



Freedom from the Heart: Victoria Clarke Irish Independent August 2003

Being abandoned by her father as a baby left Victoria Mary Clarke with feelings of rejection that dogged her for years. She turned this negativity into a lifetime's manipulation of men, and even a date with Johnny Depp left her feeling lonely and insecure. Then she went through the Hoffman process, the Rolls-Royce of self-help workshops. She describes her journey of discovery.

I am staring at Johnny Depp, who gazes back at me from his cinema screen, with limpid, luscious, brown eyes. His fabulous features, raven locks and sultry smile suggesting that God is, after all, a female and that She has sent him down to tease us mortal women with a vision of what Paradise is like. But Paradise is a state of mind. It isn't Johnny, however gorgeous he might be. I do not say this lightly, I assure you. I have had occasion to put this theory to the test.

A few years ago, I found myself in the uniquely enviable position of playing the lover of that fantastic creature up there on the screen. In his directorial debut, a pop video for The Popes. A limo had collected me that morning and taken me to have my hair and make-up done. Johnny had pressed money into my hand and told me to go and buy clothes, whatever clothes I fancied. An assistant had come with me, to carry my bags as I whirled through Bloomingdales. My chauffeur had driven me to our location, and I had looked in the mirror and known that I looked seriously good in my short dress and silver stilettos. Johnny had presented me with flowers. We held hands and strolled through New York, on a summer afternoon. We drove around together in a long white limousine, and we sat outside cafes, watching the world go by. We staged a fight scene, in which I got to bash him around with my handbag. He cried. It could have been fabulous. It could have been the most perfect experience, the most ecstatic experience of a young woman's life. But I have never been as lonely, never been as insecure, never wanted to go home quite so

desperately. Why? I hear you exclaim, especially you who also fancy Johnny. What kind of eejit must you be? I shall explain.

Paradise is all very well. But wherever you go in the world, there is one thing that you must take with you, and that one thing is you. And if anyone can ruin Paradise, it's most likely to be you. The girl who looks at Johnny and thinks only about how ugly he must find her, how boring, how tedious. The girl who thinks so much about how to impress him, how to make him like her, that she forgets to let him impress her -- that is the girl who can ruin Paradise.

Little boys and little girls long to be loved, more than anything else in the world, especially by their parents, whom they worship as gods because to them, their parents are gods. For the first few years at least. Omnipotent, omniscient, gods whose approval is paramount and upon whom we all depended for our very survival. The human animal is the most vulnerable of all creatures, as an infant, and cannot fulfil any of its own basic needs. Unable to stand up, unable to walk or talk, unable to forage for food or shelter, the abandoned baby would die very quickly if it were not cared for by another. Just as important as the need for food and shelter is the need for love. Perhaps even more important, when you consider the consequences of abusing or neglecting a human child.

Consider Hitler, for example. The Swiss psychoanalyst Dr Alice Miller, in her study of the effects of childhood abuse on adult behaviour, suggests that his unhappy childhood made him into the kind of person who could commit the atrocities that he committed. Not that his childhood made him less guilty, just that it made what he did make sense.

Most of us will not grow up to behave like Hitler. But if every one of us exacts revenge on one other person, just one, for whatever love we didn't get when we were children, how many people will be affected? If I am angry and upset because a man has rejected me, and I get into my car and drive carelessly, because I am distracted by my upset, and if I knock down and kill your child, and if you are so angry that you continually find opportunities to punish other drivers, what repercussions have been caused by that single incident? Men reject women every day of the week.

And women reject men. Someone, somewhere is getting dumped right now by a lover. In fact, millions of people probably are.

But whether the person being rejected will accept it sensibly, believing that it is their partner who is missing out, and move on freely, after a few tears for the passing of something good; or whether that person will cling obsessively, analyse their own and their partner's behaviour and motivation until they have no friends left to bore, and then progress to psychopathic rage, self-loathing, hopelessness, despair and the desire for revenge; this will depend very much on how Mummy and Daddy loved them, and, more important, showed their love.

Little children are entirely egocentric. If Mummy is talking on the phone and tells a three-year-old to go away and stop bothering her, the three-year-old believes that she has done something wrong and will try another tactic and another, until she gets the attention that she needs. It is not possible, at that age, to conceive of Mummy having a life of her own. But however hard they try, sometimes Mummies and Daddies simply can't give enough love to prevent their child from feeling rejected, abandoned and unlovable.



My own Daddy was a case like that. He and my mother broke up before I was born and he played no further active role in my life. But he played a starring role as the man that got away. The invisible man who never wanted me and who must be pursued, must be won over and seduced and, most important, must be punished.

I didn't meet my father until I was nearly 30. But I had been working feverishly to impress him ever since I became a teenager. Certain that if I could become beautiful enough, successful enough, famous enough, I would be able to attract him back into my life; he would see me somewhere in a magazine and come to claim me, never again to abandon me. I would prove myself to be lovable.

Like most people who are angry with their parents, I had no idea that I was angry with anyone. I thought I was an exceptionally nice, tolerant and forgiving person. And if I secretly hated men, and wanted to get back at

them, I was merely doing my duty by the fairer sex against the common enemy, in the age-old war. So what was wrong with that?

The first battle that I won happened when I was in primary school, aged about nine. I had taken a fancy to a cute boy in my class and one afternoon, during a game of kiss-chase in the playground, I chased him and caught him. But instead of kissing me, he got free and kept right on running. My first taste of being rejected by an object of desire.

Horror of horrors, I thought to myself. What's wrong with me? Am I not pretty enough? That's it, I decided. I'm ugly. I checked my reflection in the mirror that evening, and sure enough I was right. I was a dog. There was nothing I could do about it. Or was there?

I got my first taste of revenge at the school disco. The same little boy had sent a friend over to ask me to dance, being too shy to ask me himself. I snorted derisively and sent the kid back to his friend. No way, I told him... You don't know how to dance! And that was the end of him. Being a clever little thing, I had figured out that if you treat them mean, you keep them keen. I desperately wanted to keep them keen, I wanted more than anything to be loved and adored, so I ridiculed boys and rejected them before they could get a chance to reject me. And I never let them see that I cared.

I got what I wanted. I frightened the boys away. Only egomaniacs persisted in pursuing me. I only pursued men who were unattainable or unavailable. I very much needed to conquer the ones that ran away. And at some point in every relationship, the balance of power would shift and I would become the vulnerable one, the needy one, the clingy one. They always got their revenge.

I am not alone in this power struggle. Entire industries have been built on the insecurity that emerges when love comes a-calling. There is scarcely a product on the market which isn't sold on the promise that it will make you more desirable to the opposite sex and therefore give you an advantage over the enemy. But you only have to look at Marilyn Monroe to see that being perceived as the sexiest woman in the world doesn't make you feel beautiful inside, doesn't make up for not being wanted by your parents.

But every problem has its solution. Every quest has its Holy Grail. Writing for the Sunday Independent may have started out as a way to get noticed by the invisible man in my life, but it was through my work that my own solution presented itself, in the form of a thing called the Hoffman Process: an eight-day residential course which is held in 14 different countries, including Ireland. A course which promises to give you a future different from your past, and to free you from the negative thoughts and behaviour, including the anger, depression, destructive relationships and low self-esteem, that have been caused by the relationship that you had with your parents. I had been told that this absolute Rolls-Royce of self-help workshops could do for me in eight days what years of therapy might never manage.

I did the course in England, and on my way over, Aer Lingus lost my luggage. Ordinarily I would have been infuriated, but on this occasion I was delighted. My baggage was exactly what I wanted to get rid of. Having moved out of my flat and put all my stuff in boxes, and having taken the added precaution of breaking up with my boyfriend, (who, I figured, would dump me anyway, sooner or later), I was ready for an entirely new life.



The Hoffman has been evolving for 35 years since Bob Hoffman, its creator, first began working with it. Not being a trained psychiatrist, he had the common sense to realise that it's absolutely no use analysing your childhood and crying over it if you don't come to a position of understanding it, letting go of it and moving on with a blank canvas. And in order to do this, he believed that it was essential to be able to get access to the part of ourselves that is equipped for understanding, wisdom, compassion, forgiveness and peace. What he called the Spiritual Self. He decided that for the process to be complete we need to integrate fully the four aspects of ourselves: the physical, the emotional, the intellectual and the spiritual. And he decided that we need to find a way to put the spiritual aspect in the driving seat and allow it to permeate our lives with love, replacing the need to look to partners, friends, parents and people outside of ourselves to make us feel lovable.

This is not to say that we should let go of the desire to love and be loved by others. Quite the opposite. One of the most important features of the process is forgiving and unconditionally loving our parents. In doing this, we let go of the need to keep forming relationships with people who remind us of Mummy and Daddy, with the disastrous results that occur when they disappoint us, abandon us or reject us in the same way that our parents did.

So how does it work? What do you have to do? You have to enter into the Hoffman wholeheartedly; you have to surrender to it. You have to agree to do this, or there's no point coming. You surrender your mobile phone, your books, tapes, newspapers, magazines, any distractions. There will be no contact with the outside world for eight full days. Before you arrive, you will have done several weeks' worth of preparation, examining the negative traits that are affecting your life and examining which parent you picked them up from, or which parent you are rebelling against, because we either adopt our parents' behaviours and attitudes or rebel against them. Then, when you are fully conscious of what it is that you want to change and let go of, you have to be prepared to express those feelings that you have run away from all your life. In front of this group of very normal-looking people who are all wearing badges with names like Reject, Abandoned, and Unlovable.

A great deal of screaming and howling and bashing cushions goes on. The work is intensely physical, because we hold our feelings in our bodies. You have to be prepared to confront your demons honestly and thoroughly, even when it's embarrassing to do so, and it often is embarrassing. Horribly embarrassing... Sometimes you think, I can't go there, I really can't! But you go there anyway, because everyone else is doing it. You work from eight in the morning until late at night and you are given endless homework. Everyone calls you by the name of your worst trait. After you have exorcised your rage and shame and sorrow, you forgive your parents, from the bottom of your heart. And you celebrate wildly, with your inner child. The Hoffman people are the best facilitators that I have ever come across in 10 years or more of doing groups and workshops, and they are full of surprises. You will be delighted and touched by their kindness and ingenuity. And what's most delightful is

that the Hoffman works. At the end of it all, you are sent back to the world.

The first thing I noticed was euphoria, intense euphoria. As if a permanent grey cloud had been lifted, I started waking up feeling enthusiastic about life in a totally new way. The second thing I noticed was that I wasn't obsessing about what other people thought of my hair, my clothes, my make-up, my weight; about what other people thought of me generally. As I walked around, I started noticing things about the world that I had been too busy to notice when I was worrying only about me. Very soon after the course, I had dinner with my father. We hadn't seen each other for a year, he hadn't wanted to speak to me after I had written an article about him in this newspaper which embarrassed him. At the time I thought, sod you, mate, you deserve to be embarrassed, after not wanting me for all that time. I had made a public show of forgiving him, in the magnanimous way that only the self-righteous have. And I had never seriously considered his feelings or what kind of a life he must have had.

This time, things were entirely different. For the first time ever, I stopped worrying about what he was giving me or not giving me and I just saw him as a person. And I liked him. I felt genuine love, when I looked at him, even though I didn't have the guts to say it. This was a person who had found himself with a child that he hadn't asked for and he had done his best. His abandonment of me had absolutely nothing to do with me, with what I looked like, or what kind of a person I was. He simply hadn't felt able to be a father to me, and I could finally accept that.

Since I did the Hoffman, a lot of things have changed. The most remarkable thing is that I now accept responsibility for my own happiness. It doesn't depend on a man wanting me or not wanting me. The process has given me tools that I go on using, if I feel myself slipping into depression or self-pity. I love my friends and family more than I ever did before and I appreciate them more. I talk to my guardian angels and listen to them, more than I let myself be ruled by my intellect or my emotions, and I look after my body in the manner that it deserves. Most important, when I lie on the beach I can take a real holiday. A holiday from negativity. And I am left with a desire to be the best and happiest person I can be. Which could eventually overtake my desire to be the prettiest person I can

be. So Johnny, if you are ever short a leading lady again, I am entirely up for it this time!

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