

Getting in Touch with the Parents Within

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An old man once told me, “When two people go to bed together there are always at least six people there – the two people and the internalized representations (the memories) of their respective parents within.” He then noted that the bed often gets even more crowded with the memories of former lovers and the attitudes of friends, siblings and other important figures in the lives of the two people. Metaphorically speaking it can sometimes get crowded rather quickly and often seems to require a kind of ‘exorcism’ for the couple to finally get a little peace and quiet, and develop a little emotional intimacy between the two of them. In bed with a new lover, the internal thoughts race: “What would my Mother say?” “Look at me, I’m just like my Dad.” “I can’t wait to tell my friend.” “I can’t enjoy this while my sister is unhappy.” “How do I compare with her previous boy-friend.” And some thoughts even get verbalized, “Shhhh, I think I just heard someone.” But was it someone out there or someone in there? Perhaps it is not someone lurking in the hall but the memory of someone lurking within, someone who is watching, criticizing, encouraging, or simply commenting.

Adults often wonder why they are thinking and talking so much about their parents in their psychotherapy sessions. “That was a long time ago. I can’t change them. What’s the point? Why should I blame them? I need to forget it and take responsibility for my own life.” It’s true. It was a long time ago. You probably can’t change them. Blaming will do little good and who can argue with taking responsibility for one’s own life. But forgetting it is quite another matter and there is an answer to the question of, “What’s the point?” To begin with, we remember (and forget) in different ways.

One way to ‘remember’ the past is to be held prisoner by the experiences of the past and unconsciously (forgetfully) repeat the troubled dynamics of the past in current relationships. “I was the bad boy in my family and now I maintain that reputation in my adult life.” “I was always the mediator in my family and I continue in that role.” “My mother and father were afraid of me becoming a sexual being and now as an adult I hear the echoes of their concern every time I get close to someone. And then I have to run away.” So, if one way to remember the past is to unconsciously repeat it, the other way is to consciously deal with the thoughts and feelings associated with the important events in order to overcome symptomatic behavior. That is ‘the point’ in speaking about things that are difficult to speak about in therapy.

When we do this, we often come to discover that we have two fathers and two mothers and doubles of every important person in our life. There is my-mother-in-the-world who lives in thus and such a place and then there is my-mother-in-my-mind – ‘my-mother-within’ – my-internalized-mother - that collection of memories and feelings, conflicts and pleasures, orders and messages, values and attitudes that comprise my experience of my mother. And it applies to my father, my siblings, grandparents, step-parents, and friends as well. There is often a considerable difference between the internalized person and the actual person and while real people will die, our internalized parents and other important

figures live on in our conscious and unconscious memories soothing and/or torturing us with their messages.

So what is the point in talking about all that? The point is that when a person is able to talk about the persistent memories that trouble his/her soul, one discovers that the past is alive in the present and that many of one's day-to-day conflicts are connected to attitudes, opinions and values belonging to one's internalized parents. If we cannot confront the parent within and consciously agree or disagree with his/her message, we may become, poetically speaking, 'possessed' by that parent within.

We recognize our 'possession' in the way we pass on to our children messages that were given to us. We hear our parent's voice coming out of our mouths when talking with our children. Or we find ourselves saying and doing things in blatant opposition to our parents, as if to say, "Even though you aren't with me, I keep you close to me by living in opposition or speaking in rebuttal to you and all you tried to impose on me."

Adults identify with or oppose their parents within, in their choice of a political party, an attitude toward religion, a style of relating to a spouse, a way of raising a child, a view of authority, etc. I was once playing with a little boy who shouted in the midst of our play, "You, hush your mouth!" It sounded so incongruous to our play that I looked at him and asked, "Who says, 'You, hush your mouth!'" as if to suggest that I knew it certainly wasn't him. He then replied without hesitation, "Grandma says, 'You, hush your mouth.'" Similarly we often find adults parroting or, again poetically speaking, 'channeling' the voices, views and values of their parents within. To these messages we reply, "Your cliché may be a fine representation of your parent's view, but what do you think? How do you feel? What do you want?"

The parents within may encourage or inhibit one in the choice of a career, the pursuit of romantic relations, the management of money, the freedom with which one pursues one's ambitions, the structure of one's family, one's attitudes toward health and self-care, etc.

"My mother wanted me to be a doctor and my father wanted me to follow him into the family business but what do I want to do?" "My mother wants me to get married but no-one is good enough for her. Now if I don't get married, I disappoint her and anyone I choose will disappoint her. So what should I do? Who is good enough for me, with or without my mother's disapproval?"

The 'voices' or internal messages of the parents within are often affirming and/or critical. They may inhibit sexual desire or career ambitions. By uncritically following the directives of one's 'parent within', one may act out in the pleasure of identifying with a parent, even if it is a self-sabotage. In depression the person often wallows in self-criticism but the question soon becomes, "In whose name are you criticizing yourself?" With a little reflection it is often possible to identify the voice of the other within, the one in whose name the person attacks him/herself. "I don't like to look at myself in the mirror because I criticize myself in the name of my mother. I've put on some weight. She would be dissatisfied and I unconsciously repeat her judgment every time I look in the mirror. I try to avoid her by not looking in the mirror but its like trying to run away from

something in my back pocket. Her criticism pursues me wherever I am. I don't confront this internal other. I just make the futile effort of trying to get away from her criticism, which I carry with me wherever I go."

"I'm a workaholic. I've received financial and professional rewards far beyond my dreams but it's never enough. My father, may he rest in peace, said I'd never amount to anything but he was also never able to acknowledge what it was I had accomplished. Now I continue to work like a horse but like him, I never acknowledge my own accomplishments and never feel I'll amount to anything." We could say that this guy is driving real fast (working real hard) trying to get away from the guy in the back seat. And who is it that is in the back seat (in his unconscious)? We don't know for sure but among others, it looks like it's the memory of his father haunting and criticizing his every move.

One need not be disturbed to feel an internal conflict between differing desires, competing considerations, and ambivalent feelings. This is, in fact, a very typical state of affairs for all of us. And yet we often speak of the 'self' as though it was an independent singular entity. It isn't at all. The self is a cluster of voices that we each must find a way to manage. An identity is not a singular point but a collection of identifications. The voices and messages of important people that we carry within us, are part of our identifications and the important 'others' that make up who we are. When we don't manage our internalized 'others' we find ourselves doing things we can't understand or find ourselves repeatedly falling into unpleasant repetitive behavior patterns. Identifying the desires of one's parents within - or the desires of one's 'others' within - is the first step. After that, one must elaborate the internal dialogue, track it down in the interactions of daily life, resuscitate the thoughts, memories and emotions concealed in such behavior patterns and, in doing so, make the unconscious conscious.

The mind is not as an isolated unit. It is an interactional organ made up of a composite of influences. If we can find a way to listen to and scrutinize the influences of the parents within, as well as the miscellaneous 'others' within, we are able to more consciously manage the desires, or demands, of those 'others' and in doing so, help to distill out a desire of our own.

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