

Psychotherapy Newsletter

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Poles Apart

It is a legitimate phenomenon. It is a common dynamic. When we saw it in extreme ways, we named it. Bipolar. We named it. We labeled it. We numbered it. We medicated it. We concretized it. It became the person. She is bipolar. We do this sometimes. A dynamic takes on a life of its own. We stop identifying with it in ourselves. It is a 'thing' now and I do not want to think I have that 'thing.' Or, I am relieved I have this 'thing,' or my child has it – now there is a label, an explanation, and no more growth is required.

But I have seen the dynamic in myself. I see it in those I work with. There is a long continuum of severity. It is a pull toward something glittery. Something that feels good. Something that will stimulate. A substance. An affair. A new car. An exciting partner with an exciting life. Attention. Adoration. Accomplishment. Importance. Fame. Food. Winning. Orgasm. That is one pole. The manic pole. The up pole. The push toward the distraction, the good feeling, the fix. The thing to fill the hole. It is what we do to avoid the other

pole. The down pole. The flat line. The emptiness. The deadness. The blankness. The fear. The insecurity. The shame. The abandonment. The depression. The dread. The thing that has always been there, but we taught ourselves to stay away from it.

It takes inordinate courage to break into this pole system. It takes determination. It requires a guide. It requires acknowledging and feeling the low place. We are never sure how bad it is going to get. Will I be able to function while in the process? How low is the low? How painful is the pain? How dead is the deadness? How shameful is the shame? It requires movement toward a counterintuitive place – the down pole.

It also means seeing the up pole for what it is – not real, genuine, grounded, authentic self. It is about another person. It is about a thing. It is about the effects of a substance. It is about the quest for wild sex. It is not about me. It is about something external. It is not about building a real person inside. There is something that does not ring

true in it. It is about avoidance. It developed out of survival. It was adaptive. But it is not healthy. It is not grounding. It is not true growth. If I want to grow, I have to pull toward the down pole. There is no other way. There are no shortcuts.

Some of us have lower down poles than others. We did not create our original down poles. They are a product of our environment and personal wiring and how we responded. Something chronically overloaded or underloaded our system and we went haywire inside. Sometimes the up pole is extreme anger. Rage. Kicking and scratching. An attempt to put up a fight. Rebellion instead of giving up. But we look crazy. We look wild. We look out of control. We get the label. Sometimes we have to have medication. We cannot function without medication. We are dangerous to others without medication. We are dangerous to ourselves without medication. We cannot receive help without medication. Often the label and the medication do their own damage. They become part of the problem. They further deteriorate a sense of self-respect. I lose trust in who I am. I do not learn to manage my own ups and downs. I live with the notion that those around me did not know what to do with me. I did not know what to do with me. I became too much. I am too much.

Some feel we do not recover from this pole system if it is extreme. They believe we are originally, organically wired for this system or we have been this way so long, we have become permanently wired. I do not accept this as an absolute truth, though it is for some. At the extreme, defenses are so well fortified that therapy will be sabotaged because the down pole feels utterly and completely unbearable. But

for others, they can access the necessary determination and patience and ego strength to unwire. To rewire. It takes a healthy relationship with another to rewire. It requires the steady, soothing presence of the other. It requires a new, healthy attachment system to build new, healthy pathways. It is possible. I have experienced the rewiring in myself. I see rewiring happen before my eyes in my work each day. The push toward the pain. Willingness to live in the pain for a season. Feel the pain. Name the pain. I see healing. Calming. Grounding. Growth. Self-awareness. Self-reflection. Integration. Wisdom. I see the person develop. I see a genuine, authentic person immerge. And there is nothing more miraculous or spectacular than this. This is the true solid middle ground between the poles.



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