

# PSYCHOLOGIES

Psychologies' Health + Wellness Director, Eminé Rushton, is blown away; deconstructed – and put back together again at the first emotional, empowering Finding Self Retreat at 42 Acres  
by Eminé Rushton

## Pieces of me: Finding Self Retreat at 42 Acres

There's no way to prepare for what will happen over the following four days. It's 10am, and we've just arrived – 10 women from different places, with different stories and careers and varying outlooks and opinions – and are sipping chia and berry smoothies in the beautiful flagstone-floored kitchen of 42 Acres in Somerset.

There is welcoming small talk and bear hugs from the **Finding Self Retreat** leader, Tony Riddle, a 'natural lifestyle coach', brimming with energy. Anticipation is keen. All we do know is that we are here to find some things, and let go of others.



I've been hanging on to guilty shadows for years: returning to work weeks after having my first child (financial necessity, perhaps, but small salve for the emotional knots it created); post-natal depression that swallowed me up into a sleepless, lost void.

Years have passed, but the guilt remains, and surfaces too often.

Sometimes, I find myself parenting on autopilot – repeating things that didn't make sense to me as a child, and make no more sense to my own children. Reining in my kids, over and over again, when I actually long for them to run free.

Doors open to an incredible room – flanked on one side by views of the greenest garden and a grand oak tree – and filled with cushions, blankets, mats. Alan Dolan, a world-renowned 'transformational breath expert', guides us through the principles of breath work – something I've never tried before – and soon we are lying down, eyes closed, puffing and panting in regular rhythm. This is not your classic 'deep breath in, slow breath out' practice: Dolan encourages a longer inhale and a short puff out – as though trying to extinguish a candle, gently.

It feels unnatural and I struggle. But we keep going. He repositions people, checking that our mouths are wide open enough, and very lightly feeling our bodies for places where we might be holding most resistance. A woman beside me cries out – a primal wail that takes me back to the birthing room – then sobs uncontrollably, and Dolan helps her breathe through it.

Then another, on the other side of the room, howling, then panting and steadying, as her breath returns to normal. I feel unsettled and uncomfortable.

When Dolan comes to my side, I am tight and nervous. He softly, intuitively feels along my clavicles, ribcage, abdomen – and I am surprised when he touches a spot that makes me gasp. I feel embarrassed and try to hold it in, but it's no use; and, instead, he guides me in breathing through it. It is uncomfortable but, as I learn during my stay, discomfort and resistance are telling us something, and we need to get better at listening.

I spend 30 minutes struggling with the process – feeling light-headed, as though the breath pattern is too shallow, which makes me feel anxious. And then, unexpectedly, everything loosens up: my neck relaxes, my jaw stops feeling taut and tense, and I just breathe. And lose time. Twenty minutes later, I become conscious of feeling light and happy – and rested. Remarkable.

We wander across to the communal dining room for our first plant-based lunch, made by resident chef Mark Mabon. The fare is vibrant and full of vital goodness: butternut hummus, sprouted crackers, sweet potato wedges, beetroot soup, buckwheat tabbouleh and seaweed rolls. It's clean and nutrient-rich grub, without being ascetic.

Towards the end of our stay, we get scrambled eggs at breakfast because our bodies crave warmth and protein as the healing work gets more intense, and many of us go into hibernation mode.



## The ties that bind

Next, we meet Nicola Dunn, a 'family constellations practitioner'. I am, again, unfamiliar with her practice. The belief is that, as children, we remain deeply bonded to our families, and it is difficult to break free of ancestral patterns as we grow – out of filial, inherent loyalty, but also for fear of being disowned by the 'tribe'.

Family constellation work seeks to highlight these patterns that restrict and harm us, and to allow us to be released from them; to feel empowered to walk our own path, without being owned by, or owing anything to, shadows of the past.

To say my cynicism was heightened would be an understatement – and to explain the mechanics of how one's story unfolds seems reductive. It is what it is – neither rational nor easy to understand, but powerful. This work is the most bruising part of our time at 42 Acres. The deep-rooted trauma, pain, sadness and regret that fills the room with each story is profoundly moving.

Stories so different from my own strike a chord of human connection, and we weep for our sisters, mothers, fathers, grandmothers. How patterns of pain are repeated generation after generation – alcoholism, mental instability, adultery, abandonment – became clear for all to see. But we are not our mothers or fathers, we carry no legacy.

We end our first day shaky and drained – but protective of those who have opened up about their pasts in a room full of strangers. A quiet dinner, as people process the day... then we are ushered back into the same room, transformed with candlelight and blankets, to lie down for a sound bath and energy healing, with Carly Grace and her crystal singing bowls.

I feel completely enveloped by Grace's mesmeric voice and those beautiful frequencies.

The new day begins at 7am with Riddle, the Finding Self Retreat mastermind, taking us through a series of simple movements – which, nevertheless, challenge our bodies to the limit. On hard wooden floors, kneeling, stretching, spreading toes, taking the body's weight on our knuckles (ouch!) – movements our primitive ancestors would have performed as part of a normal day.

Then, outside to the wet grass, barefoot, which draws groans and complaints, until Riddle, who is skilled at putting first-world problems into perspective, helps us see the wonder of it all: green grass, blue skies, morning dew, and a chance to roll, jump, run, hop and play.

At one point, we are pressed forehead to forehead, looking into the eyes of the person opposite! It feels uncomfortable, confrontational, unnatural... and then, totally peaceful.

During the next transformational breath-work session with Dolan, my asthma and hayfever reach fever pitch. I panic. I don't have an inhaler with me as I've not needed one for 20 years. He assures me that this is my body resisting; that the minute you touch a spot that's holding on to something painful or negative, your body has a reaction that makes you want to flee. Breathe through it, is his mantra.

I keep going and the heightened histamine responses quieten down. More breath work comes over the next three days, and we get a chance to move past the past, via Dunn's constellationwork.

I work through my story – a new mother, shellshocked, lost, exhausted, doubting and distant. I see my little girls for all that they are – wonder, magic, wildness – and realise that they embody all that I've ever hoped for; they just need space and trust to thrive.

## Transformed by freedom

The profound depth and energy of the Finding Self process – both **emotional and psychological** – shows on all our faces. We are deeply tired. We have little conversation left to make. We walk past one another with kind eyes, but need the emptiness of our private rooms to process all that has happened.

In the end, we learn more about each other than we know about our work-mates, friends, even family... and, most powerfully, we learn about how far removed we have become from our natural, primitive ancestors.

To see Riddle move – roll, crawl, climb, jump – is to see a body that has left behind sloping chairs and squishy sofas in favour of the ground; a body that thrives on natural food – strong, lean, dynamic; and a mind that is passionately clear about how we should be living our lives, and encouraging our children to live theirs.

I've invested in barefoot shoes for myself and our children ([vivobarefoot.com](http://vivobarefoot.com)), and am no longer precious about them padding around parks, gardens, forests barefoot. I have been reintroduced to the purpose of play for play's sake; as a means to natural movement, to free up that sedentary spine. But the latter would not have been possible without the lifting and clearing of the old debris – the stuff that weighs us all down, and fools us into thinking that we can't, or shouldn't, or mustn't.



Somehow, over the course of the next few weeks, I transform. It is slow going, but the dedication you give to the retreat stays with you. There is no other way now that these freer instincts feel so natural. The day after the retreat, flung straight back into work, I wake with the darkest circles under my eyes that I've ever had.

Once the working day is done, I sleep and sleep and sleep, and meditate, and place crystals around my home, and read books, and feel as though my eyes are wide open for the first time since childhood. I see my children in a different light. I want to learn and grow and heal. I want to be a better mother and ensure my children live free of my own mistakes and misgivings.

I stop blowdrying my hair. I donate half of my clothes. I clear out my cupboards. We collect wood from the forest and make bonfires and sing in the garden. We map the stars. We marvel at the moon. We retreat back to a place where the good things live... and vow never to lose sight of them again.



To find out more about 'Finding Self' and other retreats, and to book, visit [tonyriddle.com/retreats](http://tonyriddle.com/retreats).

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