



Love is Not All You Need: A Revolutionary Approach to Parental Abuse

Kay Ingamells and David Epston

UNITEC Institute of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand

This case story is a composite of similar family situations where the parents were at risk of harm from their teenage children and commonly the father/step-father has moved out of home leaving the mother to parent the children on her own. Several of these cases involved physical threats to the lives of the parents. These referrals occurred in a *Child, Adolescent and Family Mental Health Service* and a *Family Therapy NGO* between 1985 and 2005. This approach is offered as a complement to the widely published 'non-violent resistance' approach of Haim Omer and his colleagues. We hope it goes some way to address what Lavi-Lavavi et al (2013, *Journal of Systemic Therapies*, 32(4), 79–93). describe as 'the mother's plight':

The plight of the mother continues to present a major challenge. . . We are also seeking ways to allow the mother more breathing space, help her to disengage from abrasive conflicts, acknowledge her contribution and sacrifice, and provide her with vantage points that may help her recognize and enhance small improvements. Hopefully, these measures will enable women to evolve from unacknowledged victims to pillars of the family' (p. 92).

Keywords: family violence, parent abuse, oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), non-violent resistance, conduct disorder, narrative therapy

Key Points

1. Discussions are engaged in for the parents to reflect on 'love is all you need', wants and needs, self-sensitivity and other-sensitivity.
2. Long standing constructions of ideals and aspirations and the parenting practices derived from them are called in to question.
3. Moral outrage is considered to be essential to the moral stamina required to 'revolt' against the young person's extreme behaviour.
4. 'Revolutionary' change is discussed and a 'declaration of independence' is prepared and delivered to their adolescents.
5. The 'revolution' is enacted in alliance with neighbours, friends and family and in some instances, friends of the adolescents.

The Referral Letter

The referral from Dr Adams, the psychiatrist read:

13 year old young woman took an overdose of paracetamol 3 weeks ago. Called mother who took her to Accident & Emergency. Seen and followed up over last 2 weeks. No suicide ideation. Discharged to GP. Family issues. Please can you meet with this family this week?

parent. *I mean she says things to me that I would never, ever have thought of saying to my parents. You just want to slap her face, but you can't you know'.*

Jane, her body stiff, said with a look of desperation: *'The other night, Becca was screaming at me that the dinner was "crap" and "shit". Adam, our 4 year old hid under the table. It broke my heart to see him so scared of her because he loves Becca. I feel like we are losing Susie too because she can't stand it. She is staying round at her friend's house all the time.'* Al looked towards Susie, raising his eyebrows, *'You're no angel either, Susie, but at the moment you come a long second to Becca'.*

The story unfolded. It appeared that this was a long standing pattern which had recently escalated from initial bad-temperedness to dramatic life-threatening actions. I discovered that Al and Jane considered that they were being held hostage by Becca's threats to harm herself, both subtle and explicit. Such threats followed any insistence that she carry out some duty that she didn't wish to fulfil such as to tidy her bedroom or if Jane said 'no' to her persistent demands for money or to stay out late.

Jane had begun to fear returning home from work, anticipating that she would be met with yet more demands from Becca and find herself caught once again between holding out against them or risking further threats of self-harm. Al was also finding home life unbearable: he longed to be able to 'fix things' for his family but, in the face of Becca's threats, had no idea what to do and couldn't find words for the mixture of frustration, fear and anger that preyed upon him. Al had started going round to his friend Mike's house each night for a drink until what had started as occasional visits had become habitual. He felt guilty that he was not at Jane's side but told himself and Jane that, *'I no longer have a place in this family. I am sick of being abused in my own home'.*

Jane and Al had no idea what to do. Becca had been 'seen' by a *Mental Health Service* several times and, after the usual assessments (in which 'mental illness', abuse and other possible sources of distress were excluded as a 'cause' of Becca's behaviour), the service had come to the conclusion that the overdose and threats of self-harm could best be explained by what was referred to as 'family dynamics' and suggested that Jane and Al seek family therapy. That is how they had arrived at my door.

How many parents, confounded by a family life which has become dominated by teenage tantrums, threats, violence and the dread that their daughter might respond to any challenge to their demands with an overdose or violence, would be willing to talk about how they fear living in their own homes? How many would tell family and friends? Wouldn't it be more usual for parents in this predicament to remain silent in their humiliation that their own child is abusing them? Of those family members and friends who had some knowledge of the situation, how many of them would be too respectful to speak up about this family's predicament without being invited to do so?

Could these tantrum overdoses and the tyrannical threat of them instigate a servicing of young people's every want? What might these young people be led to think about themselves if their each and every whim was serviced? Where would this lead? How might this have them lead their lives? How might this affect their family life? All these questions went through my mind as we reflected on this family and their tribulations; all these questions guided us in our considerations. This is the story of a family worn down by tantrums and abuse. This is also the story of a mother who decides to revolt.

Session One, Part Two: When Loving and Giving is a One-Way Street

'You know, Kay, we've always said "love is all you need". It's been our motto. I'm beginning to think we've made some big mistakes because I can't understand why Becca is behaving like this. We have given them all so much love. We have always bent over backwards to make sure that they are okay. It's just so unfair. I try to listen and understand but she doesn't want to talk to me anymore, and then she starts with her threats. I know I shouldn't give in to them so I try and hold my ground but I feel like I have over-reacted. Then I feel bad and give in. I know I shouldn't. I just feel like I am stuffed. . .stuffed!'

Jane's voice faded into despair. As tears began to form in her eyes, she wiped them away hurriedly with the sleeve of her hoodie. Al chipped in, his voice weary with resignation: *'I just don't know where we've gone wrong'*. I addressed the despairing Jane and displaced Al, *'Do you think it's possible that all your loving and giving has become a one-way street, and that somewhere along the way your children's wants have become confused with their needs?'*

Jane swallowed hard. *'We've always tried to give them what they wanted. I always thought that if we respected them they would respect us but they don't seem to. I just find it so hard to know what to do'*. I asked, *'What do you think Al?'*

Al shifted uneasily in his seat. *'What's going to happen to them in the hard world out there?'* he said wearily. I wondered if servicing their children's needs had, contrary to their good intentions, been depriving their children of invaluable life lessons.

'Al,' I asked, *'are you concerned in any way that unfairness has crept into the care of your children in that, by giving so much, your children may not have had enough opportunities to learn what they need to learn to live in the hard world out there?'* Al had no trouble replying: *'Yep. I don't think they have any respect for other people and they don't know how to be responsible'*. *'Susie, what do you think of the idea that your parents have been unfair to you by not helping you to be ready for the hard world out there? Do you think that maybe, out of their love for you all, they need to find ways of mothering and fathering that might seem unfair to you now but may prove to be fairer to you in the long run?'*

Susie stared at me, her eyes fixed in surprise, then she recovered herself. *'I don't think they've been unfair, but I suppose we have had it pretty easy. I don't know, it's getting me down too'*. I said, *'Susie, have you been worried about Becca?'* Susie's lip began to tremble. *'Susie, how would it be if I carried on speaking with your mum and dad to see if we can find a way to help things be better for Becca and for you all? Would it be alright if I spoke with them without you present? I think your mum and dad need to find the way forwards on their own as your parents'*.

Susie's face softened with relief. Jane and Al agreed that the next time we met we would continue to explore how this habit of unfairness had taken root in the mothering and fathering of their children. I warned them that the road ahead might well be a rocky one and that other parents facing similar challenges are often met with intensified threats from their daughters or sons when they re-establish their parental authority. Jane and Al left our meeting, sobered by the realisation that they could go no further along the road that they had been travelling but relieved to be no longer standing paralysed at this crossroads.

Session Two: The Difficulty of Knowing What's Fair and What's Unfair, What's Unreasonable and What's Reasonable?

Jane announced that there had been something of a turning of the tables. The day after our session she had decided that it was time the girls learned to do something for themselves. Instead of doing their clothes washing for them as she had always done, she had left their washing lying on their bedroom floors where they left it, and stayed in bed herself for an extra hour. When later that day Susie asked where her clean washing was, Jane simply said, *'Oh, I've given up doing your washing now'*. Much to her surprise, Susie asked her to show her how to use the washing machine. Not surprisingly, Becca had left her dirty washing in a heap in her room.

Al, who was running late, joined us. I put him in the picture.

Kay: *'We were talking about wants and needs and I was asking Jane about whether or not your parenting in the past has been about "loving and giving?"'*

Al: *'Well Susie has been getting too much until now. My sister set her up with an interview as a summer lifeguard and she didn't even bother to go. Lynette was really annoyed about it and had a real "go" at me. She said, "You two have to toughen up with those girls". I've realised she's right.'*

Kay: *'What do you think you have been serving? Have you been serving her wants or her needs?'*

Al: *'Her wants!'*

Kay: *'What do you think her needs are?'*

Al: *'Her needs are to take some responsibility for herself. She hasn't lifted a finger all holidays. She's just sat at home emptying our fridge.'*

Kay: *'At what point do you think mothers and fathers should let their children know that if they as parents continue to take responsibility for them, they will be depriving them of taking responsibility for themselves?'*

Jane: *'Well we do but we don't stick to it.'*

Al: *'Yes. We lay down the law and then we give in.'*

Kay: *'Looking ahead to when Susie is 40 years old, do you have any idea what she might wish you had done or said to her right now, aged 15?'*

Al: *'She'd say "take responsibility for yourself" wouldn't she?'*

Jane: *'I suppose so but we would have to make her do it and I would find that very difficult.'*

Kay: *'You said last time we met that you have a motto of "love is all your need".'*

Jane: *'Yes, you know I have always thought that if we just loved our kids it would all work out. Last Sunday morning was a real low point. Becca started swearing at me when I got home from a late shift and was on my bed with all her friends drinking and eating. I found myself thinking "whatever happened to my lovely daughter".'*

Kay: *'Do you think it's possible that in the past, even though your intentions have been so very loving, love has been confused with giving in to what your children want?'*

Jane: *'I guess so. I just thought they would love us if we loved them and that if we respected them they would respect us.'*

Kay: *'Are you coming to question how children learn love and respect for their parents and others?'*

Jane: *'Yeah, I guess I haven't made a point of them respecting me so maybe they haven't learned it. I lose their respect for myself every time they say "no" to me and I let it go.'*

Kay: *'Al, what do you think about this? How do you think children learn to be loving and to practise respect?'*

Al: *'Well it's been harder for Jane. I've always worked long hours and before we had Becca, we agreed that she would stay home and be a full-time Mum. We were really hanging in for Becca...'*

Jane: *'Yes. You see Susie isn't Al's. I had Susie when I was 17 and I was a single parent until I met Al when Susie was two. We had some problems and had IVF. Then she was premmie and we thought we were going to lose her. It was a terrible time.'*

Kay: *'Given you had to go through so much heartache to have her, did you ever think that Becca deserved special treatment in any way?'*

Jane: *'We were just so thankful that she had survived. Looking back now, I tried to give her the best of everything and we doted on her.'*

Al: *'Yeah, it was our one time away from her and she was all we could talk about.'*

Kay: *'Do you think that loving Becca so much has led you to be especially sensitive to her moods, wishes and feelings?'*

Jane: *'When I look back now, I think so.'*

Al: *'To be honest she was very spoilt.'*

The Letter

The next day I wrote Jane and Al the following letter.

Dear Jane & Al,

It was good to meet with you yesterday. As I mentioned, I often write to families after our sessions to ensure that I have adequately understood their situation and in addition to ask questions I wish I had asked during the session itself.

Sure enough some questions came to mind whilst I was reflecting on your situation. I would be most interested to hear your answers or any thoughts you might have about these questions next time we meet. If you think that I have not described what we talked about fully or have misunderstood your situation in any way, could you also bring it to my attention next time?

Jane, before Al arrived you talked about some changes you had made. You said that a couple of days before we met, you had decided to have a 'lie in' and had resolved that you were no longer going to do the girls' clothes washing. You also informed me that you felt you hadn't had enough expectations of the children in the past and that you wished that you had started years ago. But you said that your lie-in was not as peaceful as you had

hoped because you found yourself troubled, wondering whether or not your expectations of the girls were unreasonable or unfair.

Jane, do you suspect that your expectations may be having a late growth spurt but that perhaps, and very understandably, you are feeling a few growing pains? After all, have you ever noticed how overnight changes often feel as uncomfortable as a new pair of shoes to begin with?

Jane, do you have any ideas about why it was difficult for you to work out what expectations might be reasonable and fair? Do you think it may have been in part because your expectations of Becca at least, have been so shaped by the weight of your gratitude for her very existence?

Now that you have decided that your children can learn to serve themselves rather than being served, what kind of response do you think you might anticipate from them as time goes by? Do you think that they will take kindly to your new expectations which express your love for them in a way that serves their needs rather than their wants? Or do you think they might protest the changes in some way or other?

Jane and Al, towards the end of the session we talked about how separating your children's wants from their needs had been especially hard with Becca.

Isn't it understandable that if you have waited so long for a child and then when she is born and you are in fear for her life, you might want to treat her with especial care? Is it any wonder that your love and concern might leave you blinkered to some of her needs and sensitive to her wants?

Jane, do you think your 'special care' of Becca might have had a bearing on 'giving in or setting boundaries and sticking to them?' Thinking about it now, do you suspect that weak boundaries might be even more painful for you than for her in the long run?

You both told me that you don't want to make your children unhappy, but then you talked about some realities that life holds. You said there was a difference between real unhappiness and tantrumming. If you always say 'yes', if you're always 'manipulated', where do your children hear 'no' from? What kind of lives will they lead if they never hear 'no'?

Al and Jane, at what point do you think a mother or father should say to a young person: 'I will not allow you to have such power over our family anymore; we are in charge, not you?' Truth be told, what do you guess Becca would most like her parents to do right now?

I cannot believe that departing from the ways in which you have mothered and fathered your children in the past is going to be easy. In fact, would you consider that it might be one of the most difficult things you might ever take up in the course of your lives?

I look forward to meeting with you again on the 4th March.

Best wishes,

Kay Ingamells

Session Three: 'Self Sensitivity' 90%, Sensitivity to Others 10%

Jane came on her own to the next session. Although Al told her he was busy at work, she suspected that he had been overcome by his feelings of powerlessness and resignation. We began the session with my reading the letter aloud to Jane. Jane reported that the letter made her '*realise I thought being a loving mother meant taking care of them in every way 100% of the time and this has made it difficult for them to respect me as well as for me to respect them*'.

Once again she reported some novel developments. Jane had ‘put her foot down’ when Becca had decided at the last moment that she didn’t want to attend her surf rescue training.

Jane: *‘I said “we are going in the car now”. And when we got there she said, “Don’t make me go. You’re so mean, I hate you”. I found it really difficult but I insisted she stay. I went away feeling really upset but when I came to pick her up she said she had enjoyed it.’*

Kay: *‘Did you take a stand for what you knew in your mother’s heart was right only afterwards to be undermined by guilt for not responding to her wants?’*

Jane: *‘Ummm I did.’*

Kay: *‘How come you “put your foot down” even although the guilt was putting such pressure upon you to give in?’*

Jane: *‘Well I thought it was the best thing for her.’*

Kay: *‘Does putting what was “best for her” first rather than giving in to her wants say something about your wisdom as a mother?’*

Jane: *‘Yes! That I know what’s right for her and it’s okay to say it and insist that she does what she says she will do.’*

Kay: *‘Do you think guilt would have got in the way of your motherly wisdom in the past?’*

Jane: *‘I think it would have. I wouldn’t have wanted the children to plead and cry. I wouldn’t have wanted them to be unhappy. I would have brought her home again.’*

Kay: *‘What has enabled you to act on your motherly wisdom and use your motherly voice lately rather than be sidetracked by their pleading and crying?’*

Jane: *‘I don’t know.’*

Kay: *‘You’ve given me one example after another of how you have used that motherly voice very powerfully and afterwards. . .’*

Jane: *‘And yet I don’t feel in control. I don’t feel in control at all.’*

Kay: *‘Do you also think it is possible that using your motherly voice is uncomfortable because you are not that used to speaking with it yet?’*

Jane: *‘I said to Susie when she butted in. I said: “I’m the mother. I’ll decide what Becca will do and what she won’t do. I don’t need input from you”.’*

Kay: *‘Do you think that it’s possible that your children have developed over-sensitivity to themselves and to their own feelings and insensitivity to you and to your feelings?’*

Jane: *‘Yes!’*

Kay: *‘If you were to put that in percentages, what percentage of the time do you think they are sensitive to their feelings and what percentage of the time do you think they are sensitive to your feelings and the feelings of others?’*

Jane: *'They consider their own feelings 90% of the time. Al is really kind and generous and caring but certainly he would put what he wants to do above anything or anyone else, especially me.'*

Kay: *'What happens to your feelings and to your needs?'*

Jane: *'They get forgotten.'*

We talked about the effects this imbalance of sensitivity e.g. self-sensitivity versus other-sensitivity was having in her relationships with her children and their relationships with her. Some of the questions I posed were:

'Would you be interested in restoring the balance between Becca's over-developed sensitivity to herself and her under-developed sensitivity to others and in particular to you as her mother?'

'What kind of struggle would you expect if you were to pit your mother's wisdom against the widespread mother guilt?'

'Overdoses as tantrums' and a big night out

A month later I had a call from a worker from the after hours *Mental Health Crisis Team* to report that Becca had taken another overdose. The overdose had followed an argument with her mother about tidying up her room in which Becca struck her mother in the face breaking her glasses. Jane had to go immediately to her optometrist as she was due to start work an hour later and could not work without them. Becca tried to stop her mother leaving the house but Jane had no choice but to do so. Becca took the overdose as soon as Jane left. This overdose posed a greater risk than the earlier ones and it looked like she was in a manner of speaking, 'upping the ante'. Jane became concerned that Becca would take her own life and so arranged a safe haven for her at Becca's aunt's home for a few weeks.

Becca was seen for an urgent psychiatric review. The psychiatrist concurred that Becca's overdoses appeared to be an extreme reaction to her parents attempting to set appropriate boundaries. A safety plan was put in place with the parents and I met Jane and Al a couple of days later. To my surprise Al and Jane were not as shaken by the overdose as I had expected. Instead they concluded that Becca's extreme behaviour was her way of 'testing us'.

We discussed how they had dealt with tantrums when their children were toddlers. On seeing the similarities between toddler tantrumming and Becca's extreme form of teenage tantrumming, Jane and Al became inspired with a renewed courage and confidence. It now appeared that perhaps this was a problem that they recognised and not only had some experience in handling but could rightfully assume they might overcome.

The next morning I had a phone call from Jane. She had discovered from the mother of one of Becca's friends that Becca was planning a big night out to a nightclub in the city with a group of teenage friends. The nightclub called 'Krave' was in the heart of the city, an hour by bus from the suburb that Becca lived in. Jane and Al told Becca that she couldn't go as she was under age. Becca was outraged and insisted that she would go regardless. Jane later discovered that \$100 was missing out of her purse and challenged Becca who, as usual, denied taking it.

Jane and Al enlisted the help of Becca's aunt, uncle and her elder brothers to come around that evening. Despite this, Becca made her escape out of her bedroom window. The team hot-footed after her, combed the local mall and found her waiting

at a bus stop with two friends. Al took hold of her arm and asked her to get in the car. Becca began to scream ‘blue murder’, shouting ‘you are not my parents. I don’t know you. Help someone! Help! help!’ The passer-bys that had assembled called the police who arrived very quickly at the scene. The police believed Jane and Al’s version of events rather than Becca’s street theatre. Becca protest resulted in her being handcuffed, read her legal rights and taken down to the cells because of the fracas.

I asked Jane how she felt about the evening’s events: ‘*It’s good to be in charge at last. I have never seen Becca so demure. The police wouldn’t release her until she had promised not to harm herself.*’ Guilt had not had its way with Jane this time.

Session Four: Instigating the Revolution

While Jane and Al had begun to turn the tables on the habits of parenting which had flourished on their sensitivity to their children’s feelings and servicing of their wants versus their needs, I was concerned about the extreme nature of Becca’s actions and that Al and Jane’s newfound determination could be compromised in the face of them. Consulting with *David* in supervision, we decided that a community approach was needed to match the gravity of the situation and to provide sufficient reinforcement for Jane and Al’s fledgling initiatives. While no approach was without its risks, any alternatives we knew or could think of were riskier. Becca already had ‘upped the ante’ and the Mental Health Service was doing all that it could with a safety plan and daily check-ins with them. The stakes were high and we all knew that ‘love would not conquer all’ in this instance.

Jane and Al sat awkwardly in their chairs, their awkwardness matched by mine as I prepared to suggest a ‘revolutionary’ course of action. Before I could do so, I knew that we were at a critical juncture and careful preparation was needed before Al and Jane would have the momentum they needed to press on and the moral stamina to sustain it. This preparation took the place of an enquiry in several stages which might well be titled:

Have your young people become so addicted to you doing all the work and thinking for their lives and all the caring for their hurts that they are unable to care for themselves and for those closest to them?

Beginning gently, I enquired further with Jane and Al into how they had been driven by their love for their children, the pain that they had endured and the urge to safeguard Becca in particular had slipped into an over-sensitivity that had acquired an unfettered life of its own. The feeling in the room changed from one of awkwardness to one of solemn contemplation as the full implications of the loving yet treacherous path they had unwittingly taken came into view. Concerned to underscore their insights into how their loving practices of ‘care’, ‘service’ and ‘sensitivity’ had come to cause such anguish, I asked them carefully and gently:

1. *Has your care for your children led them to be careless with others?*
2. *Has servicing your children’s every want and demand led to endless demands and ever more servicing?*
3. *Have your children become so sensitive to themselves and so insensitive to others that they have become addicted to these habits of self-sensitivity?*

4. *Has this addiction to self-sensitivity and insensitivity to others become so virulent that Becca is prepared to harm herself and those she loves?*

Jane and Al became more subdued as 'the penny continued to drop'. They sat heavily in their chairs, mirroring each other in their stillness. Their sobriety suggested that we were ready to proceed to the next stage in our preparation for some revolutionary action. The questions which I now put to Jane and Al went as follows:

1. *Jane, do you have the suspicion that mother love is leading to mother abuse?*
2. *Jane and Al, has your love for your children been turning sour? Has your love even turned to the dislike of your children if the truth be known?*

Then hesitantly, as I knew that the questions to come would be shocking, I carefully asked:

Has your despair been so great that you have even contemplated your own suicide rather than continue to be subjected to abuse from your children?

Al and Jane's eyes met. Their answers did not require any words. *Jane, and Al*, I ventured with care, *'would you say your life as it is now is revolting?'*

Jane lent forward in what I took to be surprise while Al looked up, shaken from his contemplation of the carpet. Tears began to well in Jane's already reddened eyes and I knew that this question, strange as it might seem, had found its mark. Al found his voice and ventured *'Well that describes it alright'*. A look that I could only describe as relief passed over his face.

Looking to Jane I asked: *'Would you be willing to tell me how your life is revolting?'* Jane's previously still figure found renewed vigour as she told me:

'We can't go on like this. I don't know if we had even realised how bad it had got. I feel as if I have become a slave in my own home and sometimes I wonder if life has become worth living'. She turned to Al, her voice laced with a quiet command as she asked: *'Al, we can't let this go on. What are we going to do?'*

Al muttered: *'Yes, I know. It's all gone too far!'*

Sensing that Jane and Al had come to realise that their old ways of loving their children were impossible to return to and that 'any port in a storm' would be welcome, I ventured the question to which our enquiry had been slowly building:

Jane and Al, would you consider a revolution which would turn your relationships with your children upside down?

Silence held sway and after a few moments I offered some companion questions:

1. *'If you do not take revolutionary action, will you martyr yourselves in one way or another?'*
2. *'Could you be left with a terrible guilt when you look back at what had happened in your family in years to come if you do not take decisive action?'*

Jane responded first with grit in her voice I had not previously known: *'Things need to change so we will do whatever it takes'*. Al nodded in assent. Faced with the intolerable alternative of continuing to live in fear of continued 'tantrum overdoses', abandoning Becca to 'institutional care' or the eventual end of their relationship and life as a family, Al and Jane found the courage to take a step with me towards a radical course of action driven by their love for their children, each other and their family. This was not to be a revolution *on* their kids. This was a revolution against 'a

love is all you need way of life': a culture of being servile to their children which had spawned habits of such sensitivity to self and insensitivity to others in their children that their lives had become 'lifeless' and Becca's life was at risk.

Jane and Al had tipped out of despair into moral outrage. By the end of our inquiry, Jane and Al were sufficiently outraged to consider 'revolutionary action'. They had already begun to revolt but the inquiry we had just engaged in served as further fomentation. Becca's overdosing tactics had been invalidated: they could no longer be substantiated as 'cries for help': a dissonance had occurred which had created the opening for revolution.

Next, we talked about the differences between a successful revolution and an unsuccessful insurrection/revolt and it was at this point that I suggested to them that vital to their success was the involvement of their family and friends as a revolutionary team. Using the analogy of fire-fighters, we discussed how 'preparation and team work is everything':

How they organise around crisis is critical. Imagine a house fire. At any moment the fire-fighters can lose their way in the smoke. There is always someone close behind you so that at any moment you can swing your arm back and find someone. The person behind them can do the same. It means that they can go further knowing they can always retreat and not lose anyone'.

We planned a 'pre-revolutionary meeting' for 2 week's time. Jane and Al drew up a list there and then of 10 friends and family members they could call upon. I specified that these should be people who could be depended upon to provide moral and/or physical support e.g. babysitting, security, providing relief, etc. and on whom they could rely not to be critical of them. 'Supporters' who offer criticism, no matter how constructive can powerfully undermine resolve and demoralize the parents. I explained this to Jane and Al, suggesting that should they find that someone they expected to be supportive became critical, they should respectfully ask such a person to withdraw from the team.

We decided that the purpose of the meeting would be to introduce the reasons for the revolution. The actual details of the revolution would not be disclosed to the children and for that reason Becca and Susie would be advised to go to their rooms or to go out for the evening. In saying that, we did suspect and perhaps hoped that they might wish to put an ear to the keyhole!

The following letter was sent that night to Becca in elaborate italics. It's purpose was to prepare (at least Becca) for what was to come and was the first of several such letters:

Dear Becca,
We would all like to have a happier house. Things are going to change around here. You will be informed in due course.
Signed
Your parents

Session Five: The Recruitment Drive

Following several phone conversations with Jane offering my encouragement, the evening of the first pre-revolutionary meeting arrived. Gradually the seats in the living room filled until the room was overflowing with friends and relations. It was arranged

that Jane would begin the meeting: *'Thank you all for coming. As you know life has been difficult in this house for some time. Enough is enough. We have asked you here tonight to help us to get our family back on its feet again.'*

Several friends and family members heard for the first time how Jane felt like a prisoner not only in her own home, but in her own family. Friends began to bristle and spoke up in astonishment and support. Unwittingly, Jane's uncle single-handedly created outrage when he suggested that she 'took things too personally'. The supporters took umbrage and leapt to Jane's defence.

The group, now sharing their sense of outrage, spoke of how they would feel if they felt that they had lost all freedoms within their own homes and felt unsafe under their own roofs. Spontaneously they began to make suggestions. One suggestion from Jane and Als' neighbours was that they take it in turns to come round in the evenings and 'babysit Becca's behaviour'.

I sat silently until it was obvious that their solidarity had reached sufficient proportions. Then I hazarded this question: *'When would you like to hold the revolution?'* *'What's wrong with right now'*, Jane insisted.

Sessions Six and Seven: The Declaration of Independence

Jane called me on the phone to tell me that Becca, *'has been really difficult and unreasonable but I am a lot firmer and you know I am gaining some ground. She made another threat to harm herself the other day when I said she couldn't go out to a party in the city. I didn't give in as I would have done before and she went up to her room quiet as a lamb'*.

The next day Jane called again and reported in:

'I threatened to take Becca back to my friend's home tonight and she knows I mean it. She was demanding a \$50 top up for her mobile phone and swearing that she wouldn't move until I gave it to her. I'm not giving in. I have rights too.'

We met twice over the next 2 weeks to draft the *Declaration of Independence*. Written in the spirit of the *US Declaration of Independence* it would signify the ending of the parent's oppression by their teenage daughter's behaviour. The document was to include an assertion of what they now stood for as parents and simple and obvious 'rules' coupled with the consequences for breaking them that could be secured either by Jane or with some members or her revolutionary team. Jane intended to present this declaration to her supporters at the next revolutionary meeting. We began to plan a ceremony to mark the occasion of the unveiling of the declaration and to prepare letters of invitation designed to create a sense of anticipation.

At the end of our first revolutionary planning session, the following letter was dispatched:

Dear Becca & Susie,

I need you to know that I am finding my life in this family revolting and I wish to inform you that in due course I will declare my revolution in this family for you and my allies/supporters to hear.

Since I intend to overthrow the way things have gone for several years now in this family, I urge you to prepare yourself for a quite a shock.

You are going to meet a mother whom you may find difficult to recognise, even if I still look the very same. But not if you look deeply into my eyes or into my heart. I intend to live in my family but my family may have to live differently with me. I am saying all

this to warn you to get ready to meet your mother who will demand justice under her own roof.

*Your Mother,
Jane*

Giving voice to the revolution

It didn't seem fair to expect Jane and Al to write a document detailing and announcing their revolution on their own, so I decided to sit down with them and sketch it out. I took their answers to my questions as the structure and then constructing the declaration from their responses, I checked with them every step of the way until they had a document in their hands that spoke of their oppression and of the new order that they sought to bring into existence.

And so Jane and Al and I met to draft a map of the past regime and the new world that was already making itself known: Meeting for our seventh session, I asked them: *'Have you heard of the US declaration of Independence?'* Both nodded hesitantly, presumably wondering what on earth was to come. *'I suggest that we use it as a guideline for your Declaration of Independence. How about I read through some of it and would you be willing to make some comments?'*

Jane and Al appeared somewhat confused yet such was their desperation, they were willing to proceed.

I read aloud, skipping to the most relevant paragraphs, aware that I was talking in the language of the 18th century and that at this point Jane and Al might be feeling somewhat perplexed:

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

In other words, I remarked, *'If one group of people feel that their rights are being violated, they should begin by declaring what these violations are.'* Jane and Al nodded their understanding and I continued:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men (and women), are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness – That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed – That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to affect their Safety.

Jane and Al indicated that they needed some assistance here so I ad-libbed: *'If your rights have been ignored and trodden on, you then have a right to overthrow the government supposedly put in place to defend the rights of all. In other words you have the right to overthrow the way things have been in your family and insist that your rights as parents are honoured from now on.'* I went on:

.....Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and

usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.

To my surprise, Jane and Al were nodding thoughtfully. I elaborated: *'To me this means that generally people will put up with a lot but there comes a point when the balance tips: their suffering is so great that they snap. And it is their right to put an end to it and demand that the situation radically changes.'*

I then said: *'How about I ask you some questions and from your answers I will begin to work on a declaration that documents your suffering and your determination that it should end? This document will convey how your family life has been, the circumstances that brought it about and the aspirations you have for a fair and just family life in its place. When we finally meet with your revolutionary team, you will read it to them, hand in hand, reading one sentence each at a time to show your unity.'*

Jane looked somewhat relieved while Al again nodded silently. *'What are the key words that describe how you feel living in this family'*, I inquired. *'Disrespect and abuse'* said Jane. A note of resolve found its way into her voice as she voiced her indignation: *'Our rights as parents have been abused. We have been trodden down and that is so sad when we love our children. Love has been driven out.'* Al ruefully looked sideways at Jane. Al, I asked, *'Did you and Jane feel that love was enough, that love would conquer any difficulties your family might face?'* They both nodded silently but with some emotion. Jane bit her lip.

Kay: *'So tell me then, exactly how has disrespect and abuse been operating in your lives and how it has driven love out of your family?'*

Their suffering is explicitly spoken aloud for perhaps the first time. Jane gives voice to what it has felt like to return home from her work as a nurse in a hospice after being up all night assisting the dying to find piles of unwashed dishes in the sink and vomit on the bathroom floor after Becca had come home drunk and thrown up. Or of how she took out her purse at the supermarket to pay for the family shopping to find her credit card and cash had been removed. *'Can we call these crimes of disrespect I asked?'* Jane nodded in agreement. *'What would you like to reclaim from this disrespect and abuse'*, I asked them. Jane's eyes brightened. *'Ahhh they still think they can get whatever they want if they embarrass me in public. That has got to stop!'* Al concurred, *'Yes, it's about time!'*

Kay: *'What do you think would work when they try it again? What has worked in the past?'*

Jane told me with a note of triumph; *'Well, once I did leave them stranded...It worked beautifully!'*

Kay: *'Have you any idea what might put an end to your abuse in public altogether?'* Jane had no hesitation in replying: *'Letting them know it's going to happen, having a clear plan and sticking to it. It would be hard but I'd have to be prepared just to get up and go just as soon as any abuse or embarrassment starts.'* *'What about them getting home?'* Jane declared: *'Well, they'd have to find their own way and I guess it would defeat the object if I gave them money for the bus so it would have to be left to them!'*

I responded: *'Great! What else would be at the top of your list?'* Jane, her enthusiasm getting the better of her: *'Taking my things!'*

Kay: *'Hmm, how about asking your team members to remove things of Becca's and Susie's of a similar value to the things that have been taken and auctioning them on Trade Me[1] to pay for your losses? Do you think that it might work,' I asked? 'Yeah, why not. I'd love to see Becca's face if we did that'* Al replied!

Kay: *'If you were to ask your team to carry it out, then you would have their support. What do you think?' 'Yes, there's no way I'd want to do this on my own', [2] asserted Jane. 'I know they're behind me 200%'*

'How about one more thing?' I suggested. Jane: 'It drives us mad that they get pocket money and never do their jobs, or if they do, they are late and don't do them properly. Maybe we should make it so that if they don't do their jobs, they get no money?' I added a proposal. *'And how about getting the Team to supervise?' 'Good idea. It's about time I had support behind me. There is no way I can do this on my own' [3].*

Returning to the purpose underlying such revolutionary actions, I asked:

'What would you like to say so that they understand that this revolution is being carried out in the name of your love for them. That this is not an attack upon them no matter how it might feel?' Once again Jane declared: *'Well, I will tell them that I love them and I want my family back!'*

Kay: *'What would you like to say about the reign of disrespect?'*

Jane: *'I'd like to announce that is well and truly over. Dead and buried.'*

The Declaration was drafted and re-written:

Declaration of Independence

The time has come to put an end to the disrespect which has been dividing us as a family and abusing me as a mother.

As the mother of this family I have certain unalienable rights. These rights have been abused by disrespect.

It is my right therefore to put an end to this. I do not do this lightly. I do this for the love of my children and my family. Disrespect in this family has almost driven love out.

Enough is enough.

It is my duty to you as your mother not to allow this disrespectful behaviour to continue.

Disrespect has inflicted itself on me as your mother in many ways. Some but not all of these crimes of disrespect are as follows:

1. No gratitude is shown for what I do for my family. I bend over backwards time after time and all I hear is complaints about what I have not done or more demands. It is all 'give, give, give' from me and 'want, want, want' from my family.
2. I am embarrassed by my family in public. There appears to be no concern for the impact of this on me as a person or as your mother.
3. None of my possessions are my own. I have nothing that I own that is not taken and abused or at risk of being taken and abused.
4. I have no privacy. Even my room is not my own.
5. I am verbally abused when ask for the most reasonable of things to be done.
6. There is no respect for my feelings.

7. You each say that the others should not be abusive and disrespectful and then you do it yourselves.
8. You take no responsibility for your mess and expect me to be your slave.
9. I do not even have peace in my own bed when I am asleep. You wake me up even when I am exhausted from caring for the dying. You have stolen my privacy, my peace and my peace of mind.

This is going to stop!

I will no longer be your slave.

I reclaim respect for myself as a mother and as a human being.

The reign of respect and the end of disrespect in this family starts NOW!

We will begin with the following:

1. Verbal abuse or bad language in public

If anyone uses language or speaks to anyone else in a way that **I** consider abusive when in public:

- I will leave immediately without comment.
- I will leave no matter where we are or what the time of day.
- You will be responsible for finding your own way home.
- You will pay for your transport home yourself.
- If you do not return home at a reasonable time and I have reason to be concerned, the police will be called.
- My support team will begin a search if necessary.

2. Taking and/or damaging my belonging

If you take any of my belongings without my explicit permission, or if you damage my belongings even if given permission to use them:

- A member of my team will, with me remove one (or more) of your possessions to the value of the ones taken or damaged.
- These possessions will be sold on Trade Me until the value of my belongings has been recovered. This money will be given to me in lieu of the damage or loss.

Be aware that no taking of my possessions without my permission is acceptable under any circumstances. This action will be taken even if you 'borrow without asking' or return possessions quickly. It is unacceptable to violate my privacy or take my things in ANY circumstances.

3. No jobs done = no money

Susie and Becca will be expected to do jobs at home. In return I will pay you pocket money. For any jobs not done or not done well enough an amount deemed equal to the work not done will be deducted from the pocket money.

- This is not negotiable.
- You will be given no money from me (or from your father) for anything else so don't even think to ask.
- A member of my team will inspect the jobs each week at an agreed time and decide whether the work is worth the full amount of pocket money or not. If not, a lesser amount will be given.

- The team member will give you the money via me.
- Susie will be able to earn up to \$25 so Susie you will do up to \$25 worth of work.
- Becca will be able to earn up to \$15 so will do up to \$15 worth of work.
- Any further requests to earn further money will be decided by the team and may be refused.
- If you choose not do your jobs there will be no money.
- The jobs you will be asked to do are not negotiable. These will be based upon the jobs that are most in need of doing. This will be decided by myself and the team. Jobs may change from time to time at our discretion.

I declare a revolution in this family. The revolution starts now. I reclaim my right to respect and dignity as your mother. Understand that this revolution is in service of my love and commitment to my family. Understand that never again will I allow disrespect to undermine and damage my family in the way it has so ruthlessly and cruelly done in recent years.

A week later Al had an accident at work and spent some weeks in hospital. Several revolutionary meetings were cancelled because of Jane's work. I still do not know whether or not the *Declaration of Independence* was ever read to the family. What I do know is that the revolution happened. The last words should be Jane's. This was written 8 months later.

Jane's revolution

A year ago, Becca was taking overdoses because she didn't get what she wanted. You could call these 'overdose tantrums'. A year later, it is almost impossible to believe how much change I have brought into the life of my family. It has been truly revolutionary. Before the revolution, my life was not my own. I had no privacy, I would be woken up while I was asleep following a night shift and my possessions would regularly be taken out of my room without permission and sometimes they would be ruined. Now I have a deadlock on my bedroom door.

Before you could have said that guilt had such an effect on my mothering that it didn't even allow me any privacy or self-preservation. Things that would have upset me or cut me up before just don't seem to get a grip on me any longer. I decide what is right and wrong now and I don't buy into the bargaining or guilt trips that I used to. I am the teacher not them. Now I find their insults and complaints silly. In fact, what used to upset me now makes me laugh. I can see manipulation for what it is now.

The boundaries between them and us are clearer now. There was a \$600 phone bill because they were calling their friends' cell phones after they had run out of credit and I declared I wouldn't give them any more. I removed the phone for a month. The next thing is to put a pin number on the phone so that I am the only one who knows what it is. I may not need to do that but I am prepared to and now they know it.

Susie asked me to borrow some money from me because she was waiting to be paid for the weekend job she has got at the mall. When she got paid, she was outraged that I wanted her to pay the money back. I stand my ground now and guilt doesn't confuse me. In situations like that, I tell them what's what and I don't go back on it.

We talked with Kay at the beginning about how their needs and wants seemed to have got confused and how their over-sensitivity to themselves had made them insensitive to me. Well the tables have been turning. I am more sensitive to my own needs now and less to

theirs. It has got to serve them much better because they have to look to their own resources and take responsibility for themselves now.

What I have done is bringing me closer to my children. I don't dread going home any more.

We are beginning to have reasonable conversations again. Don't get me wrong; it is not a bed of roses. Becca is still a little difficult.

This revolution has been infectious. It has affected me at work too. I have more strength to advocate for some of the families that I work with. Families of the dying are often in a powerless position and sometimes I am far from happy with the service they get. I have got a newfound energy and am now getting physically fit. I am starting to feel that nice kind of tiredness you get rather than the tiredness I've had in the past of being everything to everybody. Now I am just some things to some people. Al is a different person now too and he comes straight home from work and has taken on more of a supportive role. He is certainly different. He's learnt to be firmer too.

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