



A Letter To Myself

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Someone had said that a good way to find out about yourself was to write a letter. The letter should be addressed to yourself and include advice, based on the knowledge you have learned over the years. In this way, it was possible to self analyse and learn. So, I sat down one November morning and, taking out a crisp sheet of paper, and a pen I had got free at an event I attended recently, I undid the button of my trousers to let the egg and bacon sandwich spread out a bit, and then stared blankly, in a determined sort of way, at the sheet of paper.

The silence and growing tension I experienced was unbearable after a few minutes of blankness, so I played a computer game instead. Returning after thirty minutes of mayhem on my screen, I began writing. The word TEEPOT came to me first. I had been on a training course, something offered to recovering drug addicts and alcoholics, and was taught how to look more positively at life. The trainer asked; is the word TEEPOT spelled correctly? We all said no, it wasn't. Then she asked if it was spelled wrong. We all said yes. She then said that both answers were wrong. Amid our confusion, she said that only one letter was wrong. And that is the human condition; one thing goes wrong and we condemn everything! Five letters of the word were perfectly fine. I liked her example and decided to adopt it in my self analysis programme.

My mobile phone rang. I put down my free conference pen, and answered it. It was Karkani who was in Muscat, in Oman. She said that she would not be returning just yet because something had come up in her family, some illness or similar, and she would let me know more later. The call was short because it is very expensive. I wasn't very happy, partly because I missed her, and partly because I had already bought the coach tickets to Heathrow airport to go to collect her. And before you sensible people start telling me I should have got her to buy a ticket from Manchester, because it is closer, let me tell you it was much more complicated than that. She went to Muscat via lots of friends in London, and so she naturally got a ticket, connecting in Dubai, which was leaving from Heathrow.

I applied the TEEPOT formula to this problem and soon calmed down. Everything was just as it had been before the call, except she would be delayed. Simple! I breathed an alcoholic breath of calmness and diverted my attention back to the letter. No sooner had I picked up my pen again, when the letter box clattered. I went to see what all the fuss was about, probably a bill or a free offer for something that wasn't in fact free. It's only when you apply the theory of 'stupidity reasoning' that you realise that nothing is free in the letter box war of commercialism. It was the familiar brown envelope but when I opened it, there was a nice surprise. The housing people had enclosed a cheque, but it wasn't only for the amount I had expected. After months of wrangling, they had finally enclosed the extra amount they owed me, in total it was several hundred pounds! No need to apply the TEEPOT strategy here, I thought.

It was a good excuse to stop my pitiful attempt at writing a letter to myself and, buttoning up my trousers I set off to town to cash the cheque. I never trust these local government departments, and only truly believe that they are genuine when the money is in my wallet, in real cash notes. As usual there was a queue as long as you can imagine. I deal with these queues in a simple way, using my new found psychology techniques. I looked at the clock in the housing office. It said ten fifty nine. I then applied my brilliant technique and told myself that I would be out of the office with my money in less than an hour. There is no tension then. It can't possibly take that long, but if you assume it will take that long, then you don't get upset with the staff.

Fifteen minutes later, I exited the automatic sliding doors of the housing office with a bulge in my wallet, mainly of twenty pound notes. I felt about six inches taller; isn't it strange how easy it is to feel better? Had they refused to pay for some reason, I might have been a raging bull instead. Passing by the Commercial Inn, I saw some people standing outside. Ever since the smoking ban, there are always more people outside some pubs than in them. Amongst the crowd was my friend, Sharma. We had a long history of heavy drinking, fun, and hangovers.

Do you remember the missionary story? I asked him, after getting in the drinks.

No, he replied. You see, you have to understand that we alcoholics usually remember only about up to the fifth pint or so. On that occasion he was plastered.

Well, I began, you were so pissed you were only upright because you were sandwiched between the stool and the bar. When I came into the pub you urgently called me over. You whispered in my ear; look over there. I looked and saw a man in his late forties with a moustache. You whispered; he is a missionary, he kills people in Africa!

It was brilliant! I will never forget how long it took before I stopped crying with laughter. And all this time Sharma couldn't understand why I thought it was funny to kill people in Africa.

Actually, the man was ex-British army, dismissed for some wrongdoing. He became a mercenary and apparently, killed people in Africa. What made it doubly funny to me was that it was probably true; some missionaries probably also kill people in Africa. We laughed at that and remembered some more little moments, like the time I went to town with my brother to get some chicken. The women folk at home were waiting so that they could get cooking, but we didn't get home until six hours later, drunk as skunks and without the chicken! It's easy to get waylaid sometimes.

The lager was going down easily and we were soon into our fourth pint each. Sharma is the sort of person that just makes you laugh and laugh. We were weak and our sides ached. I have always felt that accidental or unplanned meetings lead to extra special sessions. Then, suddenly, I remembered about my tickets to Heathrow and told Sharma all about the waste of money. He got the wrong end of the stick and said he wasn't free to go to London.

When he managed to put his head in gear again, he said, why don't you go to see her, then?

Logic goes right out of the window when you've had a few. The coach tickets were about £30 each. The airfare to Muscat is about £450. Sharma, rocking slightly from side to side, even though we were sitting down, looked at me for a response, through his thick round glasses.

Well, I said, I have the money, (feeling the bulge in my wallet), and I have all the visa stuff that's still valid from the last time I went. Sharma continued to stare at me, as if his solution for my problem was a revelation. The coach tickets are for tomorrow, I added, thinking about if I could get an air ticket at such short notice.

I should tell you that I am a very impulsive person. Once, I went to town to buy a computer magazine for £2.99 and went home with £2,500 worth of tickets, to take the family to India. And when you are in a pub at lunchtime, everything makes a different sort of sense.

Well? Sharma interjected impatiently.

Let's have another drink, I said, partly to delay any response and partly to convince myself to go. Who would rather be in cloudy, rainy, windy, dull Yorkshire when you could be in the scorching temperatures of Oman? And with a tasty woman, as well!

It took six pints before we both stumbled out of the pub and walked across the road to the very conveniently placed travel agents. Really, the travel agent's is just that close!

Destiny decreed this trip, and a ticket was available for eight forty five in the evening, the following day. This was uncanny, because the coach would get me to Heathrow at about four thirty in the afternoon, just about the right time to get to the terminal and do the check-in stuff. The wallet was duly emptied, almost, and the ticket was safely tucked away in my pocket.

Sharma and I thought that this wave of good fortune deserved another drink, and we staggered back across the road and into the same pub again.

I woke up the next morning lying on top of my bed. Next to me was an open suitcase with some of my clothes scattered around, in a sort of half packed way. My head was thumping but I was used to that; a good snort of vodka would sort that out in minutes. I groaned as the memories of yesterday dripped back painfully and slowly into the reality of today.

Apply the TEEPOT, I told myself. I should explain something about how to apply this technique. Always start with the things that are good and positive and then refer to the bad points. In that way, the scales are already heavy on the positives. Well, one positive was that I woke up early. Although I had to get the coach at ten o'clock, I have always woken up early. I have never had an alarm clock and typically wake up between four and five in the morning. So I had plenty of time to get ready. Everything was positive really and except for the ticket in my pocket, everything was the same as ever. There was only one negative; the rent was due. But, even that wasn't too bad because my landlord is very understanding and he would give me some leeway. Once, I had even been three months behind. He just told me to keep him informed and try to pay something as soon as I was able to.

I had a slug of vodka and reminded myself to get some for the journey. Alcohol isn't allowed on the coach, so you have to mix it in with some fruit juice or something, to make it look like a soft drink. Ha! The simple life of the travelling alcoholic.

Another thing you have to do on this coach trip is to have lots of food for the journey. The bakers shop is next door to the travel agent where I got my ticket. I reflected that the housing office was about fifty yards from the Commercial Inn, and the travel agents and bakers were only about fifteen yards from there. And the coach left from the bus station which was only about a five minute walk from my flat. Everything in my life is pretty close and nearby.

There was no-one outside the pub when I passed it. The doors were open but I was on a schedule today, no slacking. I arrived at the bus

station with a suitcase, one piece of hand luggage and a carrier bag full of sandwiches, crisps, and my drinks of fruit juice, bottled water, and a quarter bottle of vodka, already prepared and mixed in with orange juice.

The coach is the best form of public transport if you want to go to Heathrow from here. There is only one change of coach, at London Victoria. On the train, you have to go to Leeds, or Wakefield, change trains to Kings Cross in London, and then get the Underground to St Pancras, and finally the Heathrow Express. The cost on the train is three or four times the price of travelling by coach and you are always guaranteed a seat on the coach. The only drawback is that the coach takes a bit longer. But it is comfortable and usually you can get two seats right down to Milton Keynes, when other people join.

Everything went fine, and I checked in early for the Dubai flight. When I went through to the duty free I went through my classic routine of having a few pints of Guinness. Whenever I travel abroad, I always miss the beer. You can get lots of different beers in Middle Eastern and Asian countries but it's not the same as beer in the UK. In Muscat, you can drink in tourist areas but not elsewhere, and I was glad for that. Karkani's relatives live near the tourist areas and the sea, although Muscat isn't really a brilliant seaside sort of destination.

It was about five hours to Dubai, a stop over for two hours and then a short journey of about an hour and a bit to Muscat. Karkani didn't know I was coming, but I knew how to get to the house and got a taxi.

The Jeep

Your family jeep,
Held together with
Hope alone.
No doors, no roof,
But a camel in jeeps clothing!
I can't remember
When I had so much fun.
Tearing through the dunes
Hanging off and
Almost falling out.
No seatbelts and
No insurance
And I daren't even think
How the driver
Got his skills.

In the back with you
I was almost writing
My will
Just in case.
Holding on to you
Or rather you
Holding on to me!
It didn't matter.
The jeep was holding
On to the sand.
Phew!
All the roller coasters
Rolled in to one!

Oranges

I couldn't believe
In the blazing hot sun
How orange,
Oranges can be.
The fruits, succulent
And calling out to us.
I can see where you
Get your fruit obsession from.
And your orange peeling skills,
I could taste your perfume
As I squeezed the juice
Into my mouth.
And you dripped juice
All over the place
A fragrance
That I smell every day.

Hookah

I still can't believe
You sitting there
Looking all fruity
And calmly smoking
From the hookah.
It was so funny
But almost dignified
At the same time.
Bubbling the pot
And blowing out
A little balloon
You made with
Your cheeks.
I tried to look
Calm and collected
But I couldn't
Get the hang of it.

Secret Shrine

We drove slowly this time

As if it were

Important to show respect.

A secret shrine in

The desert, the history

Of the Gnostics.

You spoke in a whisper

And widened your eyes

To emphasise

The importance that I

Listened and heard

The magnitude of

What you spoke.

We were solemn

And I could feel

The history calling out

To me.

Candlelight

In the evening

When the impossible heat

Decided we had

Had enough

And the cool breeze blew in

From the desert

You lit a candle.

Its heat was cool,

Unattainable it seems,

In the laws of physics.

You dreamt a smile

Into my eyes.

You ate

Like an angel

Hardly trying,

Instead swimming in the

Light of the candle

And caressing me

With your eyes.

Dreamworld

We left your Dreamworld

After the pain of

Your cousin's childbirth.

She was ill, as you said,

But a happy illness

Only of pregnancy.

We had to go

But I could have stayed

In your caravan

In the desert.

Back to where?

You promised me

That we would make

Our own oasis

Back in my land,

Our land now,

And dream new dreams

Of our own.

Back in good old Blighty, we had to get new coach tickets because the other ones had expired. I smiled at the whole episode; spending all that money to save £30. But it had been worth it just to see Karkani's face when I walked into her family home. She was shocked first, then smiled, and then the love filled her, like the red, amber, and the green of traffic lights.

The dream was over, but although the skies were gloomy and the wind was biting, it was a relief from the heat of Oman. Hardly a feast, I said, as we stocked up on sandwiches and stuff for our journey home on the coach. She just brushed up to me and we momentarily dissolved into each other. After we had shopped, we went to the bar in Terminal Two for a drink and snacks before departing. You see, the coach stops outside that terminal and I was happier to relax there, near the boarding point.

I told her about the rent then, and that I hadn't paid it. She said that we shouldn't worry about it, so I didn't! It's good to be carefree, even in terms of paying the rent. We shared an egg mayonnaise sandwich on the coach and from then on, we shared each thing as we ate. It was like a game, although to an observer it would be something they would rather have preferred we did in private. But coach seats make your experience almost private, in any case. Karkani said she'd like to meet Sharma. I didn't know whether I should introduce her to him, although he had said we should go round to his home so his wife could meet Karkani. The last time I met Sharma's wife it was funny.

There were about five of us, give or take a phantom caused by alcoholic double sight, a common event in my life in those days. Sharma had two houses; one to let. It was empty at the moment and over drinks in the Town Hall pub, we all decided to take the party to his empty house. So we bought a bottle of whisky and some lamb, onions, and chillies, amongst other bits. Once at his house, someone who fancied themselves as a cook, put the meat on and we started playing cards and drinking, without a care in the world. We were seriously out of it when a woman turned up. She happened to be

Sharma's wife, and she swore for a bit, and cursed, and then we all left before she could actually throw us out herself. She was very angry, probably at Sharma's inability to share their family burdens. We stumbled off, to our own respective wives, no doubt waiting for us with rolling pins. It was really funny when we were out of earshot of her. And now, she was inviting Karkani and me, for a meal! She terrified me, and I have avoided her for years. Sharma, however, in his expansive and generous way, assured me that she was over that incident. The thing is; I don't know if she is or whether it is just Sharma being simple.

I asked Karkani if she wanted a slug of vodka, but she said no. Then, after a few minutes she said yes, and delicately drank from the disguised bottle. I didn't think it was possible to drink delicately when it's vodka. Instead of getting fruity with me, the alcohol just made her sleepy and she dropped off with her head resting on my shoulder and her perfumed hair hanging down and spread all over my shirt front. I just settled down and buried my face in her hair.