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PATTERNS OF THE PAST

People think that relationships are about happiness.
But they're not. They're about transformation.

Joseph Campbell

The screen on the television fluttered and then went blank. He got up from the sofa, switched off all the lamps, and climbed the stairs.

"Great", he thought, seeing the light escaping from the half-closed bedroom door, she was still awake. He slipped out of his clothes and slid in beside his wife, who smiled at him, looking up from her book, and then went on reading. She smelled good. Her regular breathing and the outline of her body beneath the sheets had a strong effect on him. He reached out a hand and caressed her smooth belly. She smiled again, so he moved closer and began gently to nibble her ear.

"Not just now, OK? I want to read," she said, moving her head away.

He said nothing. His heart was pounding and his body began to freeze. She remained immersed in her book, as if he weren't there.

Finally, he broke the silence: "I might as well sleep in the other room," he said.

She put down the book, and gave him her long severe look.

"For God sake, what's the matter with you?" she said with studied impatience (as if she didn't know).

"I just felt close to you, and wanted to make love with you, but I see I'm in the way," he said in his best innocent voice.

"But do I have a choice here?" she demanded. "Or is it all just about you, again?"

"But you never want to, there's always some reason or other. I think you've got a real problem with sexuality, no wonder your last marriage didn't work out."

"Don't you talk to me about sexual hang-ups," she screamed back. "All you want is a mother to take care of your every little whim. Well this lady ain't your mother, get it? Even if the last one was." Now she was standing over him, pointing, while he held his head in a long-suffering way.

“OK, I’ve got the message,” he said, rising to his feet with a burst of energy. “Just remember all I wanted was some loving time with you, not another bloody lecture from the Ice Queen,” he added, before he stormed out, slamming the door and stomping down the corridor, to take final refuge in the cold guest bedroom.

Another night of domestic war.

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The Inner Family in action

How often do such scenes repeat themselves in houses up and down the land? What started as a dream of love ends as a battlefield. Both parties feel aggrieved, lonely, and sexually frustrated. If either regret the things that they said, they keep it to themselves - at least for the time being. In the morning they may apologise and try again. But sometimes one partner will take days to come round, and in the meantime they are building up a stock of bad memories. Those are very hard to eradicate.

What was really going on in this exchange? Let’s take a closer look.

In this apparently simple clash of wills between his attempt to make love and her wish to stay reading, many different levels of the couple’s personality got fired into action. The trigger point for him was her saying ‘No’ to his advances. Even though she did it in a perfectly reasonable way, he had a strong reaction - physically and emotionally. The chief problem was that when he heard her ‘No’ he began to feel rejected. All of us struggle to handle the feelings of rejection when they come to us. Men in particular can take it hard when their offers of love-making get spurned - they become very vulnerable, and often experience hurt.

As soon as the feelings of rejection and vulnerability come over him, our male

responds in a sulky way. In this mode it is as if he has turned into a little boy who cannot get his way. Now, any woman will agree that possibly the least sexy thing to have in her bed is a sulky little boy. It is definitely not a ‘turn-on’ for her. A woman does not want sex with a child. If she wants to have sex, it will be with an adult man who desires her, and who is not going to be upset by the slightest response she makes. So his childish reaction *guarantees* that they will not have sex. It is a set-up for loss.

Not only does he react like a spoiled child, there was also another tone to his voice - haughty, as if he were looking down on her. As if *she* were the child, and he some superior grown-up who knows better. And to this she does respond. She reacts to him with barely disguised irritation: she has been through this movie before, and is now in her irritated but long-suffering mode. So he shifts gear, and tries to be a sweeter and more innocent child, since that has been known to win her round before. But she will have nothing of it. It just gets her goat even more - as he probably intended. His sweetness masks a certain manipulativeness, designed to portray her as a withholding mother figure, which is how the child in him now experiences her. And on it goes: at every stage of the game they both up the ante a little more, adding increasing hostility to each exchange until it is totally out of control.

What is remarkable in this conflict is that each both partners adopt styles which appear to have the character of either children or parent figures. Why should this be?

The answer lies in the very earliest moments of human consciousness. Unlike other vertebrates, the human being is born extremely helpless and dependent on others. Where foals are on their feet and curious within minutes, human babies need a good nine months before they make their first steps, and several years before they can fend for themselves in any but the most rudimentary way. We are extremely vulnerable and dependent on our fellows, especially our parents. Perhaps this vulnerability is nature's price for our large self-reflective neo-cortex, upright position, and unmatched manual dexterity, for these features give us the unbeatable evolutionary advantage. But vulnerability and dependence remain difficult issues for us as we grow up.

At the same time, it seems that nature has designed us to expect unconditional love and protection from our parental caretakers. It is as if we are programmed to be inter-dependent social beings who trustingly expect a good welcome and good treatment from those who are already in the world.¹ During the period when our bodies and minds are doing the most developing, we rely on these powerful adults for everything - not just food, physical shelter and stimulus, but above all love and approval. The psychological effect of this dependence is that, in order to encourage our protectors, and to cope with their inevitable shortcomings, we learn to apply a certain amount of manipulation, through facial expressions, tone of voice, and so on.

At the same time an internal process of identification and character building is taking place. The logic works like this:

whatever is strong and coping gets linked with the powerful parents we see outside of us, and whatever is weak and dependent gets associated with the child we are. As time goes on, those parts of our own psyche which are powerful acquire *parental* status, and those which are vulnerable acquire *child* status.

A parent has the function of keeping the child safe, and of helping the child to regulate his energies, until he is able to take over those functions for himself. This is perfectly natural, and the internalised parent has similar functions within the psyche - that is those of *protection* and *control*. In this way, the child has a functional parent part built into his imagination, to support and regulate himself, while he develops his own autonomous self. But he also has a complimentary child part, which stands for all the qualities need protection, such as vulnerability and dependence. And this is where the trouble lies.

Our 19th century forefathers did not much approve of the qualities of childhood, such as unbridled emotionality, innocence, spontaneity, and messiness. In consequence, being a child in Western society has not been a particularly attractive option, until very recently.² As we saw earlier, our psyches take a long time to catch up with the changes in society. And so there remains a consensus pressure that encourages individuals to further identify with the parent parts of their psyche, and to disown the child parts.

This creates a severe internal tension, which is usually resolved by the tendency not to appear vulnerable or dependent, and to be self-reliant, or aloof, or even domineering. It amounts to a parody of adulthood, further distorted because these qualities of parenthood are conceived from a child's perspective. The inner parent turns out to be mostly a fantasy

adult - what a parent is 'supposed' to be - modelled on the child's experience of his own caretakers. They, in turn, were most likely struggling to be adults themselves, from the perspective of their own suppressed inner children.

Inner parent figures have yet a further function. Because our biological goal is to become adults, boys and girls, as they grow out of infancy, need their fathers and mothers to identify with. To greater or lesser degrees, they inevitably succeed in this - even when a person does their utmost best not to turn out like their father or mother. Even when they go to all possible lengths of rebellion and contradictory lifestyles, they will unfailingly develop *some* of their characteristics, especially in terms of unconscious behaviour patterns. It is a reality (and often feels like a tragedy!) which we all have to face. Leaving aside the genetic inheritance, the likeness is of course due to the exposure to our parents' attitudes, beliefs and behaviours during our childhood.

The emphasis is therefore firmly in favour of suppressing the inner child in favour of the inner parent. This area of internal conflict is well documented in the psychological literature. It has inspired several theories, from the complex internal dynamics of the psychoanalytical school of Object Relations³, to the simple, but useful models of Transactional Analysis.⁴ The latter proposes that we can usefully speak of an adult psyche as composed of three primary poles - *Adult*, *Parent*, and *Child*.

The *adult* part, is that which grown up people intend to present to the world. On the inside, however, there is a *child* part, compiled of disowned, vulnerable, foolish and messy aspects of the person. Alongside this is the *parent* part, whose function is to keep the inner child in check, thereby

keeping the person safe from hurt, dependence, and regression in daily life. In practice, there is usually an internal conflict between the parent part and the child part. Although he used different terms, this approximates to Freud's starting point, when he described humans as struggling with the unconscious tension between civilisation and instinct, mediated by the *Superego*.

While this inner set-up seems to be almost universal in our society and comprises the bread-and-butter work of psychotherapists, it is still not common knowledge outside psychological circles. It is extremely unecological in terms of its effect, since keeping the inner balance stable consumes a lot of psychic energy. In the TV programme *Fawlty Towers*, John Cleese's Basil Fawlty is a prime example of a person who constantly struggles, and hilariously fails, to maintain his inner stability and keep life under control, and we love to see him, because all know what it feels like.

When inner parents and inner children get together

An intimate relationship is an enormous threat to the precarious inner balance we have been describing. Within the fearful psyche intimacy is as dangerous as Kryptonite to Superman, for you cannot have a satisfactory relationship without both partners permitting the ability to be vulnerable and dependent together. But it is not so straightforward. Let us consider what happens when individuals come together. Imagine the interaction between four competing poles - or six, if you add on the adults they are intending to be. Relationship is a complex business!

In times of stress - and relationships can easily become stressful - the inner

situation is heavily taxed. First we may try charm or manipulation; in other words, we may act from the child within us, while looking for a response from the parent part in the other. If that fails, we have recourse to our parent part, in which case we will be looking towards the child part in the other. In the long run, relationships can crystallise around such tendencies, so that partners find themselves unable to operate outside these restrictions. Each partner is unconsciously bonded from the position of their inner child with the hoped-for ideal parent, which they see in the other. At the same time, the same-gender parent's attitude and behavioural tendencies towards the opposite sex are crucial in forming a base-pattern for our own behaviour. These reinforce the inner parent, and in consequence effect how we relate to our partners.

We call the patterns of interaction between the inner parts of *Bonding Patterns*, after the term first coined by therapists Hal Stone and Sidra Winkleman.⁵ A chief feature of these bonding patterns which we noticed in our own lives, and of those which our client couples have told us about, is the rapidity and predictability of the patterns and interactions. It's astonishing! In the case of our couple, the time elapsed between wanting to make love and stomping down the corridor was only a few minutes. Perhaps you recognise this speed in your own arguments, which if you take the trouble to analyse, usually turn out to be bonding pattern interactions. How does it get out of hand so quickly, and where does this energy come from?

Bonding patterns are driven by the impulse to protect actual (or imagined) vulnerability, strengthened by the old adage that attack is the best form of defence. If you look closely at the dynamics in the example you will

notice that there is a progressive, but rapid escalation of hostility in each partner. Although this creates a lot of energy between the partners, it leads only to an impasse followed by separateness. When they experience themselves as separate they do not have to be dependent on each other at all. Comforting togetherness has been lost, but a comforting independence has been gained.

However, as we saw in the previous chapter, such independence is more likely to be a compensation for the inability to be alone. It is driven by the inner child, and seen in this light, the distancing partner is still pushing for togetherness, but this time one marked by the closeness of conflict.

Bonding patterns and the war in the bedroom

If we could look inside the psyches of the couple in our story, we would witness a drama which evokes familiar disappointments and self protection urges from their past. Here's how it works:

When the man experiences rejection from his mate he is most likely to experience a phantom from the past, a mother figure, who at that moment is withholding what he desires. He feels rejected, fragile and vulnerable. In his unconscious mind, she is one who is 'selfish', because she is bent on her own agenda, rather focused on her child's needs. Whenever an ancient unavowed neediness creeps into sex you can be sure that a parent/child dynamic is being evoked, and that there will be trouble.

His sulky complaint comes from the wheedling little boy in him, and is designed to make her feel guilty for not taking care of him. It is aimed at a little girl in her, who he knows grew up feeling that she had to take care of

everyone's needs. But it evokes an exasperated parent part in her. "What's the matter with you?" is a direct volley on the 'silly' little boy in the man. It is both a defence of her little girl, whom he was evoking, and redirection of the action towards the area where she knows he hurts: the little boy who is prone to rejection. It is therefore both self-protection and counter-attack. But it is so innocent, and so rapid. And the reality is that the woman is probably motivated solely by a desire to protect her little girl from the inference that she is a *bad* girl, for having failed to do what she was supposed to do.

To counter his feelings of rejection, the man first tries to manipulate her from his child place. "I see I'm in the way," he says innocently. As this seems to fail, he sees he has to get tougher to protect himself. So he escalates into his parent part. In this case it is an aloof and rather patronising parent. "I think you've got a real problem with sexuality," is fairly hostile. You don't have to get violent (though it does happen) in order to escalate; a falsely powerful superiority can be achieved by simple matters of body language and vocal tone. Some, especially the English, can achieve it expertly, simply by raising an eyebrow. The point is that the escalation forces the energy in the opposite direction, since the invocation of the parent part is matched by aiming at the inner child in the partner.

The icy, aloof father threatens to withdraw, but his behaviour is also rather punishing, showing that he has not given up fishing for this bad little girl. He employs some of the style of a domineering, punishing father-who-is-to-be-obeyed. Could it be that she did in fact have a father who withdrew and abandoned her, or who was dominant and punishing? If so, then in this guise he is aiming directly for the little one in her, whose history he

either knows or senses. Or could it be that his father was distant and aloof, and that it is an old identity pattern, into which he slips in times of stress? It may even be a combination of both. Under the spell of a bonding pattern, in attack-in-order-to-defend mode, we intuitively seek out the particular kind of child that our partners were, and supply them with the 'right kind' of parent to frighten them. And we know all these quite well, for when we fell in love we had a precise match between these inner figures.

But it is even more complex, because our responses are partly modelled on those we know from our parents. For example, the woman feeling the paternal hostility to her inner child has recourse to her inner parent for the express purpose of self-protection. But she is also influenced by the ways her mother reacted to her father, or other males in her life. And in her own counter-offence towards his child, she may be unknowingly influenced by the kind of attitudes which her mother had to whiny, needy children. This in turn will be based on how her mother was mothered, and therefore her mother's attitude to her own inner child. This will have profoundly influenced how the daughter was brought up, particularly in the codes of what was allowable in terms of vulnerability and needs.

These themes can go back generations. It is a veritable hall of mirrors! But for now, back to the action.

In response to his further escalation she replies with venom: "All you want is a mother to take care of your every little whim. Well this lady ain't your mother, get it? Even if the last one was." She has become a furious mother-figure, exasperated by the self-centred needy infant that it has been her unending misfortune to be saddled with - give her strength!

In return, he has to escalate again, now turning into the ultimate 'know-it-all patriarch', putting his finger on her self-evident frigid pathology. How else can she now protect her 'useless' little girl, but by becoming Jezebel-the-Merciless, and dismissing him with one shake of her tail. And so he rides off into the icy sunset, where another different type, with a different history, might have become Mr See-if-I-care-I-can-rise-above-it-all, or Conan-the-Barbarian, breaker of plates, vases and doors, or she may have escalated to Kali-the-All-Terrible, goddess of destruction, eater of male inner children!

And all in the name of protection of vulnerability. And all in a few minutes flat.

Bonding Patterns for peace

Like all things in nature, the bonding patterns come in countless varieties. A bonding pattern row may be triggered at any time, and with varying intensity. Couples at our workshops, hearing about bonding patterns for the first time, enthusiastically tell us about incidents from their daily lives which fit into the structure. Often there is a couple who has entered into one on the way to the workshop. Map reading on a car journey is a sure-fire starting point for many couples. Here, in a stereotypical case, the controlling father (primed by an anxious little boy) may exercise his infuriating influence on the 'useless little-girl-woman'. Ordering in a restaurant, or dealing with tradesmen or taxi drivers, are other instances which frequently have the power to evoke bonding patterns. Partners seem to fall blindly into traps where they adopt a style - perhaps an angry mother or a critical father - quite without any intention that they themselves can recognise.

The bonding pattern of the couple we have been analysing is a dynamic one - it is all action. But there are many other varieties. Imagine the scenario if there had been a different woman in the picture - one who was afraid of any conflict, or of upsetting the good father she had married. Perhaps she would have put down her book, become a compliant child, and given to the little boy in the man what he needed to feel good again, without self-interest, but also without passion or desire. There are many relationships which settle for the quiet life, inner children appeasing inner parents, afraid to rock the boat, settling for the known.

We call such patterns *static bonding patterns*. They serve to avoid conflict, to not threaten the security of the pairings, based on the stable patterning of inner parent with inner child. Other patterns which appear dynamic are so repetitive that they create their own stability, and are therefore also counted as static. These have their energy focused in only one direction, like the comic character Andy Capp, the cheeky child eternally meeting or outwitting the restrictive mother in his wife Flo. And then there are those where both are party to the collusion of remaining children together, brother and sister, like the Babes in the Wood.

As society becomes more complex so do the roles and bonding patterns we find. Sometimes it is hard to spot when an apparently adult response is simply a pseudo-adult one. A pseudo-adult response is one in which the energy has gone from the child part to the parent part. It is not always an explicitly aggressive escalation, but it is defensively and strategically directed nevertheless. Such a move can be infuriating for the other partner, because it appears so innocent. But the experience of being on the receiving end is of an aggression so passive, so finely attuned to making the other

impotent, that they become furious. Relationships can develop long-term patterning around such dynamics. For example, a 'new man' who has read all the right books can say all the right stuff.

But if he is motivated by his inner child's fear of not upsetting mother, he can cause his partner to become so exasperated, that she becomes the one who is 'carrying all the anger' on behalf of the relationship.

Although they do not feel particularly pleasant, *dynamic* bonding patterns have one advantage over static ones. Mutually collusive patterns are harder to get out of than ones where partners bump up against each other. In terms of transformative potential, the man in our example is extremely lucky to have a wife who is able to stand up to him. It can be considered a gift. For if at some point he bothers to take the time to think about what is going on, he will realise that he has to come to terms with what feeling rejected does to him. He will then begin to recognise to what lengths he will tend to go, in order to prevent himself feeling his vulnerability. He will begin to see how he treats his own neediness. In short, he will be forced to look in the mirror that his partner offers him, through her refusal to comply with the demands of his needy inner child. If he then bothers to do the necessary psychological work he can come through it chastened and transformed. Then everything may change: his partner will feel much more secure around him, and he may find that he begins to get much more of what he is longing for!

On the other hand, a relationship where both are doing all they can for stability, or a quiet life - even if under the guise of 'not upsetting the children' - will more often than not turn out to be a static prison, where there is no passion, no opportunity for growth. If

there is any sex, it is unlikely to mature and develop, and is more likely to wither and die. Over the years, any sense of shared intimacy will probably elude them. The woman who offers duty-sex (or *womb-sex* as we call it) in exchange for peace, is most likely to be stuck in a dutiful-daughter or pacifying-mother role. Her ability to obtain deep pleasure from this is doubtful. It may be difficult for her to surrender to her own orgasm, and her health may well suffer.

A man who is fully occupied with deploying his pleasing-son role in his sex life may learn some useful techniques, but he will never penetrate to the heart of his adult partner. If he remains in the old paradigm of 'giving her one' and rolling over, he will be sure to miss her altogether. In lonely complicity they may both settle for either of these, but he may find his own erectile potency elusive in the long run.

A survival-bonded relationship may last a long time - and many marriages have been based on such sound pragmatism- but the opportunities for growth are stifled. What is extraordinary about the bonding patterns is how stable and enduring they can be. Even the most violent and abusive patterns are hard to break, for this reason. Most battered wives, for example, go back home and never finally leave. Most psychologically castrated husbands stick around. The tacit refusal of both partners to look in the mirror of awareness which the presence of bonding patterns points to, means that the couple has agreed to put their priorities elsewhere. They may be able to maintain a stable relationship, what we call a *maintenance marriage*. But if one partner wants some change, then they will either have to get out - or bring in a third party, by having an affair, for example.

¹ See Jean Liedloff, *The Continuum Concept*, Arkana, London, 1986.

² See Nick's *The Making of Them*, Lone Arrow Press, London, 2000.

³ See the theories of internal objects of W D Fairbairn, especially as described in Stephen M. Johnson's masterpiece, *Character Styles*, WW Norton, New York, 1994.

⁴ See Eric Berne's *The Games People Play*, Grove Press, New York, 1964.

⁵ See H Stone and S Winkleman, *Embracing Each Other*, New World Library, San Rafael, CA, 1989.