

SEPARATION - THE KEY TO INDIVIDUATION

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"I need and want to make a disclaimer: When I talk about mother or primary care giver, I do not mean REAL MOTHER but mother AS AN EXPERIENCE that did not or could not meet the child's needs." Larry Hedges, PhD, Founder, Orange County Psychoanalytic Institute

"Give your child roots and wings, not loot and things." Denis Waitley, *The Psychology of Human Motivation* tape series

"Parenting is the only relationship whose success is measured by the quality of separation." Sidney Lumet

Numerous authors have written about the first years of life and what it takes for a child's "normal development" to lead to a healthy and productive life. (Erikson, Winnicott, Mahler, Freud, Hedges, etc). There is agreement as to what "normal development" is, for the most part, but accomplishing it is another story.

Tony Robbins, author of *Unlimited Power*, said that 80% of families today are dysfunctional. It is my belief and the premise of this article that this figure is so high because today's children are not allowed to separate from their families of origin. Dysfunctional, then, means that the phase of attachment or separation has not been accomplished in a manner that allows for individuation. Individuation is the emergence of a person in his or her own right, able to search for and attain a meaningful life and to initiate and sustain a process of individual growth toward ever-increasing personal competence and adequacy.

A child needs what child psychologists call an "average expectable environment" and "good enough mothering" in order to grow up healthy. This does NOT occur when:

1. The fine line between giving too much and not giving enough is violated;
2. Parents need a child for their own gratification;
3. The child is thwarted from focusing on developing as a child because he/she is focused on parental needs.

1. The fine line between giving too much and not giving enough is

violated: The child needs its parents to give enough consistency so that the child can develop trust, feel loved, cared for and considered, but not so much that the child is so overindulged that autonomy does not take place.

If we, as children want something for the sake of wanting it (as all children do) and we are indulged every time, we do not learn the essential process of delaying gratification. If, on the other hand, when we want something that is appropriate to need and want, and it is denied us for the sake of denying it or is not given out of neglect, then the child learns that his/her needs are not important.

For us to develop normally and separate from our parents there must be a degree of restraint and consequences for certain behaviors that are deemed inappropriate. An example of this restraint would be when we are prevented from eating all the candy in the bowl on the table. Continuing gratification does not allow for an optimal level of frustration and socialization. As long as continuing immediate gratification exists, the absence of the parent is experienced as a threat and therefore separation is impossible.

On the other hand, neglect of our legitimate needs leads to what psychologists call "learned helplessness," which is the belief that we are at the mercy of external forces, that we no longer have control over what happens to us.

There is a well-known experiment that used two groups of college students to demonstrate learned helplessness. Each group was exposed to a very loud noise in a

room from which they could not escape. The first group was given a button that would shut off the loud noise. The second group was not given a way to shut off the noise. In the second phase of the experiment, the same groups were put in another room. Both rooms were equipped with a button that would turn the noise off. The first group looked for it. The second group, which had **not** been given the way to turn off the noise in the first experiment, did not even bother to look for a way to turn off the noise. As with the second group of college students, children who are not allowed to take control of their lives learn to be helpless. What a child does not get as a child leaves an empty hole inside. Until the loss is grieved and resolved, the child feels helpless and worthless.

There is a lovely true story I heard on the radio some years ago and have related it to many of my clients. A little boy found a caterpillar lying on the sidewalk. The boy picked it up, placing it gently on his jacket. Upon arriving home, he showed his mother and asked her if she thought it would live. His mother explained what it was. Putting it on a bed of leaves and grass, she told the boy he could possibly observe the caterpillar turn into a butterfly. The boy, of course, was thrilled, and eagerly watched it develop. Gradually the caterpillar began the transformation to cocoon, to butterfly. At one point in its struggle to free itself from its cocooned body, the caterpillar seemed to falter, movement then stopped altogether. To the horrified boy one thread seemed tighter than all the other spots on the caterpillar's worm-like body. Thinking that perhaps the struggle had been too much for the caterpillar, the boy got a tiny pair of scissors and carefully snipped that tight thread. Sure enough, the caterpillar's movement resumed almost immediately. Within a few days the butterfly emerged from the tiny cocoon. When it had completely shed its final pieces, the little boy saw the butterfly had but one wing. He subsequently learned that the struggle is what develops the butterfly's wings.

Over-loving, well-intentioned parents sometimes interfere with a struggle that will develop their child's wings.

2. Another aberration in our normal development is when our parents need us for their own gratification. The burden of our parents' dependence on us causes our environment to be other than average.

Parenting is a huge responsibility that persons assume when they decide to have a child. Whether or not it is "rewarding" should depend on what kind of job is done - as with any other job. Parents should not need us

to appreciate them ("you should ... because of all I do for you",)

to like them ("do you love mommy?" or "then I hate you too",)

to be there for them ("you seem to like your friends more than you like your family",)

to support them ("you're my little man...you can be the daddy now...she's like a little mommy, she can do all I do...").

A good example of parents needing a child to fulfill their own needs without regard to the child is the following: As the result of a mixup, a friend of mine was notified late that he had been accepted at the university. In order for him to play on the athletic team he would have had to be there the next day. His parents were on a holiday and when they heard the news decided to remain at the resort, as planned. My friend was in a panic as to how to get up to the university and play on the team. I suggested that we rent a U-Haul and go. We went, moved him into his apartment, and he played on the team. His parents were irate. They felt that they had been denied the experience of placing their child in college. This child and his needs were totally inconsequential to them. He and I were seen by the parents as betraying their needs.

Another example is that of Joseph Kennedy, a narcissistic man who was not able to fulfill his own political desires and therefore looked to his children. No one will ever know about Joseph Kennedy, Jr. who died before his time, but we do know that Jack Kennedy, the 35th President of the United States, pursued his political career (and perhaps his sexual

exploits) because of his father's needs rather than his own.

The tragedy is that we will fulfill any role that our parent needs us to fulfill. I emphasize the word NEED because it may be very different from what the parents consciously say that they WANT for the child. If the period of attachment is determined by our parents' needs rather than our own, then our attachment period will be prolonged beyond what is healthy for us.

I often see clients who have been taught that they need to share their feelings with their children. They call it "being honest with their kids." Unfortunately, it is a way to satisfy parental needs at the expense of the child. An example of what I hear parents saying to kids in service of "sharing their feelings" is:

Child: "I hate you Mommy"

Mother: "You don't hate Mommy - you love Mommy."

or "That hurts Mommy when you say that."

or "Then Mommy hates you too."

The message in the above examples is: Our feelings are wrong, we cause pain when we have feelings, we are rejectable when we have feelings.

An appropriate, healthy response to

Child: "I hate you, Mommy" is

Mother: "You are feeling very angry right now"

or "You are feeling pretty strong about this aren't you?"

or "I'm glad that you are telling me how you feel - sometimes it is hard to find out what those feelings are - good for you!"

or "I can see you are having lots of feelings about this. Can you tell me more about them so we can clear the air?"

The message in these examples is that our feelings are feelings and do not devastate or change the order of things. Instead, our feelings are validated and encouraged.

However old we are we express our feelings in order to resolve our issues so that we can become separate from our parents, to become

a person with separate feelings, separate decisions, a separate self. Only with this separateness will we ever be able to relate as an adult to our parents or to the world at large.

3. Another abreaction is when we are thwarted from focusing on our own development because we are focused on what our parents need. Edith Jacobson (*Self and the Object World*, 1954) postulated that relatedness is essential to development. In fact, it is primary. Our minds are structured according to our experience of ourselves in contrast to others. As we interact, we form beliefs about how relationships work and these beliefs form our future reality about how we will relate to others. It is among the everyday tasks that our developmental tasks have positive or negative outcomes. In order to grow, we need an environment of empathy.

Most of the personal and interpersonal problems people face are due to either attachment issues or separation issues. They are intertwined: the greater the abuse, the greater the attachment. The greater the unhealthy attachment, the less likely that separation will take place. We all have a deep, natural need to be approved of by our parents. The normal time for this approval is during the first 7 years of our lives. THAT IS THE TIME WE ARE MIRRORED AND VALIDATED. WHEN THIS DOESN'T HAPPEN, WE ARE STUCK WITH THE LIFE-LONG TASK OF DOING EVERYTHING IN OUR POWER TO GET THAT MIRRORING AND VALIDATION.

In *Choose to be Happy* Kaufman does a great job of describing us as children when we try to express our feelings and are met by an inappropriate reaction from our parents. If, when we are little, our feelings are not accepted as feelings, then we learn that our feelings are not acceptable - i.e. they do not please our parents. We begin looking for our parents' reactions to things rather than asking ourselves how we feel about those things. We begin monitoring what we feel and only worry about whether what we is acceptable. We become what Bradshaw calls "human doings" rather than "human beings."

As children, we should not be made to feel responsible for adult feelings in any manner. If we feel that our exploration, curiosity,

uncertainties, and other emotions are not supported because they make our parents unhappy, then our developmental tasks will not be negotiated with a positive outcome. The result is mistrust, guilt, shame, and doubt about who we are. When our behavior makes our parents unhappy, we feel directly responsible. Making our parents unhappy is TOTALLY UNACCEPTABLE to us.

SEPARATION

Before separation can begin we need to know what it is that we are attached to and what form it takes. Are we attached to being good so that we can finally get approval, being abused, being ignored? etc. We need to know what it is that we are enmeshed in before we can begin the adventure of separation. When someone comes into therapy, I always ask them what event occasioned them to call me. That event is often the most important kernel of the work that needs to be done.

Attachment, in an average expectable environment, is essential for growth. Being attached and taken care of properly is the basis for normal living. Prolonged attachment is what is harmful. A bell doesn't ring when separation needs to begin. Some stages of separation begin shortly after we can distinguish our mothers from other people. Margaret Mahler refers to our first phase of separation around age 2 as reproachment. It is a time when we are independent for seconds or minutes as long as our mothers are there to watch. We bravely move out into the world but quickly look back to see if mother is watching. At the far end of what seems to be an appropriate time for separating is when the government no longer holds our parents responsible for our actions when we turn 18 or 21, depending on what we do.

Many times we marry someone with our parents' exact traits in an unconscious effort to resolve issues with them. The attachment continues in a complicated form.

For example: Many adult children of alcoholic parents marry alcoholics in the hope that they can change their spouse as they could not change their parents.

Howard is the fourth of eight children. His father was alcoholic. Howard was given little attention and spend most of his teen age years depressed. He remembers helping his older

brother hide alcohol so their father would not get drunk. The father died at age 57 and Howard never forgave himself for not being able to save him. Howard married an alcoholic. When she attempted suicide, he brought her into therapy to be "fixed," willing to fix himself as long as the end result was that she was fixed. When I told him that he could not fix her, he was visibly upset. He would not believe this. He stated, "I feel driven to change her. I have to." The issue here is not changing her. It is a deep attachment to his father from which he had not separated. His wife is only incidental to the original attachment - never separated story.

Joan is the oldest of five siblings. Her parents were both only children and, although educated and responsible parents, were unaffectionate, unavailable and uninvolved with the children. Joan was given less attention than the others because she demanded less attention by being "good" and taking care of herself. Even today her mother, who lives close to her, never visits her but drives to see her sisters who live farther away, because "they aren't doing as well as Joan is." Joan is a successful business woman who got involved with a man with whom she began a business. He did not want to marry her and when it came time for a partnership in the business, he passed her over. She continues to be "good," demanding little and taking care of herself. What brought her into therapy was frustrated at being ignored by this man. The issue here is not being ignored by him but rather an unresolved issue with her parents from which she has not separated. This man and the men to follow are only incidental to the original attachment - never separated story.

When the psychodynamic issue is described and we become aware of what we are doing to ourselves, we often respond with disbelief. We cannot believe that there is any connection. When we hear that our parents weren't perfect parents or that we are still involved in some way, we immediately defend them. Howard said, "He did provide for all of us." Joan said, "Although she didn't ever give me her opinion on anything, she had a great sense of humor." When we notice that we begin giving non sequitur defensive statements about the person in the

repeating pattern, we can be sure that the attachment is there. If the timing is right and trust has been established in the therapeutic relationship then we have a good chance of facing the attachment and the need for separation.

Once we decide to separate and face the unresolved issues with our parents, the journey begins. Susan Forward in her book *Toxic Parents* gives a good outline for resolving of such issues:

1. State what happened.
2. State how we felt about what happened.
3. State how it has affected our lives today.
4. State what needs to be done now.

The process of closure with past events requires only that all the appreciations and resentments be clearly stated.

The journey is not easy. It is bucking city hall. It is making waves. It is telling the king he has no clothes. This is tough business. The fantasy of most people is that it is too late, that it doesn't matter anymore, that their parents cannot handle it and it would kill them, that they will lose (or never get) the love they have worked so many years to achieve. It is my experience that most parents are relieved to have the incidents and the circumstances discussed.

The moment of realizing that separation is necessary may feel like a death. When we get separated and reborn into being our own person we will be tested. The tests are when we choose a different type of man - without the unresolved issues - or a different job because our boss is not treating us in a manner that allows us to feel respected. It may be that the new situation feels unfamiliar, uncomfortable and boring. The realization that we need to lay new groundwork for our new identity is a crisis that will need to be weathered.

It is important for us to be clear about what happened as a result of the extended attachment. It is important to remind ourselves of what it did to our lives, or it will creep back in. We need to be longer in independence than we were in attachment in order for it to be automatic.

We hang on to limiting relationships and a lower functioning because we know what is coming next. The outcome is predictable. Living in the present is going beyond the known. To live as our own person means we will not know what is coming next. There is a moment of truth, a crisis that is like a blank space in time. We have to be ready for new, unfamiliar behavior. In Christianity, this black space came after the crucifixion. After Jesus Christ died on the cross on Friday there was nothing. If you were a believer, then Jesus' death was the end unless he indeed could raise himself up again. Without the Resurrection, there would be no Christianity. Without our own resurrection as a self individuated self-in process, there is no separation.

We were manipulated into our attachments by our parents, siblings, and other caregivers, and THEIR needs, expectations, good intentions, meanness and ignorance. We survived. Sometimes, in the average expectable environments and with good enough mothering, we even thrive. But other times, when the environment is not average and the mothering not good enough, we continue in the survival mode. We are constantly vigilant so we will not be annihilated or unloved or, at least, lose what minimal love we have. We remain attached to this quest for approval and survival. Separation and only separation is the key to our individuation.

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