

Dancing with Etta James

Eva let me in and took me into the lounge. Etta James' voice filled the room. Eva paced, spun and danced, not wanting to stay still for more than a moment. She motioned for me to sit on the sofa and began to talk.

She spoke rapidly and with passion about her family, her fears and her concerns about the government and the Council and how information held about her could be used against her. She was expansive, passionate, moving rapidly from enthusiasm to anger and back again. She talked with her hands, adding to the dance with large gestures and waves.

She showed me a worrying recent report from children's services and said "Can I smoke? I need to smoke? Are you ok if I smoke? I know I shouldn't? Do you mind? I'm really sorry. It's really bad for me. I should quit. Do you mind though? Do you smoke? Do you mind if I smoke?"

Eva positioned herself and her cigarette in the kitchen and she leant precariously out into the lounge, sometimes disappearing back into the kitchen in a valiant attempt to keep smoke away from me and continue talking. And talking. About everything.. Sometimes all at once.

There was a large pile of papers on the lounge floor. Cigarette dispatched, Eva would disappear into this pile of papers, trying to find evidence, trying to show me anything she thought would help, before the music lifted her up and she would pace or dance around again before descending into the papers.

I was introduced to Eva by the children's social services team. They had written a report which expressed concern about the welfare of Eva's children. They were worried about the family and asked me to visit. Eva was also waiting for an assessment by the local mental health team to explore possible bi-polar disorder. She had a CPN assigned to her and the police had been involved in a recent crisis and were concerned.

There were many areas of Eva's life which were out of control or broken. She was deeply in debt. She was worried about paying rent and affording to look after her children. She was scared about losing her kids. She'd been told to apply for Personal Independence Payment (PIP) but her form had been declined by the DWP. The house was disordered and chaotic. She did not feel she was coping. Her life was erratic and didn't feel stable. She had visited her kids' school and become upset and a bit aggressive a couple of times as her mental illness had been mistaken for intoxication. She was aware of her difficulties, but unable to hold onto one thing long enough to make any progress. It was clear that she was very unwell and things could unravel faster than formal services could be able to help.

Eva's main focus at this moment in time was her PIP form. Nothing else mattered. But she was caught in a desperate catch 22. Following the report from children's services, she had been unable to look at any kind of official

paperwork without becoming so ill, that she couldn't physically look at the forms. Paperwork literally made her sick.

Tentatively we agreed a way of tackling the form. I would read out each question. Eva would tell me what she wanted to say. I would write it down. I would then read it back to Eva who would tell me what to add or change or leave out. I would make the changes and read it back to Eva. Rinse and repeat until every question in the form was complete, and these forms are long and intrusive at the best of times.

All the while, Eva would need to move, to dance, to pace, to sing, to smoke, to sit by me, to sit away from me, to go off on long, verbal tangents, to ask me questions about everything and ask me questions about nothing.

And still Etta sang. At a slightly lower volume...but still she sang.

During 2 visits we spent over 6 hours completing this form. Getting it to a point where Eva was happy with the information it held. And just about confident enough that it would not be used against her and her family in any way.

The form was done and sent off. And then Eva began to open up.

Over the coming months, we would meet to chat about what a 'good life' meant to her. And I began to learn about the parts of her life that she wanted help with.

Her husband lived overseas. What started over 10 years ago as a holiday romance blossomed into a relationship and Eva spent much time out there in the early days. They got married and had 2 children. When Eva and the girls moved back to the UK for schooling, they applied for residency for him. It was declined. During the process, a visitor's visa was also declined. The girls had not seen their dad for 9 years.

Above anything else, Eva wanted to take the girls overseas to visit their dad. Out of all the things in her life that were causing her stress and anxiety, she told me this was the thing that caused most pain. But she had convinced herself that it was just a pipe dream, a fantasy that would never happen. She thought it was pointless thinking about it.

I suggested she could think about it as a real plan rather than believing it would never happen. I made no promises, nor did I judge her for her priorities. We looked at her financial situation to see if there might be a way of making that trip. A decision was still pending on the PIP so we tentatively looked at what the award might look like. A full award with back payment would still not be enough (Eva had debts and living costs to consider too). So next we found a couple of ways of crowd funding. Eva wrote her story up and managed to raise a few hundred pounds.

Then the icing on the cake – Eva was awarded a full PIP payment with a backdated lump sum. The detailed information we had put on her form was so complete, that she did not even need to have a PIP assessment visit.

The fantasy of having Christmas as a complete family was now a concrete plan. Eva felt listened to, valued and hopeful about the future for the first time in a long time.

It would be neat if the story finished here. If I could tell you that Eva and the children had visited their dad and had their first family Christmas in 10 years.

But that's not how life works. The people who we walk alongside don't have neat lives that fit into neat boxes. They live with conditions or circumstances that are chronic and ongoing. They are often the people who ping pong between different high cost services or criminal justice, falling outside the right box for the right intervention at the right time.

So, let me bring you up to date with Eva. It's been nearly a year since we first danced to Etta James. We see each other every now and again but we don't have regular appointments to see each other. She comes to my drop in session if she needs to talk. Which is probably once every few weeks. She knows where to find me. She doesn't have to wait for another person to refer her, she knows she is not a 'case' that will get 'closed'.

She didn't spend Christmas with her husband. She began to get the sense that he was less than genuine. And when he started to ask her to send the crowd funded money to him instead, she realised that this relationship fell into a pattern that is all too familiar for her – of being abused and exploited.

She realised this. For herself. She grew the confidence to understand that his actions were harmful to her and the children. That they all deserved more. And after a few months of me not seeing her, she came to one of my regular neighbourhood drop-ins and managed to get some legal advice. Now we are meeting up to complete the online forms for her divorce.

And the money that she'd crowd funded? Some of it was spent exuberantly. Some of it was used to pay off her debts. And some of it was used to make sure she and the girls had a good Christmas here in the UK. Because life isn't perfect.

And while life is less than perfect, it's helpful to think about what didn't happen to Eva in the last 12 months.

She didn't get sectioned and admitted to a high cost mental health hospital with high cost aftercare.

She didn't get arrested for causing another disturbance at her children's school.

She doesn't receive costly long-term care and support from social care.

She didn't suffer a crisis during the gruelling diagnostic process for her bipolar disorder.

She didn't end up with looked after children. The state did not have to find a placement for her kids.

She didn't lose her house and they didn't end up in temporary accommodation.

Eva is not a problem solved. She is a person who knows where to come when things get tough and understands that she can and will get through things. We don't seek to 'solve' a problem, we seek to compassionately cultivate resilience and purpose so that people are better equipped to live their life independently.

We have no services, no personal budgets and no referrals. It's remarkable what you can achieve with just 3 things: ourselves, our relationship with the person, our presence in the community.