

Counselling For Toads 25th Anniversary Foreword by Louise de Board

It is an honour to write this in celebration of the 25th anniversary of *Counselling for Toads*, written by my late father Robert de Board. It is hard to believe that it is 25 years since it was first published in 1998 to great acclaim. This unique book caught the attention of the media, resulting in its being the subject of a cartoon in the Times and it was also the topic of a question in the popular news quiz 'Have I Got News for You'. Since being published, over 3 million copies have been sold worldwide, including an astonishing 2 million copies sold in China, where it has become a bestselling non-fiction book. Writing *Counselling for Toads* was the achievement that my late father was most proud of, it was the culmination and bringing together of many threads of his life.

My father was born in Bristol in 1932 and grew up during the second World War. My Grandfather was a clerk in the railways and my grandmother was a primary school teacher. Bristol was bombed heavily during the war and my father, along with thousands of other school aged children, was evacuated away from the city to avoid the danger. He was sent to Polruan, a small fishing village on the river Fowey, in Cornwall, until the danger lessened.

When he eventually returned home to Bristol, there was a new book on the shelf in the sitting room! Previously there had been a copy of the Bible and the Radio Times, now next to this was another book entitled, *The Wind in The Willows*. So began my father's love of *The Wind in the Willows* and fascination with the author Kenneth Grahame. It was an interest that would last for the rest of his lifetime. His love of the tale of Ratty, Mole, Mr Badger and, of course, Toad would eventually result in his writing *Counselling for Toads*. It should be noted that Heron, who is Toad's stern but excellent therapist in *Counselling for Toads*, had not yet flown in.

While he was lucky to avoid danger and eventually return home safely, the impact of being sent from urban war-torn Bristol to the breath-taking Cornish coast had a lasting effect on my father. Part of this lasting impact was to retain a sense of boyhood, which included adventures. Throughout his life he read and re-read books about adventure and boyhood. He loved the 'just William' Stories, by Richmal Crompton, and those books where children leave their everyday lives and walk through, wardrobes, and out of shires and fly through windows into worlds of fantasy quests. When in his sixties, he discovered and introduced me to the world of *Harry Potter* which he adored. The book that he always returned too first though was *The Wind in the Willows*. Perhaps because, on reflection, my father's experience of evacuation was in many ways traumatic. The evacuees lost families homes and social structures, and, like the creatures in *The Wind in the Willows*, they were all in the same boat.

After his return to Bristol, my father led a full and varied life. Following his schooling at St Brendan's College, he was sent to Nigeria on National Service. He returned to go to Selwyn University Cambridge to study theology, eventually becoming ordained as a vicar in the Church of England (this resulted in me becoming one of the very few people who have been baptised by their own father!)

At the end of the sixties my Father left the church. He said that this resulted from his discovery of the writings of Sigmund Freud and Psychoanalysis. He spent the rest of his career working in the field of management development and counselling. He developed an innovative and successful leadership programme at Greenlands College, now part of Reading University, teaching leadership skills to senior managers from all aspects of industry, that still runs today. He had close links with the Tavistock Institute in London, attending courses and programmes and working closely with staff from the Tavistock to run his leadership programme, and he had an in-depth interest in all things psychological. When my brother and I sat down to breakfast as children, rather than asking how we slept, my father was always more interested in our dreams and trying to work out their possible meanings. His interest in psychology and his previous many years of work as a Samaritan where he gained the initial experience of Talking Therapies, would eventually lead him towards becoming a counsellor.

Readers of *Counselling for Toads* sometimes think about which creature in the book most reflects their personality. My mother thought that my father's personality most reflected that of Toad. At one stage he even bought his own green racing car! Throughout his life there was always "nothing-absolutely nothing- he liked better than simply messing about in boats". He spent very many happy hours on the Thames, not too many miles away from Cookham Dean where Kenneth Graham had lived. He owned a narrow boat and a wicker hamper for picnicking. He always preferred an engine to rowing, (I don't think Ratty would have been impressed)!

Beyond boats and cars, my father was intelligent, articulate, charming, and very funny. He had a big personality, and he was a natural leader who thrived in the company of others. He loved laughter and could roar at jokes. In later life he was famous for telling a very long rambling pirate joke, in an excellent Bristolian piratical accent. The joke always culminated in much laughter even though the punch line was often blurred. His humour, confidence and irreverence could sometimes lead to trouble and unnerve the more serious and staid members of some of the many clubs and societies that he was involved in (especially the good men and women of the Rotary Club). And he once hit the tabloids as a young curate in the 1960s for swearing in the pulpit (an incident that he was proud of!).

Over the years I have enjoyed reading and recommending *Counselling for Toads*. I think it is a beautifully written book, that sparkles like the sunshine on the river. The setting of the book starts from where *Wind in the Willows* finishes and continues in the style of Kenneth Graham. I love the gentle humour throughout, for example when Ratty is trying to think of a title for his new book and he considers 'breezes in the bushes' or when Portly, the lost otter from *Wind in the Willows* is mentioned to have become a chef "and is particularly good at cooking fish." Touches such as these make me smile every time.

There have clearly been many changes and developments in the field of counselling and psychotherapy over the last twenty-five years and yet the concepts and theories about Transactional Analysis and human relations that are described in the book remain unchanged. The ideas and theories are as pertinent and as relevant as ever. The reader learns of the fundamental importance of 'Emotional intelligence'. The greatest skill that results from this, is the ability to form good relations with others through handling and understanding their emotions. It can be argued that there has never been a greater need for Emotional intelligence on an individual, a societal, and also a global level.

Counselling for Toads is a charming, enjoyable, and easily accessible book. As such, it has sometimes been described as deceptively simple. However, as the reader joins Toad on his counselling journey (or psychological adventure!), they are introduced to in-depth and valuable concepts. These include ego states and the powerful psychological concept of 'Games'. These ideas, along with many others, are helpful throughout life. Once gained, the reader can store them forever, in a sort of psychological toolbox to pull out when needed.

Millions of people have found *Counselling for Toads* helpful, indeed many report it to be life-changing. The text has been the on booklist for counselling students for many years but it is readable and relevant to any reader hoping to learn how to navigate life and gain self-confidence. It teaches us how to ultimately move (like Toad on his Counselling journey) towards the state of 'independency,' which as Heron explains, "implies a sort of pride in yourself, with all your unique talents and differences."

The book ends with the creatures each going their own way. When Ratty leaves, he declares to his friends that he is "going to move to a grey, seaside town in the South. It's a lovely little place with a harbour which has one steep side with houses and gardens running down to the rocks...when you look down the flights of stone, overhung with great pink tufts of valerian you see patches of sparkling blue water. The harbour is full of little boats tethered to the rings and stanchions of the old

sea wall. And all the time a small ferry boat keeps chugging from one side of the harbour to the other.”

This is a description of the harbour at Fowey. A description of the view that my father saw as a small boy on waking up and looking out of his bedroom window on the first morning of his evacuation from war-torn Bristol all those years ago. The image remained clear and unchanged in his mind.

I visited Fowey with him many times and I returned for the final time shortly after he died in 2020, the small ferry boat continues to chug from one side of the harbour to the other.

My father would have been delighted to know that people are still reading and enjoying *Counselling for Toads*. I hope that they do so for many years to come.

— Louise de Board, daughter of late author Robert de Board