

Extract 1: Ever been in a car crash?

As I walked through the door I almost felt like the journey to work that morning had been worthwhile. During the course of my long weekend memories of the monotony and pointlessness of my job had faded, and I had become, if not optimistic, then less suicidal. I still hadn't caught my breath from the jog, but unfortunately the police incident tape had blocked my quickest route to the office.

Sheila looked at me quizzically. In my highly motivated state I could not understand her lack of perception. "What are you doing here?" The tone of her voice, I noted, indicated nothing less than open hostility. "I work here", was my reply, although since I was talking to my boss at the time it was said with a sense of uneasiness. Her response was swift and curt "Did you not get my message?"

Although Sheila had yet to get to the point, the point was becoming increasingly clear. Despite the fact my senses were drip-feeding me impending doom and imminent worthlessness, I decided to press home my one remaining theoretical advantage. "What message?"

The question failed to frustrate the monstrous mountain of fussiness and vitriol that stood before me. "We don't want you to come in any more." All that was apparent in her tone was smugness. "We don't think you're showing enough commitment". The hairs on the back of my neck bristled, and I felt irritation boiling over inside me. "Oh, really". There was nothing I could do that I felt would be adequate, so I just stood nose to nose with her for a while. As the security guards ushered me from the building, so ended my resistance, along with my first office job.

It is the first thing you hear when accident victims are interviewed- 'It all happened so quickly'. There was nothing that I could quite compare to the feelings I encountered the first time I was sacked, or 'let go', as the more familiar and infinitely more patronising phraseology would define it. I suppose I went into shock, but I'm sure genuine accident victims would take issue. All the same, as I walked, blinking, out of the building and into the autumn sunshine, I must have resembled someone emerging from the shattered remains of their vehicle to wonder aimlessly in the road, mouthing 'what happened' to anyone present.

Once I had got my bearings the more day-to-day repercussions hit me. In the following weeks it became clear to me that there are four main emotional phases which somebody goes through following a sacking. I could probably write a thesis on the subject, and I would probably get paid for it as well. The first phase is embarrassment. During the embarrassment phase you worry about what people will think. It's not so much the laughter that hurts, more the shocked looks of sympathy and beseeching questions regarding your future. "What, they actually sacked you! They can't do that can they? What ARE you going to do now?" Immediately following a sacking a great deal of time is spent re-assuring people that you will probably survive the experience. The embarrassment usually pre-empt the next phase, which is anger. The anger phase involves shifting the blame to anything

and everything which could possibly have precipitated your sacking. During the anger phase nothing is your fault, which helps to alleviate your embarrassment and is often accompanied by public venting and excessive drinking. The anger phase is usually lengthened by well-wishers who all sympathise with your plight and help by suggesting various courses of legal action, presumably because they don't want to have to deal with a mate who is going off the rails. The plus point of the first two phases is that people are quite likely to buy you pints and prevent you from getting rounds in.

These phases could be considered the 'glamour' stages of a sacking, but unfortunately they do not last too long. This is because they both represent false positions reached by your traumatised soul, and people soon get tired of it. The main phases are three and four: frustration, followed by dejection. These phases tend to last much longer, and in some industries and among certain demographic groups they can last forever.

You are frustrated for one of two reasons. One reason is that you cannot do anything about your sacking, and that jobs involving your skills set have disappeared, or at least have been re-located to China. As a result you will have to work in a call centre, at least until the call centre is re-located to China. This is the sort of thing that trade unions get upset about.

In my case I was frustrated because, by whatever means you may care to mention, being sacked was a highly preventable phenomenon. In such cases you have to live in the certain knowledge that a few choice actions, entirely within the boundaries of your own control, could have prevented the entire sorry episode. Trade unions tend not to get involved in these situations.

I very swiftly realised that I was entirely culpable in practically every single aspect of my sacking. Having only just been AWOL following an extra-curricular appointment involving the great unwashed and a big bag of skunk, I had also failed to show up on time for any single day that I worked at Market Reach. This had already, certainly, irrevocably stacked the balance against me when I had staggered in that morning, without considering the remaining issues, involving a personality clash and a catalogue of almost total incompetence.

The personality clash with Sheila was quite serious, really. I'm not a man to hate people lightly, but I can honestly say that, *at the time*, she was about as intolerant and fussy a human being as I had ever met. Of course I have since been playing in the big leagues, but even now I would prefer never to have to mention the name of Sheila; none of my future girlfriends will carry that name, and neither will my children. In fact, even to write the name and see the ink dry on the page grieves me hugely. This is despite the fact that I have changed the name to protect.... well, me from her really. She is a BIG lady, and although her sheer bulk is enough to make me nervous on its own, she carries with her a sense of aggression and a dangerous glint in her eye. Although I'm normally on the winning side in a punch-up, it was still

foolish of me (and potentially very dangerous) to upset her on as regular a basis as I did.

On reflection it is quite easy to see where it all went wrong, and therefore equally easy to see why phase three was such a sobering experience. I'm sure a little cosying up ("oh what nice triceps you have" etc) combined with setting my alarm ten minutes earlier would have made my incompetence easier for Sheila to bear, but hindsight is all that, and all that, and besides it's not in my nature.

This leads neatly on to phase four. Dejection is the obvious conclusion of the logical thought process related to being sacked. In fact, it could be argued that dejection is the ultimate conclusion of any logical thought process. Simply analysing the bare facts of being sacked, dejection is perhaps the only possible outcome. Allow me to explain the case in point. Having been sacked you have no job. Without a job you (a) have no money, (b) have no career, (c) have nothing to do and (d) are faced with a trip to the job centre.

The job centre is the ultimate insult. My local job-centre resembles a gathering point following a major disaster. Society is torn asunder, its soft under-belly exposed in all its dubious glory. There is a general atmosphere of despair, because contrary to expectations raised by the name of the establishment, the last thing anyone can gain from a trip to the job centre is a job. Forget it. The main purpose of a job centre is to provide a roof under which everyone can fill out forms, which are multitudinous and readily dispensed.

Considering the interminable and exhaustive nature of the simple process of claiming benefit, it would appear to be a miracle that benefit fraud is so widely spread. Anyone who manages to fill out the forms correctly should add it to their C.V., as it must count for something when applying for senior administrative posts. Despite the intimate detail required by these forms, I feel sure that there are crucial areas they have yet to address. For example, no matter how complex or convoluted the process becomes, and no matter how many extra layers of bureaucracy have been introduced over the years, there are always groups of tradesmen in recently soiled overalls turning up in their lunch-breaks to sign on and supplement their income. Although I feel sure they know something I don't, I have never tried benefit fraud, because I know that I would be caught and imprisoned, somehow.

The job centre is relatively near to my ex-workplace, so I decided to walk. Fortunate, really, since I didn't have a car at the time. As I staggered the 20 yards through the pedestrianised zone towards my destination, I stared at all the people dressed in shirts and ties who were hustling through the concrete cancer ridden streets. In a way I almost felt jealous of them, since I had to go to the job centre and they didn't. I never thought that I really wanted my job until it was gone. The exterior of the job centre loomed before me, as I strolled into its clutches. From the outside it looks very much like an a travel agency, except that instead of last minute getaways to exotic destinations the cards in the window promise casual cleaning work. Inside, everything is open plan. Job centres don't have doors or walls inside, probably to

make them appear welcoming and transparent, but only succeeding in making them confusing. At the back of the room, there are lots of desks with people sitting behind them, none of whom look like they are doing anything in particular. On the wrong side of the desks, the job centre is always full of people sitting on regulation issue furniture waiting for god knows what.

Pulling a ticket and taking a chair, I squinted up at the number board, waiting to be called. I was seen in surprisingly quick time, probably because they were glad of a new face. "So why are you out of work, then?". "I got sacked". I felt sure that they heard this sort of thing a lot, but the clerk still looked taken aback. In the throes of phase one, I stared at my knuckles. "It happens to everyone". My laugh was hollow, and as I picked up the ream of forms I reflected that they probably DID see that sort of thing more often at the job centre, since no one else I knew had been sacked yet.

Anyway, sacked after three weeks of employment (did I mention that), and only ten minutes into the working day, I return home. Forget the job centre, this is the worst part. There is not really much else to do other than visiting the job centre, and going home. I tried to go for a little bit of a stroll, but the weather was turning cold and I didn't have anywhere to go anyway. I thought that maybe shopping would be a good idea, but I realised that I didn't like shopping, and I didn't have any income. You have to go home.

I finally trawled in at about eleven. Knowing that my Dad was on his day off, and still heavily wrapped up in phase one (embarrassment), I dreaded his reaction. Realising that I had forgotten my keys in my customary morning haste, I was forced to ring the doorbell and wait with no little trepidation, examining the shoddy state of my best shoes. As the door opened, he immediately knew what had happened, of course he did. "What are you doin' about the house?" Honesty was the best policy. "I got sacked". His reaction was bland, and I wasn't sure how to read it. Then, I never was sure how to read him. He is a gruff but lenient man, an Irish navy with a somewhat dubious history. I have heard several rumours regarding his past, however I suspect none of them to be true. Either way, when you'd done something right the whole town knew about it, when things had gone badly not much was said. In my opinion it was worse that way. In any case, he knew the stock response. "Whatcha goin' to do now?" I couldn't say anything, I just went inside and sat in front of the T.V. The truth is, I didn't know. I was certainly going to eat a lot of cheese on toast and watch a great deal of daytime television. The office party appeared to be out of the question. I could say with great certainty that I would at some point have to go through the arduous process of finding another job. But not yet.