

Family history: a therapeutic look at shame & potatoes



As psychologists we might regularly encounter distressing family situations. I recently dealt with two situations—from different ends of the age spectrum—which highlighted the importance of early family relationships.

First, a colleague requested assistance with a 10 year-old client who was becoming increasingly agitated, aggressive and destructive during a supervised visit with his mother. A number of interventions were attempted; however, the situation eventually escalated to the point of requiring police involvement. In short, a 10 year-old boy was forcibly removed from his visit with his mother by a police officer, because he didn't want to be separated from her and

return to his group home. He was carried out, pleading for his mother not to leave him. His mother has addiction issues and his father is not involved. This incident was emotionally distressing for most of us in attendance.

The second situation occurred in a correctional treatment group, during which participants were asked to complete a one to two page autobiographical timeline. One group member—a 58 year-old First Nations male—came back with a 14 page, single-spaced, handwritten autobiography in which he described the effects of his residential school experience. He reported shutting down his emotions in order to not get beat up or have his food stolen.

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Family history—continued from the previous page

He stated, “I still don’t know how to behave in happy gatherings like Christmas or birthdays when people are laughing” – as he had never experienced celebrations as a child. He said, “I had to teach myself how to pick-up my daughters and kiss them and tell them I love them.”

If you look deeply into the palm of your hand, you will see your parents and all generations of your ancestors. All of them are alive in this moment. Each is present in your body. You are the continuation of each of these people. ~ Thich Nhat Hanh ~

Dealing with maladaptive family systems, current or historical, often reminds me of Carl Rogers’ (1977) famous potato analogy. Rogers describes the potatoes in a box in his family cellar, a minimally conducive potato-growing environment, as striving to reach their potential by growing thin sprouts towards the distant window. However, if compared to potatoes provided with optimal growing conditions—e.g., nutritious soil, ample water, and sun—the end results are dramatically different. Yet, despite never having achieved its full potential, the potato in the cellar manifested its ‘actualizing tendency’. That is, it did the best it could given the environment available.

Unfortunately, many people with impoverished early childhood environments, either physically, emotionally, or socially, go through life personalizing the negative experiences and experiencing shame. Perhaps resulting in a pattern of shaming internal dialogues—“I’m a failure”, “Why try, I will never amount to anything”. Shame can be a formidable obstacle to change. I have found that one of the most therapeutic things someone can say to themselves is that they ‘did the best they could given their circumstances’.

Further, most people would have likely struggled under similar circumstances. Finally, it can be helpful to view a current maladaptive coping strategy (e.g., emotional detachment, aggression) as having been, at one point in time, an adaptive response to a negative situation, such as abuse or neglect. Over time, if shame can be reduced, there is likely to be a greater chance of therapeutic change.

The 58 year-old above appears to be on a healing journey from his past. He exhibited significant positive changes in his approach to life, leading up to and during the treatment group. Sadly, the 10 year-old appears to be only beginning his journey and hopefully one day will realize that he ‘did the best he could given his circumstances’. ❧

References

- Rogers, C. R. (1977). Carl Rogers on personal power: Inner strength and its revolutionary impact. New York: Delacorte Press.
- Schwamm Willis, J. (Ed.). (2003). A Lifetime of Peace: Essential Writings by and About Thich Nhat Hanh (p.141). New York: Marlowe & Company.