

Psychotherapy Newsletter

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Stringing Pearls

Sometimes in the course of my work as a therapist I am asked whether it is necessary to go back in time and consider one's past when working on issues in the present. The longer I sit with people, the more I realize there is no way around the fact that the reality that was established in our youth has a profound effect, a definitive effect, on the way we do life in the present. There is a unique and particular feel that gets set up in our childhood – a style of communication – a way of relating – a certain pervasive message that is overtly and covertly set out as reality. We are susceptible to it because we are completely dependent on the environment into which we are born and only know that which is set up for us within the walls of our childhood home. It is reinforced day in and day out and becomes part of the fabric of who we are. We know no different and do not think to question it until it has already been integrated into who we are. This unique reality that is created becomes the lens from which we view all aspects of life – our work, our play, our interactions with others, our vision of God. The idea that someone can see a therapist for six to eight visits, as provided by many health care plans, and expect to experience profound change in this well established mindset and way of being is incredulous. The most we can possibly expect is a little relief from a current crisis - and for some, this is enough. Perhaps your childhood provided you with a foundation that offered

enough health and flexibility to enjoy life for the most part, and you just need help getting over a little "bump" in the road. In this case, short-term therapy may be adequate. For others, however, the core schema is not healthy and the "scale" of life is tilting more in the direction of unrest and frustration and heartache than in the direction of joy and satisfaction and fulfillment and a longer course of therapy is necessary.

Everyone has some "pearls" in their life scattered here and there – children they love, a good spouse, good health, some good friends, a good job. Sometimes there is a sense that though these isolated good things exist in their life, they do not have permission or the ability to gather their pearls together and string them into a necklace that creates something beautiful, something that defines their life in an overall positive way. In my opinion, an important function of a good therapist is to help someone become aware of the themes and experiences in childhood that have caused the pearls to stay scattered and isolated. Sometimes these themes include a death in the family – mother or father or sibling – and this caused the family to be in a perpetual state of grief. Sometimes a divorce occurred and a child was raised by a stressed single parent and had to switch back and forth from house to house each week. Sometimes the family breadwinner had an ongoing problem with maintaining

employment and there was a continual theme of financial stress. Sometimes there was a substance abuse problem and the family learned to organize around the times that a parent was drinking and what mood or tension would be created in the home. Sometimes sexual or physical or verbal abuse occurred and a child's sense of trust and confidence was significantly compromised. Sometimes there was a sibling with special needs that sapped the parents of extra energy or the ability to have light-hearted fun. Sometimes one's parents came from homes where strict obedience was expected and no effort was made to find out the individual passions and interests of family members as life was more about being good and responsible than being creative and flexible and this became the only way they knew how to raise their children.

There are many versions of what can drain the life out of life...and leave the pearls scattered so broadly that they can't possibly be considered a piece of jewelry. Sometimes people adapt a martyr theme that justifies hardship and unhappiness into an honored way of life. We aren't meant to be happy here on earth. Our reward and happiness will be in the afterlife. In my opinion, this idea needs to be challenged and explored. One of the greatest pleasures of my work is when I have the privilege of working with someone and begin to see the ship change it's course. It takes effort and hard work, but it can be accomplished. Someone begins to see that the burden that had become part of how they design a life is merely something that was formulated out of the circumstances of their youth and not the only way that life can be lived. They begin to see the value of checking in with themselves and getting to know who they are and what really works for them. It's as if a light bulb goes on and it's the beginning of the appearance of joy and hope. Sometimes people hang onto the themes, the flavor, of their childhood almost out of loyalty to their parents. It feels like a dishonor to venture beyond the paradigm. My parents had to suffer, why

shouldn't I? They begin to see, though, that it really serves no purpose to stay on that dismal road. They realize they have the option to stop the dynamic in their generation and break through the chain of inherited bleakness. They experiment with identifying who they are and what they want and begin to communicate it to others. They rethink their personal relationships and clear more space for health. They rethink their job situation. Do they enjoy what they do? Are they giving more of themselves than works for them? What would happen if they didn't take business calls on the weekends or at night during family time? Alternate roads begin to appear. They begin to think outside their previously prescribed box. It's very enlivening to observe, to participate in, and to be in the same room, as this process unfolds. They begin to question their previous view of God. Does God only expect me to be good and responsible and restrict my pleasure? Or could God want me to be real, to pay attention to who I am -- my own unique contribution, way of looking at things, way of being in the world? Is it possible that God could ordain fun and enjoyment and satisfaction? When this process begins to occur, I realize the pearls are being gathered -- all the good parts that were there all along are being recognized and collected, and soon, very soon, the pearls get strung together and something beautiful appears...and finally, life actually feels worth living.

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