

## Reaching For Higher Ground

*Maybe it's just the dream in me,  
Maybe it's just my style,  
Maybe it's just the freedom that I found,  
Given the possibilities of living up to the dream in me, you know that I am reaching for higher ground.*

– John Denver



I was inspired recently by comments made to me by one of my long-standing clients. Her fight with cancer has been going on for quite some years and I have sat alongside her listening to her story. Quite often she was accompanied by her husband and together they made a very strong team. She always managed to frame her illness as being a small problem in a huge world of possibilities. In her low periods she and I, sometimes with her husband there too, sat

in her world of darkness after she had received disappointing news or had experienced a tough time in treatment. But she managed to see every challenge as being one issue to which she could react to in one of many ways. At the moment her prognosis isn't too bad. But along the road she's travelled – from the initial tests and the waiting for the results to come through, to the diagnosis and the trauma that that brought to her, her husband and her family through to the difficulties of treatment – she has displayed a richness of courage and an inquisitiveness to dig below the “why me?” to reach the “why not me?”. She was quick to realise that tomorrow is not guaranteed to any of us; whether we know we have an illness today or not.

Paulo Coelho wrote in “Eleven Minutes” that “life always waits for some crisis to occur before revealing itself at its most brilliant”. I held that thought as I listened to my client plan her immediate future. On her many good days she shared with me her thoughts about making the best of whatever time she has – months, years or decades. Her recent epiphany was “Why should I wait for good news or bad news to make a move to start turning my dreams into reality”. “David”, she said, “didn't you once say that this is about me learning to live with cancer rather than waiting to die from cancer?”

I did recall saying that to her many months earlier and I asked her what meaning she made of that comment. “Well, if I wait for the “all clear” from my doctors, then wait again for the 6-month tests and then the 12-month tests to come back clear, haven't I already lost a year in making a new beginning for myself? This diagnosis is a wake-up call to me. What am I waiting for? I can't look for a guarantee that I'll be clear from here-on-in so I may as well get on with

## Counsellor's Reflections

it, and as far as I get is as far as I get – I hope it's to the end. Since I was a little girl, I have dreamed of one day running a business designing kid's clothing. I remember when I was small my parents couldn't afford to buy me fancy clothes so my mother would sketch out a design and she and my aunt would cut out the material and stitch together my dresses themselves. I've always dreamt of doing that when I grew up. But I married young and had my sons quite soon after that so I never really had the time or opportunity to develop my skills in designing and making clothes for little girls".

Her reaction immediately reminded me of the beginning of Randy Pausch's "The Last Lecture" where he said: "Whatever my accomplishments, all the things I loved were rooted in the dreams and goals I had as a child..... Sitting there, I knew that despite the cancer, I truly believed that I was a lucky man because I had lived out these dreams."

I have had many clients talk about their diagnosis as being a watershed in their life – a chance to question what has been and a chance to make decisions about the future. I've been told that sometimes making small steps forward in clarifying or progressing a dream can develop a new strength or excitement in combating the effects of treatment, rather than being all-consumed by the effects.

I see my job as a counsellor is listening to my clients talk their struggles and issues and also listening to them as they talk about their dreams and ambitions. Sometimes I feel that I represent the middle ground between pain and future dreams, not letting clients slip too deeply into the negative aspects of where they currently are and not letting their dreams of the future become an escape from the realities of today. And the middle ground is an interesting place for me to sit.

I listen to client's pain and watch them face and find the courage to tackle the challenges and fears that their diagnosis brings – not just to themselves but to those around them in the family. Another gem written by Paulo Coelho, this time in "Chronicle – Hagakure and the Path of the Samurai" says "Courage does not mean the absence of fear, but the ability not to let yourself be paralysed by that fear". Having something to look forward to after the treatments can sometimes give clients a way to detach themselves from their fears and from the immediacy of the effects of their diagnosis or treatments.

*I have a dream, a song to sing  
To help me cope with anything  
If you see the wonder of a fairy tale  
You can take the future even if you fail  
I believe in angels  
Something good in everything I see  
I believe in angels  
When I know the time is right for me  
I'll cross the stream – I have a dream  
I have a dream, a fantasy  
To help me through reality  
And my destination makes it worth the while  
Pushing through the darkness still another mile*

– ABBA