

# INTRODUCTION

Birth of a Self in Adulthood



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## Introduction

This is a book about adult patients who have been unconsciously held back from traversing the normal process of psychological development. They are not yet separate, whole selves because of their parents' continuing psychological needs. These patients may be unable to complete their education, move into a profession, freely love anyone outside the immediate family, marry, or have children. They have received only superficial permission from their parents to become independent. The main underlying and contradictory message is to stay home and serve as an extension of their parents' lives.

A common diagnosis given to these patients is *borderline*. This term has been used to cover a large number of patients who appear to be neither neurotic nor psychotic, and it seems too general, suggesting that such patients belong neither here nor there.

For the purposes of this book, the term *impinged-upon adults* or *children* seems preferable. This term suggests that those to whom it is applicable have been deprived of the rights and privileges normally enjoyed by a free person. Many impinged-upon adults are talented people, and the word *borderline* carries the misleading connotation that their physical or intellectual

capabilities are only marginal.

People who have had an impinged-upon or otherwise impoverished childhood are often condemned to an incomplete adulthood with compromised satisfaction. A psychotherapy in which the issues are properly understood is one of the few ways to provide a reprieve from this fate.

Feelings about an enmeshed relationship with parents seem to surface at the beginning of each new life stage until the issues are understood. A few patients are fortunate enough to get some psychotherapy during their adolescent years when they are first attempting to break away from home. Most of my patients seek therapy between the ages of 25 and 35 because they see their friends are surpassing them in the life steps of marriage, profession, and procreation. I also see some patients in their 40s or 50s who are looking back during a midlife crisis at the life that seems unsatisfactory or unfulfilling. The longer patients wait, the more severe, impulsive, dramatic, and turbulent are their accumulated feelings. Abrupt changes in profession, marriage partner, and living arrangements often represent an unaided attempt to cope with this problem. With psychotherapy, it is never too late to examine what has happened and why.

This is not a book about teaching patients to dislike their parents. Instead, it is an attempt to help both parents and children understand why

they have not been able to continue with life in a productive way. Pathological parental messages are passed on to children with a certain level of deception but in most cases without conscious destructive intent. The parents of these adult patients may have themselves been prevented from becoming whole, separate persons by their parents. Therefore, in each successive generation, the parents have no choice but to send underlying messages to their children for the purpose of enlisting an offspring's lifelong aid in making the parents feel psychologically whole.

The patients' problems are examined in order to pave the way for healthy interaction between patients and parents. A new relationship is possible if both parents and patients wish to make the necessary changes. Parents and patients may become estranged for a time because in the process of understanding and changing, the patients may feel angry and distant. Without the aid of psychotherapy, the parents may also respond to their offspring's changes with psychological and physical abandonment. When psychotherapy is completed, however, the patients' growth and new stance with respect to their parents is often sufficient to ease the long-term tension between them. The patients become able to foster a new relationship that sidesteps psychological difficulty and supports their parents in a healthier way. The patients are then able to go on with life, while their parents are given a chance to function more completely without their offspring as their extension.

This book describes the specific nature of interactions between parents and children that promote healthy psychological growth. In the profession of psychology, the focus has largely been on understanding pathology, and it is easy to lose sight of the kinds of interactions needed for growth.

The material presented in this book comes from fifteen years' experience as a psychotherapist. I originally formulated the concept of unconscious parental messages, or *commands*, to consolidate and organize the similarities in the feelings and experiences of my patients. The commands are used only as a format for responding to patients; they are not directly stated within psychotherapy hours.

The delineation of this therapeutic process begins in Chapter 1 with a number of patients' initial concerns, or presenting problems, which typically appear in the first session. Chapters 2 and 3 describe the underlying commands given unconsciously by mothers and fathers. Each of these "unwritten" rules is contrasted with a growth-producing permission that can replace it. In Chapters 4 and 5 the patients' relationships with their families during treatment and ways to meet the psychological needs of both patients and parents are considered. Chapter 6 explains the ways in which patients pass on commands to peers as a result of their own sense of psychological incompleteness. These commands are also contrasted with corresponding permissions. Chapter 7 explores the way a patient relates to people outside of

the family. Chapters 8 and 9 present in detail the patient's relationship with the therapist and the therapeutic issues that need to be addressed to enable the development of a whole, separate self. A review of the literature has been provided in Chapter 10, primarily for the benefit of the mental health professional.

The vignettes included in the text present examples of the commands in the words of the patients. Some of these vignettes represent a compilation of thoughts expressed by many patients, and each has had all identifying information changed or deleted to protect the confidentiality of the patients. In addition, all the patients cited have given signed permission to use brief segments selected from their psychotherapy.

Growing and questioning are especially dangerous tasks for the particular patients described in this book because the underlying messages from the parents oppose them. If impinged-upon adults avoid professional help, they may remain caught in what Roger Gould (1978) described as

a hostile dependency on those who control our safety because we can't freely see, feel, or act in a way we believe is correct. We can't afford to form judgments that contradict divine [parental] rules.... Because we are afraid of our core, we have no access to heightened passions.... We can't trust our intuition, so we lose certain nuances in life and impoverish our interpersonal relationships. We can't trust our own assessments of reality, because we constantly need endorsements from someone who is bigger, [p. 42]

After repeatedly encountering their inability to go on with life, at whatever stage, impinged-upon adults feel confused and caught. Gradually they realize the necessity of psychotherapy. This book represents an opportunity to share a therapeutic perspective for working with adults who are seeking to gain the independent lives they deserve as whole, separate people.

The psychotherapy for these patients tends toward the kind of exploration that Bettelheim (1982) believed Freud envisioned when creating psychoanalysis. The patients have two tasks: first, to deal with external living parents who are often physically nearby; and second, to deal with the “intrapsychic” parents, or the parental messages resulting from memories that have been collected throughout a lifetime. This dual approach allows

the soul to become aware of itself... to become more fully human, so that we may no longer be enslaved without knowing it to the dark forces that reside within us. By exploring and understanding the origins and the potency of these forces, we not only become much better able to cope with them but also gain a much deeper and much more compassionate understanding of our fellow man [especially our parents], [p. 4]

Patients who have been impinged upon often ask whether there are any books that address the particular problems they are facing. This book is intended to address that need. It is also for mental health professionals and people in training to do psychotherapy. Much of the available literature is written in complex theoretical language. This is a more experiential book,

sharing concepts derived from working with patients. It is written in the personal language used in the psychotherapy hour with the hope that this style of communication will provide clarity for both psychotherapist and patient.

Many people with whom the information in this book has been shared feel that it speaks to their own lives and the lives of others they know. The borderline dilemma thus appears to be larger than one originally thought—perhaps a pervasive feature of the human condition. This book is intended to encourage solutions toward growth and independence and is based on my belief that therapists, parents, and children can understand enmeshed relationships well enough to realize the birth of a self in adulthood for any person who wishes to take on the challenge.

The commands may be useful to therapists trying to understand their patients and themselves, but therapists must search for the theoretical orientation that best corresponds to their view of life and experience. Some therapists will benefit from seeing patients' issues in this frame of reference; for other therapists, the commands will become a point of departure from which a new, more relevant theory may be created to enhance their individual understanding. This book will hopefully generate useful dialogue, conflict, argument, criticism, and support for the purposes of expanding psychotherapists' understanding of human difficulty with life's course.

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