

*There's nowhere you can be
that isn't where you're meant to be.*

JOHN LENNON

Introduction

The ride of my life

At 23:00 on an autumn night in October, 1999, I arrived at Brixton Underground Station in South London and made my way up the steps onto Brixton Road and into the chilly night air, where I waited in a queue to take a bus up the hill to Acre Lane. I had no idea how my life was about to change forever. For many, Brixton conjures up images of race riots, police brutality, ethnic divisions, unemployment and run-down council estates. It is a region of London with a tough reputation; a gritty, working class suburb notorious for being one of the highest crime areas in London. It was certainly no place for a middle-class white man with a posh English public school accent to be on a Friday night. Especially at that hour, when many revellers would be stumbling home after the obligatory 23:00 cut-off for serving alcohol in the city's pubs.

I was completely sober, but I was high on a different kind of fix. I had spent the evening at a personal development course and felt inspired by what I had learned. As I stood in the queue my mind was buzzing with possibility; I was only partially aware of the noise of the other commuters around me. Two guys in front of me were having an animated discussion about a big football game coming up at the weekend; two others were gossiping about their boss at work. The rest was just noise. The bus pulled up and we all clambered on and took our seats. I took my place at the front, just behind the driver's cabin. As the bus pulled away, the talking subsided, and within seconds all was quiet, except for the hum and drone of the vehicle.

It was not unusual to sit on a London bus where nobody spoke; in fact, it was unusual when people did speak. It was as if there was an unwritten rule that everybody adhered to – sit down, shut up and mind your own business.

Perhaps it was my elevated mood that made me notice the transition. I was struck by the stark contrast between the jovial banter that had gone on before we got on the bus and the stony silence that now filled the space. No one uttered a word. What happened?

In that moment an insight flashed through my mind. *Fear*. These people weren't talking because of fear – fear of being too loud, too Northern, too Southern, too foreign, too black, too working class, too inappropriate. I knew that feeling well. I wondered if it would be the same if the bus were full of seven-year-olds returning from a day trip. Probably not.

A voice in my head piped up. "Well, why don't you say something? Go on, make a speech. Get people interacting and connecting."

It was joined by another voice, one I instantly recognised – the voice of reason. “Make a speech! Are you crazy? What would people say?”

The first voice – the voice of courage – persisted. “You say you are committed to transformation. You say you want to lead. Well, why don’t you start here, now, on this bus?”

“You are not ready,” Reason protested. “Besides, you are in London now, not Cape Town or Johannesburg. You are committed to transformation in South Africa, so you will wait until you get there and do it then.”

Courage scoffed. “Oh really? You think it is going to be any easier then, do you?”

Another silent voice entered the fray, and this one I had known all my life. It was my mother’s, and it spoke words I had heard countless times over the years. “Darling, what on Earth are you thinking? Just sit down and don’t embarrass yourself. What will people think?”

As the voices jostled for prime position, I realised I was faced with an important decision, one that would potentially change the course of my life. I had arrived at a crossroads. One option was to listen to these voices and stay seated. This way I would avoid embarrassment and confrontation, and my comfortable life would continue as it always had.

But this option didn’t sit well with me. I thought about South Africa and I was reminded why I was going back there – to make a difference in the country of my childhood. The country had given me so much joy, and I had also experienced pain and

guilt about the privileged life I'd led there when the majority of its people were oppressed and impoverished. I was going back to heal myself, and I hoped to assist others in doing the same. I was excited about my plans. I had hankered for the life, the smell, the people and the spirit of the place and dreamed about it for so long. In just a few months I would finally be returning to a country I had grown to love. I knew that, in order to make the kind of difference I envisaged, I would need to seize the opportunities that were presented to me, to take action in spite of my fears.

Would I seize the opportunity here? Could I allow the voice of courage to prevail so that I might transform the mood on this bus? It was crazy and outrageous, of course. But what if? Why not?

"You are waiting," Courage said.

The voice was right, of course. I *was* waiting – for the right time, the right place, the most appropriate circumstances. I had been waiting for a long time, wishing to make a difference and live the kind of life I truly wanted. And here fate was presenting me with the opening that could change everything.

I would do it. I decided that, yes, I would stand up and make a speech. I would get these people thinking, talking, and interacting ... anything but this oppressively loud silence.

But there were still too many unanswered questions cluttering my mind: *What am I going to say? How will I start? What if I'm told to f*** off ... jeered at ... punched in the face?*

Courage spoke again. "Just start speaking about the things you are passionate about – South Africa, your life and aspirations, being courageous ... anything. Do it quickly!"

My heart pounded and I could hear its thud-thud beat quicken, resounding in my ears. My hands were damp and my forehead beaded with sweat. I knew the further the bus kept moving towards my stop, my chances of seizing the moment were diminishing. My breath came in short gasps and I struggled to get enough air into my lungs.

I decided that the only way I was going to get out of my seat was to imagine I was jumping out of an aeroplane. I could see the lights and I counted down three ... two ... one ... *go, go, go!*

I stood up and moved past the person seated next to me. I straightened up as I stood in the aisle, facing the other passengers who were sitting impassively. Every seat was taken, and a few people were standing at the back of the bus. My mind was numb. It felt as if the seconds were draining away in slow motion and everyone was staring at me.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Simon Ekin. It is very quiet in here, isn’t it?” I began shakily.

I took a deep breath. “To fill the time, I would love to deliver a little speech before my bus stop. I am not drunk and I am not going to talk about religion. I just have a message I think is worth sharing.”

You could hear the proverbial pin drop.

“I am passionate about South Africa. I grew up there and am due to return to live there shortly. It is difficult to think of South Africa without thinking of Nelson Mandela, who led the extraordinary transformation from a racist state to a democracy. What is the difference between him and me, and you?” I asked.

No one said anything, not even a snort or a jeer.

Buoyed by the attention, I pressed on. “There’s very little difference, actually. He is a human being, just like us. What sets him apart is that he had a vision – something that he cared about deeply. He was unwavering in his commitment to attain freedom for his countrymen, and for that he was willing to give up his own freedom. Most of us can’t even commit to a week of a gym programme or two months of a relationship!”

Still no one spoke. My anxiety started to rise again, and I resolved to quickly end the speech. The bus stopped and a woman got on. I imagine she must have realised something unusual was happening because she looked at me quizzically. I jumped into my conclusion.

“What would happen if we all took action in our lives, in whatever small way, to cause the changes that we dream about? Maybe for one of you that could be picking up the phone and speaking to a friend you’ve fallen out with, or for someone else it might mean going over to see your mom and telling her you love her. Tonight, ladies and gentleman, I hope I can inspire you to do something courageous in your own lives, as I have attempted to do in speaking to you right now. I want to tell you that this is one of the scariest things I have ever done in my life.”

I took a deep breath and smiled. “Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for your attention.”

And just like that, my speech was over. The woman who had got on the bus last spoke up. “Ey, mate, you the next Jerry Springer or wha’?”

A few people laughed, then all was quiet again. But this time I could tell something had shifted. There was a curious energy in the air that hadn't been there before.

The silence was broken by a gentleman in the front row. "What about peace in Pakistan? We try to bring change in Pakistan, but if you try, you get killed," he said, drawing a finger across his throat. "How does what you are saying apply to Pakistan?"

"You tell me," I challenged. "Sir, if you want peace in Pakistan, then you need to do something to cause it. Mahatma Gandhi famously said, 'Be the change you want to see in the world'. I have no idea what it must be like in Pakistan, but whatever you want, it takes vision and commitment to achieve it, and above all courage. So maybe start small. Get people together and start a conversation about how to transform your country."

His neighbour, a round-faced woman wearing traditional West African attire turned to him. "Just because it's not easy doesn't mean you can't try," she said.

A few heads nodded in agreement.

"It's not peace we need, it's money. That's the problem with the world today – only a few people have money while the rest of us struggle every day," a man shouted from the back of the bus.

"Money is the root of all evil," someone else said.

The conversation was now out of my hands. I watched in awe as these strangers, who a few minutes ago had barely made eye contact with each other, now engaged with each other as if they'd known each other for years. They debated, bantered and

laughed together. I glanced out the window and realised the bus had arrived at my stop. “Ah, that’s my stop; I need to get off here,” I said above the noise.

I started to make my way to the exit at the back of the bus, my heart thumping at what I’d just done. People clapped and cheered as I moved towards the door, a few high-fiving me as I went.

A woman handed me her business card. “I’m from Johannesburg. Look me up when you’re there.”

I was so wrapped up in the euphoria I didn’t see the man at first. But as I took a few steps closer to the exit my pulse began to race and I froze. At the far end of the bus, right next to the exit was a guy who struck fear into my heart. *Beefy* is the word that comes to mind. He had the kind of bulky physique that suggested years of lifting weights in dodgy South London boxing clubs and gyms, coupled with the consumption of copious pints of beer and plates of greasy pub grub. He just stood there, his massive frame blocking the aisle. He seemed to have no neck that I could make out; his shaven head looked like it was joined directly to his torso. Under his chin was a tattooed broken line underneath which were two words. I couldn’t make the words out as I was standing too far away, and I dreaded the inevitable moment when I would be close enough to read them. He stared straight at me, and I shuddered at the crooked scar that ran down the side of his face.

The voice in my head had been silent during my speech, but now it spoke up again. The *I-told-you-so* in its tone was unmistakable. “Nice one, Simon! See what you’ve done now? You didn’t listen; I told you to play small, to keep your head below the parapet. But no, you just *had* to speak up. And now you’re about to be knocked off your high-and-mighty soap box.”

For the first time I began to feel my so-called act of courage had indeed been foolish. Looking at the bulky man I felt sick. He hadn't said anything throughout the lively conversation, and I feared the worst. What if I'd annoyed him? What right did I have, as a middle-class white guy who had grown up with all the privileges that my social class afforded me, to think I could stand up and preach to this group of what seemed like mostly working-class folk?

I moved forward gingerly, my mind racing to figure out how I could avoid the beating I convinced myself was about to happen. I could no longer hear the jovial chatter that continued around me; all I was aware of was the sound of my thumping heart in my ears. My breath caught in my throat as I came close enough to him to make out the two words tattooed below his chin: CUT HERE, they taunted.

"Excuse me, mate," I croaked.

He didn't step aside; instead, he strengthened his pose, stretching out and resting his arms on the two seats on either side of the aisle. He was standing squarely in my way and we both knew I was trapped, though he seemed to take a particular pleasure in the standoff.

Without taking his eyes off me he leaned forward, until his face was just a few centimetres from mine. I held my breath, and braced myself.

His voice came out in a low growl. "Mate, there's a lot of people who are going to think you f***ing mad, but don't ever, ever give up what you doing, alright?" he grunted. "Now go on then, f*** off," he said finally, with something that resembled a half-smile, stepping aside to let me pass.

I couldn't believe this guy was actually praising me, but I didn't waste time celebrating my good fortune. I smiled at him weakly and then hurried to get out before he changed his mind. I only dared to exhale once I was standing safely on the pavement.

As the bus drove away I sighed – happily. I had caused transformation on that bus, been a catalyst for conversation, engagement and debate. I was thrilled at what my single act of courage had achieved, and right there and then I was hooked. The spark had been ignited for my life's mission as a teacher of courage, though it would take more than a decade before I truly stepped up to the challenge. ●