

Individual and Family Therapy

SCHIZOPHRENIA

AND THE

FAMILY



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SCHIZOPHRENIA AND THE FAMILY

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SCHIZOPHRENIA AND THE FAMILY

In the last chapter we examined the relationship of the individual and family life cycles in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, a play in which a continuing interplay of these cycles was precluded by the impasse of childlessness. We noted in that chapter that the birth of the first child represented the most critical stage in a family's development, profoundly and irreversibly altering the family's structure. Simultaneously the baby is enveloped in a brief phase of symbiosis, soon to be followed by the separation-individuation process, which Mahler, Pine, and Bergman have called "the psychological birth of the human infant" (1975). Severe disturbances in this early stage of development have been implicated in the development of the schizophrenic disorders. We turn now to T.S. Eliot's *The Family Reunion*, a play portraying a "schizophrenic" man and his family. It illustrates some clinical insights of both individual psychiatry and family psychiatry.

PLOT SUMMARY

We are told in the play that thirty-five or forty years before the action begins, Lord Monchensey and Lady Amy were unhappily married and childless. Amy became pregnant with her first son, Harry, only after her youngest sister, Agatha, came to live with them. The pregnancy precipitated Lord Monchensey's plans to murder his wife. Agatha, who had become his mistress, interceded for the sake of the unborn child, whom she afterward felt to be partly her own. After two more sons were born, Lord Monchensey left his family and died soon after. Amy raised her sons with the aid of servants and relatives, after "adopting" Mary, the orphaned daughter of a cousin.

Amy had hoped and designed that Harry and Mary would wed and remain on the family estate. Instead, against his mother's wishes, Harry married a depressed and dependent woman in a ceremony that excluded his family except for his Aunt Agatha. While on a transatlantic voyage a year before the play begins, his wife drowns. Harry is not sure if he pushed her or fantasied that he had pushed her overboard. The play opens as Amy, feeling her own death to be near, summons her family to a reunion on her birthday with the hope that Harry would take charge of Wishwood, the family estate.

In the play's two acts, which precede and follow Amy's birthday dinner, Harry, helped by Mary and

Agatha, is able to leave his family again. This time he goes without the menacing furies (hallucinations) that had been pursuing him since he had left home eight years previously. His mother dies upon his departure.

THE SCHIZOPHRENOGENIC MOTHER AND THE SKEWED FAMILY

The concept of the “schizophrenogenic mother” was first briefly described by Frieda Fromm-Reichmann (1948).

The schizophrenic is painfully distrustful and resentful of other people, due to the severe early warp and rejection he encountered in important people of his infancy and childhood, as a rule mainly in a schizophrenogenic mother. [p. 265]

The concept with its etiological (and somewhat blaming) implication stimulated considerable clinical research, which has been reviewed and contributed to by Cheek (1964). As in the early work of Johnson and Szurek (1952) on the influence of parents in the acting out of their children, the concept facilitated a shift in emphasis from a model weighted on intrapsychic factors in understanding mental illness to a more interpersonal one. It helped investigators study parents directly and ultimately, by the fifties, helped them study and treat the entire family as a group.

The clinical literature has, in addition to its etiological emphasis, on rare occasions given a fuller account of the schizophrenic’s mother. Searles (1958) for example, in his paper on the relationship between the schizophrenic and his mother, has contributed a more sympathetic view of this vilified woman. The characterization of Amy in *The Family Reunion* is “classical” in its demonic aspects, but it also provides more insight into her “schizophrenogenesis.” Amy’s opening speech expresses her depression, her fear of death, and her longing for warmth:

I have nothing to do, but watch the days draw out,
Now that I sit in the house from October to June,
And the swallow comes too soon and the spring will be over
And the cuckoo will be gone before I am out again.
O sun, that was once so warm, O light that was taken for granted
When I was young and strong, and sun and light unsought for
And the night unfeared and the day expected
And clocks could be trusted, tomorrow assured
And time would not stop in the dark! [p. 225]

We see moments later that this fear of death is rooted in her dread of separation. She sees herself, her family, and her home as inextricably bound together.

If you want to know why I never leave Wishwood
That is the reason. I keep Wishwood alive
To keep the family alive, to keep them together,
To keep me alive, and I live to keep them.
You none of you understand how old you are.
And death will come to you as a mild surprise,
A momentary shudder in a vacant room. [p. 227]

This underlying, pervasive fear of separation makes her exert a formidable control over family affairs. The theme of her all-powerful dominance is first expressed by the other family members who as a chorus speak of being puppets of Amy as they assemble for her birthday.

Why do we feel embarrassed, impatient, fretful, ill at ease,
Assembled like amateur actors who have not been assigned their parts?

Like amateur actors in a dream when the curtain rises, to find themselves dressed for a different play, or having
rehearsed the wrong parts.

.....

Yet we are here at Amy's command, to play an unread part in some monstrous farce, ridiculous in some
nightmare pantomime, [p. 231]

Expressing his sense of Amy's omnipresence, Harry, upon his return, is immediately obsessed with being looked at. The source of this haunting feeling of being observed later emerges as Mary and Harry reminisce about their childhoods.

Harry: Why were we not happy?

Mary: Well, it all seemed to be imposed upon us;
Even the nice things were laid out ready,
And the treats were always so carefully prepared;
There was never any time to invent our own enjoyments.
But perhaps it was all designed for you, not for us.

Harry: No, it didn't seem like that. I was part of the design
As well as you. But what was the design?
It never came off. But do you remember

Mary: The hollow tree in what we called the wilderness

Harry: Down near the river. That was the block house

From which we fought the Indians. Arthur and John.

Mary: It was the cave where we met by moonlight
To raise the evil spirits.

Harry: Arthur and John.
Of course we were punished for being out at night
After being put to bed. But at least they never knew
Where we had been.

Mary: They never found the secret.

Harry: Not then. But later, coming back from school
For the holidays, after the formal reception
And the family festivities, I made my escape
As soon as I could, and slipped down to the river
To find the old hiding place. The wilderness was gone,
The tree had been felled, and a neat summer-house
Had been erected, 'to please the children.'
It's absurd that one's only memory of freedom
Should be a hollow tree in a wood by the river, [p. 248]

Ever under the watchful eye of Amy, they can recall but one memory of privacy. Harry explains to the family doctor why he can have no self apart from his mother and her feelings.

Everything has always been referred back to mother.
When we were children, before we went to school,
The rule of conduct was simply pleasing mother;
Misconduct was simply being unkind to mother;
What was wrong was whatever made her suffer,
And whatever made her happy was what was virtuous —
Though never very happy, I remember. That was why
We all felt like failures, before we had begun. [pp. 258-259]

Fromm-Reichmann (1948) emphasizes the importance of nonverbal aspects of child rearing.

The Schizophrenic, since his childhood days, has been suspiciously aware of the fact that words are used not only to convey but also to veil actual communications. Consequently, he has learned to gather information about people in general, . . . from their inadvertent communications through changes in gesture, attitude, and posture, inflections of voice or expressive movements, [p. 273]

It is clear that Harry has sensed the force of this nonverbal communication when he tells Dr. Warburton about his mother's power over the children.

I think that the things that are taken for granted
At home, make a deeper impression upon children

Than what they are told. [p. 259]

These seemingly inevitable cues are illustrated in his memory of the day his father died.

I remember the silence, and the hushed excitement
And the low conversation of triumphant aunts.
It is the conversations not overheard,
Not intended to be heard, with the sidewise looks
That bring death into the heart of a child.
That was the day he died. Of course, [p. 260]

Harry must have hoped that his father might serve as a buffer in his relationship with his mother. On the night he was told of his father's death, he gave up all hope:

... When she kissed me,
I felt the trap close, [p. 261]

The absence of the father in this family created more of a vacuum within which Amy's need to control was all the greater.

In Lidz's studies of the families of schizophrenics (1960, 1963) he noted the repeated presence of seriously disturbed marital relationships. He divided these into two basic types, which he called schismatic and skewed. The schismatic family was characterized by an open schism between the parents and repeated threats of separation. The skewed family was one with a semblance of harmony due to the acceptance by one spouse of the serious psychopathology of the dominant partner.

In all ... the fathers were particularly ineffectual, assuming little responsibility for family leadership other than earning a livelihood. They were either weak, ineffectual men who went along with wives who were schizophrenic or at least questionably so, or they were disturbed men who could maintain an outward form of capability and strength because of the support of a masochistic wife. [1960, p. 605]

The Monchensey family appears to be a hybrid of these types. The marriage was schismatic while it lasted. However, upon the husband's departure it became "skewed," not only by his absence but also by the other family members' acceptance of Amy's behavior.

Some insight into the reason for this appears in Amy's bitter statement to her sister. "I *would* have sons, if I could not have a husband" (p. 282). She reveals the interchangeability of husband and son. This generation reversal, together with her wish to keep Harry in an infantile state, suggests the kind of

contradictory demands made upon schizophrenics. While Amy wants Harry to return and take charge of Wishwood, she nevertheless longs to turn back the clock.

. . . I wanted . . .
. . . nothing except to remind him
Of the years when he had been a happy boy at Wishwood;
For his future success. [p. 283]

Agatha, who has some distance from the family system, responds to this plea for a denial of reality by exposing its relational intent of controlling Harry's life.

Success is relative
It is what we can make of the mess we have made of things,
It is what he can make, not what you would make for him. [p. 283]

UNDIFFERENTIATION: THE RUBBER-FENCE PHENOMENON

The insistence that Harry must make his own life, that he must separate and differentiate from his family, is a central theme of the play. This theme is directly linked with the play's focus on the powerful mother-child relationship. It is the separation and differentiation from the state of fusion with the mother that psychoanalysts (see Mahler 1952) and many family therapists (e.g., Bowen 1968, Slipp 1973) have described as the primary if not major source of difficulty in schizophrenia.

The play underscores the vital need for separation with its emphasis on life's first separation, birth. Amy's birthday is the occasion for the family reunion. The warm sun she longs for in the opening speech is a kind of wish to return to a state of union with her own mother. These hopes are now displaced and centered on her first-born son. This is in accord with Searles's hypothesis (1965) that:

the well-known symbiotic relatedness . . . is fostered by a transference to this child on the mother's part of feelings and attitudes originally operative in a symbiotic relationship which obtained between herself as a small child and her own mother, [p. 225]

The symbiosis is repeated in the next generation when Harry marries a woman who will not leave him alone. Harry says he has pushed her overboard:

You would never imagine anyone could sink so quickly.
I had always supposed, wherever I went
That she would be with me; whatever I did

That she was unkillable. [p. 235]

Later Downing, his chauffeur, relates:

Always [they were together], Sir.
That was just my complaint against my Lady.
It's my opinion that man and wife
Shouldn't see too much of each other, Sir.
Quite the contrary of the usual opinion,
I dare say. She wouldn't leave him alone.
.....
She wouldn't leave him out of her sight, [p. 241]

Harry tried to free himself from this fusion by pushing her overboard only to discover his need to resolve the underlying tie to his mother.

Nothing is more threatening to symbiotic fusion than change. Preventing change in order to perpetuate their undifferentiation is one of his mother's persistent aims.

Amy: Nothing is changed, Agatha, at Wishwood.
Everything is kept the same as when he left it,
Except the old pony, and the mongrel setter
Which I had to have destroyed.
Nothing has been changed. I have seen to that. [p. 228]

Amy: We are very glad to have you back, Harry.
.....
You will find everybody here, and everything the same.
.....
Your room is all ready for you. Nothing has been changed. [pp. 232-233]

Mary: Your mother insisted
On everything being kept the same as when you left it. [p. 246]

Ivy: You are quite right, Gerald, the one thing that matters
Is not to let her see that anyone is worried.
We must carry on as if nothing had happened . . . [pp. 266- 267]

Harry sensed early on this campaign to arrest his development. Dr. Warburton remembers his childhood illnesses:

And we had such a time to keep you in bed.
You didn't like being ill in the holidays.

To which Violet adds:

It was always the same with your minor ailments
And children's epidemics: you would never stay in bed
Because you were convinced that you would never get well. [p. 255]

We can imagine Harry fighting at this early age for his life. His fear of never getting well expresses the anxiety of his defenselessness in the face of his mother's control.

Reliance on symbiosis and prevention of change, translated into family terms, reflects a belief in the self-sufficiency of the family as a unit isolated from the wider society. Denying contact with the wider world means that developmental milestones like marriage are disequilibrating and tend to be discouraged.

Amy hoped that Harry would stay in the family by marrying Mary, her designee and second cousin. This insulation of the family has been described by Wynne, et al. (1958) as the "rubber fence phenomenon":

The normal pattern or organization of family roles and relations constitutes a differentiated subsystem of society rather than a self-sufficient, complete social system. When there is a continual effort in family relations to maintain pseudomutuality, the family members try to act as if the family could be a truly self-sufficient social system with a completely encircling boundary. Schizophrenic family members, in failing to articulate a differentiation of family member from family role structure, tend to shift and obscure the idea of the family boundaries. The unstable, but continuous boundary, with no recognizable openings, surrounding the schizophrenic family system, stretches to include that which can be interpreted as complementary and contracts to extrude that which is interpreted as non-complementary. This continuous but elastic boundary we have called the rubber fence, [p. 211]

Such families are deeply threatened by a new marriage, which can be approved only if the prospective family member can be encircled. So early in the play we learn Amy's view of Harry's wife.

I am very glad that none of you ever met her.
.....
She never would have been one of the family,
She never wished to be one of the family,
She only wished to keep him to herself
To satisfy her vanity, [p. 230]

Then later when talking to Gerald about Harry's distraught state, Amy "prefers to believe that a few days at Wishwood among his own family, is all that he needs" (p. 237). Amy will permit an outsider, Dr.

Warburton, to speak with Harry only because he is an "old friend of the family."

Family secrets become especially important in such families, not because they really are secrets, but because they serve as a rationale for keeping family members together. In this sense a schizophrenic's family is a kind of secret society demanding complete loyalty and placing a pressure on the family members who, in the play, speak as an uneasy, undifferentiated chorus:

Why should we stand here like guilty conspirators, waiting for some revelation
When the hidden shall be exposed, and the newsboy shall shout in the street?
When the private shall be made public, the common photographer
Flashlight for the picture papers. . . .
.
Why do we all behave as if the door might suddenly open, the curtain be drawn
The cellar make some dreadful disclosure, the roof disappear . . . [pp. 242-243]

The metaphor of the open door or the disappearing roof at a family level, is analogous to Freud's concept of the lifting of repression at the individual level. The family secrets serve to protect the unity of the family, as the defense of repression hopes to control the instincts and thereby the integrity of the ego. How often have schizophrenics revealed the family secrets during the acute state of their illnesses, thereby blowing the lid off both in terms of family organization and individual personality organization.

That individual and family organization are thus conceptually and existentially interlocked is grappled with in a paper by Laing (1967). He sees "the family" as a synthesis of the internalization of each of its member's experience of "the family." He concludes that "the 'family' is united by the reciprocal internalization by each of each other's internalization" (p. 111). It is this coinherence in more undifferentiated families that leads to the blurring of boundaries between individual and family, reflecting in another way the rubber-fence phenomenon.

The recent innovation of "network therapy" may owe its alleged effectiveness in the treatment of families of schizophrenics to the resultant widening of the family circle. The network counters the centripetal fusing force, which leaves individual and family undifferentiated.

When Harry finally is ready to leave home, Mary, still sharing in the family fear of separation, tries to extract from his chauffeur and servant a "promise never to leave his Lordship." Downing replies:

After all these years that I've been with him
I think I understand his Lordship better than anybody;
And I have a kind of feeling that his Lordship won't need me
Very long now. I can't give you any reasons. [p. 288]

Downing here acknowledges that Harry has begun the process of growth and differentiation.

DIFFERENTIATION AND GROWTH

How do we understand Harry's recovery? It emerges from two more solid relationships characterized by mutuality in contrast to the engulfing relationship with his mother. The first is with his childhood playmate, Mary; the second is with his Aunt Agatha.

In the first act as Harry and Mary share memories of childhood, they move closer together. Mary reaches out to him and tries to understand him.

Harry: You do not know,
You cannot know, You cannot understand.

Mary: I think I could understand, but you would have to be patient
With me, and with people who have not had your experience, [p. 250]

Harry insists that she cannot understand him. He begins to drive her away, and then with obvious ambivalence asks her to stay:

No, no don't go. Please don't leave me
Just at this moment. I feel it is important.
Something should have come of this conversation, [p. 250]

As they then move closer, Harry, who had felt there is no way out of his "no exit" existence, senses a ray of hope:

You bring me news
Of a door that opens at the end of a corridor,
Sunlight and singing; when I had felt sure
That every corridor only led to another,
Or to a blank wall; that I kept moving
Only so as not to stay still, [p. 252]

Just at this moment Harry is overwhelmed by such intimacy and reprojects the image of his ever

watchful mother, in the form of hallucinations.

Don't look at me like that! Stop! Try to stop it!
I am going. Oh, why, now? Come out!
Come out! Where are you? Let me see you,
Since I know you are there, I know you are spying on me.
Why do you play with me, why do you let me go,
Only to surround me? — When I remember them
They leave me alone; when I forget them
Only for an instant of inattention
They are roused again, the sleepless hunters
That will not let me sleep, [pp. 252-253]

In this state of panic Harry, in speaking — to his hallucinations — begins to differentiate a new emerging self from the self of his childhood.

Come out!
(The curtains part, revealing the Eumenides in the window embrasure.)
Why do you show yourselves now for the first time?
When I knew her, I was not the same person.
I was not any person. Nothing that I did
Has to do with me. The accident of a dreaming moment,
Of a dreaming age, when I was someone else
Thinking of something else, puts me among you.
I tell you, it is not me you are looking at
Not me you are grinning at, not me your confidential looks
Incriminate, but that other person, if person,
You thought I was: let your necrophily
Feed upon that carcass, [p. 253]

So at the moment of being touched by Mary, Harry feels himself more trapped by his inner world, but he gives a hint that he wishes to shed a former self.

From the outset of the play Agatha is the most differentiated from the family. She is less involved in the need to keep the family as unchanging. Early in the play in response to Amy's insistence that nothing is changed at Wishwood, Agatha predicts that Harry will have changed.

. . . . I mean that at Wishwood he will find another Harry.
The man who returns will have to meet
The boy who left. Round by the stables,
In the coach-house, in the orchard,
In the plantation, down the corridor
That led to the nursery, round the corner
Of the new wing, he will have to face him —

And it will not be a very *jolly* corner, [p. 229]

It is Agatha who reveals to Harry the “hidden” secrets surrounding his birth. He discovers that Agatha had become his father’s mistress, had prevented the murder of his mother, and had longed to have him as her own son. She is a “mother” who unlike his biological mother can allow him to separate and grow, and he exclaims in relief:

Look, I do not know why,
I feel happy for a moment, as if I had come home.
It is quite irrational, but now
I feel quite happy, as if happiness
Did not consist in getting rid of what can't be got rid of
But in a different vision. . . .
.
. . . . Now I see
I might even become fonder of my mother —
More compassionate at least — by understanding.
But she would not like that. Now I see
I have been wounded in a war of phantoms.
Not by human beings — they have no more power than I.
The things I thought were real are shadows, and the real
Are what I thought were private shadows. O that awful privacy
Of the insane mind! [p. 275-276]

He is finally freed from the “knotted cord” that ties him to Wishwood and his illness. With the assistance of both Mary, who tries to reach him and Agatha, a surrogate mother, Harry experiences a kind of rebirth and is able to leave home without being haunted by his pursuing hallucinations. That his recovery necessitated his mother’s death is a reflection of what Eliot expressed more explicitly in *The Cocktail Party* (see chapter 2) when Dr. Reilly insists on seeing the family:

Indeed, it is often the case that my patients
Are only pieces of a total situation
Which I have to explore. The single patient
Who is ill by himself, is rather the exception, [p. 350]

What the limits of that “total situation” are is the central question asked in the family therapy paradigm.

WHAT IS SCHIZOPHRENIA?

In times past Harry would have been deemed possessed or demented. More recently he would be labeled schizophrenic. All these views have in common that “madness” enters, originates in, or is equated with an individual’s mind or personality.

The recent innovation of family psychiatry establishes another vantage point from which individual illness may be viewed. Using the medical idiom, we describe Harry’s “illness” as the “symptom” of a pathological family process one of the central aspects of which is a persistent symbiotic bond structured and reinforced by a set of family myths (Ferreira 1963) and programs of behavior (Ferber and Beels 1970). In his own discussion of the play, Eliot criticized its ambiguity as to whether it would be viewed as the tragedy of the mother or the salvation of the son (1961, p. 90). This is a query at an individual level of analysis. Viewed from a family frame of reference, the play is a tragedy of the Monchensey family or of any family if the death of one family member must follow upon the separation and growth of another. But more important, the tragedy is not in Amy’s death but in the lives of each of the family members to the degree that he is inextricably bound to the family. The ambiguity is, in fact, an indication of how well Eliot perceived an essential underlying dynamic in abnormal human development, namely the complex interrelationship between two almost fused individuals.

What then is schizophrenia? This chapter has discussed the central theme of *The Family Reunion* as that of the developmental phase of separation and differentiation from an undifferentiated state. When this phase is unsuccessfully negotiated in parent and child in a family without sufficient countering differentiating forces, an atypical person results. Often such a person is labeled schizophrenic because the family needs to stabilize an increasingly unstable family system. This stabilization is analogous to Freud’s discussion of symptom formation on an individual level. A family system achieves some relief when the focus of its tensions is hospitalized. The patient is separated from the family but at the same time further tied to them by virtue of his “illness” and subsequent dependency. The impulse to retain and the defense of extrusion are here united in the hospitalization, which like a symptom may then become fixed and subject to secondary gain. In a family system the secondary gain is shared by all and leads to what has been termed family collusion. The dangers of thus diagnosing a young person as schizophrenic when he is trying unsuccessfully to break away from an undifferentiated family has been

discussed by Haley (1967).

Schizophrenia is viewed here not as an illness but rather as a label that is part of a dynamic process involving interlocking genetic, psychological, social and cultural factors. The genetic predisposition that is a part of the process has been discussed by Wender (1967), who has also discussed the limitations of such significant single etiological factors (1967). We might say, in conclusion that Harry's recovery from "schizophrenia" was facilitated by corrective interpersonal experiences and, in part, by his never having been labeled and treated as such.

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