

# Letter to the Self

## *A Technique to Assist Role Assessment and Intensify Level of Warm Up in One-to-One Counselling*

by Patrick Fleming

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***Directing a client to write a letter to Self on the whiteboard during a one to one therapy session facilitates their warm up and indicates paths toward progressive development.***

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Tony sits deep in the chair. Today his body seems small. He stares mostly at the floor and occasionally glances at me from under his eyebrows. He is deep in gloom. 'I thought I was getting somewhere with you. Now this has happened and it is all back to square one'. We are at the beginning of the fifth session. The air has become thicker and darker, the room cheap and tawdry. Life is mortgaged to despair.

Tony is forty nine. He is a professional photographer on the staff of a university. In the last year

he has become increasingly morose, his wife has left and his workplace is being reorganised in ways that he sees as very destructive. An early family environment which was sadistic and punitive had been brought forward in the work and enactments had been produced which have effected some social atom repair. Several days before the present session he drunkenly assaulted a bouncer at a nightclub and he now faces serious charges. He has never acted in such a way before. He is downcast, frightened, ashamed, and blaming.

Assuming on our established positive relationship, I remain dispassionate. I direct him to act. 'Go to the whiteboard. Take a felt tip and write a letter. Write a letter to yourself. Write 'Dear Tony' at the top, 'Love, Tony' at the bottom. 'Now fill in the body of the letter'. Tony at first looked disappointed that I was not sympathising with his position. He then quickly stood up

**Dear Tony,**

**Life has been a shit for you - is it you doing it to yourself or do you have no control of what is being forced upon you? I know you only want to be good, happy and useful but every time you come good you cop another downer.**

**You have a lot of hurt inside and very mixed emotions. You have a lot of love to give but no one wants it. You have good ideas and capabilities but again no one listens.**

**You need to come to terms with the problems and shed your insecurities - become yourself, find yourself, for yourself.**

**Love, Tony**

and, taking a felt tip pen, began to write ...

At the completion of his task I invite Tony to sit down so that we may both ponder upon his letter.

As Tony was writing I made an assessment of his role system and identified those roles which needed to be mobilised in the here and now. Although Tony is despairing there are several positive roles in relation to himself which he indicates in his letter. It is to these roles, in addition

to the despairing roles, that we need to address our attention in this session.

I pointed out that in his letter Tony had made generous evaluations of himself, he had displayed a tenderness toward himself, and had expressed a vision of himself toward which he wished to develop. I suggested that his initial movement from defeat into action had become gradually lost as he wrote and warmed himself up in his writing to his personal story of

## The Role System of Tony

Progressive Roles	Coping Roles	Fragmenting Roles
generous self assessor seeker of self	yearning exile confused ruminator stubborn Eyore woeful martyr	despairing reject

despair. I invited him to see that his positive expressions toward himself had become overwhelmed by this despair. I then described the various roles that I saw in his functioning (see role diagram).

On the basis of this work Tony set out each of the roles using objects in the room. He was then able to identify the various roles in his own functioning. In the conclusion of the enactment he brought forward the previously underdeveloped roles of *generous self assessor* and *seeker of self*.

The technique of a letter to self offers a number of benefits in the

one-to-one setting. Firstly, the intervention offers spontaneous novelty. The second benefit lies in the invitation to the client to become a *systems analyst*. In joining with an exploration of his system Tony developed an overview of a situation in which he was enmeshed. The third benefit of the intervention is that it creates a setting for a self generated mirroring. Tony's functioning was displayed, to himself, by his own projected work without my intervention beyond the initial invitation to write. Finally, the letter to self can provide an excellent warm up to further enactments.