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UCHANGE

In the first session the subject (hereafter 'S.') was woken in a Standard Room. Though S. had been warned to expect surprises, S. was still surprised. The bare and unfamiliar surroundings were no doubt a source of confusion, as was the subject's wrists being bound. But for S. the greatest shock was probably being naked and chained to a metal post.

'Is this a joke?' yelled S. while looking wildly around the room. We waited fifteen seconds. Then we woke the goose.

In the opinion of four of the observers (the fifth refused to speculate on a bird's mental state) the volume of the goose's honking suggested she was angry. While S.'s fear was entirely justified – a goose bite is a solid seven on the Mueller Bite Scale – S. was failing to consider things from the goose's point of view. *She* had not been warned or given her consent. Whatever confusion and distress S. was experiencing, hers was certainly worse.

S. was bitten thirteen times, none of which were serious, just extremely painful. The worst injury S. received was self-inflicted. Our subject's efforts to escape resulted in severe abrasions to the tethered ankle. This was a wound we had foreseen but could not prevent. S.'s propensity for avoidance/flight behaviour was well-documented. S. left rooms in the middle of arguments, refused eye contact, and only communicated via text message.

When we saw blood on the goose's beak we thought it prudent to subdue them both. After the goose was found to be unharmed – it was only S.'s blood – she was revived, fed several kinds of grain, then returned to her pond to rest for six hours. During this time we cleaned S.'s wounds, then provided intravenous nutrition.

Sessions two, three and four were broadly similar. S. woke, saw the goose, then became distressed. While trying (and failing) to avoid the goose's attacks, S. made legal and physical threats against the UCHANGE Corporation (which had little to fear, being blessed with a distinguished team of lawyers). At no point did S. seem to consider that all the shouting was upsetting the goose. Each of these sessions had to be terminated early.

In contrast to our subject's tantrums, by the fifth session our goose was habituated to the situation. Her peck and honk rates significantly decreased, suggesting that she, unlike S., didn't need to attack when she felt trapped.

Some subjects break arms or legs; a few bite off their tongues. Yet these actions are not unexpected: most subjects are profoundly disturbed. Even so, our entire group was appalled by S's actions in the sixth session. After being woken in the typical fashion – a 60Hz pulse to the thalamus for five seconds – S. did not, as in previous sessions, sit up and unleash a torrent of abuse. Instead S. lay still. There was nothing suspicious about this: all subjects become catatonic early in their treatment.

As the goose approached the supine S., she made her usual honks. But these honks did not, in our majority opinion (the team member who had previously abstained did so again, while another disagreed entirely) suggest agitation. They could have been honks of curiosity, or her way of saying 'Here I am.' Often a honk is just a honk, just as a kiss, hug, or caress may have no ulterior motive. But these arguments would have been lost on S., who during the initial UCHANGE consultation had freely admitted to being uncomfortable with displays of affection. To quote S., 'I can't help thinking the person is only being loving to make me say how much I love them.'

As we watched S. do nothing, one of us expressed satisfaction that our subject had been brought so quickly to a catatonic state. Only I thought, 'What if?' But before I could share this suspicion with the rest of the team S. sat up and lunged at the goose. Though she did her best to escape, our subject managed to grasp her by the neck.

We had no choice but to push what we call the Red Button (it is actually blue). S. went into spasms, allowing the goose to escape. All observers are required to endure a ten-second burst of this pain to dissuade them from using it capriciously. One member of our team who'd had his arm burned by an industrial laser said that those ten seconds were worse. Another team member said it was like giving birth, but many times more painful, as if her brain and all the organs in her chest were tearing through her flesh.

After this incident, the sessions were suspended while the goose recovered. In addition to a bruised throat, one of her wings was damaged. This was a matter of grave concern; one of us (the abstainer) wanted to withdraw the goose and cancel the whole treatment. We had to patiently explain to him that firstly, nothing would be gained by exposing another

goose to the same risks, and secondly, that any replacement goose would be less habituated to S., and thus more likely to attack. And so the cycle would repeat. .

During the hiatus we reviewed S.'s emotional history. The two failed marriages, the three abandoned children, the many broken hearts. In all of our subject's relationships the pattern was the same. An initial period of euphoric optimism would make S. feel so incredibly close to the other person that their future together was guaranteed to be perfect. When, after several weeks, this optimism began to wane, S. would try not to be discouraged. S. was determined to make things work, to focus on the other person's positive qualities rather than their irritating flaws. So what if B. sang out loud when S. was trying to read? Or that C. sometimes stopped to talk to random homeless people for several minutes in a manner that felt contrived, as if they weren't doing it out of genuine interest or concern, but so they could use the moment as evidence that they were a 'good' person? But despite S.'s best efforts, such issues acquired more and more significance, until they seemed to epitomise all that was wrong with B. or C.. S.'s increasing moodiness and mental distance from B. or C. or D. would make the loved one demand to know what the problem was. And S. couldn't explain, because S. knew it was petty, and yet it seemed so important. All S. could do was leave.

This was the pattern of behaviour that made us construct a scenario S. couldn't escape from. All the scenario's elements – the implacable goose, the lack of exits, being tied to the pole – reinforced this message. We hoped that a situation of continual crisis might force the subject to confront their fear of intimacy. Instead our subject was resisting the cripplingly expensive treatment they had wanted so much they had sold their house and car.

By the time the goose received a clean bill of health, our team had devised a new approach. Legal assured us that the contract provided us with the necessary latitude.

In session seven we activated S., who was understandably groggy, having been kept unconscious for five days. Two minutes after that we woke the goose. Some researchers claim that geese have poor memories, but there was no doubt that *our* goose recalled her last encounter with S. She rushed at our subject with rage.

There is no greater wake up call than the imminent attack of a goose. S. quickly stood, albeit shakily, then adopted what can only be described as a

fighting stance. The unchained foot was placed in front, ready to kick, while S.'s centre of gravity was kept low.

Geese have delicate necks. They are not like the necks of giraffes that swing fast through the air as a weapon. A well-placed kick can break that feathered tube.

And so when the goose was five feet from S. we pressed the Red Button. We pressed it and we counted. Some subjects black out after ten seconds; ours screamed for fifteen.

In the following session, we woke S. and then immediately pressed the Red Button. S. screamed for twenty seconds, prompting speculation that S. might have an abnormally high pain threshold (the record is twenty-five seconds). But in sessions nine, ten, eleven and twelve, S. passed out more quickly.

When we woke S. for session thirteen we did not press the Red Button. We were reassured to see S. immediately adopt a foetal position. S. stayed like that even after the goose attacked. Her most well-placed pecks – three to the face, and four to the groin – elicited no response. Though our hands remained on our Red Buttons, S. was no longer a threat.

This was an assessment the goose seemed to share. Over the next five minutes her peck rate declined, until she abruptly sat down next to the face of the still unmoving S. While S. did not flinch or betray any sign of distress, S.'s heart rate did increase. Ideally the goose would have remained next to S. until S.'s heart rate returned to normal, but unfortunately the goose took this opportunity to relieve herself. Though she did not excrete onto S.'s face, the faecal product was nonetheless ejected directly under S.'s nose. And while we hear a lot of nonsense from subjects about how evolution is to blame for their emotional and sexual problems (usually that their desire to cheat on their partners is some kind of biological imperative), there's no denying that certain kinds of revulsion are hardwired into us. Rather than have a reflex undo all our efforts – we pictured S.'s twitch of disgust, the goose's vicious response – we quickly deactivated both S. and the goose.

There's often a point in treatment when it becomes apparent to observers that their subject has a real chance to heal. Most textbooks argue that nothing can be known about a subject's prospects until they leave the catatonic phase. Though it is true that 24% of subjects remain catatonic until removed from the Standard Room, we believe that the virtues of the catatonic state are

unjustly dismissed. As four of us argue in a forthcoming paper in *The Journal of Affective Psychopathology*, 'the apparent unresponsiveness of the subject during the catatonic state is no indicator of his or her mental state. A blank expression and vacant stare may well be the inverse of the subject's mind. Rather than being empty, their mind may only now be fully engaged in solving the problems that led the subject to seek help.'

But to our abstemious colleague, the deathly immobility of S. during the fourteenth session wasn't cause for optimism. He congratulated us on how well we had broken the subject. 'But don't confuse this with S. being fixed,' he sneered.

We met his cynicism in a calm, reasoned manner. 'Look,' we said, and pointed at the screen on which S. was not moving, and the goose was not pecking, just calmly preening herself. 'Don't you see the achievement?' We then reminded him of our subject's inability to fall asleep while facing their partner. Even when he shouted, 'But this is a fucking *goose!*', we kept our temper. 'A goose is never just a goose,' we informed him. 'A goose can be many things. She can be a lover, a wife, a husband, a mother, a father, a teacher the subject wanted to impress. She can be anyone from the subject's past.'

When this didn't convince our sceptic, all we could do was shrug. If he couldn't see that S. had taken a baby step towards healing, there was nothing to do but wish him luck in his next profession.

The next session would usually have been scheduled for the following day, but we thought it wise to postpone the session. We all needed time to clear our minds of the accusations our former colleague had callously hurled.

We were reassured by the events of session fourteen. We wished our former colleague could have seen S. weep when the goose stopped pecking them and moved to the other side of the room. 'Thank you, thank you,' S. kept saying, thinking the goose was showing mercy, when she was merely drawn to a subsonic pulse we'd activated. Even with our knowledge of the deception, the moment was still touching. One of us was so moved that he copied some of the video footage and sent it to everyone in his social networks, who then shared it with everyone in theirs, and while this undoubtedly had positive consequences – making people happy etc. – the downside was that our colleague had to be dismissed for violating client confidentiality.

S.'s responses in sessions fifteen to twenty were absolutely textbook. Watching the screen was like viewing a familiar play with a different cast. This was a new goose, and a new subject, but the same scenes had taken place thousands of times before. As one of us joked, this must be how God feels all the time.

But even He might have stifled a yawn at the way S. followed the emotional script. No circus creature could have leapt through those hoops with greater alacrity. It had been a short hop from fear to gratitude; from there it was an equally small step for S. to feel affection for the goose. By the end of session seventeen S. had given her a name. As for why S. chose 'Emmie', we had no idea; it belonged to no one in S.'s personal history.

When S. was woken for session nineteen, the first thing our subject noticed was that they were wearing trousers and a sweater. It was the first time we'd seen S. smile, but it didn't last long. S. quickly realised the goose wasn't moving. 'Emmie?' said S., then tried to go toward her, forgetting the leash. S. fell then lay on the floor, saying over and over, 'Emmie, are you alright?'

We let this go on for several minutes before waking 'Emmie'. It's fascinating how a scene that seems excruciatingly corny to someone viewing it from the outside can feel like a moment of heightened emotional splendour to someone within it. What could be more clichéd than a person kneeling with their hands outstretched as a person/animal rushes towards them? And yet there was no mistaking S.'s joy as 'Emmie' approached while honking and shaking her tail. It was like an emotional maple syrup dripping from S.'s eyes and mouth. Nothing in S.'s face, posture or heart rate suggested concern about being pecked. The three of us ticked the TRUST box on our forms.

S.'s faith was not mistaken. When 'Emmie' got within beak-range she didn't even hiss. She looked at S., and S. looked back, and then S. slowly extended the two hands that by being bound were basically one. These hands, or hand, touched the side of the goose, and although I had my finger on the Red Button, my colleagues weren't worried. As the goose's feathers were stroked, her beak hovered close to S.'s face, which could not have been a better target, given S.'s arms were lowered. But 'Emmie' not only accepted S.'s affection, she also seemed to return it. Her beak nuzzled against S.'s shoulder in such an adoring manner that our former, social

media-loving colleague would have been unable to restrain himself from creating a video file of the moment. Even knowing that the sweater worn by S. had been rinsed in a liquid proven to attract waterfowl (with the exception of swans) would not have blunted the moment's appeal for him. And we would not blame him for this. There's so little romance in life; sometimes you must invent it.

S. and 'Emmie' stayed in their almost embrace for another ten minutes, and doubtless would have gone on longer. But the INTIMACY box had been ticked. First S., then 'Emmie', began to look tired. S. lay down, then 'Emmie' did too, and in this way they faded into sleep together. It was as graceful a deactivation as you're likely to see.

We were impatient to start the final session, but couldn't neglect the precautions. 'Emmie' and S. received thorough examinations. The goose was fine, but we found minor abnormalities in S.'s ECG – too much theta, a sporadic alpha. Our cardiologists assured us this wouldn't prove fatal for another decade.

We woke 'Emmie' first. When S. came to she was already nuzzling against their shoulder. S. sighed happily, said 'Oh Emmie', then started to stroke her feathers. After that, I kept one eye on 'Emmie' and S. while with the other I watched the hands of the clock move with an awful slowness. Twenty minutes is a long time inside a small room without windows. Especially when those twenty minutes are a solid block of time that can't be accelerated, that must be endured, while knowing you could instead be spending an extra twenty minutes with the person you love, who you want to be with, who says they want to be with you, but can't, not yet, not until their kids are older.

But at some point during that twenty minutes I came back to just what we had achieved. We had helped a person fool themselves into thinking a creature feels something it cannot, just as they could not, the difference being that the creature was never aware of this lack. The creature had not watched itself playing the same role in relationship after relationship, saying the wrong things, repeating mistakes, hurting so many people. So the person wasn't only a fool for thinking that a creature might love them, they were also a desperate fool. And maybe this would save them.

'Shall we?' I said after nineteen minutes and forty-five seconds had passed. 'Why not,' said my colleague, so slowly it was almost a drawl. The

other just nodded, brushed her bangs from her forehead, then unlocked the plastic casing which housed a button that was actually red. She looked at the clock, five seconds passed, and then it was time. She pressed the button and as usual, nothing seemed to happen. Another minute had to pass before 'Emmie' raised her head from S's shoulder. As if she were straining her ears to catch some very faint sound.

'What is it Emmie?' said S., with as much concern as if she were a sleeping partner who had suddenly woken. 'What is it?'

She honked, but not in answer. It was a honk of distress. Her neck drooped and she took a step back and then began to shake. Soon it was like invisible hands were pulling her in different directions. S.'s hands, though visible, could not reach her, and so all S. could do was watch and shout for help while feeling genuine anguish. Her honking grew higher in pitch, then abruptly stopped. For the next thirty seconds she was silent and writhing, her orange feet kicking as if she were drowning. During this period S. shouted 'No!' seventeen times.

When she went still, so did S. And I looked away from the screen, at the clock, where the hands were still sweeping round. When I looked back S. was lying on the floor, at full stretch, fingers clawing at the air that kept them from the body of 'Emmie'. S. was crying silently through eyes that were so tightly closed they seemed to be trying to burrow into S.'s skull. The three of us looked at each other, nodded, then ticked the COMMITMENT box.

That evening, as I lay in bed with Sue, I kept looking at the clock – she had to leave at eight. I thought of my two former colleagues, wondering if they would miss the job, the sense of achievement. Inevitably, I also thought of S., who at that moment was definitely sleeping in an actual bed. I wondered how long it would take S. to find true and lasting happiness. Unlike our geese (who adore the retirement pond), our subjects often find the transition back to 'real life' difficult. But we do all we can. After the last session we keep subjects sedated for between six to eight weeks, so that when they wake their memories are hazy. Whilst they never think the sessions were only a dream, their recollections are dream-like. They don't know what sequence things occurred in, or why; they recall absurd and horrible things that cannot possibly have happened.

This loss of clarity is vital (and not just for legal reasons). It's the feelings, not the details, we want them to keep. If most go on to find husbands, wives,

a face they can look at, a voice they can stand, it is because they retain the memory of having surrendered to a force greater than their selfish needs. Something that could hurt them, and often did, and yet could also spare them. Of course there are no guarantees. But we have our hopes.