

THE REMEMBRANCE OF THINGS PAST: On the Collection and Recollection of Ingredients Useful in the Treatment of Disorders Resulting from Unhappiness, Rootlessness, and the Fear of Things to Come

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Lack of hope for future change is hypothesized as a distinguishing factor between suicidally depressed young adolescents and other young people who are also objectless, the developmentally dispossessed. Methods by which the affective reserve of hope and self-love can be therapeutically augmented are suggested, and speculations are offered on the role of the personal past and group past in generating hopefulness in the nonclinical population.

During the course of one's professional experience, dealing with a wide gamut of psychic pain and inability to function, inevitably a question arises. The question has to do not so much with why it is that some people crumble under the pressure of human suffering, but rather why it is that more people do not? We have all upon occasion been pressed into respectful amazement at the bouyancy, hopefulness, and strength with which some people with crisis-haunted lives cope and even enjoy. Their life histories may seem considerably grimmer than those of many of our pa-

tients, and usually offer no clue that would help us to understand their unquenchable capacity to greet a new day like an old friend. In short, and in the medical metaphor, we know considerably more about pathogenic agents than we do about the immunological response.

Erikson offers assistance in understanding this phenomenon with his concept of the development of basic trust or, more accurately, basic hopefulness. The concept, which is useful to diagnosticians, breeds a sense of futility in therapists: patients who seem to have not

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nearly enough of it have no chance to develop it now, since it was all determined in the first year of their unlucky lives. Still, we find intuitively correct the idea of an inner, untouchable cache of warmth and richness; a personal, unloseable, unspendable treasure; an emotional insulation against psychological chill or shock. This is an *affective* reserve. It has nothing to do with those harder, colder, more rational structures that well-developed ego skills erect against despair or breakdown.

We know a fair amount about techniques for expunging bad memories and experiences, of clearing up the locus of infection. We are learning more about ways to enhance the ego's capacity to patrol against stress and to deal with it if it does succeed in invading our lives, and we know more than we realize about how to make deposits into that early, inner, affective treasury. The evidence is contained, I believe, in the not inconsiderable number of cases about which therapists confide to each other in mystification: "I don't know what I did right but he improved dramatically—and quickly." The mystification leaves those of us who deal with young patients uncomfortably vulnerable to the prompt pronouncement of the larger society: "It had nothing to do with psychotherapy—he just outgrew it."

The components of the antidepressant which we unconsciously administer are most apparent in groups that suffer from depression for developmental as well as intrapsychic reasons: suicidal early adolescents; more specifically still in a highly visible subgroup: adopted, suicidal, young adolescents. But, as is common in our professional history, lessons learned from the extreme, the very clearly defined few, are useful in under-

standing much more about most of us.

The symptomatic depression that we are often working to alleviate in the suicidal young adolescent is based not on self-hatred or guilt, but seems instead to be a deficiency disease, a lack of love for their lives and a lack of hope (or even thought) that they might feel quite differently in a year or two. The first lack is common to all of us from time to time; it is the second that seems to define a capacity for suicidal depression. Where, then, did the rest of us garner the homely conviction that "this too shall pass?"

What exactly might be the contents of an inner treasury that generates hopefulness? Odds and ends, one suspects, perhaps resembling the hodgepodge that every latency-age child stores in a carton under the bed: souvenirs and bottle caps and trophies and photographs and baseball cards and sea shells and coin collections—things that have symbolic value in their own right (coins), things that have the capacity for stimulating pleasant memories, and things that reinforce a treasured mythology of the self, things that revivify a former version of a self overlooked in the press of the daily and present self; things that recall a time of happiness obliterated by the weight of current unhappiness; things to be touched fondly, turned over musingly, returned to the box, which is in turn shoved back into storage.

If this kind of collection and recollection is shared, it gains considerably in ability to revive not only the memory but the pleasant affect associated with the life fragment. Adults have their collections also. Family gatherings watch slides of past vacations, to the endless delight of the ones involved and the

boundless boredom of those who were not. Pictures of smiling people on sunny beaches, family Thanksgiving dinners of the past evoke warmth (faded or forgotten are memories of the luggage lost, the attack of *turistas*, the dreary unheated cottage, the burned and tasteless dinner), and we view the slides again and again. The practice is further evident in every home: why do we keep one earring, three foreign coins (total value 30¢), a jacket far too small that we will never wear again? It is too easy to conclude that "they have sentimental value" without bending attention on exactly what sentimental value is.

Old people lovingly savor favorite memories and incidents, turn them over and touch them, put them away and take them out again, to the irritation of their young ("If I've heard that story once, I've heard it a thousand times"), but their age peers enjoy the recitation. These same old people can capture the fascinated attention of the most self-absorbed adolescent with stories of what his father and mother were like when they were young, especially stories that illustrate their early fallibility. Parents will testify that children are endlessly fascinated and delighted with anecdotes about their own unreclected toddler antics. Here, repetitiousness bothers not a whit: "Tell me again how I gave all the bacon to the dog when I was little!"

What is it that contributes to all of this mysterious and totally irrational fun? Children gain sustenance by learning from a loving adult about a personal past they cannot remember—a person who was "me" that "I" never knew, who lived and experienced before possessing the words and conceptual skills, the ego, to capture and preserve memory. As adults, we need small symbols as a

stimulus to memory, but children are totally dependent on us to construct a sense of the self they never knew who was interesting, lovable, and easily discriminable from every other round-limbed two-year-old. If they do not gain such a sense from us purposely or, as largely happens, by happy accident of parent-child interaction, they face a hazard in early adolescence when they confront the developmental task of autonomy and identity formation. Most of us reach adolescence with some version of a warmly cathected conviction—*once, in the past, there was a lovable and interesting person that I do not personally remember but I believe that I was. In the future, which is another great void of unknown possibilities, it seems possible that I could become a person lovable and interesting and totally different from every other human being, even though there seems to be nothing in my current perception of my life or myself that would support that possibility.*

Self-definition is not the lonely intrapersonal curriculum that psychoanalytic theory describes. There are crucial stages in our lives at which the self, the what-I-am, lies naked, helpless, and vulnerable in the hands of the people around us. Children need, and usually get, a sense of a self that has been incubated in the memory of loving others and delivered into their minds gradually. But for years that self was totally dependent on the careless benevolence of their caretakers. Children sense the breathtaking riskiness, but also the inevitability of this. In adolescence, if all goes well, they are aware that there are aspects of the self invisible to them but perhaps visible to the beholder. They are aware (from their narcissistically re-

shaped versions of their toddler selves) of the motes and beams in a self-observing eye. One huge component of the delight in the retold toddler anecdotes comes from small wickednesses recollected with pride and amusement by a loving adult eye. The primitive, archaic superego is weakened immeasurably by this device. One retains a memory trace of punishment, recrimination, and resultant self-hatred that followed the two-year-old's feeding of all the bacon to the dog—feeling tones of “bad, silly, don't ever take or touch,” are enshrined promptly by the archaic superego and haunt early childhood. Fond and amused recollection by adults to the now more mature and competent child's ego reprocesses the bacon-feeding: it is now a comic resourcefulness, a well-meaning bit of baby's attempt to nurture and protect (the importance of bacon in breakfasts past having also receded in adult memory, like the lost baggage and *turistas*). This engenders hope in the child that outsiders can be both kinder and more veridical in their perception of the child's self than internal agencies would ever be. This leads adolescents to confide in peers details of what they thought and felt, in the hope that these outsiders might implement a further and similar relabeling. (That wasn't “cowardly,” that was sensible. You weren't “boring,” your goodlooking date was vain and snobbish and not worth your consideration.) That, after all, is what friends are for. Therapists, accidentally more often than theoretically, do quite a lot of exactly the same sort of thing—rescuing, refurbishing, and relabeling personality components the adolescent patient has despairingly consigned to the trash. But some adolescents, those who have not had the experience of a benevolent re-

definition of self by outsiders early in life, will not be willing to take such an awesome chance on the outsider, whether friend or therapist.

Can one prevent or remedy this lack, when it is apparent in the depressions of latency or early adolescence? The purpose of this long introduction is to affirm that we can, we do, and we have done so. In the course of any psychotherapy, we define and relabel components of the self; we reassess blameworthiness. There are other things we do by accident that we might do by design with excellent therapeutic effect. The suggestions that follow apply primarily to latency-age children and young adolescents. There might be ways to extend their applicability to older groups, but they lie outside the scope of this paper.

ON SPINNING STRAW INTO GOLD

There is a process that occurs without intention in most families and only becomes noticeable by its absence in especially handicapped families. It is implicit in the misunderstood and universal question, “Where did I come from?”, in response to which, parents struggle with birds and bees and eggs and sperm. Adoptive parents may freeze because they fear the child wants to know about unsettling or threatening qualities in his own progenitors (*e.g.*, his mother was a prostitute and his father died in jail, so they tell the boy a soothing tale about how they chose him above every other child). These responses are, of course, important. But the unexpressed portion of, “Where did I come from?” is, “*Where am I going?*” Here, information about progenitors is the very important straw that can be spun into the gold of a narcissistically cathected version of the self.

The child is asking for a clue to what part of the whole grab bag of human characteristics might belong to him. Given a hint and a little encouragement, he will do the rest himself. His mother was *Italian*. Brushing past pizza parlors and the Mafia we hurry to the Medici, da Vinci, travel posters of lovely Mediterranean villages, the sea empires of Venice and Genoa, the glory that was Rome, tales and legends of battles and victories, and pictures of heroes in splendid costumes. (Information about the major industries of modern Italy simply will not do it.) *The information must have the ring of glorious improbability but must also be generally accepted as historically correct.*

Adolescents, with their more mature cognitive capacity, may not require such a notable quantity of splendid unlikeness in their contemplation of ethnic past and identity. In fact the splendid past, united with an observable present, seems useful to them in much the same way: the incident at Entebbe, the reforming of the Spanish government, help them with developmental issues as well.

But the latency child's heritage must look and sound like nothing that is available in his current life situation, although it must nevertheless be stoutly supported as truth, and as a truth with which he has a biological continuity and with which he shares a group claim and proud history. As the adopted child spins this material into his conception of what he intrinsically is and might become, he will learn to sing songs in Italian and boast and brag on the superior attributes of Italians. His Scandinavian parents may feel hurt, unappreciated, and resentful if they do not understand the process. They may be impelled to denigration of Italians or to

further hurtful revelations about his Italian mother.

Similarly, if one describes his father, the safecracker, as having been "very clever with mechanical objects," one then hurries on to building, engineering, the Golden Gate bridge, the Eiffel Tower, the automobile, the sculptor, and the fix-it wizard. Again, the adoptive father, an English teacher, may stand to be hurt by loudly expressed contempt for verbal skills and by Ds in English composition, unless he understands the process. Adolescents who are neither adopted nor very depressed make natural use of the same strategy as they try to become adults without becoming like their parents. They struggle to establish a claim to certain attributes and achievements independent of identification with their parents.

My contention that more than a wish for sexual enlightenment is contained in the question, "Where did I come from?," is supported by some clinical experiences:

One adopted child, who knew only that his mother had been Norwegian, fantasied that he had been left on an Atlantic beach by Viking sailors.

Another adopted child (of a West Coast mother and Spanish sailor) cherished the notion of having been left by a pirate father—on a Pacific beach, of course. He produced proof: a picture of himself as an infant on a blanket at the seashore. He "knew" it had been taken on a family picnic, but he had a more important use for this knowledge than storage as a mere fact. His nourishing fantasy was supplemented with coin collections and dreams of finding pieces-of-eight. He was eight years old at termination and usefully vague about why coins were called pieces-of-eight.

Adoptive parents, well intentioned and often following professional advice, are gently determined not to allow the

child to "deny" the fact of adoption: "No, dear, you do not get your brown eyes from Uncle Henry, because he is not a blood relative of yours. No, you did not get your interest in music from grandma, although of course . . ." Unwittingly, they foster a self-definition that is poverty stricken and full of "what I am not." Inexorably, parents may cut off attempts to claim attributes that are not contingent on what the child does but flow effortlessly, like a hidden treasure, from what he *is*—a sense that functions as a talisman and that engenders a necessary feeling of uniqueness through membership in a powerful, invisible, secret clan. Without it, in adolescence the boy may be hopelessly trapped in his version of a self that holds no possibility of future joy or pride. American blacks have long been aware of the need of their children for an ethnic past that would feed their imaginations and hopes, and as a result their aspirations for the future.

THE CHILD'S NEED FOR A SENSE OF A "FORGOTTEN SELF"

In the previous section, attempts were made to illustrate the child's need for a claim on a splendid historical past that he shares because of what he is, because of what he possessed when he entered the world. Earlier, we alluded to the child's need for a sense of the unremembered person he was: his preverbal self incubated and held in trust for him in the minds of loving adults. It was speculated that parents and relatives deliver this inheritance to latency-age and adolescent children largely by accident of parent-child interactions: "You climbed an apple tree when you were only four. I was so scared when I saw you bobbing and smiling up there." The sense of a

self unremembered, but accepted as truly existing in the past, inoculates against despair by suggesting that a new and unknown but lovable self could exist in the future. It has been hypothesized that young adolescents—objectless and striving to assemble an identity and ego ideal components for developmental reasons—are prone to suicidal depression if they have not developed a narcissistically cathected introject of a stronger self-that-was.

This is visible in treatment of suicidal young adolescents whose parents for various reasons could not or would not recall details and anecdotes of the adolescent's preverbal past:

A seriously suicidal young adolescent, whose schizophrenic mother recalled nothing about his childhood, talks briefly in therapy about a dream in which he cannot cross a bridge. He stands lonely and helpless while the car containing his family toodles merrily off. As he works in therapy, he begins to read books about French history and detailed travel books (bus #4 to Mont-Saint-Michel leaves at 10:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m. in the square and costs 75 francs). His grandfather was a French Breton. He adorns his room with French travel posters, and he begins a coin collection. He is fascinated with "Treasure Island," and his therapist is transparently cast as Long John Silver, who both befriends him and helps him find the treasure and at times seems to betray him and lead the forces that would take the treasure away from him.

Another suicidal young adolescent was sent at age three to live with her grandparents because of family reverses and misfortune. She returned home at age six upon the death of her grandparents. Her mother is unable to provide her with anecdotal evidence of a preverbal self because of the physical separation and because of the mother's need to repress the memory of an exceedingly painful period.

Another mother is ashamed of an incident of infidelity occurring when her child was three. She left home with a lover for a few months,

leaving the child in her husband's care. The marriage was patched together painfully along with an agreement that the stormy period would be forgotten. Therapy with the suicidal adolescent examined the predictable sense of guilt, anger, and insecurity the adolescent felt about mother's leaving, but the depression did not dissipate until the parents were encouraged to recollect anecdotes about the infancy and preschool years of the child, incidents that had nothing whatsoever to do with the major event that had clouded those years for the parents.

Adoptive parents, alarmed at the "Where did I come from?" questions, shy away from reminiscence. It is often very healing for their depressed adolescent children, and for them also, to share in pleasurable recollection from the child's preverbal past, a common history in which they were heavily involved and which they too readily overlook in their concern over a lack of biological relationship.

Therapists usually see easily that there was a traumatic family event in those years. Our experience and technique help us to work with traumatic memories and their residue. Often, it seems that the interpretation and understanding alone do not bring relief. There is a remaining sense of depression and emotional malnutrition. We may conclude that the trauma is "insufficiently analyzed" and that certain early lacks are irreversible, or that the preverbal self is inaccessible to real therapeutic change. Any of the above may be true, but we should not rest upon such conclusions without at least attempting to tap the healing power of retrospective self-definition.

TALISMANS AND TOKENS

Not only the depressed but the developmentally dispossessed—*i.e.*, the whole of humankind—show evidence of

the need for a portable past, a tangible treasure. The delights of coin collecting hinge not on a current value but on the promise of a greater value in the future, a value unsuspected by the unenlightened majority. The 1918 copper penny, the Indian-head nickel, the anniversary minting hold a symbolic promise made by the past directly to the future. The box of Mexican pesos, Greek drachmas, and British shillings are real things with a real value in a place never seen, and in primary process logic they provide a talisman against a time never experienced. Seashells grew beautiful in infinite variety in a never observed undersea world. Baseball cards hold the records of past exploits and faces not currently visible but undeniably existing—although perhaps not available next year and thus of even greater value at some future time. Talisman and token must provide evidence of a link between reality on the one hand and romance and sentiment on the other. Tokens in romantic literature are unarguable proof that the shepherd's daughter, possessor of the ruby ring, is indeed the long lost daughter of the king, unlikely though it may seem. It is furthermore unarguable proof of identity, and supports claims to attributes and heritage. It is inexcusably cloddish of us to conceive of fantasies of jewel robberies merely as castration threats, and it is no wonder that such interpretations put patients off. It is inexcusably arid to think of the collections of the latency-age child simply as symptoms of obsessive-compulsive neurosis.

A WINTER'S TALE

A winter's tale is told around a fire to help forget the threatening, encroaching cold. We know that such tales are

meant to be full of fear and adversity, and also of magic and surprise and a general spitting-into-the-eye of the reality principle. Writers of talent of the second rank tell us, "You can't go home again," mock the delicate appeal of *The Glass Menagerie*, and tear down the summer house in *The Cherry Orchard*. Talents of the first rank convince us that it is "better to weep with Don Quixote than to laugh with Sancho Panza." Shakespeare's *Winter Tale* is based on the corollary that "the king shall have no heir until that which is lost shall be found." One may conclude that Shakespeare was fretting about a carelessly misplaced penis which precluded procreation, or one may conclude that Shakespeare was saying that babes set adrift and lost can be joyfully restored to parents; old cruelties and misunderstandings may be undone; wives thought dead are alive ("Oh, she's warm. If this be magic let it be an art lawful as eating."). Shakespeare, the artful realist, is not advocating abandonment of the reality principle. He is telling us something about undoing mistakes, misperceptions, and misunderstandings so that we may recover our treasured past and thus gain access to a future—not so very different from the aims of psychotherapy. What is different is the emphasis on recovering what is valuable in the personal past that gives the self a sense of continuity and worth. In our eagerness to rid ourselves and our patients of the crippling, limiting effects of pathogenic elements in the past, we have overlooked its potential to contribute to a necessary store of narcissism; narcissism with its concomitant "self aggrandizement" and with its creative use of primary process—a fine madness, if you will, but "no settled

senses of the world can match the pleasure of that madness."

Is it indeed madness—the need for a winter's tale with its components of sad truth and magic? In the course of psychotherapy, we are aware of the need to make introjects both less angelic and less demoniacal than they seemed to the overburdened ego to be. Most parents are neither angels nor malevolent sadists—optimally, the ghost loses exaggeration and gains attributes of common humanity. Mothers were not hating and rejecting only; they had burdens and sadnesses unrelated to their necessarily egocentric children. Is it madness to minimize the *turistas* and remember the snow-capped peaks viewed from a fragrant flowery terrace? Both memories, remember, are "real." Is it madness to bypass my-father-the-safecracker and remember my-father-the-mechanical-genius? It is only pathogenic if one refuses to meet the gentleman in the first place. Why he did what he did with his talents is beyond our understanding and judgment, but his attributes, colored by the wish to love, are part of him.

AFTERTHOUGHT

Since this paper was written, *Roots* has occurred—a social-psychological phenomenon. In support of the thesis of this paper, I submit that white audiences identified with the heroes, the blacks, and share with them a need for evidence of enduring strength over generations in their own kind. Whether our ancestors were kidnapped and dragged to America or driven from their villages by famine, the sense of a painful uprooting and a loss of familiar and loved people, places, and customs is common. The square footage per passenger in steerage was comparable to that avail-

able in slave ships, and the realities confronted in this country were nearly as harsh as the ones left behind. Whites coped with the loneliness by looking forward. They had an opportunity denied the blacks: to survive and to grow a sense of competence and strength attributable only to their own qualities. The talent, competence, and strength of blacks "belong" not to them but to some lucky owner. Whites are only now able to sample the satisfaction and sense of continuity that results from examining

not only "what I am" but "what we were and are." Looking backward earlier contained risks best symbolized by Lot's wife, immobilized at the sight of the loss of all that life held in the past. But "looking backward" now promises an enrichment of the spirit. In the words of Kizzie, a lay psychologist, explaining why she never married her lover, Sam: "Sam wasn't like us. Nobody ever told him where he come from so he didn't have a dream of where he ought to be goin'."