



## TWENTY HELPFUL THINGS MY THERAPISTS SAID



by Carolyn Spring

### 1. I LIKE PINEAPPLE

I don't suppose it's unusual to like pineapple, but here was a person who liked pineapple and blueberries, who ate breakfast, who was real: alive and different and existing in her own right, someone who ate pineapple, not just someone who wanted to hurt me. There was a delectable simplicity about liking pineapple, and that throwaway comment crashed against months of avoidant haranguing and fearful apprehension of this person who otherwise had seemed unknowably untrusting of me. Now in three words I felt trusted – trusted to know that she likes pineapple. And the tiny enormity of that pineapple, exposed in a languid disclosure, made us realise how little we knew of normal, of favourite fruit and breakfasts without dread and a sore throat.

### 2. I DON'T THINK SEX IS YUK

Possibly said in defeat, not knowing how to counter indignant, adolescent repulsion, but a breakthrough nonetheless, peeling away layer upon layer of darkest assumption that sex is yuk, that all sex is yuk, that everyone finds sex yuk. I don't think sex is yuk – a dazzling possibility, shocking, promising, hopeful. Someone brave enough, convinced enough, at last to say: there is good sex, sex that isn't perverted or disgusting or harmful or coercive or humiliating or sickening or abusive. And so a summary of the wrongness of what happened to us and a validation of our clenched-tight-knowing that it was wrong, that we hated it, that we were right to hate it; and relief that there is something else, something better, something unpolluted and clean and wholesome and lovely; a validation

that the ache within us for something good, something not-yuk, is okay.

### 3. IT'S NOT HAPPENING NOW

Those words – it's not happening now – used to prickle: they scratched me, irritated me, they were caustic and unwanted. At first I just felt stupid – I know it's not happening now. But slowly that mantra began to contain the awfulness of flashbacks: everything compressed together in a sandwiched world of past-and-present together, the room around me vague and dreamlike, choking breathlessness, hot flakes and embers of disgust, retching self-loathing ... of memories happening now. All this was like a collision of time: nothing was real, or distinct, or remarkable. It just was, it just is. Then the whisper-like certainty of it's not happening now. And a gradual re-orienting of my mind towards it's over and a disengagement from the triggering panic. Bit by bit, over time, the mantra became a buffer – it's okay, it's not happening now – so that detached and curious, I could hear 'You're just being triggered and nothing more, nothing more', until the arousal ebbed away.

### 4. I CAN HELP YOU

I grew up in a world where no-one helps you, where you can only, really, help yourself and where those who are supposed to protect you, instead of doing so, deliberately and intentionally hurt you. Desperate for years with the sparseness of medical and church-based help, desperate with guilt and self-harm, desperate with suicide, desperate

with post-traumatic stress and the clamouring screech inside of 17 years of abuse, desperate with the aloneness of ostracism and stigma ... and then one day, in a therapist's office, in a first session, she says I can help you. Electrifying, time-stopped, breathless wonder and disbelief that after years of people watching me be raped and tortured and degraded – people watching and participating but never ever intervening or preventing or helping – here is someone saying I can help you. Is it a trick? What do I have to give in return? Are you mad? But then, with stillness, with conviction, with quietness, so that the air did not move and the traffic outside did not drone: I can help you.

### 5. I BELIEVE YOU

No-one believes you. You know that; deep inside, you have always believed it; you were told it; it is truth. When you talk of things that happened that shouldn't happen, things that don't happen, things that can't happen, why would anyone believe you? You don't believe yourself. In your mind – in your minds! – all the time, two truths, two worlds: the outside world of everyone else's truth, and the inside one of confusion and pain. There is no confirmation, no validation, of your inner world in the outer world. Whispers in darkness that say: That didn't happen; you're making it up; no-one will believe you if you tell. Confusion of what in the middle of the night was dream and what was real, the insistence (loud, strident) to yourself that pain doesn't hurt and they won't believe me. But then I spoke, words funnelling out from petrified blanks in



my mind, words squeezed into being to describe the things that are true in my tremulous body and frozen affect but that my mind would not believe. And she said I believe you and a shudder, a pleading inside – please don't believe me; please don't let it be true – but an exhalation too of tension, the knowing that what is true has been validated as true and there is now at least one person in the world – for the first time one person in the world – who can tell me that it's true and that it happened and that I'm real.

## 6. IT WASN'T YOUR FAULT

Never had it occurred to me consciously that it was my fault; always unconsciously did I believe that it was. But suddenly those words – it's not your fault – and I realised that I had always blamed myself, always felt responsible, always assumed, in narcissistic, precocious error, that I caused it. Then the disturbing, fluttery fear that I didn't cause it: was I really so helpless? That seemed, somehow, worse. So I oscillated back, in those words – it wasn't your fault – between sturdy powerlessness and guilty exoneration. If it wasn't my fault, whose was it? Years of assumption, schemata for living, shaken up like a bag of flour and lying now like a fine dust over my sense of self. Do I blame someone else if I can't blame myself? How can I blame them? – better to blame myself. That people did evil things to me, and I didn't deserve it, and I wasn't to blame, is newly traumatic: I live in a world that I cannot control through taking the blame, and my worldview feels anxiously collapsed.

## 7. I'M SORRY

These are the words that adults in my life never spoke. Two apologies: I'm sorry that it happened – shocking, why would anyone care? – and I'm sorry I got it wrong – impossible humility; it must be a trick. Can it be true, that someone is sorry that it happened? – when caregivers stood by and failed to act, failed to be sorry, showed no regret? What is this person, recently a stranger, feeling towards me? Suddenly I see care and compassion lived out, acted out, articulated and enunciated in the form of these words – I am sorry – and there is glimmering hope. Then later, at a moment of empathy-failure – I am sorry I got it wrong: and that sears me with wonder. You can't be wrong, it must be me, it is always me that is wrong – I am fretfully intolerant of this apology, and I flail around needing to find the hard aggression I am so used to in people who are always right even when they are hurting me. I am sorry I hurt you – people don't apologise for hurting me, do they?

## 8. I DON'T UNDERSTAND

My therapists are not omniscient, and they don't understand. I'm glad when they say it. I'm glad when they stop pretending that what I'm saying makes sense to them. I don't know how to communicate the confusion and the distress, fragments of being and fragments of knowing, that I lived in, that I did, that I was. I feel betrayed by the all-knowing smugness of a therapist who seems to understand. I am trying to speak of things that I cannot comprehend,



that I cannot integrate, that I cannot fit with the normal, the outer, the shared, the real. Sometimes when I hear I don't understand, I hear an acknowledgement, not a failure, an incomprehension that reflects my own, and it feels calming to sit with their broken uncertainty rather than alone in my own.

## 9. YOU'RE OK JUST AS YOU ARE

I grew up with unconditional negative regard, my acceptability nebulous and eternally unattainable. So I leaned forward continually and expectantly into the disdain-eyes of my mother in everything I did, leaning forward, forward, trying always that little bit harder to be the good girl who never complained or resisted. I will try harder, I will be better, I will unlove myself enough to be okay one day. Look at me! My efforts to my unpleasable mother always said; I know I'm bad but look at how hard I'm trying not to be. Never hard enough. I could empty myself of everything that is me and still never attain it. You're ok just as you are: it feels like heresy, disloyal and unkind. I know I'm not okay. How can I be so ungrateful to my mother as to disagree with her omniscient contempt of me? This new person, this impostor, this 'therapist': everything about her must be wrong. She is wrong to accept me, wrong to approve me. The impossible unrightness of my mother's dismay at who I am is the normative, regulated state of my mind; being ok just as I am grates and jars, painful in its painlessness.

## 10. I WON'T SEND YOU AWAY

If I make you cross, if I make you sad, if I make you frustrated, if I make you scared, if I make you yuk, if I make you repulsed ... will you send me away? Of course you will. Can it really be true that there is this place, this one place in the whole world, this one place in this empty humming space between us in this room right here right now – one place where I can be? – one place where I can say anything, one place where I can feel anything, one place where I can stay? The clock hand ticks and I know I will have to leave but I can come back next week – the certainty of that is exhilarating. I can keep coming back, can't I? Whatever is unfinished, unsaid, undone: we can bring it here again next week can't we? Suddenly I have a future – week-long, 7 days – I have a future where we can look at a past that isn't now, and I can keep coming back, coming back into more and more now moments, and I can keep saying and being and feeling and you won't send me away. One wrong move as a child and dread sucked up my insides like a vacuum cleaner: I will be sent away, to some Oliveresque children's home faintly but grotesquely sketched in my imagination: I had to be very very careful not to do the wrong thing and be sent away, and now here – here in this empty humming space between us – I can be and not be sent away. Can I?

## 11. YOU'RE NOT YUK

Yuk is the child's word to convey the fetid, rancid, seething disgust, the slithering foulness, of wet and scum and





nauseating me. I describe horror and repulsiveness and I am smeared with the reality of it, wiping away the crud and the excrement as if it still remains. I tell you and mirrored in your eyes I see the revulsion that you see in me and then softly and cleanly and honestly and truly you speak to me: You're not yuk. The words are like magic – a gasping for breath, a really? and something in your eyes of openness and compassion is the first time I've heard that in that way, the first time I've believed that I'm not a Little Shit. And it is a magical wiping away and I can't believe you just yet but I want to and the oil-slick blackness inside emulsifies slightly at your detergent kindness, and swirling patterns appear in my mind of aspirations of possibilities of hopes of being one day clean.

## 12. I'M NOT CROSS WITH YOU – I'M CROSS WITH THEM

People don't need a reason to be cross; people just are cross; they need a reason not to be cross. There is this mother: scratchy, hard, prim; tipsy, explosive, bigoted; furious, gossipy, efficient. A thousand combinations of mood and personality and chameleonic in intensity and cause, but always, always cross. We were forever just a moment, just a word, just a breath away from fury and acid; holding tightly to ourselves every muscle of our thoughts so that none should start the landslide. Incipient, uncausative rage at everything and everyone was a cloak around our mealtimes, our bedtimes, our life. And now this mellowness of thought and feeling in a therapy room

means nothing to us of mood and atmosphere because crossness just is, in the background, in the shadows, in the cobwebs, in the air. She was cross with everything except what was happening to me. Angry only, I imagined, that I had blood in my pants and there would be more washing to do, and I didn't want to be in trouble for that. She was angry with everyone except the people who were doing it to me.

## 13. I'M COMING BACK

Out of sight, out of mind: even after three years my object-inconstant mind could not comprehend beyond the inevitable cessation of being that was a therapist on holiday. The therapy room encounter was a mirage only hours later: a week is a long-time when you cannot remember anyone. And then the anticipation, the dread, of starting again the following week. I could remember the physical form, even remember the facts of our previous meetings, but I could not hold and contain within myself the memory of safety and connection with a person between sessions. Even the therapist behind the text or the email was a different person. But those words – I'm coming back – an empty promise at first but a real one. She always came back. And years of uncertainty plagued by threats – if you're not a good girl – began to be placated.

## 14. YOU ARE PRECIOUS

Precious as a good thing, not a bad thing, shameful and hurting and distorted and macabre. Precious in the sense of having

intrinsic value, before and beyond what happened to me, regardless of what sex act I can perform on an adult, what sense of gain I can provide. For as long as I've known, I've been what I've been as an appendage to someone else's psyche, with no value in and of myself, no sense of goodness, no sense of autonomous worth. But now, this idea blossoming upon me – intrinsic value, intrinsic worth, intrinsic goodness. Am I precious? – even without earning it through suffocating perversion which itself confirms my unwanted, unglad sense of evil? To be precious, to be precious to someone: huge draughts of disbelief mingle with excitement. Can I be precious? Can I be something, someone, to value, to regard with loving-kindness, to love? And love not as control and power and manipulation and guilt and coercion, but love as patience and kindness and goodness and respect? You are precious.

### 15. I TRUST YOU

I never trusted myself. I knew, in metaphors and shadows of my mind, what I had done. Guilt at surviving, guilt at complicity (however forced) hung shroud-like upon me. Forever expectant of exposure of some unconscious crime, I trust you flickered against me like a malfunctioning mosquito light. Don't you realise, don't you know? Unsafe in their trust of me, pressured almost by their trust of me, I slithered and squirmed away from such an untruth. You can't trust me, you mustn't trust me. I had no evidence to offer of such untrustworthiness, just a sense that deep within I harboured a criminal dangerousness, shameful

secrets, that I had seen things and done things that I should not. That slither of hope – I trust you – infected me as a wound, my mind scabbing over at the possibility that it offered, of atonement and redemption and belonging. I wanted, more than anything, to be trusted, to be trustworthy, as if by being so would separate me forever from my birthright wrongs, and escape me into the world of my therapists, far far away from the evil I had seen.

### 16. I WON'T HURT YOU

The assumption, of course, is that everyone would. The assumption is that hurting is what I exist for, that I can see pleasure mirrored in someone's eyes only when there is pain. Then as an adult, if there is no pain from that other, I must myself balance the pain-pleasure transaction or bankrupt the relationship. Closeness, intimacy, love: all must be bankrolled at some level with pain. I will be loved if I'm in pain; I am good when I am in pain. And now the impossibility of pleasing this therapist who doesn't want my pain, doesn't want me hurt. Just emptiness lies between us, and I don't know what it means; no pain, no gain; I cannot get her to love me now: please hurt me. Or at least let me hurt myself.

### 17. I LIKE YOU

I know what it is to like people; from below I adulate the strong, the wise, the powerful. But for someone to like me is risible, hollow mockery. What is there to like about me? Inadequate, always crumpled-up in the inadequacy of what



I am and what I can't be, never fitting in, always suspiciously distant in my assumed unacceptance. I see people, self-declarative in their confidence, exuberant in self-enjoyment, fully aware of their likes and dislikes, fully expressive of such likes and dislikes, part of the group, secure in their attachments. And now I like you and I want to laugh, first in defensive ridicule and then in alarm at the feral discomfort of what that could mean, of echoes of what it meant to be liked. I want to shrink back inside, swipe away the liking of me, retaliate with noxious offence – anything to stay safe from this petulant, unreasonable liking of me that speaks shivery danger. Being liked wasn't safe.

### 18. I FEEL ...

There seemed enormous hubris in *I feel*. Feelings expressed were unknown to me; do other people have feelings? Here is this person, masked in unknownness, telling me what they feel. It is discomfitting, alarming, breathtaking, but crisp with novelty. These are feelings expressed but not acted upon, feelings of sorrow or joy or anger or pleasure or doubt or urgency, feelings from another person wave-breaking above the tidemark of their consciousness, expressed to me. Is this what it means to be real, a real person expressing real feelings? Is it really okay to express feelings? – where is the shame, the humiliation, the tight-shrinking clutch in the tummy, the dread of hurt that should come, that always came? And suddenly here is the someone-else's-mind, and

a different way of thinking and seeing and feeling that is to me abstractly alien, invitingly fresh, boisterously new. Here is another person, the other person who can say what they feel, and feel what they feel, without punishment or terror.

### 19. IT DOES MATTER

Sexual abuse – it doesn't matter; rape and torture – it doesn't matter; infanticidal attachment – it doesn't matter. Somehow the horror has to be airbrushed away with it not mattering, somehow the gagging revulsion has to be suppressed. It doesn't matter; I don't matter: that is the only explanation for those things, the only rationale behind what happened. And then my therapist with freedom-words: it does matter. No, no, it can't matter, I can't let it matter. It does matter. Yes, yes, it does matter; no, no, it doesn't matter. And so, adrift in rapids I hurtle through the splash-crash of emotions – it mustn't matter but it does. It matters to my therapist; perhaps then in time I can let it matter to me.

### 20. YOU CAN CHOOSE

I didn't know what it was to choose. The sense of an individual, autonomous, able to be oneself, with wants and preferences and feelings and ideas: I didn't understand this. I thought – really thought – that life was about survival, edging past other people's moods and inconsistencies, winning their approval so that they wouldn't hurt you, trying to fit in and blend into beige-like anonymity and avoid a low-revving constant sense of danger. As a child I had been allowed



to choose, in an insidiously evil kind of way that destroyed my sense of free-will: sometimes I got to choose who raped me, or I could put my hand up to choose when the abuse was to start. 'Choices' I took to mean my ability to steer the best course through a crash waiting to happen - risk-management, seatbelt-

clutching style. But now: You can choose. And the powerlessness of evaporated free-will against this new freedom, real freedom, grown-up tax-paying freedom, seemed a contrast too blinding to regard. You can choose: again and again, loud like a claxon, reminding me of me. I am me, and I can choose. ●

