

It was one of those moments that could have gone horribly wrong

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At five or six in the afternoon on Saturday 4 April 1992, a man walked towards me with an iron bar. I had a few seconds to decide what to do. I was a Leeds United fan with my two brothers, and we had just exited Manchester City's old stadium in Moss Side after a 4-0 defeat and climbed into my car a couple of streets away.

Not in the best of moods, I found myself behind a driver who stopped to chat with his friend coming in the opposite direction. A little mouthy, young, impudent and unaware of the gang territory I was in, I drove on the pavement to pass him, unwisely wound down my window and firmly said, 'Get a f***ing move on!'

Not happy with my response, he nipped in front of me on the adjoining street, got out, reached inside the rear footwell and took hold of his weapon of choice. I had seconds to figure out this changed environment. Seconds to choose diplomacy or escape. There was a holler behind me. A woman trying to cool him down. That was my moment. I sped to the right, hit my tyre on the curb, but managed to pass him as the lights turned green, which connected us to the main carriageway out of Moss Side.

Luck. Fortune. The stars aligning. A warning. Still a chase on the carriageway, but with enough traffic to slow him down, my heart beating out of my chest, and then finally... relief. It was one of those moments that could have gone horribly wrong. Not just for me, but for my brothers too. I had put all our lives at risk. I had allowed my brazen tongue to lash a stranger whose temperament I couldn't begin to comprehend.

Incidents like this perhaps explain my interest in anger and why I sit comfortably with it now. Why I try to get at its roots and unravel some of its hurt. Freud saw anger as primitive, unavoidable and linked to repression. Jung saw it as a shadow, the rejected part of our personality, which needs integrating. Sartre viewed it as consciousness responding to blocked possibilities. Nietzsche, the chronic resentment of the oppressed. Kierkegaard saw it as synonymous with despair.¹

The clients I have seen have been many things: stricken by divorce (struggling to find their track again); defeated by life (out of work and without direction); wounded by the past (a traumatic childhood); men desperate to understand their psyche and the out-of-control reactions that sometimes plague them; or just people cut off from

society, acting in ways that they don't see in others (their truth resembling no one else's).

I approach such cases in different ways. My longest-serving client recently came to an end. There were times when I instinctively knew what to offer him. When, for example, I asked him to watch *A Man Called Otto* because it might stir something that had the potential to restore hope, belief or faith by 'letting life in'.² Otto is a curmudgeon who lost his wife, Sonya, when she was 62. But the real tragedy in his life occurred when they were much younger. We learn about Otto's life through flashbacks and his 'chatting' to Sonya at her graveside.

Clients rarely focus on the bits of films that you imagine they will but instead report back with observations and angles which say a lot about themselves. Such sharing can safely and indirectly reveal a person's values and anxieties. It is a therapeutic phenomenon filtered through the conflicts, defences and desires of his/her inner world.

A quarter of a century after my experience as a young man naively traversing the streets of Manchester, I commenced my Level 4 diploma just a few streets from where the incident occurred. I only realised this the other day upon thinking about my relationship with Moss Side. There was a young lady on my course who lived locally. Her experience of life was very different to mine.

Gunshots were very much the norm. Not much fazed her.

I'd walk 1.5 miles from the city centre each Monday and Wednesday, and back again, relieved to reach the Heineken brewery on my way in and desperate to reach Deansgate Station on my way home after a long day, with the possibility of being mugged in the dark.

What am I trying to say? That we must risk things to progress? That people who are acutely different from us teach us the most? That being in bad situations matures us and makes us ready for professions like this? That meeting opposites in the counselling room is one of the most unexpectedly satisfying joys? That hearing about a person's life and seeing those moments of vulnerability or frailty in outwardly tough-looking clients is somehow cathartic and life-affirming?

Yes. All the above. I only wish I could meet the iron bar man from 34 years ago and talk about our respective lives. How they've panned out. What the significant events were for him. ●

REFERENCES

- 1 Kaufmann W. Existentialism: from Dostoevsky to Sartre. London: Plume; 2004.
- 2 Sony Pictures Entertainment. A man called Otto: official trailer. <https://tinyurl.com/wu4xtwa8> (accessed 20 May 2026).