

THE STORY OF DORY THE CAT

David Epston, 1988

I introduce the following story into families where young people, for any number of reasons, are experiencing difficulties belonging, and their parents/caretakers, for any number of reasons, are experiencing difficulties belonging them.

The Browns were one such family. Mark, now in his late 40's, had separated from his wife when his only child, Ellen, was three. Since that time, he had been a litigant in one of the most acrimonious and unrelenting access and custody disputes I have known. What sustained him emotionally and justified the immense legal expenses he incurred was an indelible image of three year old Ellen.

Some months before we met, he had lost his custody bid once and for all in the High Court. However, by this time, he had remarried Jan and they now had two young children of their own, aged 2 and 4.

Throughout these litigious years, Ellen obviously was training in hatred at the same time as developing a great passion for horses and horse-riding. She was to comment later, that at times she preferred horses to people and one could certainly sympathize with her point of view.

However, we were to find out later that Ellen and her mother and partner had been having family therapy as she became more under her own control and less under theirs. Without warning, Mark was contacted by his ex-wife to inform him that Ellen was now his and that he could pick her up that night at the Domestic Terminal, Auckland Airport. Mark, who since the High Court decision had started to accept the inevitability of having little to no involvement with his long-lost daughter, must have wondered if there was some higher authority at work for his dreams to come true in such an unexpected manner. Hardly able to restrain himself, he rushed to the

airport to be reunited with his daughter.

Rekindling within himself the image of his beloved, three year old daughter, he waited impatiently: Ellen arrived, no longer 3, but a tall, self-willed 12 year old. His greetings expressed all his longing; her response was that of a person sworn to revenge. Every kindness he offered was replied to by scratching, swearing, scowling and hissing reminiscent of a cornered animal. Nothing he said or did seemed to make any difference. In fact, the harder he tried, the more hateful Ellen became. Scowling and verbal abuse often led to violent assaults on Mark. A rather strong-willed man himself, Mark had never known anything like this. He had undertaken a commando training during his army service and was still terrified.

The story was told to Ellen at the beginning of the 3rd session. It was necessary to reorganize the seating arrangements. Ellen would typically seat herself as far away from her "new" family as was physically possible, but in the direct line of vision of her father. She would embrace the largest soft toy she could locate. If looks could have killed, Mark would have been moribund. Richard, in order to capture her attention, requested that Mark (for the duration of the story) stand at a safe distance, behind her. She desisted from shouting mordant comments and at other times from hissing contemptuously.

The story was as follows:

There once was a cat called Dory. She was a long-haired ginger cat with a big, fat bushy tail, a big white ruff around her neck, and a little bit of white right at the very tip of her nose. One day, she just more or less turned up at our house, probably because we had two other cats and sometimes we would leave their food outside on the back step. I guess that's how Dory came to start dropping by every so often. She looked an awful mess. She had great big fur balls all over her and she just couldn't seem to get rid of them. She would try, but it seemed too much of an effort. Under all that cat fur, we

guessed that she was pretty slim and pretty hungry. Also she never made any friendly cat noises at all - no meowing, no purring, but just growling.

Our two cats, Sammy and Monty, didn't like her coming around one bit and would give her a smack whenever they got the chance. We didn't like them doing this and told them off but they just started doing it behind our backs. Dory never stood up for herself or fought back. She just ran away and would only come back when the other cats weren't looking. When we gave Dory food, Sammy and Monty would eat their food quickly and then push Dory aside and eat hers too. This was very unfair. We tried telling Sammy and Monty off and smacking them when they were mean, but it did no good at all. They still kept doing it.

One day, we got an idea. Why not belong Dory? If she belonged, she would stand up for herself against Monty and Sammy. How do you belong a cat? I went to the library and looked up books on cats. There was nothing in them on belonging cats. I rang up some cat lovers, but they couldn't help me either. I thought to myself I will have to invent Dory's belonging. One thing I did know about Dory was that she just adored anchovies. What are anchovies? They are little fish that are very salty and strong-tasting. (I have enclosed some anchovies for you to taste (Now you know what I mean!))

I then made a long line of anchovies leading from the hedge where Dory would hide out, to the back door of my house. I left several inches in between. I then went back to the door and stood there quietly, kneeling with my hand held out as if to pet her. She would start eating the anchovies but then see my hand held out and run away. Every day for a long time, I did this. Each time, she ate more anchovies and got closer to my hand. I took my time; Dory took her time, but she sure liked those anchovies.

The first time she bumped into my hand, she, a fright and scratched me. She didn't know how to put her claws in like most cats. I was

hurt and angry and almost wanted to hit back; didn't. I thought to myself - I am big and have plenty of belonging. I decided to see if I could stick it out. Again and again it happened and every time, Dory would get a fright, scratch me and then run away. She didn't know yet how to keep her claws in. But, because I was so interested, I noticed that the scratches were not quite so deep or didn't hurt quite so much. I guessed Dory was starting to belong me just as well as I was starting to belong her. I came to look forward to those little scratches every time - they even started to tickle.

Once I laughed Dory usually ran away if there was any noise Not this time. She stood still, wondering what it was all about. Then the most amazing thing happened. Dory meowed!

I never thought I would like a meow quite so much as I did that day. After that - it wasn't overnight at all - but it seems that way looking back, because from that day on, Dory always kept her claws in, even if she got in a temper with me. More and more, she allowed me to touch her. And then one day, Dory jumped up in my lap. We've belonged to each other ever since although I'm not quite sure exactly when it all started. Was it the anchovies? Was it my hand held out ready to pet her? Was it Dory learning that she could scratch me and I would still hold out my hand? Was it Dory deciding to trust me and keeping her claws in? I will never know now. It's too late. What I do know is that Dory belongs to me and I belong to Dory to the day we die.

The story in itself did not, by any stretch of the imagination, bring about any instant reunion. But it did seem to start a long and difficult process of accommodation with Mark coming to appreciate his self-willed daughter and Ellen appreciating her self-willed father.

Appendix

Terry, aged 13, was another un-belonged young person. By coincidence, his family had very recently provided him with a kitten.

I ended the fifth session with his family by reading the story of Dory The Cat and gave him a copy of his own. I met Terry a month later and in the course of the interview, I questioned him about the story:

DE How many times have you read the story?

Terry I've read it three or four times.

DE Where was it kept?

Terry It's sitting above Dad's desk. And I just grab it and take it up to read it in bed. After I read it, I feel happy and I give my cat a big cuddle.

DE When do you do this?

Terry I read it sometimes when the family is upset fights or something.

DE Why does it make you so happy?

Terry I feel happy because I've got somebody I can love.

DE How does the story tell you that?

Terry The story tells me how people can get attached to other things and objects. This sort of idea - to be loved and to have somebody love you - could influence me to change my ways ... probably.

DE How would that work?

Terry I'd have quite a bit more influence probably to change completely. It's too soon to say if Terry's prediction comes true, but I hope he's right.