

# thisHumanCondition

## Daniel Speraw

### Pusher vs. Brat

**Note:** *the following story is true*

Michael is extremely confident and very successful in a tough field: insurance sales. Last week, when he asked to come along to my group psychology, I could not imagine him in that setting; and then, he volunteered to go first.

Looking down, he remained silent and the eight of us waited.

I felt anxious. He was so self-assured, what could he possibly have to say?

The silence stretched on.

Finally, he began mumbling. Raising his head, I heard, “— take it anymore. I am killing myself.”

And then he was crying.

I was shocked. Michael was the strongest guy I knew.

The psychologist—call me Dr. J—took him a box of tissues. The rest of us sat uncomfortably, waiting for Michael to stop.

Eventually, Dr. J said, “You are very hard on yourself.”

With his head back down, Michael murmured, “Yes.”

Dr. J asked, “How?”

Michael looked up, eyes red and said, “I schedule appointments day and night.”

“Do you eat lunch?”

He nodded and said, “I usually grab something at my desk. After a morning of cold calling, I can do the paperwork for new clients.”

“Dinner?”

“Not usually. I have potential clients to see. It takes a lot to be successful.”

“Do you put yourself off when you have to use the toilet?”

Michael reluctantly nodded.

“After you have pushed yourself through a long day, how do you push back?”

Michael seemed to understand the question, because he quietly answered, “I stay up too late watching movies.”

“And?”

“I eat the whole time.”

“And?”

“I drink too much.”

Dr. J paused and then asked, “Of what?”

He again hesitated and then said, “I recently switched from beer to bourbon.”

Michael and I have been friends for years, and I wondered if I knew him at all.

Dr. J said, “So, the harder you push yourself, the harder you find yourself pushing back.”

I blurted, “You make it sound like he is two people.”

Dr. J nodded and said, “Some of us are split within. Let’s call one side The Pusher and the other side The Brat.”

He turned to Michael and asked, “Who are you, the Pusher or the Brat?”

Michael, who seemed to finally have his emotions under control, answered, “Uh, both, I guess.”

Dr. J cried out, “No! Neither!”

He held the silence and then softly said, “You are the one that will release the struggle.”

Michael looked confused.

Dr. J glanced at each of us, as he continued, “Thoughts and feelings are not the same as actions. You may be feeling and thinking like a Pusher, or like a Brat, but you can choose to act differently!”

Dr. J turned to Michael and asked, “How would someone live your life, if they were not killing themselves?”

Michael looked thoughtful, as he said, “Well, they would take time out for breakfast—as well as lunch and dinner.”

“What else?”

“They would take more time for themselves on the weekends.”

“And?”

“And they would find some fun things to do in that time off.”

Michael had begun talking faster: “They would take an occasional evening off, blocking out that time on their planner. And they would cut back on the eating and drinking at night.”

Dr. J nodded agreement, as he added, “And they would be able to cut back, because they would be giving themselves more and pushing themselves less.”

## Start Feeling More!

I watched my spaceship swirl round and around until it disappeared. My mother found me crying, shirt soaked, hand deep in the toilet.

Pulling me into her arms, she murmured, "Don't cry dear, it is alright. Stop crying now."

That evening, I was calling my dog. As I stepped into the backyard, my father said, "Hey Sport" and broke the news: my dog had bitten the mail carrier, and Animal Control had taken him away.

For a long time, my mother tried to console me, saying again and again, "Stop crying, now. It's okay. Please stop crying."

Finally, my father yelled, "Stop that crying, or I will give you something to cry about! Stop it now!"

"And you did," said the lanky psychologist, Dr. J, a therapist my wife had forced me to see.

"I stopped what?" I asked, fist clenched.

"Why did you want this session?" countered Dr J. He had an annoying habit of switching topics.

"You know, my, uh, wife left me."

"Why?"

"She says that I do not share myself, that I am too distant."

"And so you are," he said. "At forty-two years old, you continue to obey your parent's directive: 'Don't feel.'"

"But I feel!"

"What?" he challenged, "What do you feel?"

"I, uh, well, **anger**," I said, forcing my fist open.

Dr. J leaned forward and said, "Anger is an 'instead of' emotion, a defensive emotion. When was the last time you felt something else, like hurt for example?"

I sat there thinking, searching my memory, reaching back. Dr. J finally sat back and motioned with his hands. I blew out an exasperated breath, admitting defeat.

Dr. J smiled sadly and said, "Your wife just left you."

He let that sink in and then added, "You stop yourself from feeling uncomfortable emotions. If you felt more, you could share more, with your wife and others."

I heard the defeat in my voice, as I said, "How am I supposed to start feeling more?"

He asked, "A few years ago, when your mother died, how did you handle it?"

"I went right back to work," I answered, with a touch of pride.

"And last week when your wife left?"

"I, uh, I have been working more."

"Working more," he repeated, voice flat. "And when you are not working, what do you do?"

I shook my head, trying to keep up with him, and answered, "I like to read, watch a movie or go out with friends."

I added, "Wait. I am confused."

"Come on," said Dr. J. "At the first sign of a negative feeling, you automatically distract yourself with work, a movie or people."

"No!" I blurted. "I have been working more because I have the extra time."

"Do you snack when you are not hungry?"

Reluctantly I admitted that I did.

"So, there is yet another way that you avoid negative feelings. Some use alcohol and/or drugs; others use extreme over-eating, gambling and sex."

"Alright, okay," I said, "Just tell me what I have to do to bring my wife home."

"You must be willing to feel uncomfortable."

"Uncomfortable?"

"Of course, or you will just continue avoiding."

"Okay, I can do that," I said. "I **am** willing to feel uncomfortable. Is that it?"

Dr. J laughed and said, "In that first moment, when you want to begin what might be a distraction, gently ask yourself what you are feeling."

As I opened my mouth to reply, Dr. J added, "Also, when you feel irritable or angry, take a peek underneath and, again, ask yourself what you are feeling."

He pushed himself out of the chair and began pacing, something we were not allowed to do.

He continued, "And whenever you catch even the hint of a feeling, voice it. Say, 'I feel sad', 'I feel hurt', 'I feel afraid' or whatever you even **guess** you might be feeling."

He was now motioning with his hands and waving his arms.

"Say it aloud. Say it several times. Shout it from the roof tops!" he yelled.

I began to laugh and stopped abruptly.

I said, "Sad. When my wife left, I felt sad; angry too, very angry. And sad."

At that moment, I felt my eyes tear and thought seeing a psychologist might not have been such a good idea.

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Daniel began writing in the 1980's, with a nationally syndicated newspaper column; but through-out his Life, he has searched through religion, meditation and psychology, all aimed at releasing the past and connecting more deeply with those in his life. He is now using this knowledge to write [This Human Condition](#), sixty-four short pieces on positive change. **You can send him a message on Facebook: search Daniel Speraw.**