

Appendix C

Passengers-on-the-Bus Metaphor

Hayes, S. C., Strosahl, K. & Wilson, K. G. (1999)

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy: An Experiential Approach to Behavior Change.
New York: Guilford Press, pp. 157–158

Suppose there is a bus and you're the driver. On this bus we've got a bunch of passengers. The passengers are thoughts, feelings, bodily states, memories, and other aspects of experience. Some of them are scary. What happens is that you're driving along and the passengers start threatening you, telling you what you have to do, where you have to go. 'You've got to turn left,' 'You've got to go right,' and so on. The threat they have over you is that if you don't do what they say, they're going to come up front from the back of the bus.

It's as if you've made deals with these passengers, and the deal is, 'You sit in the back of the bus and scrunch down so that I can't see you very often, and I'll do what you say pretty much.' Now, what if one day you get tired of that and say, 'I don't like this! I'm going to throw those people off the bus!' You stop the bus, and you go back to deal with the mean-looking passengers. But you notice that the very first thing you had to do was stop. Notice now, you're not driving anywhere, you're just dealing with these passengers. And they're very strong. They don't intend to leave, and you wrestle with them, but it just doesn't turn out very successfully.

Eventually, you go back to trying to calm the passengers down, trying to get them to sit way in the back again where you can't see them. The problem with this deal is that you do what they ask in exchange for getting them out of your life. Pretty soon they don't even have to tell you, 'Turn left' – you know as soon as you get near a left turn that the passengers are going to crawl all over you. In time you may get good enough that you can almost pretend that they're not on the bus at all. You just tell yourself that left is the only direction you want to turn. However, when they eventually do show up, it's with the added power of the deals that you've made with them in the past.

Now the trick about the whole thing is that the power the passengers have over you is 100% based on this: 'If you don't do what we say, we're coming up and we're making you look at us.' That's it. It's true that when they come up front they look as if they could do a whole lot more. They do look pretty scary. The deal you make is to do what they say so they won't come up and stand next to you and make you look at them. But what if it was a little different to this? Imagine that the driver (you) has control of the bus, but you trade off the control in these secret deals with the passengers. What if, in other words, by trying to get control, you've actually given up control! What if it were the case that these passengers can't make you do something against your will.