

28. Punishment Therapy

A restaurateur seeks counsel during COVID lockdown.

It takes a long time to qualify as a psychotherapist. Matilda White after graduating with a Ph. D. in psychology from Melbourne University, obtained additional certifications in Rogerian and Pavlovian therapy when she served as an intern at New York's Bellevue Hospital. She then returned to Melbourne and served another four years as psychotherapist at the University of Melbourne Hospital Parkville clinic for mental health, tucked away in one of the fancy row houses on Royal Parade. Now, thirty four years old and unmarried, she at last settled into a private practice. She had no time for a personal relationship. All her time was spent on relationships with clients. For many years, her various colleagues who took it upon themselves to give her advice, informed her, often intrusively, that she was too devoted to her work, that she should "get a life," that it was unhealthy to work such long ours to the exclusion of all else. She couldn't count the times that she had been lectured with the old saying: "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy." Putting aside the sexist connotations of that outdated saying, she often wanted to say back to her well-meaning colleagues that devotion to work was the healthiest thing that anyone could do. And besides she had many relationships, all with her clients. She valued such relationships above everything else. By serving her clients she was serving herself. That's right. It was healthy, she was convinced, that she be dependent on her clients just as her clients were dependent on her. It seemed just. It ensured that each did not take undue advantage of the other. How many relationships had she noticed among her friends and colleagues where the stronger exploited the other? It was an occupational hazard of therapists that they might lapse into exploiting their clients. The pressure of time (as more or less assured by the ways in which Medicare reimbursements worked and the ceaseless demands of insurance companies) constantly weighed on the shoulders of all practitioners who dealt with clients.

It takes a long time to become a patient of psychotherapy. There are a lot of factors involved. Of course the main one is the process of denial, the natural tendency of humans to deny problems that face them, their infinite capacity for self-deception. This is followed by the terrible fear that one's colleagues or friends or relatives may find out that you are seeing a therapist. "What on earth can be wrong with them?" Or, alternatively, "it's about time. There's something really wrong with them."

John Paolo was such a person, like any other hard working person, or so it appeared. He owned a very successful Italian restaurant and pastry shop on Lygon Street, Carlton, a chic suburb of Melbourne that served the many professors and students of Melbourne University. He worked long hours, chatted with his regular customers, supervised his young staff (usually students) and worked as a barista as well at busy times. What would such a successful, congenial person like John Paolo need from a psychotherapist?

First of all, you may have noticed from his name that John was Italian, of course. He was raised in a loving Italian family (could there be a family that was not loving?) that migrated to Australia two generations ago. The trouble was, though, that he took a disliking to the Roman Catholic church and the demands it made on his family's lives, not to mention money. Worse, his loving and doting mother had him pegged to go into the priesthood. The day she pestered him to do so was the day he graduated from high school and immediately got a job as a barista in one of the few coffee shops then in Carlton. She hugged him and said, "I'm so proud that now you're ready to become a priest." He lost his temper, raised his voice and in anger, told her to mind her own business and to shut up!

He had felt really bad after that, and of course he apologized. He even went to confession and confessed to the priest, whoever he was, and received platitudes and useless demands of whatever number of Hail Marys to repeat. John Paolo on that day, as he left the church lost his faith and never returned to it except for special occasions when relatives got married, or christenings. As the years went by and he threw himself into his work, and got his

own coffee shop and later a restaurant up and running, he had no time for anything else. You might say his work was his faith. And to see the customers come in, the money mount up, what more could one want?

Unfortunately, the year was 2020, the year of the corona virus. All Victoria, especially Melbourne was locked down. His restaurant and bar closed. His life's work, not so much ruined, he had enough money tucked away to withstand a year or so of income loss. Initially, it did not bother him. But after a couple of months, there were fewer and fewer things for him to attend to with his business. He had way too much time on his hands. Without work. What was there? He began waking up in the middle of the night, thoughts running through his head. Always bad thoughts. Memories of things he had done wrong. Little things and big things. They came to him every night. Perhaps the worst, his yelling at his mother about her wanting him to join the priesthood. It became so bad, he made a list of things he had done wrong, then screwed it up and threw it away. He tried repeating prayers he had learned in chapel when a choir boy, and that worked a bit, but the bad memories, especially those that he had tried to forget, many to do with sexual relationships. He had been a bit rough on occasions. Said some things too. Why must these memories come to haunt him every night?

He tried sleeping pills. But soon realized that they were addictive and blunted his mind, a condition that he could not withstand. He again thought of going back to the church and confessing to a priest. He got as far as the church door, but turned back. He had lost his faith when a teenager and it would never come back to him, he was sure. The trouble was he had too much idle time on his hands. Spent all the time thinking about himself. He needed someone to talk to. And that was when, as he was walking aimlessly around the neighborhood, he passed the mental health clinic in Parkville. The thought that he might be mentally ill, of course, shocked him. But in the end, the sleepless nights, the uncontrollable bad memories, forced him to the edge, and finally on one of his walks, he stepped into the Melbourne University Hospital Clinic for Mental Health.

“Your problem is that you have too much guilt, John,” announced Doctor White. She sat across from her client, John Paolo, on a faux suede couch, her legs together and knees slanting to the side, small dainty feet, and toes, the nails painted in deep purple, peeping out from elegant Italian sandals.

In contrast, John Paolo sat stiffly on a wooden chair with a woven wicker seat, no cushion. “I don’t need a therapist to tell me that,” he said, trying to keep his very strong feelings of aggression bottled up. “That’s what I’ve been telling you the last couple of sessions. That’s why I’m here.”

“Yes, indeed. I was just summing up, smiled Dr. White, unruffled. The long list of bad memories of past, shall we call them events, is certainly overwhelming. And of course, I’m sure you know that it’s not unusual. In fact, if any person sat down to make a list of all the bad things they had done, they would probably equal or surpass yours.”

“OK, so guilt is normal. Is that what you’re saying? That there’s nothing wrong with me?”

“No, I’m not saying that. The fact that you have come to me, says that for you, it is not normal, that you are unable to live with the guilt. People deal with their guilt in many different ways. That it’s bothering you, causing you continuous sleepless nights, is not normal. And we need to do something about it.”

Paolo leaned forward, waving his hand as tough to gear himself up. “So we’ve had four sessions and I don’t feel any better. What do you recommend? And don’t say medication. I want my mind to be clear, not half there, if you see what I mean.”

Dr. White stood up from the sofa, leaving her notebook and pencil behind. She came up to him, then suddenly clapped her hands loudly at his ear, stamped her foot, and screamed “Aahhhh!”

John was stunned and jumped up from his chair. “What the...!”

Dr. White returned to her sofa and sat. She smiled kindly. John noticed the kindness. But he also noticed her slightly purple lipstick. Her mouth was, well, enticing. It was at that moment that more guilt readied itself to descend upon him. He could easily jump up and ravish this woman. He tried to put it out of his mind,

more so, out of his body. But the more he tried, the more impossible it became. He remained speechless, crossed and uncrossed his legs.

“I startled you,” purred the therapist. “That was a simple example of fright therapy, or to put it in official terms, the first Pavlovian administration of pain therapy.”

“It wasn’t painful. I mean...”

“I know. The guilt, it leaped on you, first into your head, then right down to your toes.” She wasn’t sure why she said the last part, about the toes. She frowned slightly and made a mental note of her mental lapse, as she called such occurrences. She could see, however, that her client had been put off guard, placing him in a vulnerable, or should one say, ready state, to receive her therapeutic schedule, one that would drive the guilt out of his head. Pain therapy would do it.

John looked at the floor then up and into his therapist’s eyes. He had to remind himself that she was his therapist, not a potential partner. She scared him. But she enticed him.

Dr. White stood up. “Well, our time’s up. We’ve made good progress today. Same time next week?”

“Thanks Dr. White. Yes, I’ll be back.”

Now, there is pain, and there’s pain. Tearing off the fingernails is pain. It is excruciating. Slapping you on the buttocks is painful too. But it is a different kind of pain. Certainly not excruciating. However, when the therapeutic schedule requires that one administer pain to one’s client, slapping the buttocks is a little too close to other parts of the body that may react differently. That is, those parts may be stimulated in ways that make the pain pleasurable. It seems like a contradiction. But then whoever designed our bodies had quite a sense of humor. Our bodies and the minds that accompany them are full of contradictions. There is an old saying, “she is her own worst enemy.” It sums up the angst in which we all live.

“Welcome John. Let’s get down to business. Please take your place on the chair. But first remove your shirt, so I can get a look at your bare back.

John did as he was told. He had thought of little else all week

except imagining her in the nude and on the couch. His bad memories had receded. Her therapy was working! He sat on the chair, but then Dr. White gently touched his elbow and said, please sit astride the chair, facing the back of the chair.”

Again, he did as he was told. The therapist went to her desk and retrieved from the drawer a small whip, a little over one meter long, three thin strands of leather attached to a leather bound handle. She held it in front of his disbelieving eyes. She herself was a little worried because she had inadvertently touch his elbow, which broke the therapist-client rules, that there must be no direct touching of bodies.

John did all he could to hold back a gasp. He gripped the back of the chair until his knuckles were white. And before he could say anything at all, the therapist had lashed his back with a stroke of the whip. He wanted to scream, but held it in. She said nothing. She gave him two more strokes. Red welts appeared on his back. A nice smooth live back, observed Matilda. Actually, a gorgeous back. She stepped back, upset that she had thoughts or were they feelings that she should not have as a therapist? “That will be all for today. How was your guilt last week? On a scale of one to ten, ten being the worst, how would you rate it?”

“Can I turn around now?” asked John.

“Yes of course.” Dr. White had returned to the couch and sat writing notes. She did not look up, because she was worried if she saw his naked front, she might make further mistakes.

“I’d say about seven since last week. It’s helping, doctor. Amazing.”

“Excellent. Then same time next week? It will be a double session, as there will be a lot more to do.”

“A lot more of what?” He tried to feel his back. It felt extremely sensitive to touch. Burned a little. But his body felt very much alive, as though he had had a couple of stiff shots of espresso.

“It depends on what you report to me next week. Oh and by the way, please do not try applying a whip or anything to yourself. It must be done under strict clinical control.”

“Of course. I’m a lapsed Catholic. I don’t do that sort of stuff,” John replied with a grin.

Doctor White gave him a clinical look. “If you don’t mind, Mr. Paolo, we will keep religion out of your treatment. As a matter of fact, I take back my advice about doing it at home. I’ll write you a prescription that will allow you to purchase a do-it-at home whip. These are a smaller version of the one I used, and there are no knots in the leather strands. “

“Really?” asked John in disbelief.

“Yes. Medicare classes it as a prosthesis class B. The pharmacy on Grattan Street has it.”

She handed him the prescription. “See you next week, John,” she said with a clinical smile.

John could hardly wait for his next appointment with Dr. White. His sleeplessness had gone away, that is, after he had finished imagining what his therapist might do with him next time.

Pain therapy schedules are not widely acknowledged to be effective in treating guilt. In truth there have been no peer reviewed studies of its effectiveness. And it should be acknowledged that Dr. White was trying this therapy after having been disillusioned by the several other talking therapies, none of which worked, in her opinion, especially did not work on eradicating or even alleviating guilt. Some research had suggested that Pavlovian conditioning, applying a painful stimulus to a person to remove an annoying habit or other aspect of behavior had been affirmed by many peer reviewed studies. It was a time honored method of behavioral therapy. What she was doing was simply an extension of Pavlov and his dogs.

It had been argued by modernists that Pavlov used rewards to get his dogs to salivate at the sound of a bell. But rewards, it had been found time and again, simply made the subjects soft and pliable so that they would do anything to get the reward. Witness the dogs who will go half crazy to get a tiny morsel as a reward for doing some silly antic. They do not go crazy when they are taught discipline using pain as the stimulus. It is like everything else. Too much of a good thing, whether reward or punishment is not recommended. Moderation is the rule. However, the trouble with any kind of conditioning (rewards and punishments) is that

there is the constant temptation to keep increasing either the rewards or punishments. That is, the danger of the slippery slope.

And so, in the double session, there is a hint that the temptation had already begun, as far as the therapist was concerned. She, or course, is not aware of this. Rather, she sees it as a scientific step in a carefully arranged schedule of punishments. The ultimate reward being the eradication of her patient's guilt.

John arrived a little late for his appointment. Dr. White was a little annoyed, but tried not to be. She did not want to waste the double appointment.

"Hell, Mr. Paolo. You may lay flat on the couch, and take off your top clothes first to show your back. It has no scars I take it?" She examined his smooth olive back. Not a scratch or mark. She donned a pair of surgical gloves and rubbed her fingers over where she had lashed him. All fine and smooth. Without another word, she lashed him three times on the back with her whip. John yelped a little, but then smiled, then gritted his teeth awaiting the next stroke. Instead. He felt his therapist's hand (fully gloved) on his shoulder.

"How would you rate your sense of guilt this week, Mr. Paolo?"

"You can call me John. I'd say a four or five."

"Then we are making excellent progress. Now slide down your pants to bare your buttocks." She turned away while he did it."

He heard the rustling of the leather strands as she raised the whip above her head, then brought it down in a fast lash, but the stroke just grazed his well curved buttocks, so tight for a fifty year old Italian male, she thought. The client grunted.

Matilda gripped the whip tightly and then brought it down with a fierce lash and it connected across both buttocks, eliciting a yell from the client.

"Did that hurt you badly?" she asked, with concern. "There's no skin broken, if that's what you are concerned about."

John was amazed to hear himself say, "Oh no! It was great! I mean, wasn't too bad." Lying on his stomach caused other parts of his body to react to the lash as well. It was a well-known

autonomic reaction. His face became flushed.

“The schedule calls for several more to the buttocks and back. Shall I stop? You look a little distraught.”

“Oh no, doctor White. It’s all good,” John mumbled into the arm of the couch.

Doctor White stopped to make some notes. She then set her timer and returned to the schedule. It recommended a pause of one minute between applications.

Very quickly, the double session (a total of thirty minutes) was up. John, embarrassed turned away as he pulled up his pants and buttoned his shirt. He rubbed his very sensitive buttocks and tried to place himself in front of the couch so that the stains would not be noticeable.

Dr. White, now at her desk, said without looking up, “single session next week, Mr. Paolo. You did well today. Let’s get the guilt down to two or three next week.”

“Thank you doctor.” John hurried away.

She’s on the couch. John had thought of little else since their last session. It took an herculean effort to control himself. He had not expected to be assigned the chair with the wicker seat. She sat with her knees together on the edge of the couch, legs bent at the knees, slanted, her sweet toenails painted in that very light purple, peeping at him through her white sandals. He sat in the chair and shifted it a little to face her, his hands clasped tightly in front of his belly. The edge of the whip peeped out from under her bottom. She must have sat on it without knowing, absorbed as she was reading the notes she had taken last week. John wriggled in his chair and moved it a little forward scraping it on the wood floor. He coughed a tiny cough. She looked up and smiled.

“So how is your guilt index today?” she asked.

“It’s a four,” I think. Not all that much progress from last week, I’m afraid. He was lying, of course, hoping for more of last week, and if she gave it, he would take it to another level.

“Well, I’ll soon see to that. But just to make sure, you should come here and sit by me. “

John of course couldn’t wait to get on the couch. “You’re

sitting on the whip,” he said as he sat down beside her. He looked for last week’s stains and saw none. She might be sitting on them too. He managed to place his bottom tightly against hers and the whip dug into him.

“Oh, just a minute,” said Dr. White. She felt for the whip and her notebook dropped on to the floor. John leaned over to get it.

“Leave it,” she said, “you need to get naked today.” He needed no second asking. He stood up, and in a flash everything was off.

“On to the couch,” she ordered as she stood up beside him and raised the whip.

John was half out of his mind. He grabbed the whip out of her hand and gave her a light belt on her shapely bottom.

“Ouch! Mr. Paolo. That’s not what you should be doing. Now, give me the whip this minute!”

But he held the whip tightly and stood back, hands on hips. “What’s your guilt rating, doctor?” he asked with a devilish grin. “Maybe we should attend to that. You know, transference and all that.”

“You’ve been reading up on psychotherapy, I see,” smiled Dr. White.

But John was not listening. He grabbed her lightly buttoned thin cotton shirt and pulled it open. It was not enough. He dropped and used both hands to carefully remove her clothes. She did not resist. But she did lean down to pick up the whip, then quickly turned to him and gave him a lash across the front of his legs. The little leather strands found their mark. And indeed over the next few minutes that seemed like a lifetime, they left their marks in every imaginable place.

“Your guilt index?” John asked as they fell on to the couch together.

“Ten, she said, “and yours now?”

“Ten!”

They took it in turns to use the whip on each other. They found themselves on the couch, then on the hard wooden floor, standing or prostrate, it didn’t matter. And by the time the buzzer on Doctor White’s timer went off signaling the end of the session,

they were both exhausted.

“Session is over, Mr. Paolo. Please get dressed and we will continue this therapy session next week.”

“But what about my guilt?”

“Do you feel any? I don’t. I feel liberated.”

“Exactly how I feel. Then that means I’m cured?”

“Unfortunately, that’s not likely. But we will review your progress at our next session. Please keep a record of your daily guilt level. Take a rating morning and night.”

“Thank you doctor. You’ve done wonders for me.”

Doctor White was at her desk again. “Good-bye,” she said without looking up.

John returned to his empty restaurant and made himself an espresso, double shot. The past hour had turned into a fog, a blur. His body tingled to the point that it hurt, especially from the red marks of the welts doctor White had laid on him. What had happened to him? It was the most amazing thing. But had he done it or had she? He was reminded of when he was a little kid and his mom yelled at him, he would always say, “it wasn’t me, he did it,” blaming his older brother.

He went upstairs and showered. There was no one he could talk to about this. If he did, they would tell him that he just raped his doctor. And that wasn’t what happened, was it? If you went back to the very first session, it was she who started it all. And now, in the frightening carnal fog that had descended upon him after this session he did not know who was to blame.

And there it was. That word had nosed its way into his thoughts. It signaled that horrible word. Guilt. He walked around his vacant restaurant, polishing tables, cleaning cutlery. The fact was, he could not wait for the week to go by so he could face off in another therapy session. Maybe it was all part of the therapy. After all, it had begun to work. The whipping, that is.

So John Paolo continued to show up for his weekly sessions, and each session repeated the last, except that the ferocity of the exchanges with the whip gradually tempered, and his guilt level remained at five. He began to think that his therapist was no longer interested in his problem. That it wasn’t therapy at all. But

At last the COVID lockdown had been lifted and his restaurant was almost back to what might be a new normal. A limited number of customers dining in his spacious restaurant. Friends to say hello to, regular customers calling to make reservations. Most of his staff had returned, happy to have work to do, as was he. Nothing like constant work to keep a man happy, distracting him from the carnal fog. He gradually began to miss a session or two, or three. And in the end he quit going. On quiet days in the restaurant he tended to think back to the first sessions with Dr. White. My God! How could he have done it, and worse, actually loved it? But then, the early sessions had really saved his life, mental life that is. They were like a gift from Heaven, though re-living them now was like going into the depths of Hell. He yearned to do it all over again, but with someone else. Because he had to face it, the doctor now disgusted him. He had done a one eighty.

And so, at the end of a very good day at the restaurant, after he closed up, he had made an appointment to see a priest at the church in which he had been christened. He had not been to church for many years. Too busy with his business, was his excuse to the local priest who pestered him from time to time, and treated him well none the less, each time John treated him to a free lunch.

The confession got off on the wrong foot. John didn't want to confess all his sins at once and have them absolved. He wanted just to tell someone about his adventure with his doctor and ask whether it was his or her fault. The memory of those intense exchanges with the doctor dominated his mind night and day, but especially at night when he had no distractions. Working seemed to be the best antidote. Thank goodness the lockdown had ended, otherwise he would have gone crazy, he said to himself many times over.

In the end, after an acrimonious start, the priest agreed to have lunch with him at his restaurant at which John could reveal everything. And he did tell all, and watched as the priest's face reddened during the more lurid accounts. The priest gobbled up

everything that was put in front of him. John had simply a Campari soda. And when he finished he looked the priest in the eye and asked, “well?”

The priest, youngish and with a typically well-scrubbed appearance, looked up. “These are shocking things you have told me,” he said quietly and with a very faint Italian accent. “Now I see why you have come to me. The church has had its problems with sex abuse, as you know.”

“Father, I don’t care about the church’s problems. It’s my problem that I care about. If we have another lockdown, I don’t know what I will do. I’m scared I’ll go back to her.”

“Either you should do that right away and continue your therapy, since it got you through the terrible lockdown, or...”

“Or what Father? Go back? How could you countenance that?”

“One question at a time, John. As I was saying, or you should report her for unprofessional conduct and sexual abuse of you, her patient.”

“But if I do that, the press, it will go crazy with it. I can’t!”

“Then there is a third option,” the priest said with a faint smile, perhaps a little patronizing.

“And what is that?”

“You can come back to the church and make regular confessions and receive absolution for all your sins. There is no therapy on earth that can do that, talking or non-talking cure.” The priest took the last spoonful of panna cotta and sat back most satisfied. He put out his hands, palms facing up, inviting John to take them. “In us there is hope. In earthly therapy, there are only false promises, or worse as you have discovered, debased trickery.”

They both sat in silence. The priest’s hands still open. John stirred uncomfortably in his seat. It did seem to be his only way out. But he couldn’t just blurt out that he didn’t believe the church either. They had told so many lies in their sex abuse scandals. “Is there no other way?”

The priest, wily as many are, answered, “well there is a fourth way that could be chosen along with our way.”

“And what is that, father?” John reached out one hand only

and clasped the open hand of the priest.

“You could get a lawyer and sue for damages, just like they have done against our church.”

As the routines of his restaurant slowly returned to pre COVID levels, John’s spirits revived somewhat. He did go to church and did begin to make regular confessions. Whether these were to that same priest he did not know, though he thought he recognized the voice a couple of times. He consulted with a lawyer who had successfully brought a number of cases of sexual abuse against the Roman Catholic church and other churches as well, but it quickly became apparent that such a course of action would only lead to money received or spent, and would not relieve his guilt level one bit. He had come to the conclusion after his many confessions that one cannot buy off guilt. On the other hand, he tried his hardest to remember the wonderful feelings of ecstasy he had experienced in therapy with Dr. White, and that managed to assuage his guilt at least down to a level of about 4. So that was not too bad. In fact, it inspired him to go back to her non-talking cure.

It had been a year since he was last in Dr. White’s office. She was just the same, and dressed in just the same clothes, the light cotton shirt, tight business dress, white sandals, light purple lipstick and painted toenails.

She smiled at him as he made himself comfortable on the couch.

“Please sit on the chair for today’s session,” she said, very businesslike, as though they were meeting for the first time.

“I brought something for you,” said John, reaching into a shopping bag.

“Oh! Thank you. But our professional rules of conduct do not allow us to accept gifts from our clients,” she said with a serious look.

“It’s not really a gift. More like something I hope will aid in my therapy.”

“Oh, well, Perhaps that’s OK. Let me see it?”

There was a loud rattle and John produced a set of handcuffs that he dropped on her desk. Dr. White leaned forward and picked them up, a serious look on her face.

“Stand and face the wall, hands behind you,” she ordered.

Moral: Guilt, the God of Life

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