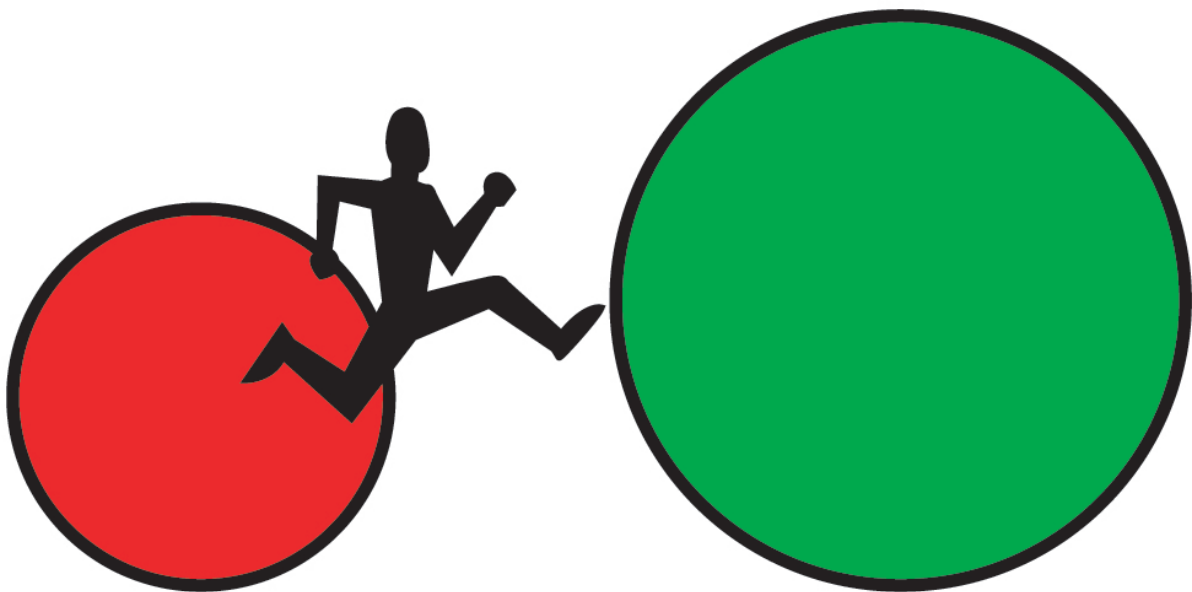

A Collection of Breakout Stories

The Second Edition

November 2006

50 stories of change
compiled by
Tony Page
and
Annette Broerse-Nijssen



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breakout stories

Foreword

Here you have a completely new edition, swollen from the original 17 to include 33 more breakout stories, more diverse in style, length and theme.

These stories are from and for people confronting a choice, which deep in our memories we first experienced as babies, venturing gleefully forth from armchair to coffee table, then effortlessly sweeping neatly placed objects into a heap on the floor, we felt our impact and new options. Since then from time to time, often starting with tentative and clumsy baby steps, we are compelled to re-invent our place in the world.

I have been inspired by friends making break-outs and break-ins, and become entranced by a set of themes that seem to run through their experiences. A learning set I began attending in 1996 has evolved into a sort of “pioneers club” as one by one my fellow members began breaking out of their former lives and rearranging themselves into new phases. For example T in self-employment was moving to be a full time mother, then exploring healing and deciding to enter a second career as teacher. Then A, finding herself hurt by values conflicts after her firm was acquired, left and drifted in an independent world before attaching herself to a fledgling enterprise called Human Insights. P completed his MBA, joined PA Consulting, left for a senior position in Deutsche Telecom then stopped coming to our meetings. J through various projects, alliances and start-ups is growing in skills and impact as he brings his heart to the centre of his work. R following a honeymoon period with Ashridge (a management development institution) is becoming inspired by an older dream she dared not believe could happen. G has navigated his way from a 21 year career with Hilton into a fresh start with Starbucks. M is drawing strength from her colleagues while leaving a firm she loved to embrace her next phase.

Earlier this year I could no longer ignore a need to express, make sense of and engage others in the breakout themes I was picking up. So my own current break-out was bound up with either sitting quietly on this, or doing something about it.

A hard lesson landed when my friends in the learning set did not really “get” where I was on this. Their hesitating rather than dashing off their stories, might in the past have stopped me in my tracks, but this time, I don’t know why, I became certain of my need to advance, and from then on I started to experience support from them and you and others, including Annette.

You might notice how each morning beside us quietly when we awake is a choice about how to approach the new day. One day we might awake boldly filled with a spirit of adventure, wanting to advance our lives, but another day be content to follow more familiar paths and routines. When you elect for adventure how are you to tap into the inner and outer resources you will need? Here, amongst the stories themselves, you will find feedback that is starting to reveal how the powerful twin processes of reading and writing stories can be harnessed to inspire and propel you on your breakouts.

Please dip in. If you find the sheer volume of this daunting, why not try short bursts, enjoying what you find, giving time for the stories to work their magic!

Tony, 16 November 2006

On Writing Your Story by Simon

This has really stirred something up inside me. It may seem odd but it's actually helping me "remember" why I do the things I do and what I'm about in terms of what I could give to others/a business.....

When I read my "story" again I do get uncomfortable, emotionally – but having written it I feel positive. In some respects I feel more confident - I've done some good things, I'm a good person, I CAN and WILL do this, again! I found writing the story is giving me (given I only finished it last night) a sense of perspective - something that I've been struggling with for a couple of months now. I now its clichéd but I am genuinely a big believer in the view that awareness is curative.

Mentally I've always tried to be acutely (too much at times because it can hinder me) aware of me, my behaviours/approach etc, and those around me - writing the story seems to help cement/commit this thinking - providing structure, freeing my head up to deal with what I need to do next and see the questions that only I can really answer. I shared the story with Caroline (tonight) which has helped me express and her understand where I'm at.

I do think that the writing definitely needs to be blended with coaching. I'm glad we (Tony and I) met beforehand because if we hadn't I'd now find myself with a desire for someone to ask me more questions - help move me on, interrogate what was really happening when the first breakout happened and what needs to the same/different for the arrival of the next. I could certainly see the benefits for an individual (myself included as my story continues) of writing at the point of breakout, as opposed to "post breakout", and working with a coach in the way I've described.

Does "everyone" know when they're breaking out? Is it the role of the coach/manager to help individuals "see it" for themselves? There's something momentous when it happens (I wrote about the rush, accountability, opportunity - I remember talking to people I met in the business about a huge bubble - and still had people asking me 2+yrs on "how my bubble was" - and nearly 4 years on it's all so refreshing and positively mentally stimulating).

Potentially, from a learning perspective for an individual, it's mind blowing stuff: often in life I think we "move on" too quickly. Breakout stories could hold you in the present whilst propelling you in to the future - helping you appreciate and capture what's actually going on. Maybe individuals would move quicker through the fear, uncertainty, doubt - keeping them focused on the point of breaking out.

The more I think about it the need or reason why I/someone is breaking out seems almost irrelevant???? - Is it about the courage, conviction, tenacity, competence that will be/is critical during the period of breakout? The point I made in my story about moving from good to great seems to keep running through my head... breakout story writing could help.

On Taking Inspiration from Others' Stories

by Malcolm ... and others

One of the things about reading the stories is it leaves me mulling over, pondering, which is perhaps the point. Some are easier to read than others. Some led me into conclusions I'm not sure I wanted. Some feel archetypal, and I'm a bit confined, oppressed.... then along comes a spark, and I'm somehow allowed to be who I am. If it seems done and dusted while this can be helpful in a way, it also makes me a bit cross. It is when you find yourself enmeshed in another story that you find it resonates.

A lot of it was about search for meaning, and a lot about chance. What is unsaid can be intriguing, disturbing, leaving me guessing, tragic...

In general this is about consciousness-raising. Stuff we keep hidden from ourselves, in the background, we choose to put it here because it is too frightening. The telling and reading of stories enables it to come to the surface. This happens more in the telling and writing process, letting words creep onto the page. Often when we are reading we do this in a more critical way: wanting to distil, not allowing myself to be immersed.

But I have found there is a different way to read, and some books are best read that way, James Joyce for example, then you enjoy it more. While there are people who specialise in free-fall writing in which you don't censor or punctuate or structure, a bigger question I am interested in is how to be in a flow state when reading.

After reading new questions arise: how would I like to approach my story-telling in a different way? If I wrote a paragraph from my new story, how might it read? What would be the flavour of it? How can reading and writing hold you in a place of possibility to make sense of your own experience?

Comments gathered from others:

- 1. Our behaviour is often a reaction to others*
- 2. I read them all wondering when I would get to mine. How will it compare? Will it measure up?*
- 3. Later I had a fantastic conversation with a colleague who had also written one of the stories.*
- 4. I am not alone. Gives me courage – there are others experiencing the same thing.*
- 5. Part of me is cross and frustrated, slightly resentful. It pisses me off all these people made transitions and I'm still stuck in it!*
- 6. I felt great empathy from and towards one author.*
- 7. There were bits in a number of stories that were really enlightening and a wake up call to me. I was struck by the fact that at different times, writers broke out with different things on their minds: some didn't care for money, some needed to care for money etc.*
- 8. I appreciate a story that says "Where I am right now is stuck and this is what stuck feels like!". I then feel gosh, I feel like that too and here's some reassurance. There's a value here in being helped to notice there's someone*

- else in this place, so I'm not a dismal failure: someone else is feeling stuck and inadequate too.*
- 9. When you find yourself enmeshed in another person's story, it resonates with you and that is interesting. Some left me mulling over, and this was the point: I did not want to be led into a fairytale conclusion.*
 - 10. I had a strong sense of many unfinished stories and as I reflected on my own unfinished story I felt both glad and frustrated.*
 - 11. Generally I felt a bit disappointed, and I am struggling to work out why. It may be because there was an element of sameness about them, including my own, which made them less stimulating than it could have been.*
 - 12. The fairytale story may be useful in some ways for making me think, but it seems too done and dusted. A lot were about a search for meaning and about chance.*
 - 13. I was struck by some pieces/phrases. Produces some affirmations/slogans I might be able to keep as a backdrop: Walk the line! Keep the faith! Ask for encouragement!*
 - 14. Hearing about someone else having lots of ideas, lots of fear and uncertainty, felt real and honest*
 - 15. Noticing someone else's massive commitment to change at a secure point in life was very impressive and inspirational.*
 - 16. Universal availability of support: it is always there.*
 - 17. There were bits in a number of stories that were really enlightening and were a wake up call to me. I was struck by the fact that at different times, writers broke out with different things on their minds – some didn't care for money, some needed to care for money etc.*
 - 18. I thought I've done bloody well to come out as unscathed as I feel.*
 - 19. To trust my urge towards creativity.*
 - 20. I realise I have a good relationship with fear; I'm afraid of the right things.*
 - 21. How respectful was I really of the other people who wrote stories? I took a long time to read and give my feedback.*
 - 22. I can read them again and again and every time pick out new things, wonder about aspects, think about 'what if's etc. It has been very inspirational!*
 - 23. A break out **can** bring you to the place where you want to be (in other words, the grass can indeed be greener on the other side). There is hope!*

No-one with a modicum of common sense would launch themselves in to the unknown unless they had to. It stands to reason. Risk takers invariably fail. And in my line of work, as a veterinary surgeon, who wants to take their cat or dog to a risk taker!



We would all prefer to stay in our own comfort zone, work with an acceptable level of stress that we can regard as 'healthy' but not place ourselves 'out there'. After taking the plunge of setting up a business the exciting times are always regarded as being the beginning of the venture. Well that's a luxury that people who are successful can reflect on. There's nothing exciting about facing bills that were not anticipated with an income stream that looks decidedly fragile.

So why on earth would a person venture out in business on their own. In my case there really wasn't any alternative. I got sacked. Feeling decidedly wounded from the injustice of it all I had a couple of options; find another job far away or stay where I was and set up on my own. Sure, I had been feeling for some time that I could do a better job self-employed. But like I said, in the healthcare sector you're not 'wired' to be a risk taker. So whilst it was a nice idea, if I was being honest with myself, it was always going to stay just that. Something fairly dramatic had to happen to move me from the comfort zone of regular income to self employment with all the precarious states it can leave you in. The injustice of being sacked for no good reason was the additional spur. As a minor aside I also took my former employer to court and won a case of unfair dismissal, which was sort-of cleansing in its own way, but financially a total waste of time.

Had I realised at the outset the plethora of petty (and not so petty) rules and regulations I would have to work through I'd have passed on the whole venture. Fortunately there isn't any such book that tells you all those things. I'm still surprised and bewildered, ten years in to running the business side of things, by the never ending stream of red tape and nuisance obstacles that the various organs of government put in the way. But even knowing what I do now there is absolutely no way that I wouldn't have gone it alone. The business itself has become an extension of my own personality, as I'm sure all small businesses become. It doesn't matter if you're a veterinary surgeon, plumber, IT consultant or whatever, being in charge of how you do things allows a lot more professional satisfaction than money can buy. Sure it's nice to be financially successful as well, but the real enjoyment is doing it your way, not being dictated to by others and not undertaking working practice that makes you uneasy.

I still run the single handed veterinary centre that I started ten years ago, and it's still single-handed. The end of each month is a financial 'concern' (it's improved from being a 'worry'). I'm still looking out of the window of my rented house at the same Peugeot 205 I bought second-hand all those years ago and I don't plan on replacing it too soon – my choice though as I can afford to.

Starting the veterinary centre was not something that I had a single minute of training for in all five years of my studies. Everything I've learnt about the business side of things has been done 'on the job'. It has been worrying more times than I've owned up to, and whilst I'm nowhere near as successful as many, I'm a lot happier than most. And ultimately that's worth an awful lot.

The benefit from writing the story was in terms of being able to reflect on the 'journey' (if that's not too melodramatic a term to use). It's always the case that we're meant to keep looking forward toward the next stage in the progress of a company. Rarely do we look backwards and reflect on just how far we've come. I'm not given to self-congratulatory backslapping, but every so often seeing just what has been achieved is a boost to confidence.

For me there was nothing to be lost by the exercise. Plenty to be gained (as indeed it was) and certainly no real difficulty in writing the piece. Having done it though I think a yearly review for the 'boss' wouldn't be a bad thing. The question is - who should do it?



breakout stories

(Told by a taxi driver at 9pm near Heathrow)

Seven years ago I was 42 years old and I lived happily with my wife and two children in Kosovo. Then the Serbs started killing and driving Albanians out of Kosovo and we had to leave our house which has since been destroyed.

Prior to this I worked as the export director of a large company employing 8000 people. Now I am driving this taxi.

It was a very difficult and confusing time. Can you imagine? You have created your life, your home and your family is happy. Then one day it is taken away from you.

15000 died and most of Europe did nothing. Britain was the only country that came in and supported us. There is a long relationship stretching back between Britain and Albania to before the first world war and this helped me gain a work permit here when we fled to Britain: we were fortunate.

Since then we have had to rebuild our lives. We will be passing my wife's flower shop in a minute. I will point it out. We can stop if you want to bring home some flowers to your wife. She has already completed her degree in design and had recently opened this shop. It is a really positive thing for her. Before this she was cleaning to earn money. One day the husband she cleans for turned up at our door and asked her if she had seen his wallet when she was cleaning. He was not actually accusing her but she felt accused and humiliated. She cried and cried. There was nothing I could do. It was terrible. Now she has opened the shop she is happy again.



My children are getting on well here. My son who is 13 has results equivalent to a 19 year old. He recently received an award presented by a government minister. My daughter is also settled and doing well.

It is taking me longer than my wife. My qualifications were not recognised so first I studied A levels and now I have just completed a law degree. I have one more year in law school before I can practice, then the challenge for me will be to get a job. I speak 5 languages but my English is not very good and being 49 it is not so easy to pick up. To be a lawyer it is all about the details of the language and my English is still not good. I did have a part-time job helping a lawyer in Watford but he has retired. Now I am thinking of getting involved with British people who want to buy and sell properties in former Yugoslavia.

Recently I have been invited back to Kosovo to get involved in restoring it. It is now protected by the UN and safe but I am not sure. It is not so easy. Our house is gone. But I will go back to see. The Serbs cannot harm us now and Milosovic is dead. But in truth one person could not have done this: politicians, the orthodox church, the propaganda, many people were involved. Although I will never be able to get back what we lost I am now optimistic for my children. So I can forgive. But I will never forget.

