replied. Turning to his father, he asked, “Unless it bothers you, Dad?”

Now this was just getting to be too much. Not only was Jason not fighting with his father, and was asking him for help, but now he was checking out how he felt about something. I waited for his father to tell him to get cleaned up. That would have been the normal routine. Then the argument would start. But that didn’t happen.

“But. . .” his mother started. “Its okay,” his father interjected, looking at Jason.

“It’s up to you, son.”

“That’s what you always say,” Jason laughed lightly. “And then I usually make the wrong decision.”

His father laughed back. “So true. Did it myself a number of times when I was your age. Still do. Let’s go get started.”

His mother looked on, amazed and hesitant I suspect about this different-than-usual exchange between father and son.

We went back downstairs to the other corner of the basement and into the workshop that his father seemed to retreat to so often.

Jason’s dad rumbled around for a few minutes and came up with some wall plaster powder, a trowel and some cloths. “We’ll need some water,” he said.

“I’ll get it,” Jason responded.

And he did.

Me, yes, I was still there, just tagging along but I wanted to know where this was all going.

And, truth is, I was waiting for it all to fall apart, or erupt into something crazy, or get back to normal.

Once Jason had the water, he led the way and we all went in to his bedroom and surveyed the damage. The wall was a real wreck where he had been smashing it. I felt guilty, like I should have stopped him. It was as if my failure to be helpful was tattooed into the wall. I felt shame standing there.

Jason’s father must have sensed what I was feeling because he turned to me and told me I could clean off the loose pieces while he and Jason mixed the plaster powder and water. I was glad to have something to do but as I moved to start the clean-up, Jason spoke.

“You didn’t do it. I did. I’m going to clean it up myself.”

“I think maybe he needs to do it, Jason,” his father said, while I stood there wondering where this suddenly sensitive man had come from. “We can get the plaster ready while he does that.”

Jason looked at his dad and then at me, and then simply said “Okay”. So I started to clean up the edges of the holes. When I was finished Jason and his dad were standing behind me with bucket, trowels, and wire mesh in hand. Waiting for their turn at the wall. I stepped aside.

“I’ll do it,” Jason said again, this time referring to making the actual repairs.

“Do you know how?” his father asked.

“Sure. You taught me years ago the first time I did this.”

“And you remember?”

“I remember everything,” Jason said.

“I never would have guessed,” his father said. “You always seemed to ignore me. It was like I was talking to a brick wall.”

“Ah, here it comes,” I thought.

“Ya, I know,” was all Jason replied, reaching in to the bucket of mix to give it a stir.

So he set to work on the wall, scraping, putting the wire mesh in place, plastering the holes until finally they were all done. His father stood beside him.

When he was finished, we all sat on the bed together looking at the wet patches which were his work, waiting for it to dry enough for sanding. Earlier I had sat there looking at destruction happening. Now we sat there looking at repair. It was like we had shifted to a different universe; like it was Act Two with different actors filling in.

“Well, fine job,” Jason’s dad said. “But what were you thinking when you pounded all those holes?”

“I was thinking that if I just kept it up long enough, he,” indicating me with a flick of his head, “would just go away and leave me alone. But he didn’t.”

“But you told me to stay,” I said somewhat defensively, I must confess.

“No I didn’t,” Jason replied, shaking his head. “You asked if you should leave and I told you that I didn’t care. That it was up to you. When you didn’t leave, I thought that if you can get

through this so can I.”

Well, I wanted to argue with him about what I had said but then I thought “what’s the point?” What’s important was what he heard, what he experienced, and what he made of it. Well, maybe that’s what I think now. Back then I probably just didn’t want to spoil the moment.

“Anyway, after a while, with you just sitting there, it all began to seem stupid. What I was doing I mean, pounding the wall. And then I started to notice that my hands hurt. Hell, at one point I thought you were going to smash the wall with me the way you leaned forward when I did. So I thought one of us had to quit what we were doing.”

Now, of course, I wanted to ask him what he was talking about, but I didn’t.

“So, I stopped. And then it was like, I realized it was like I was always hurting myself. In all kinds of ways, not just my hands. And that seemed stupid too. So I decided to quit that too. It just all seems so stupid now.”

Jason’s father looked at me like I should have something to say, which I didn’t, of course. Then he looked at Jason. “Stop what?” he asked.

“Everything,” Jason said. All the stupid stuff I have been doing for years. I decided to stop it all. Now I just want to get it over with. So when I go to court tomorrow I am just going to do whatever the judge says and start over. It’s time.”

“Sounds good to me,” his father said. And I have to confess I admired how he just let it go – the opportunity to say “about time, or

“like I have always said,” or something else provocative.

“Yup,” Jason replied, staring at his work. “Looks like the wall is dry enough to sand. I’ll do it.”

“I’d like to help,” his father said.

“Okay, we can do it together.”

Then the father turned to me. “I don’t know what you did, but thanks.”

“He made me look at myself, that’s what he did,” Jason interjected. “He was always telling me I was stupid to hurt myself.”

Now, I’m sure I never said that. I wouldn’t have told him he was stupid. That would have ended our relationship for sure.

“God knows I’ve tried to do tell you that a few times myself,” his father said. “But it never seemed to work. You always shut me out.”

I waited. Anticipating.

Jason said something about how that was then and this is now and reached out to touch the wall. “Besides, this time he didn’t say

anything, so I couldn’t argue with him.”

“Well, I didn’t know what to say,” I replied. “But now I gotta go. See you tomorrow Jason.”

“Don’t come pick him up,” his father said. “His mother and I will drive him to court tomorrow.”

Turning to Jason, looking at him like he really was his son, he spoke. “I guess if you’re gonna change, I guess we should too.”

When I turned to leave, they were standing side by side, sanding the plaster over the holes. A different rhythm. A safer one it looked like to me. A healing one. Father and son, connected in a different experience.

And as I walked away from the house, I wondered what had happened. How had these two people moved from antagonism and hostility to cooperation? How had it all changed from a rhythm of destruction to a process of repair? God knows how it happened. Because back then, I sure didn’t.

“Listening is a magnetic and strange thing, a creative force. The friends who listen to us are the ones we move toward, and we want to sit in their radius. When we are listened to, it creates us, makes us unfold and expand.”

Dr. Karl Menninger (1893–1990)

