

Youth Support - Professional Training

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"Reflections - Emotional development and
the origins of personality"

'Reflections'

- The development of the personality -

"Reflections"

" A man in a big department store sees someone in the distance approaching and looking at him with interest. He cannot quite place who it is although there is something familiar. Coming closer he finds himself reflected in a large mirror. ... Then he smiles...." (T.Leggett ; 1978)

Knowing ourselves involves recognising ourselves in someone else. Those around us act as mirrors in whom we see reflections of our behaviour, our feelings and our hurts.

As adults, it is by no means easy to see these images for what they are. The argumentative spouse berates his or her partner with "I don't know how you can behave that way with me" - "I wish you would not be so inconsiderate, why do you always have to argue?" Criticising their own faults seen in another, but unable to own them for themselves.

Subconsciously however, we acknowledge these resonances by recreating the same reflections, the same scenarios in one situation after another. It is the way in which we dealt with our earliest experiences, our earliest relationships, which is echoed and restaged throughout life forming the basis of the 'transference' relationship between patient and therapist.

The idea of understanding ourselves in the images we cast on those around us is not a new one. Consider the following stories from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries where the inner realisation sought after in Zen has been also likened to understanding mirror images.

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The Mirror of Enkakuji

Zen came to Japan from China in about 1191 but the first main centre in the east of Japan was the temple at Kenchoji, founded in 1246 by the Regent Samurai Tokiyori under the guidance of the Chinese teacher Daikaku. Tokimune, (Tokiyori's son) decided in 1278 to build a new temple. In company with the priest Daikaku (Rankai 1213-1279), he chose the 'Brahma ground' as the site of an old Shigon temple where there had once been a pagoda of Perfect Realisation. When the foundations were being dug, a stone coffer was unearthed which was found to contain a perfect circular mirror on the reverse of which was engraved the words 'En Kaku' - perfect realisation. The temple was thus named Enkakuji - it was eventually dedicated in 1282 by Tokimune as a thanksgiving gesture for his defeat of the Mongol invasions and Bukko, Daikaku's successor was installed as it's first teacher. When the temple of Enkakuji was eventually burned down in 1374 the precious mirror was salvaged and taken to Tokeiji where it was placed in a hall of mirrors - the meditation hall of the nuns. The founder of the order, the nun Shido

(Tokimune's widow) , reached a realisation when meditating in front of the mirror and her disciples followed her practice - thus the practice of 'mirror Zen' arose. Each successive generation of nuns formulated a poem, and thus a koan, illustrating her understanding of the importance and significance of the mirror.

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Our earliest relationship is inevitably with our mother, for even though some unfortunate children may be deprived of their natural mother at birth, either by accident - illness or death, or by design - abandonment or adoption; all fetuses will spend an interuterine period in intimate contact with their mother. This period between conception and birth has not long been taken seriously by psychoanalysts and students of child psychology. Interuterine health was traditionally the province of obstetricians rather than paediatricians and thus concern for the child in it's own right began at birth.

Since the early seventies, there has been a changing emphasis towards foetology and the study of the unborn child and with it has come an understanding that awareness of the environment and thus response to environmental stimuli does not switch on with the advent of labour. We now know that fetuses can hear, can detect a variety of stimuli and are affected by the hormonal milieu of the mother's blood. Levels of chemicals such as catecholamines and steroids, and adrenalin for instance alter with maternal mood changes, so does heart rate, blood pressure and body temperature. The foetus is thus no doubt affected by maternal mood changes even though perhaps unaware of their significance.

Many theories abound as to psychological development, at what stage an infant is aware, has a 'self', can distinguish 'self' from 'non self'. How does the self develop? What are the developmental stages? Should one use Freud's framework of oral, anal, phallic, and look for the beginning of the oedipal phase? Should we be instead thinking in terms of Klein's object relations with good breast, bad breast and depressive positions? Otto Kernberg distinguishes at least five stages of object relations that a child goes through in building an understanding of his self. While this makes for interesting reading and good intellectual discussion one is left wondering, how on earth can we come even close to knowing whether this has any basis at all in reality?

In order to answer this question partially, there has been a vogue in recent years of 'infant observation' - the commonest practice being to observe a mother and child for about one hour per week for the first year of life. While this is extremely commendable and no doubt gives some added insights - it has no way of reaching that first nine months of exclusive mother/infant communication.

Of course, Winnicott, as a paediatrician, recognised the importance of the early mother, child interaction and his interpretations and ideas are full of empathetic comment. Nevertheless, the best of theories can never be proved when the subject of our theorising, the self, is an intangible, an abstract and something whose very nature is in dispute.

Also, however empathetic we may be, we must remember that we are looking at the world of the child through our adult's eyes. Even those following the theories of Arthur Janov (The Primal Scream) and involved in the practice of 'rebirthing' are not really reliving the experience of their births but at best can only bring to the surface feelings and fears which 'could' have originated in the process of labour.

Only by returning to the often confusing and frightening world of the infant equipped with the knowledge of our adult experience can we ever fully understand the pressures on the developing 'self'. What follows therefore is an explanation of what I, as an adult, have found useful in explaining the developing world of my child and understanding that of the child within my patients.

First experiences may be good. The foetus floating contentedly and securely in warm amniotic fluid, his every need met before it is expressed; existing in the regulated world of his mother's heartbeat.

The unfortunate foetus may instead feel his movements restricted by sparsity of surrounding fluid, his supply of nutrients and oxygen depleted by damage to the placenta, his overtired mother's blood pressure rising and fluctuating producing an unwelcome drumming in his head.

Whether the experience be good or bad, the foetus is still entirely dependant on his mother for his environment. We suppose that the foetus has no control over his situation and is thus the passive receptor of good and bad. This may be true but there exists a possibility that the foetus may not be as passive as we have previously believed.

After birth the interaction between mother (or mother figure) and baby can be clearly observed and the socialisation of the child is readily apparent. Eric Berne believed that each infant is born as the 'perfect' free child, spontaneous, undamaged by traumatic experiences and un moulded by social mores. Throughout childhood this child is brought into confirmation with the values and codes of behaviour of it's society and thus becomes an 'adapted' child - a compliant shadow of it's former self. The baby 'adapts' to it's surroundings by realising that being 'nice' and good, smiling, complying, will bring a good response from it's mother. Close observation of infants will confirm that, contrary to popular myth, even newborn babies can socialise and an early smile does not mean wind!. Hence the process of 'adaptation' must have begun prenatally. We may be Princes and Princesses at conception, but by birth the bad fairy's spell has already begun to change us into frogs.

The baby asks for attention by crying, smiling, coughing and later vocalising. A fortunate child will receive an appropriate response which makes sense and thus aids his understanding of the world, whereas the unfortunate baby will receive the 'wrong' response or no response, leaving him confused and disturbed. We all receive some inappropriate responses since mothers are not perfect and the needs of a child can be easily misunderstood. A child's demands must also to an extent be frustrated if he is not to continue as a demanding omnipotent tyrant.

The mother will be seen by the child as being good, nurturing, provider of all nourishment, when she is meeting the baby's needs at times such as feeding. In Kleinian terms, she is then seen as the 'good breast'. When she is withholding, frustrating the child and not fulfilling his needs, she is seen as the 'bad breast'.

When mother is doing something good, she is good, and when someone is doing something good to you, you feel good, you become good. Hence the good part of mother becomes part of the inner world of the baby. The same happens when mother is being 'bad'. Hence good and bad sides of mother represent 'internal objects' for the child. At first the child cannot integrate these together. A young baby can adore the 'good mother' and then murderously hate the 'bad mother' without being able to see that both are parts of the same person. Later he may fear that he has harmed or destroyed the good while attacking the bad or that he may have exhausted or consumed the good breast by his greedy demands. Keeping these opposites apart is useful in avoiding the conflict inherent in integration but stops the child from developing a well functioning inner self.

Some of us never quite manage the integration of good and bad elements or use the split to cope with stressful situations, disowning the parts that do not fit with the currently felt emotion. If you are feeling anger or hatred for your mother, something taboo in 'nice' society, it is convenient to see her as totally wicked and neglectful, to completely disregard the loving, caring side which does not accord to your present view. You can't hate her if she's good, but you have permission to hate her if she's evil.

Children have plenty of excuses for hating their parents - why should a mother not always feed the demanding infant as soon as he desires it and should she not allow him to suck her breasts dry if he should wish it, being there only for him? Should she not unconditionally adore him, never diverting her attention to her own needs, to her husband or to another child. These are the frustrations felt by all - but what do children do with their inner rage if it cannot be expressed openly?

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Four year old Julie was troubled by severe nightmares. She woke crying at night. Sometimes she would lie still crying silently in her bed so as not to let her parents hear her, other nights she would creep to their bedroom and peep round the door to see if they were still there. Mother was upset and worried that Julie would not tell her anything about the dreams and she therefore felt impotent to help her daughter. She did feel however that they were somehow connected to the birth of her new brother two months previously. Eventually Julie became more withdrawn during the day time and refused to eat family meals - this could have precipitated the family to seek help, but rather than risk admitting a failure to cope, which is how they saw it, they sent Julie to stay with grandparents. Julie's story thus remained concealed until she herself sought help as a teenager and old memories were rekindled.

Julie's nightmares took the form of wanting to kill her mother and at the same time trying to protect her against attack. In some dreams Julie found herself wandering through a large dark house. She could hear the family laughing in another room and tried to keep away from them, but then she would blunder into the room or her mother would come to find her. The family room was well lit but Julie tried to keep in the shadows at the entrance. Her mother might come over to her and she would turn away, she knew she would endanger her mother, she would harm her. All the time she had a compulsion to get rid of her and a dread that she might.

The dreams then changed. There were the same feelings attached but now a sense that something bad had already happened. Time had moved on and the evil deed could not be prevented. Julie felt she was searching to find out what it was she had done wrong. She felt tremendous guilt but could not anchor it in any event. Until one night Julie found herself sitting at a table with several unidentified figures. Her mother came in and served them a stew which they began to eat.

The figures began to laugh - 'How do you like your stew?' 'You'll never get out of this one' and other such jibes.

Julie became aware that she must have killed her mother and served her up in the stew. She began to sob 'No, No I can't have done, it isn't true'

Whereupon her mother appeared 'Yes you did, see you have killed me'

Julie distraughtly ran around the house begging to be allowed to put things right, trying to believe it had not happened.

When she awoke, she was left with a feeling of dread, of guilt that she had killed and consumed her mother and a fear that somehow her 'crime' would be found out.

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I have said that we know ourselves by virtue of the reflected aspects of ourselves which we receive from other people. Winnicott beautifully described the mother as the mirror for the infant. He spoke of a mutual adoration between mother and baby whereby the child was able to express his feelings towards his mother who reflected them back in a way that could be incorporated into the child's developing self. If the mother acted as a faithful mirror accurately reflecting the child's feelings and relating to him as a new unique individual whom she loved, then his true nature would flourish, he would develop as his 'true self'. However if the mirror was flawed and instead of reflecting feelings, projected something different, the mother's fears, mother's worries, mother's hope that the child would somehow conform to, a mould of her making for him to fit into rather than his own space to grow in. If such a false image was projected back to the child, then he would forsake his 'true self' which was being rejected by his mother and instead, develop a 'false self' which his mother might love.

The true self becomes locked away, walled up - in the words of Roger Waters -

"... Mother's gonna make all your nightmares come true,
Mamma's gonna put all of her fears into you,
Mamma's gonna keep you right here,
Under her wing
She won't let you fly but she might let you sing
Mamma will keep baby cosy and warm,
Ooooh Babe, Ooooh Babe, Ooooh Babe
Of course Mam'll help build the wall"

Fairy stories often bring to life aspects of childhood fears which can be safely and unthreateningly faced in fable although taboo in reality. Those best gifted in writing children's stories are those who understand the often uncensored language of the child and the need to be 'naughty' 'dirty' and 'wicked' in a harmless, secure, setting. Roald Dahl's mastery of this concept is self evident in his description of wicked witches, grotesque grandmothers and a host of unsavoury characters. Those who seek to censor such children's stories merely deny the mischievous side of human nature which is surely better expressed in fantasy rather than acted out in society.

Hans Christian Andersen (cica 1789) describes the horror of a distorting mirror in the first part of the 'Snow Queen'.

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The Snow Queen - First Story
Which treats of the mirror and it's fragments.

Look you, now we're going to begin. When we are at the end of the story we shall know more than we do now, for he was a bad goblin. He was one of the very worst, for he was a demon.

One day he was in very good spirits, for he had made a mirror which had this peculiarity, that everything good and beautiful that was reflected in it shrank together into almost nothing, but that whatever was worthless and looked ugly became prominent and looked worse than ever. The most lovely landscapes seen in this mirror looked like boiled spinach and the best people became hideous or stood on their heads and had no bodies; their faces were so distorted as to be unrecognizable, and a single freckle was shown spread out over nose and mouth.

That was very amusing, the demon said. When a good pious thought passed through any person's mind, these were again shown in the mirror, so that the demon chuckled at his artistic invention. Those who visited the goblin school - for he kept a goblin school- declared everywhere that a wonder had been wrought. For now, they asserted, one could see, for the first time, how the world and the people in it really looked.

Now they wanted to fly up to heaven, to sneer and scoff at the angels themselves. The higher they flew with the mirror, the more it grinned; they could scarcely hold it fast. They flew higher and higher, and then the mirror trembled so terribly amid it's grinning that it fell down out of their hands to the earth, where it was shattered into a hundred million million and more fragments.

And now this mirror occasioned much more unhappiness than before; for some of the fragments were scarcely so large as a barley-corn, and these flew about in the world, and wherever they flew into anyone's eye they stuck there, and those people saw everything wrongly, or had only eyes for the bad side of a thing, for every little fragment of the mirror had retained the same power which the whole glass possessed.

A few persons even got a fragment of the mirror into their hearts, and that was terrible indeed, for such a heart became a block of ice. A few fragments of the mirror were so large that they were used as window panes, but it was a bad thing to look at one's friends through these panes; other pieces were made into spectacles, and then it went badly when people put on these spectacles to see rightly and to be just; and then the demon laughed till his paunch shook, for it ticked him so. But without, some little fragments of glass still floated about in the air - and now we shall hear.

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As infants we project parts of ourselves onto 'mother'. We also continue this process by projecting our emotions and parts of ourselves onto others in childhood and through our relationships as we grow up and become adults. There again, the parts reflected back may be 'true' representations or modified images and we develop by reintegrating those parts in our personality. Hence we learn about our environment and therefore about our 'self' by engaging with someone outside our 'self' - an 'object'.

In isolation, this mechanism cannot operate. And if mother does not reflect back the 'particles' of the child's 'self' - then there can be no reintegration. Without recognition, without response, the infant can feel that he ceases to exist - his developing 'self' falls apart in panic and fear of annihilation.

The same process can be seen in a 'relationship'. There is a human need for some one who loves you and cares, someone to replace 'mother' in emotional transactions. Some people grow up defended against the need for such feedback, the obsessive parts of our characters deflect our attention away from feeling and relating and the 'split' off parts are oblivious of their need for relatedness. However our ignored child hysterically shouts for attention while the depressive parts of our nature are constantly in need of response and seek their value in other's regard for them.

If the 'mirror' does not reflect - it distorts as in the fable or is unpolished and 'holds' the image, we cannot reintegrate the parts of ourselves. We can then go through life feeling that we have invested parts of ourselves in others, part of us belongs to mother, part to father, part to husband, part to children, part to friends and we 'don't know where we are'. We have lost our self in other people. We feel we are a different person in every situation and our personality has disintegrated. When such a person is under

stress this can be felt and described in graphic terms - like an 'archipelago ego'.

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"When I thought I was going to lose my job, I felt as though my world was falling apart. They moved my office to the other side of London and I just could not cope with the journey. I had to meet new people and do things differently - I didn't know where I was. I used to get on the train in the morning to go to work and get really worried that I should really be back at home, and when I got home I would be all the time thinking I should be at work. I couldn't go to see my friends - as soon as I arrived, I felt that I should be somewhere else - I was lost!"

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