

ALIENATING SIGNIFICANT OTHERS

A Meditation Psalm on Being Hurt

By MARY DUNN

The 'other' cannot be hurtfully alienating unless they are already significant and trusted.

I

*But, for my part, I cry to you, Yahweh,
every morning my prayer comes before you.
Wretched and close to death since childhood,
I have borne your terrors – I am finished!*

(Ps 88:13–15)

When a child feels unjustly punished and is flushed with shamed indignation, and can still feel the smart of slap on skin and hear the sound of harsh humiliation . . .

*Listen to me, Yahweh, answer me,
for I am poor and needy.*

(Ps 86)

When a child feels pushed aside for a rival who succeeds where they fail to get their needs met . . .

*Listen to me, Yahweh, answer me,
for I am poor and needy.*

When a child is isolated and ridiculed and watches from a solitary corner outside the ring of chums, wishing the ground would open and they could be extinguished and the hurt vanish with them . . .

*Listen to me, Yahweh, answer me,
for I am poor and needy.*

When a child pulls the cover tightly over their head and studies how to fake sleep in the vain hope that violation will pass them by tonight . . .

*Listen to me, Yahweh, answer me,
for I am poor and needy.*

When a child is separated from the others by different skin or different hair or the wrong shape of body or the wrong accent or the

wrong standard of dress or poverty or strangeness or ignorance of the unwritten rules . . .

*Listen to me, Yahweh, answer me,
for I am poor and needy.*

When a child lies awake imagining and dreading the unimaginable – that Mum and Dad could part and could ask the child to make a decision between them . . .

*Listen to me, Yahweh, answer me,
for I am poor and needy.*

When a child stands exposed for lack of knowledge in a sea of clever classmates . . .

*Listen to me, Yahweh, answer me,
for I am poor and needy.*

II

When a woman shakes in expectation of another blow and hopes the children cannot hear and wonders whether she provoked the rage and fights back her own dangerous rage and waits for sleep to calm the storm in her man . . .

*You are my God, take pity on me, Lord,
for to you I cry all the day.*

(Ps 86:2–3)

When an employee hears words like stupid and incompetent and slow and lazy, and knows that he is being exploited and insulted but cannot afford to lose the job or stand up for himself . . .

*You are my God, take pity on me, Lord,
for to you I cry all the day.*

When a couple wonder where the love went which was so strong and now feels so elusive in the welter of bills and work and children and bad temper and rushing . . .

*You are my God, take pity on me, Lord,
for to you I cry all the day.*

When an incontinent grandad knows himself to be a source of stress for a household and overhears the swearing and is shamed and blamed for every problem . . .

*You are my God, take pity on me, Lord,
for to you I cry all the day.*

When it seems as though there is nobody in the universe who is saying 'you are an OK person', and the sense of being adrift in space undermines all efforts at confidence . . .

*You are my God, take pity on me, Lord,
for to you I cry all the day.*

III

We are our relationships . . . *God is Love.* (1 Jn 4:16)

Our early lives shaped our personalities and we construed ourselves and our world-view accordingly . . . *God is Love.*

For some of the time, when we were babies, the whole universe was bounded by an infinitely loving 'mother' . . . *God is Love.*

However, there were times when we felt misunderstood, abandoned, lost, disliked, hurt, ignored, and maybe even abused . . . *God is Love.*

We learned to take our part in a variety of relationships and to discover the light and dark of being loved and being hurt . . . *God is Love.*

Both experiences were true for us, and we were split between being loved and being hurt . . . *God is love.*

IV

Pain and shame were introduced to the psyche before language could be used to clothe it in reasons and explanations and mitigating circumstances and fear of upsetting people.

*Save me, God, for the waters
have closed in on my very being.*

Pain remains in the system, encoded physically and non-verbally. It is touched off by a smell or a sound or a song or an atmosphere.

*I am sinking in the deepest swamp
and there is no firm ground . . .*

Shame is enshrined in images and symbols, in flashbacks, memories, rejection letters, bruises, dunce's caps, a crown of thorns, bread transformed into stone.

*More numerous than the hairs of my head
are those who hate me without reason . . .*

We have all been shamed – made acquainted with grief – made aware of a dark, painful wound.

*Save me, God, for the waters
have closed in on my very being.*

*I am sinking in the deepest swamp
and there is no firm ground . . .*

*More numerous than the hairs of my head
are those who hate me without reason . . .*

*I will praise God's name in song,
I will extol him by thanksgiving.
(Ps 69:1-2, 4, 30)*

V

Being hurt feels like dying inside.
It is an extinction of selfhood.
It disconnects and fragments, so that there is a loss of identity.
*My days are like a fading shadow,
I am withering up like grass.
(Ps 102:11)*

It is a discounting of worth . . . an invalidation . . . a ceasing to matter.
It isolates and it disables self-protection . . . it takes away entitlement
. . . it depersonalizes.

*I am like a desert-owl in the wastes,
a screech owl among ruins,
I keep vigil and moan
like a lone bird on the roof.
(Ps 102:6-7)*

The body registers the blow with flushing, sweating, shortness of breath, raised heart-rate, stomach pain, confused babbling and disorientation.

*For my days are vanishing like smoke,
my bones burning like an oven;
like grass struck by blight, my heart is withering,
I forget to eat my meals.
(Ps 102:3-4)*

VI

And when the self has shrunk into hiding, the enemy without becomes the enemy within. The persecutor takes up residence in the psyche, often smiling from a familiar face.

The harshly critical other becomes a voice in the head. Neglect and discounting becomes an expectation of rejection. The internal dialogue flips between self-affirmation and self-disgust – between living and dying. The psyche is polarized between heaven and hell – the spiritual heights and the shadowy depths. The 'shadow', painful, dark side of life is enthroned at the core of the self, so that the soul is structured as a split between darkness and light.

There is no path to God, henceforth, without an encounter with the shadow – which was cast at the time of wounding. There is no holiness

which does not entail holding the tension between opposites and integrating them in God. The experience which began as a hurt, becomes a vulnerability which doubts and divides and undermines as a constant theme at every turn.

So I find this rule: that for me, where I want to do nothing but good, evil is close at my side. In my inmost self I dearly love God's law, but I see that acting on my body there is a different law which battles against the law in my mind. (Rom 7:21-22)

VII

Universal stories give us a detached version of our own story. They personify and distance and role-play so that our difficulties are projected on to a stage and we may safely adopt the stance of spectator of our own lives.

This is the significance of Jung's concept of the collective unconscious: he proposed that the thematic characters which have reappeared throughout humanity's history of story-making represent our enduring relationship issues.

For thousands of years before the existence of psychology, people 'played' their problems in the form of story-telling, just as children 'play' their worries and difficulties with their toys. A harsh mother can be safely thought about as a 'wicked step-mother'; once split off into a negative caricature, her real-life version can remain loving and idyllic, regardless of her bad temper. In the same way, archetypal psychology leads us to move from the personal to the archetypal, and then to return to the personal having learned from the wisdom and experience of the ancestors.

*My people, listen to my teaching,
pay attention to what I say.
I will speak to you in poetry,
unfold the mysteries of the past.
What we have heard and known,
what our ancestors have told us
we shall not conceal from their descendants,
but will tell to a generation still to come.*

(Ps 78:1-4)

VIII

How do the Scriptures guide us to the reconciliation of our opposites?

When the pain of betrayal connects us to our shadow and forces us to be aware of the internal split between dark and light, are there biblical

stories in which God is the union of opposites – the container of persecutor and victim alike; the sanctifier, not just of holiness but also of evil – to bring us to ‘love our crooked neighbour with our own crooked heart’?¹

The internal conflict is marvellously illustrated in the story of Jacob and Esau.

The twins in the myth represent the positive and negative dimensions of personhood, split and identified as opposing forces.

In the story they are in conflict from conception. They:
*struggled so much that [Rebekah] . . . went to consult Yahweh,
 and Yahweh said to her:*

*There are two nations in your womb,
 your issue will be two rival peoples.
 One nation will have the mastery of the other,
 and the elder will serve the younger.*

(Gen 25:22–23)

In the story, Jacob tries to forget and deny his dark hairy brother – his ‘shadow’ side.

Having stolen Esau’s birthright, he moves into the light of success and wealth and comfort, leaving the ‘shadow’ part of himself behind – the wronged brother.

As he leaves, he is given a vision of personal integration in the dream of the ladder of traffic between heaven and earth. It is represented by the stone of Bethel, the ‘house of God’, the connection between light and dark, imaged as heaven and earth.

He was afraid and said, How awe-inspiring this place is! This is nothing less than the abode of God, and this is the gate of heaven!
 (Gen 28:17)

At the lowest point of alienation, when he is furthest from healing his internal conflict, he is granted an image of re-connection.

As a result, Jacob makes the transition from alienating his brother to facing his enemy as a force within himself, and he can then symbolize and ritualize the reconciliation of the opposites.

Many years later, his returning dream personifies the ‘dark brother’ as a wrestling angel, who is now recognized as the face of God.

God is the union of opposites – the integration of the split psyche – the container of abuser and abused.

Then Jacob asked, ‘Please tell me your name’. He replied, ‘Why do you ask my name?’ With that, he blessed him there.

Jacob named the place Peniel, ‘Because I have seen God face to face,’ he said, ‘and have survived’. (Gen 32:30–31)

'A crime against the shadow is also a crime against the self.'²

Jacob carries his 'dislocation' from his brother like a wound which painfully alienates him from himself – from his own 'wholeness'.

The story has no interest in morality: there seems to be no value in deciding who is right and who is wrong.

The conflict and the denial of the alienating other is the point of the story.

Jacob sees the face of God only when he can bring the opposing parts of himself into integration – heaven.

Blessed are the poor in spirit:

the kingdom of Heaven is theirs . . .

Blessed are you when people abuse you and persecute you and speak all kinds of calumny against you falsely on my account.

Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven.

(Mt 5:3, 11–12)

IX

Alienating shame flourishes in loneliness.

In fairy stories the child often goes into the forest alone, where he or she becomes vulnerable to the demons of imaginal persecutors and wild beasts.

The Giant at the top of Jack's beanstalk can smell and taste loneliness from afar.

'The patient must be alone in order to find out what it is that supports him when he can no longer support himself. Only this experience can give him an indestructible foundation.'³

Our oral tradition of stories takes us into the wilderness to encounter our personal monsters there: Little Red Riding Hood goes into the forest alone and meets the wolf; Princess Vassalisa sets out to find the hag who will give her the fire-light; Moses and Aaron personify the split by contrasting the face-to-face chat with God on top of Mount Sinai with the sordid golden calf below, in the wilderness; Christ goes into the wilderness and is tempted by the devil there.

Alienation means aloneness, separation, abandonment, rejection.

Yahweh, God of my salvation,

when I cry out to you in the night,

may my prayer reach your presence,

hear my cry for help.

For I am filled with misery;

my life is on the brink of Sheol;

already numbered among those who sink into oblivion,

*I am as one bereft of strength,
left alone among the dead.*

(Ps 88:1-5)

X

The 'other' cannot be hurtfully alienating unless they are already 'significant' and trusted. We can only be badly let down by those in whom we invested our very survival, the sacred God-image core of ourselves.

'Just as trust had within it the seed of betrayal, so betrayal has within it the seed of forgiveness.'⁴

Integration and resurrection become possible by remaining faithful to the shadow part of ourselves and acknowledging the pain and isolation.

The abandonment of the cross occurs in the midst of aloneness and rejection and alienation.

*Like a sapling he grew up before him,
like a root in arid ground.
He had no form or charm to attract us,
no beauty to win our hearts;
he was despised, the lowest of men,
a man of sorrows, familiar with suffering,
one from whom, as it were, we averted our gaze,
despised, for whom we had no regard.*

(Isa 53:2-3)

Just as Jacob saw the face of God as he wrestled with the angel of alienation, so Christ was raised after the abandonment of –

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

(Ps 22:1)

Marion Woodman experienced this resolution of internal conflict during her searing initiatory experience in India. She made a transition from culture-shock to the most profound abandonment in a psychological desert. Once her body had surrendered to dysentery, alone and alien she faced a stark choice between death and life. Her compassion for her own body led her to the following:

I cried.

I re-baptized my evil as the best that was in me.

Instead of blinding myself to what it means to be human,

instead of cringing from the filth and poverty and pain in the street, I was able to experience the horror and at the same time love the dignity of the soul that clings to life.

The Word that had been Word only in my head, became flesh.⁵

NOTES

¹ M. Woodman, *Addiction to perfection* (Toronto: Inner City Books, 1982).

² Edward F. Edinger, *The Bible and the psyche* (Inner City Books, 1986).

³ The collected works of C. G. Jung: *Psychology and alchemy* vol 12, eds Herbert Read et al, trans R. F. C. Hull (London: Routledge Kegan Paul, 1953).

⁴ J. Hillman, *Loose ends: papers in archetypal psychology* (Zurich: Spring Publications, 1975).

⁵ M. Woodman, *The pregnant virgin* (Toronto: Inner City Books, 1985).