

# Psychotherapy Newsletter

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## Holding Good and Bad in One Palm

One of the benefits of being in school and studying multiple theorists in depth about mental health issues is that some of the most common and familiar dynamics that occur within and between human beings come to the forefront of my thinking and finally become things that can be recognized and somewhat worked through. One of these dynamics is our tendency to go into a place of using *good or bad* thinking as opposed to *good and bad* thinking. In the latter, the good and the bad thoughts we have of another are held closely together, in the former, they are separated out and one dominates or completely rules at the exclusion of the other. If only good thoughts are present, idealization occurs; if only bad thoughts are present, devaluation occurs. In this system, idealization can quickly shift to devaluation.

It is believed this dynamic is formulated from birth, when, due to our complete dependency, we must see our mothers as all good. If she is *good enough*, then we can eventually tolerate and accept her failures. If she is not *good enough*, then we have to keep her badness separate from her goodness in order to survive. We must believe she will be there for us and we split off her badness and keep it separated out in order to attempt to keep our anxiety within a manageable range. Thus forms a prototype for a lifetime of managing our feelings in relation to the other. In those of us who had *good enough* parents (or a good enough therapy experience), we can hold good and

bad together most of the time, but still have the capacity, in moments of heightened anxiety, to split them apart. If we did not have *good enough* parents, then we struggle in a more profound way with this shift into a state where another can feel all-threatening, all-dangerous, all-bad, either for a moment, a few days, or over the course of years.

Perhaps we can all identify those moments when we go into a state when someone becomes all bad to us. They suddenly feel threatening. They've seemingly shamed us, demeaned us, cut us off on the freeway, dropped us, disappointed us, or outshined us. Whether or not it was intended, to us it feels very personal and purposeful. They can be our parent, our child, our friend, our teacher, a restaurant, our employer, our employee, a stranger, or God.

Perhaps we can also identify those moments when we go into a state (or a season) when someone becomes all good to us. They feel all knowing, pulled together, having all the answers, extremely competent. We look up them and forget momentarily about our own contribution, our own thoughts and feelings, and subjugate ourselves to the assumed wisdom they hold. They can be a parent, a potential mate, a friend, a teacher, an employer, a stranger, a religious institution, a pastor, a politician, or God (I guess we could safely say the only appropriate receptacle).

This is the notion of *splitting*. Things get separated off into all good or all bad; into

black or white; into love or hate. It is in this state that we are in compromised mental health. I know a child is in trouble when a parent has earmarked them as holding the badness in the family, as the one who is causing the family troubles. I know a husband (or vice versa) is in trouble when his wife is focused on the badness that resides in him and cannot hold or speak to her own contribution in the conflict. I also know a marriage needs work when each spouse can only speak of what they love in the other, and not what they hate, a sign they lack a deep level of intimacy and ability to be real and honest with each other. I know a family is in trouble when a parent can speak of their love toward their child, but cannot admit to moments of hate. We are personally in trouble when we cannot speak of the parts of ourselves we hate as well as the parts we love. We are in trouble spiritually when we cannot own and speak the badness that lives in us as well as the goodness. In other words, when we organize our spirituality around the notion of being *good* and attempt to disown or ignore our shadowy parts.

Perhaps we can say that our spirituality doesn't really begin to grow or mature until we can cry out to God and acknowledge the things we hate and don't understand about how things were created here on earth. Eventually we need to come to a place of imagining that God can accept and survive not only our love and devotion, but also our anger, rage, disappointment, frustration, and imperfection.

As with all truths about being a human being, it isn't so much that we must attempt to never split good from bad (an impossible task as we are never fully integrated), but that we give ourselves room to see when it is that we are going into this state. When we can identify it, then we have an easier time eventually moving ourselves back into a position where good and bad are held in the same palm. I love these parts of myself, and I struggle with these parts. I love these parts of you, and I struggle with these parts. I accept you and do relationship with you, not because you are perfect, but because I

have come to terms with your strengths and weaknesses. We tend to be less destructive human beings when we can do this.

There are some people we may choose not to do relationship with because they cannot hold us consistently enough in a *good enough* position. Their trust issues leave us in a constant state of not knowing where we stand and we can tell we shift radically in their mind from an overly good person to an overly bad person. Sometimes it has become just too tiring and we don't see they are working toward healing their tendency to divide up good and bad parts. It begins to feel self-abusive to maintain such a relationship.

In my work, I have offered myself as a vehicle to help another heal these splits. In the course of that process, I sometimes allow myself to be temporarily overly good for a season, and must tolerate being overly bad or all bad at times as well, so that we can identify and work with these dynamics.

In my personal life, I have chosen to look at my own tendency to split and am learning over the years to surround myself, as much as possible, with close friends who are aware and working on their splits, which allows for supportive and nurturing feelings to predominate.

I guess it is accurate to say that we are all fortunate indeed if we end up with relationships with some key family members and a few friends where our goodness and badness has been recognized and accepted and we can comfortably walk down the path of life together, weathering the storms that life presents, without having to manage huge squalls and shifts of weather within the current relationship.

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