THE DRAMA OF CHILDHOOD

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Childhood provides us with both a primary means of defence from an increasingly unmanageable environment and also a way forward, perhaps only dimly perceived, by which we might be able to grasp hold of new hope and potency to bring about change. Part of our defensive use of childhood is built upon a romanticized and idealized notion of its nature. The myth of childhood innocence has of course been discredited yet its residues hang on (Aries, 1960). It has negative consequences for our understanding of our own childhood experiences and the way in which we need to understand and integrate these in order to allow the child within our adult personalities to be creative rather than destructive. To critique the innocent and idealized picture serves not to reduce the importance or necessity of cherishing the child. Instead, we are then freed to utilize resources within our personalities which allow us to make use of the child in ourselves in a more integrated way. This in turn helps us to understand both our own realistic needs and those of our children better and to perceive that the childlike qualities of trust, dependence and delight in our environment are a necessity if the human race and the planet itself are to have some chance of survival.

Our present concern is with the degree to which childhood today is and should be seen as a phase of pre-eminent importance in the individual's development and thus in his or her spiritual growth, and the way in which our religious beliefs and practices may or may not contribute towards our understanding and development. We are confronted with a series of problems at the outset. Since the psychological needs of the child are centrally concerned with the development of the self, viewed both as an accommodation to the intrapsychic relationships in her internal world, and in relation to the external world of interpersonal relations, we are immediately confronted with having to consider the way in which the self's needs for validation, esteem and self-worth are compatible with our understanding of the Christian imperative to 'lose' the self, to sacrifice self on behalf of others and to hide or subsume the self in Christ. The child's psychological developmental need to cherish self is seen as at variance with society's understanding and the Christian's belief in the need to control and constrain him, especially his selfishness and potentially threatening individualism, as well as to protect his innocence from contamination by the world.

This ambivalence towards the child, viewed as both monster and innocent, is reflected in a second dilemma, that of our understanding of dependence. A characteristic of childhood is its dependency, necessary not only because of the infant's biological need to be sustained, but also because it enables the adult world to control the child. Thus the 'monster' can be trained and the 'innocent' protected. But our equation of dependency with childhood leads us into a secondary ambivalence around dependency. We fear it and defend ourselves from it yet at some level we are aware of its insistent need for recognition within us. Our ambivalence may lead us into denying the continuing importance of the child within the adult and her ongoing dependency needs which are potentially functional for both the individual and his interaction with the environment.

Our third difficulty is that if we affirm the pre-eminence of childhood in the psychological and spiritual development of the individual, do we fall into a deterministic trap *vis-à-vis* the individual's later life? Is there a way of acknowledging both the pre-eminence of childhood experience *and* the repeated possibilities for growth and development throughout the life-cycle? Finally, does our proper emphasis on the child's right to a 'facilitating environment' for the satisfaction of her critical emotional and physical needs lead us to sustain the myth of childhood 'innocence' in the face of a systemic understanding of the part played by *all* family members, and others too, in the genesis and etiology of family distress?

In sharp contrast to earlier centuries, psychoanalytic writers, notably Freud, Anna Freud and Klein, followed by the more recent contributions of Erikson, Winnicott and Bowlby, have painted an irreversibly convincing picture of the pre-eminence of early childhood experience. Childhood experience is valued today as never before both in the caring professions and in popular understanding. Yet we are simultaneously confronted by the paradox of being the first generation to live consciously in the knowledge of the widespread incidence of child abuse, both physical and sexual. Moreover, political and sociological writers have drawn attention to the way in which children are oppressed today in terms of sexism, racism and a lack of power over their own lives which is barely an improvement on some of the exploitation of earlier centuries (Hoyle and Evans, 1989).

Children are viewed as simultaneously victims and victimizers by a society which appears to be at a loss to understand how to confront the abusing adult of young children with the abusing young person's attacks on the elderly. To begin to unravel this problem, we need to turn first to recent psychoanalytic thinking, as represented by Erikson, Winnicott and Miller, and then to family systems thinking, and the particular contribution made by the contexual family therapists, notably Boszormenyi-Nagy.

The child's self is nurtured primarily in the family and the gross disparity of experience, knowledge and physical strength that exists between adults and children means that parents wield almost absolute power over children. Miller (1987) describes the devastating effects of the traumatization of children in their early years and the inevitable toll that is taken on society. Through an exploration of the psychoanalytic concept of narcissism, she describes the grandiose and depressive outcome for the child of the parents' inability to provide an emotionally facilitating environment. Deriving her main thesis from Winnicott (1951), she suggests that the child's accommodation to her parents' needs often leads to the formation of what Winnicott has described as the 'false self', whereby the child is given insufficient unambivalent 'mirroring' of himself and is unable to develop the deep roots of self-esteem and true self-love. He is prevented from doing so by the continuously interfering unresolved needs of his parents, which in turn have been unmet in their early childhood by *their* parents. 'Every child has a legitimate narcissistic need to be noticed, understood, taken seriously and respected by his mother. In the first weeks and months of life, he needs to have the mother at his disposal, and must be able to use her and be mirrored by her', comments Miller (page 48). Only then can a healthy self-feeling develop when the 'unquestioned certainty that the feelings and wishes one experiences are a part of oneself. . . . This automatic natural contact with his own emotions and wishes gives an individual strength and self-esteem' (page 50).

However, if mother in particular has strong unmet narcissistic needs of her own, she will then love her child as her own self-object and manipulate her or him into something that will assuage her own lack of self-worth and insecurity. Unlike her own parents, who were unpredictable and unmirroring of her true self, she is able, because of the power imbalance between them, to manipulate her child into being continually at her disposal as a mirror or echo. Moreover, her child, unlike her parent, will not desert her because he is dependent upon her. The outcome for the child, who is thus severely deprived of opportunities to develop his own true self, is that he or she becomes either depressed or excessively dependent upon the admiration of others for what he or she can achieve. When his achievements fail, so does his self-esteem.

The spiralling effect of this interaction is obvious, both in terms of its roots in the previous generation of parenting and in its far-reaching effects on the future. It is therefore to the family systems model that we need now to turn to understand the way in which emotional pathology is transmitted and the means by which the vicious circle can be interrupted.

Family systems theory seeks to show the transactional nature of emotional phenomena. Instead of the linear cause and effect model of traditional psychoanalytic thinking, the systems model sees all expressions of emotional traumata as emerging from the needs of a dysfunctional family system. The inability of a child to develop appropriate self-esteem through the formation of a true self is linked to the many conflicting needs of the family system, of which the child's false self-development is symptomatic.

For example, mother may bring an inheritance from her family of origin which has produced in her a series of unmet narcissistic needs. She marries a man who has a symmetrical problem. His response is one of grandiosity, hers of depression. Unable to meet the needs of the other, the birth of their first child cathects the narcissistic needs of both. For father, he is an achievement, a proof of his masculinity and of his self-worth; for mother, a dependable source of attentiveness and gratification which cannot, unlike that of her parents, remove itself summarily. The child experiences himself merely as an object of his parents' unmet needs, a source of their gratification and a means whereby the marital system is held together. This model gets us away from viewing mother as the cause of her child's difficulties. But even in this simple model we cannot say that the 'cause' was actually *her* mother or her parents or the marital subsystem of which she or they formed a part. We have to move outside the circle of linear thinking altogether because whatever the 'cause' that we select, and whoever gets 'blamed', the problem will inevitably turn out to be embedded in some greater system of needs and expectancies.

A less familiar exponent of this point of view is Boszormenyi-Nagy, whose concept of relational ethics provides a means of doing justice both to the systemic and to the personal ingredients in a situation. Using the ideas of entitlement and indebtedness, Boszormenyi-Nagy suggests ways in which every member of a relational system carries emotional responsibilities for other members of it. Every member of the system *owns entitlement* to receive care and the supply of his or her emotional needs from others and in turn *accrues indebtedness* to others to supply them with theirs. Thus parents and children, husbands and wives, need to own their needs and also their responsibility to each other in supplying them.

An individual can be saddled with destructive over-entitlement from a past relationship, usually with parents, whereby he or she brings to the present marital and parental relationships demands and needs which properly belong to deprivations from the past. Such destructive over-entitlement has severe consequences for the next generation as Boszormenyi-Nagy (1987, page 305) points out:

> Even though he is entitled to compensation according to the unsettled ledger of past relationships he is never so entitled in the current instance. Substitutive retribution is ethically always invalid, even if psychologically understandable. Unfortunately, through seeking the remedy to his over-entitlement via wronging other relationships, often without knowing, the victim becomes himself an unfair victimiser.

The family systems model has been criticized for ignoring the individual's responsibility for his or her actions and for appearing to subsume all the activities of individuals under the overarching belief in the dynamics of the system. Feminist writers and those concerned with child sexual abuse have been particularly vocal. Thus, Glaser and Frosh (1988) rightly challenge those who put forward the view that in the painful circumstances of child sexual abuse the child is an active seductress or the mother a willing collaborator. In the vast majority of cases, where the abuser is a man, we are faced with a clearly identified predisposing factor—that of male sexuality—which must take direct responsibility for the abuse. And yet it is simultaneously possible, as Furniss (1984) has shown, to understand the particular childhood anguish of sexual abuse within the framework of a family systems approach.

Individuals in relationships are both responsible for their actions *and* simultaneously responsive to the realities of the system's dynamics (past and present). Boszormenyi-Nagy's particular approach to family systems theory can again help us at this point.

Normally, he points out, the indebtedness accrued to parents is finally worked out through the care of the future generation. But one must be clear that the relationship between parents and children is always asymmetrical in the power imbalance that resides between them. Children do not have the same responsibility for answering the needs of their parents as parents do for their children. 'If the asymmetry is ignored and the child is expected to repay all, the conflict becomes enormous. If the parent has been developmentally deprived, the parent and the child may find themselves in an existential conflict' (Boszormenyi-Nagy, page 322). Every child, to return to the ideas of Winnicott and Miller, has a legitimate narcissistic need to be taken seriously and respected by his parents in his own right and for his own sake, yet every parent who has lacked such 'good enough parenting' themselves will have an overwhelming existential need to be parented, and in the case of sexual abuse, sexually gratified by their child. The child can be forced, because of the asymmetrical power imbalance between adults and children, to answer the needs of parents inappropriately and destructively.

But children do have *some* responsibility for answering the needs of their parents and part of any study of the drama of childhood consists in this complex dialectical struggle to do justice to these different elements of the truth simultaneously. Erikson (1950) struggled with the problem some forty years ago. 'In those cases of infantile schizophrenia which I have seen, there was a clear deficiency in "sending power" in the child' (page 201). Erikson follows this statement with a seventeen-line footnote where he tries to explain that he is not trying to isolate first causes and therapeutic effects but to put right an earlier imbalance which suggested that mothers were the cause of their infants' difficulties.

Both Erikson and Winnicott view mother and baby as a relational unit, each part of which has responsibilities to receive and give to the other. (Neither Erikson nor Winnicott of course, nor indeed Miller or other psychoanalytic theorists, conceive of the complexity of a *wider* relational system in their theorizing, which would include both parents, their parents and the sibling relationships, but the seeds are there, even though left for their fuller flowering to occur in the work of Boszormenyi-Nagy and other family theorists as we have already noted.)

Thus if we take seriously both the power imbalance that exists within families, between parent and child, and between women and men, and if we understand the full implications of the dynamics of the family system existing over time, we can simultaneously accept the child/woman as victim of parental/marital violence and understand some of the factors that predisposed *that* child or *that* woman to carry this particular role within the family.

'Innocence' is a myth which simplifies and sentimentalizes a highly complex phenomenon and which has been uncritically perpetuated in Christian iconography. Children are 'knowledgeable' and intuitively aware of their own needs and the needs of others in their immediate relational world. Indeed it is the proper task of the infant and young child to *demand* that his needs be met. It is out of the *failure* to find the means of satisfying her proper need for unconditional love, nurture and the mirroring of herself in its own right that she may become emotionally 'available' to answer the unmet narcissistic needs of an adult. This may be the depressive need of her mother or it may be the sexual need of her father. In either case her lack of symmetrical system's power makes her in every situation a 'victim'; her availability and predisposition to carry the role may make her also a participator in the transactional demands of the system's needs.

But predisposition to carry a role within the family system is not the same as having causal responsibility for bringing about the situation within which the role gets activated. Family systems theory can still be fruitfully descriptive of the processes that occur within families and help us to understand the way in which symptoms, illness, violent behaviour, displaced sexual activity and disturbances of all kinds get located within one individual or within one sub-system, as a way of calling attention to the dysfunction that exists within the system as a whole. Moreover, it is important to distinguish between an explanatory theory and a set of intervention strategies. The second may be derived from the first but one may need to recruit other forms of help—medical, legal, etc.—to care for different members of the system as well as for the system as a whole.

The theory can also, however, help us in our further endeavour to understand and locate the significance of childhood within the developmental process as a whole. Whilst the major contributions of psychoanalysis and of ego psychology have shown the particular significance of early childhood in the development of the individual, it has been left to the more recent developments of family systems theory to call attention to the ongoing opportunities which the family system offers to *all* its members.

Family therapy avoids some of the deterministic traps of psychoanalysis and encourages the view that, even after disastrous childhood experiences, there will be repeated opportunities to discover a facilitating therapeutic environment within the ongoing family system. Most individuals in fact experience deficits and traumata of greater or lesser intensity in early childhood which are healed at least partially, not through formal counselling, but through positive experiences in a more benign family system. The important work done by Dicks (1967) and others in the 1960s describes the way in which individuals choose marital partners on the basis of some kind of unconscious therapeutic intent, and it is indeed the case that marriage provides most people (since around 93% of the population marry at some point in their lives) the chance to rework dilemmas that remain unresolved from their families of origin. Often of course the dilemmas simply get repeated and, to use Boszormenyi-Nagy's terminology, a destructive over-entitlement from the past gets foisted upon the new generation. The sins of the fathers can indeed be visited upon the children but so can the nurturing experience of marriage and parenthood provide healing for past wounds. The ongoing nature of the family lifecycle thus provides a recurring possibility for people to be made whole.

The healing potential of the later stages of the life cycle beyond childhood also requires a proper understanding of the value and appropriateness of dependency. To allow oneself to receive re-parenting from one's spouse or one's child, in such a way that narcissistic supplies can be given whilst the donor also remains free to withdraw and to receive, demands that we accept our dependent needs as being lifelong. For we cannot receive if we cannot first acknowledge our need and our vulnerability. We need throughout our lives to be able to 'regress in the service of the ego'—in other words, to revisit the world of childhood and, through our significant others in adult life, gain access to its emotional gifts. Except we are able to become as little children we shall not be able to be inheritors of the Kingdom of God.

But our residual fears of dependency are strong. Even on the more superficial conscious level, we carry memories of the injustices and oppressions which dependent childhood brought. Adults' ongoing need to 'revenge themselves unconsciously on their child for their own earlier humiliation' (Miller 1987, page 89) produces an anxious recoil from dependency. And by recoiling, the emotionally injured adult cuts off the lifeline which leads to healing and help. On the other hand, the acceptance of an ongoing need to move in and out of dependency within our intimate relationships frees us to regain access to the child within our adult self and to make friends with her again. Our child self exhibits neediness and wounds but also the intuitive wisdom of those early years, and it is this child which can overcome our defensiveness and help us break through the blocks to creativity in our relationships with the world.

Part of what enables us to get in touch with our child in adult life is the institution of religion and the fact of God. The concept of God provides us with a reservoir for continuing *basic trust* in what is often experienced as an untrustworthy world and helps us overcome the basic mistrust which Erikson identifies as the pathological substrate of the first stage of development. The concept of God further provides *hope* which can be used to overcome depression and despair. Re-experiencing the trust and hope of early childhood requires an ability to regress and to become functionally dependent. Religion, with its resources of worship, ritual and consecrated ministrants set apart by their role, enables this dependency to be recognized and renegotiated in such a way that the repeated experience of childhood can be made usable within the personality.

In an important and illuminating book, Carr (1989) suggests the way in which dependence can be functionally managed using the Christian framework of ritual and belief. 'Regression to dependence is not a reversion to an infantile mentality but a movement back to aspects of our origins which continue to be vital in our adult lives' (page 214) he comments. Taking classic themes from the Christian faith story, Carr applies to them Bion's threefold model of basic assumption behaviour. Thus Carr explores the way in which the themes of creation and resurrection (re-creation) reveal the underlying dynamic of dependence. Understanding our place within the complexity of the creation, which imposes inevitable limitations upon human autonomy, is a means by which we come to terms with our dependence. And coming to terms with the continuing inevitability of dependence—inevitable (though different) in the life of the adult as it is in the child—in fact frees us to take on our mature human responsibilities.

We are now in a position to reflect briefly on the way in which religious belief and practice may or may not be helpful to us in our understanding of childhood and in our management of the 'child' who remains within our adult personalities. They are unfortunately responsible for a variety of pathological positions which contribute adversely to our human development. I will refer to three.

First, the Church's collusion with dysfunctional dependency. Its rituals can be used as a retreat into childhood and people can be unconsciously encouraged to become fixated at a pre-ambivalent stage of development. Through forms of worship, language and symbolism, the individual, far from being challenged into growth, is further infantilized. Carr (1989) identifies three elements that are common to the magical dysfunctional human need to be dependent: the wish for some dependable object, the tendency to deny that we are responsible for ourselves and our actions and the belief that things can be achieved without our personal involvement. In so far as the Church encourages these magical needs of childhood, by presenting God and the Church as solutions to these needs, they contribute inappropriately and negatively to the development towards mature adulthood.

Second, the Church is prone to ignore the relational context of the individual, separating off parents from children, women from men, and denying the adults' experience of systemic complexity by reinforcing instead a linear and compartmentalized view of reality. This reduces the Christian's ability to understand the complexity of relational difficulties or to intervene in such a way that the conflicting needs of different parties to the problem are understood within a systemic context.

Third, the Christian tradition has been and in many respects continues to be responsible for denying the individual's rightful claim to develop self-esteem and self-worth by a false understanding of the call to self-sacrifice. It often further compounds the adult's difficulties by encouraging him to redress earlier deficiencies in his early narcissistic supplies, by regressing to an imagined state of childhood innocence. This prevents the adult from profiting from the creative, spontaneous and uncensored elements of childhood that would reinvigorate adult life. The rootedness of deep self-esteem is not at variance with but is a prerequisite of mature discipleship in Christ as well as of full human participation in the challenges and dilemmas of the created order.

But the Christian framework of faith and practice can also be a fruitful source of nurture in the development towards maturity. Again three examples. Dependency is a continuing human need and has a healthy as well as a pathological function in human development. Carr (1989) points out the way in which faith and ritual can enable our crucial and functional dependency needs to be serviced. Like a good parent, God is prepared to handle our dependency—a lifelong human attribute—in such a way that we are allowed to move back and forth between regression and growth. By allowing opportunities for dependent regression in worship, the individual is enabled to face better the adult challenges of life and of Christian discipleship. By recognizing our rightful dependency upon God, humans are able to locate themselves more realistically in relation to the created order, as fellow creatures not as gods.

Second, God can be functionally recruited as a kind of transitional object, mediating between the individual's inner world of fantasy and his outer world of relationships and the environment. Following Winnicott's work on transitional phenomena, Rizzuto (1979) describes the way in which God provides an extremely usable and functional transitional object for managing the interface between the intrapsychic and the interpersonal worlds. (Griffiths [1986] has applied these ideas to the dynamics of the family and Walrond-Skinner [1989] has explored them further in a family treatment situation).

Transitional objects help us to manage our relationship between the inner world of internal objects and the external world of object relationships. The child's use of rags, dolls, etc. provides a means of secure oscillation between the two worlds; but our need for transitional objects remains and God, as Rizzuto points out, serves an identical function, recruited when needed, disposed of when not. One of the functions of religion may therefore be to enable God as a transitional phenomenon to be 'preserved' and 'on offer' for the vast majority of people who have no formal or regular attachment to a church other than (significantly) at times of transition in their life cycle, such as birth, marriage and death. This leads us to note a third source of assistance offered to healthy psychological development by religious practice.

Through the range of its sacraments and occasional offices, the Church can provide a means whereby crucial life stages are 'marked' and individuals and families are helped to move forward, assimilating the loss of the past with the anticipated growth of the present towards the future. Earlier stages can be incorporated and re-worked and the emotional benefits and achievements of an earlier stage can be built upon in the struggle towards achieving the adult personality.

The Church offers a wealth of tools to enable the normal life crises to be successfully managed and to enable the goal of each stage, as discussed by Erikson (1968), to be successfully achieved. Various writers have applied Erikson's model to the family life cycle (e.g. Carter and McGoldrick, 1980, and Walrond-Skinner, 1988). The recognition and facilitation of these life cycle crises is the best antidote to a deterministic view of the developmental importance of early childhood experience.

In Luke 9,47, we find Jesus taking a child by the hand and standing him at his side. The image conveyed is one of partnership and mutual respect. In this passage and elsewhere, the value of childhood is affirmed and its continuing necessity for the adult is highlighted. Except you become as little children, you shall not enter the Kingdom of heaven. In the light of our current environmental dilemmas and the widespread defensive claim to omnipotency over the rest of the planet, we need as perhaps never before to reconnect with our childhood self and affirm our functional dependency in relation to the created order. The drama of our childhood continues throughout life but its benefits are only made usable and its difficulties resolved by deep penetration and full acceptance of the power of its meaning.

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