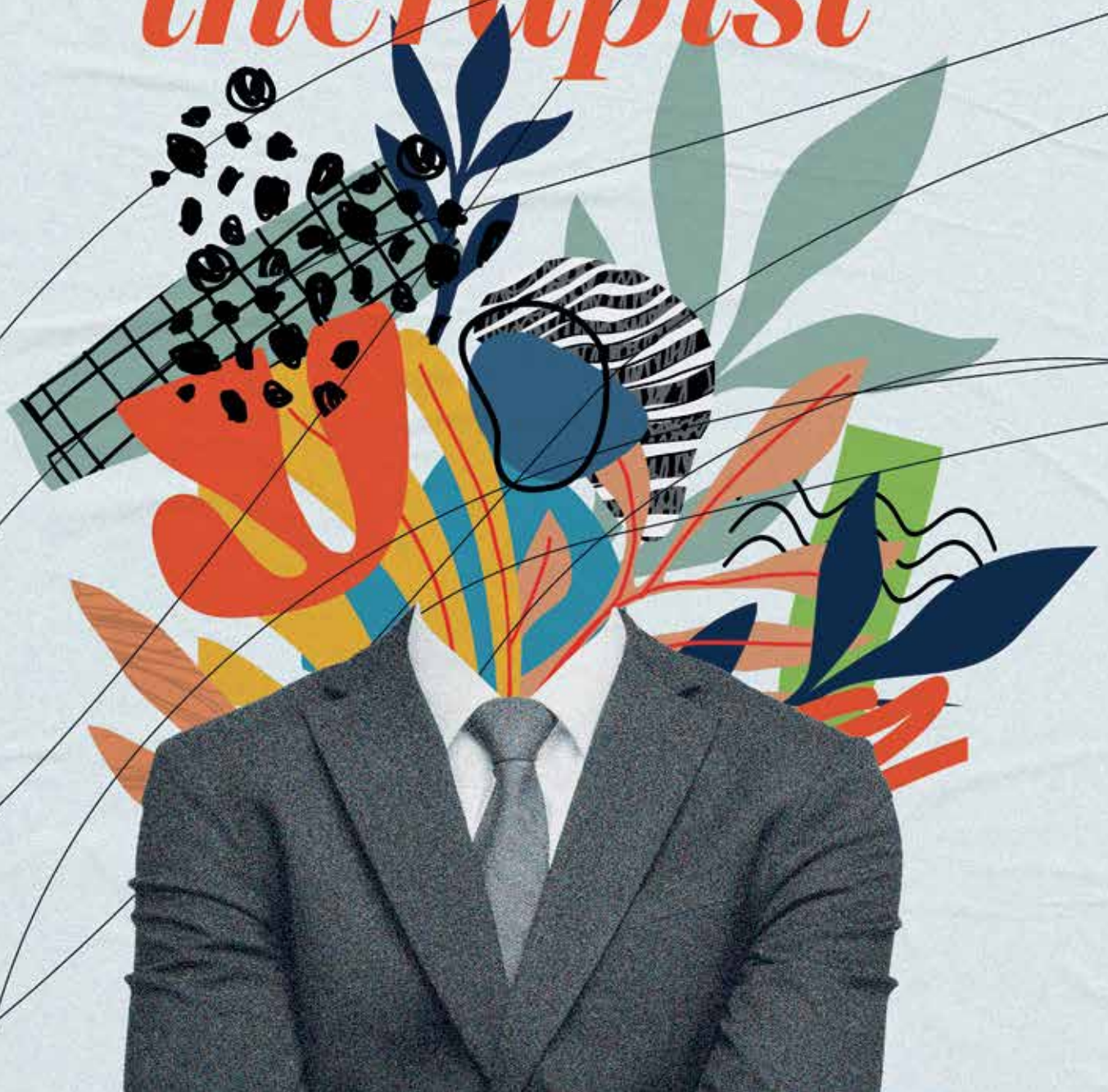


# How *business* was my *therapist*



## FEATURE



When one pursues a direction that feels contrary to one's character, there's an opportunity for individuation that wouldn't otherwise arise, writes **Aaron Balick**

When I received an invitation to speak at the BACP Private Practice conference this autumn, I was not at all surprised. That is until Rima Sidhpara from the BACP Private Practice division told me that I would be speaking on the theme of business and entrepreneurship. I laughed and suggested that she might have the wrong guy. 'I'd be happy to wax lyrical on relational psychoanalysis or the psychodynamics of social media and technology,' I told her, 'but business is not my forte – I can't even look at an Excel spreadsheet'. Rima reassured me that her team had done their research, and that I was, in fact, the right guy: would I at least consider it?

The conundrum that Rima provoked in me with this invitation is one that has been central to my personal development since 2014, when I became involved with a project called Stillpoint. At that time, I was a psychotherapist, supervisor and academic, pursuing the quiet life of an introverted wonk that consisted mostly of psychotherapy, research and writing. The publication of my book, *The Psychodynamics of Social Networking*, gave me the opportunity to enjoy my more extraverted side through public speaking and the provision of workshops on psychoanalysis and technology. It was through these activities that I became involved with the Stillpoint community, then based in Berlin, and within a year of that, I had impulsively agreed to open up Stillpoint Spaces in London – a psychology hub with consulting rooms, and a co-working and events space.

I had no previous experience of business at all and had no idea what I was getting into.

It had taken me a decade of private practice just to learn how to save expense receipts and invoice clients in a way that didn't drive my accountant up a wall, yet, seemingly overnight, I was negotiating commercial leases, working out business rates, VAT returns and managing a small team. Within a couple years, I was managing Stillpoint across three cities in three different countries, while developing our international community online. Despite the mounting evidence that I was *doing business every single day*, I continued to see myself as a relatively good academic and psychotherapist who had accidentally found himself being a not very good businessman. The conundrum that Rima provoked was about my very identity. 'But Rima,' I heard myself saying yet again, 'I'm a shrink, not an entrepreneur! What do I have to say about business?'

It's without false modesty that I continue to claim *I really am not a good businessperson*. I have managed OK, but not brilliantly, and I still struggle with it. My real strength

continues to lie in my original occupation as a psychotherapist and theorist. The only way I could deliver my conference talk with any integrity was to subject my personal experiences in business, many of which were great struggles, to a psychotherapeutic analysis – and that's ultimately what I did. And it is through these words that I'd like to communicate the gist of that conference message here in *Private Practice*. And to get right to the point, the gist of that message is that not only did that business demand so much from me, but that it demanded it from my most inferior capacities, and because of this, it made me grow in ways I never would have expected nor would have achieved through psychotherapy alone. I found in business a surprise catalyst for my own individuation.

### **A turn toward Jung**

Though I am more theoretically oriented towards psychoanalysis, object relations and relational theory, I have more recently found

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Jung helpful in understanding my journey over the last decade or so. Perhaps this is because he is more oriented to the challenges that arise in mid-life, individuation and a person's search for greater meaning. Jung defines individuation as '...becoming a single, homogeneous being, embracing our innermost, last, and incomparable uniqueness, it also implies becoming one's own self... or self-realisation'.<sup>1</sup> He later goes on to describe individuation as '...the spontaneous manifestation of an unconscious process assisted by the technical ability of the patient'<sup>2</sup> (my emphasis).

This suggestion that 'technical abilities' are crucial to the manifestation of individuation is an interesting and important one. In my case, the technical abilities that business required were my least developed ones. Rather than drawing on my superior qualities, such as my capacity for abstraction, analysis and meaning making, business required me to draw on my inferior ones, like negotiation and conflict management (I'm naturally conflict avoidant), pragmatism (I'm an abstract thinker), project management (I'm not particularly organised), and horror upon horror, numbers and spreadsheets (I'm practically innumerate). There were times in the process when it felt like I was in one of those nightmares where you're back in school, failing a maths test, and naked to boot.

Jung quite rightly uses the metaphor of the heat of the crucible in alchemy that turns baser metals into gold. This is much more beautiful in theory than in real life – especially when you find yourself running a business hiring out therapy rooms and running live community spaces on the eve of a global pandemic that sends everybody home overnight. At the moment of greatest challenge, I found that everything I'd been trained to do as a psychotherapist was practically useless to me in running a business – in fact, you could say it put me at a disadvantage. I was trained to make space for others; be receptive of their darkest thoughts and most volatile feelings; be present for their fears, anxieties and insecurities; and to create psychological safety to contain all those things. Underlying all these skills lies the prerogative to be kind and non-defensive – and pretty much pretend that the business side of private practice (and especially the

exchange of money) is referred to as little as possible. I can assure you that all the above is pretty much the opposite of what one needs to boldly negotiate for the survival of a business head-to-head with a recalcitrant London commercial landlord in a time of crisis; and this is just one memorable example of the myriad contrary-to-character challenges I had to face during that period.

### Rising to the challenge

Before the pandemic, I was just about able to get away with my identity as the absent-minded professor who accidentally found himself running a business; but when the s\*\*t really hit the fan, I had no choice but to rise to the challenges of the actuality of my role and position. The rub was that those challenges were simply not solvable with the skills I'd acquired in my previous life as a therapist and academic. The capacity to deal with it was less about learning new skills (which I did) than about confronting my self-conception all together. Whether I liked it or not, I was running a business – and nobody cared, least of all recalcitrant London landlords, that I was *really* just a nice therapist playing the role of businessperson. In retrospect, I was avoiding my own personal growth through my refusal to let go of an identity that was simply no longer true. I may not have become a *good* businessperson, but I should stop pretending that I wasn't one altogether. I had, whether I liked it or not, outgrown my earlier identity and it was time to let that go. I was something different now. I had outgrown myself.

Jung noticed an interesting commonality among his patients who '...quietly, and as if unconsciously, outgrew themselves...'.<sup>3</sup> When a new thing arose (like a crisis, an illness, or in my case, running a business), either from within or outside themselves, '...they accepted it and grew with its help... If it came from outside, it became a profound inner experience; if it came from inside, it became an outside happening. In no case was it conjured into existence intentionally or by conscious willing, but rather seemed to be borne along the stream of time'.<sup>3</sup> Let's just parse this out a little bit:

- Jung intimates that many of his patients did not outgrow themselves. They, presumably, plateaued or got stuck along the way.
- Those who did outgrow themselves did so

quietly and unconsciously, in response to a new 'thing' that arose outside or within themselves. They did not ask for it or will it, but it happened anyway.

- And perhaps most importantly, '...they accepted it and grew with its help'.<sup>3</sup> It seems to me that acceptance is crucial to personal growth – acceptance of the thing, but also acceptance of how that thing changes you.

The damascene moment for me was when I realised that despite the clearly unpleasant objective challenges that confronted me, what made me *suffer* the most was my unwillingness to accept what was happening, alongside my refusal to accept myself as a person who was up to dealing with it (an actual businessperson). Once I accepted that, I was able to engage with it more healthily and allow myself to grow with its help. Rather than continuing the old narrative that I'd accidentally found myself in this situation by some quirk of fate, I embraced the fact that I had, however unconsciously, put myself there through a series of choices that had led to this point. This didn't stop the challenges from being unpleasant, but it did enable me to embrace them as something I'd somehow chosen for myself, and which was necessary (and at this stage unavoidable) for my own individuation and personal growth.

### **Book smart, shrink smart and street smart**

I used to joke that I got into psychotherapy because it was about as far away from numbers as you could get, and like every joke, there is some truth to this. Professionally, I managed to get into my 40s for the most part avoiding all those things that I found most difficult. I surrounded myself with words. I taught and wrote about the abstractions of theory, and I held spaces for healing human conversation. Those times I had to confront difficult things like numbers (for example, at the end of the tax year), I did so while holding my nose, and complaining about it more than necessary. Before I took on this business opportunity, I had successfully avoided many of the things I thought I couldn't do and identified closely with the introverted wonk who didn't have much time for the mundane concrete world that lay outside the consulting room walls. I was all about the soft skills.

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There were some very dark times in this transition from the abstract to the concrete – and many times I wished I hadn't chosen this path. To be honest, I still can't explain consciously how it came to be that I did. Still, having said that, business gave me the opportunity – rather, verily *required* me – to grow those parts of my Self that I may have got away with leaving undeveloped had I made different choices. To be clear, it wasn't all doom and gloom, and over the course of the project I had some wonderful moments – but it was the periods in the heat of the crucible that tempered me in ways that I never would have expected, and I came out the other side more whole, stronger and measurably less neurotic than when I went in. And while my inferior skills have developed somewhat, they are still not as good as my originally superior ones.

But, in the end, I have learned that it's not so much about skills after all. When one pursues a direction that feels contrary to one's character, there is an opportunity for individuation that wouldn't otherwise arise. The very nature of this individuation is accepting the loss of who you thought you were while still incorporating that into who you've become: you include all that, but you become larger. It's a life-long process, and while I can't say that business will continue to be my teacher interminably – whatever comes next, I'm grateful for the lessons. ●

### **WORDS**

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### **YOUR THOUGHTS, PLEASE**

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