

MY RAPPROCHEMENT WITH MY MOTHER AT AGE 90:

A Fragment of an Ongoing Self-Analysis

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My father came to this country about the year of 1900, leaving a young wife and two little children in Bialystok, Poland. When he found a place for them to live as well as a few clients for his services as a paperhanger, he sent for them. Then, in succession my mother had four more children. Soon thereafter, she sickened with TB and died at age 38, leaving my father a widower with six children. I was six years old when she died, the youngest of the six. I have many vivid memories concerning these years preceding my mother's death. I will review some of them and consider their impact on my later years.

1. I was about three years old for this first one. I was sitting on the floor holding a toy. It was a cube made of thin wood squares. On one side was a little handle. When I turned it the cube sent forth three musical tones. (I remember it as a repetition of D.A.B., D.A.B., etc.) My curiosity was aroused. What was the source of this simple melody? I searched the surface of the cube for a clue

without success. I pried away one surface and peered inside the cube and saw only its empty insides. In my continued search, I took the whole cube apart and found on the inner surface of one side that the handle of the cube was attached to a little metal device that sounded these three notes each time I turned the crank. At this crucial moment of discovery, I became aware that my parents were standing over me, watching. I heard my mother say, “What a destructive child!”

2. On another occasion, not too long after, I was given a tricycle. I have seen a photo of myself dressed in a little sailor suit sitting on the tricycle with my feet on the pedals and the happiest smile in the world on my face. I recall the occasion when I was given the tricycle. It was wrapped in paper which I tore away eagerly and climbed on at once. I found the handle bars were stiff and I could not steer the tricycle. Freshly arrived from the toy store it probably needed only a few drops of lubricating oil. Whatever it was, I flung myself to the ground in a tantrum. Again, I could hear my mother say, “What an ungrateful child!”

3. Due to my mother's declining health (of which I was entirely unaware) the doctors treating her suggested that perhaps fresh air would help. In the search for a local "magic mountain" in New Jersey a small apartment was found for her in Verona, NJ, located a mere 10 miles from the Newark house we all had been living in. Alas, there was no "magic mountain" cure waiting for her there. A 12-year old sister, my sister Pearl, became the designated surrogate mother. I was sent along as a third member of this mini-menage because I was still a preschooler. This move led to a lifelong attachment to Pearl. Needless to say when an older sibling becomes a surrogate mother, the mothering role became unavoidably contaminated with some degree of hostility based on sibling rivalry. E.g. she delighted in frightening me in the dark, and probably derived some erotic pleasure when I clung to her in my terror.

4. The street-floor apartment in which we lived in Verona, my mother, my sister and I, was located alongside a little country road on which there was an old stone church with a considerable expanse of lawn. One day I was out on that

lawn on my tricycle. A youngster, my age, was there with his mother. She was sitting in a beach chair reading and her son was running up and down the lawn. In his hand he carried a bell and he shook it merrily as he ran. At one point he dropped the bell on the lawn and ran to his mother to speak to her. I saw my chance. I dropped down near the bell, slipped it into my pocket and ran off. A few days later, my maternal grandfather visited us. I brought out my stolen bell and asked him if he could attach it to the handle bars of my tricycle which he did. The next day I appeared on the lawn with my tricycle and I rang the bell joyously. The little boy was there and when he saw that bell he started yelling and crying, "Give me back my bell!" He ran to his mother for assistance. In a kindly voice she asked me where I got the bell. In defiant tones I said that bell was a present to me from my grandfather. The mother, again in a kindly voice, said, you see, son. It looks like your bell but it's not. That is a present he got from his grandfather. While the boy resumed his crying complaints, I rode off triumphantly, but made sure thereafter not to

ride my tricycle when they were on the lawn. That episode haunted me for many years, and was never discussed in my analysis two decades later.

5. My mother died on a Saturday morning. She seemed to know that it was the end because she saw her children one by one for a final farewell. When my turn came, she said my name in Yiddish and smiled at me. Her smile revealed a gold tooth which frightened me. On a few occasions, thereafter, I saw that smile in a dream and awoke in fright because of the gold tooth. In recurrent dreams of that period, I saw my mother, the same height as me, but with an adult-sized head. In the dream, her gold-tooth smile again frightened me and when I touched her, she crumbled into dust. My siblings had explained to me that she was turning into dust in her grave.

6. At the moment she died in her upstairs bedroom, I was sitting in a rocking chair downstairs in the living room. My older brother came down from the bedroom in an agitated state. He paced up and down in the living room repeating in anguished tones, "She's gone. She's gone." I thought he was saying that she had run away from home and had abandoned us. So, I said to

him, "Look in the garden. Maybe, she's hiding there." I remember the disgusted look my brother gave me when I said these words.

There are other incidents I could describe, but, due to limitations of time and your patience, I'll say simply that I concluded from all this that my mother just didn't like me and I had a persistent fear of her ghost for a long time after she died.

II. Some Long Term Effects of that Loss

In addition to my conviction that my mother did not like me was a great sense of guilt at her death. Whether I actually heard the words spoken or imagined them, I grew up with the belief that my family concurred in the opinion that "Mama was fine until Louis was born." The need on my part to make some restitution had a lot to do with my early decision to be a doctor. In addition, I firmly believed as a child that doctors did not get sick. Coincidentally, at the time of my mother's death, a neighbor had a psychotic daughter whom I heard discussed as "the one that had to be sent away." In some convoluted way that statement created for me a connection between psychosis and death. As a teenager I began hanging around hospitals on visits home from premedical studies and cultivated a precocious and intense interest in psychotic patients, perhaps in a round

about way to defend against my growing fear of tuberculosis. Ironically, just when I began a residency in neurology at Montefiore Hospital in New York City, preparatory to a career in psychiatry, streptomycin was introduced for the treatment of TB. A common side effect of streptomycin therapy was acoustic nerve deafness, for which a neurology consultation was regularly ordered. So, there I was in full flight from TB to psychiatry in order to escape the Angel of Death, only to find him (or her) waiting for me each time a TB patient contracted acoustic nerve deafness from streptomycin.

What about me and girls? It would surely not surprise an analytically oriented audience to learn that I was an intensely shy young man when it came to girls. I had a wonderful support system in my family and I could not help but benefit from the loving supportive home in which I grew up. And there were women in my life who helped me grow up, almost in spite of myself and who, alas, so often gave more of themselves than I gave in return. Let's give some credit, too, to my analysis. Most of all, I do credit my dear wife and the wonderful children she gave me, my greatest gift in my life. In short, I feel I reached a good age with no complaints, on the contrary, with many reasons to feel grateful and blessed.

And it is just because of this benign outcome of my life that I was stunned to experience what I call my “epiphany.”

III. My Epiphany

A few years ago I had a glorious vacation in Venice with my son and his family. We stayed at a hotel immediately adjoining the great Venetian opera house, “La Fenice” where Verdi first presented *La Traviata* in 1853. Two times before La Fenice had burned to the ground and was rebuilt, hence its name La Fenice, the Phoenix bird. True to its name, it burned down a third time shortly after we visited. As a family, we contributed to a fund to rebuild La Fenice still a fourth time and planned to attend the gala reopening of La Fenice. When the gala date was set, we immediately applied for tickets. However, we were told that tickets were already gone. It was not a total loss. In preparing for the trip to Venice that we never made, I searched frantically for my passport, in the course of which I discovered and discarded much household junk accumulated over many years. But I also discovered a few treasures. Outstanding among them was a very old photograph of my mother, taken perhaps shortly before she set out from Bialystok to join my father on Ellis Island, that fabulous gate of entry to our country. In this picture there

was a little boy standing on a chair and a little girl in her arms. Mother and children were dressed with special elegance for the forthcoming encounter with daddy. The boy was to be my oldest brother Irwin, and the little girl was to be my oldest sister Molly.

When I found that picture, I was enchanted. I stared at my mother's face obsessively. I had the picture framed and placed on my desk for extensive daily viewing. I think I was trying to make up for all the years I did not really see her while she was alive. In working out the chronology, I concluded that she must have been about 20 years old in that picture with her two little children. For the first time in my life I saw her as a vulnerable, fragile girl, almost a child, traveling alone in steerage, on a possibly stormy ocean. My mother's face was gentle but unsmiling. To me, her face seemed beautiful beyond words, and I found my need to stare at it absolutely insatiable. I tried to picture what she was like as a married woman in Bialystok. I was told by her mother (my grandmother) that already as a teenaged girl she was an outstanding salesperson in a department store in Bialystok. I could picture that easily because my sister Pearl was also a fine businesswoman also at an early age. But, suddenly, I saw my mother as a young person of great strength. After she settled herself here she had four more children in

rapid succession of which I was the sixth and last. It was, indeed, after my birth that she was struck down by TB. A healed childhood TB lesion in my lungs was for me a scary childhood souvenir. Considering the absence of any real treatment for TB in those days, I could imagine how the doctors must have warned my mother not to hold me or to let me get too close to her if she wanted me to survive. Indeed, I can't recall that my mother ever held me, hugged me or kissed me while she was alive.

I reviewed some of my old "memories" about her. I now put these "memories" in quotation marks to emphasize that my mother's distant behavior was surely due to doctors' orders and when I recall those words, "destructive child", "ungrateful child," I questioned how could she have made these remarks? For one thing she never had a chance to learn English, and I doubt that I understood much Yiddish at that time. In short, it's a reasonable supposition that those comments were never actually made, that they were more likely the product of "retrospective falsification."

In more recent memory I recall how my son at age 6 would leap into his mother's (my wife) lap, hug her and say, "Let's scuss", (i.e. let's have a discussion). I recall my pleasure at that sight but wondering too what it was like to hug a demonstrative mother at

that age. I still recall the deathbed scene how my mother tried, in those brief moments, to express her pent up feelings. She had to encapsulate it all in a tender smile and a barely audible voice in Yiddish. And all that stayed with me was the memory of her gold tooth - - how it haunted me in nightmares for years thereafter. As I studied my mother's picture I felt I captured, finally, the tenderness in her beautiful young face. I became aware of a vast untapped reservoir of compassion for her and for all the world; and a curious sense having grown up suddenly, and becoming possessed with an unprecedented feeling of wisdom, whatever that means. And that was my epiphany.

IV. The Lessons from the Epiphany

When I first had that epiphany, I was filled with joy and wanted to share it with everyone. But over a year has passed and I've calmed down to the point where I wondered, "Why share these intensely personal experiences with others?" Wasn't I in danger of becoming a bore with this matter? But then I felt I had learned much that I wanted to share with colleagues.

First, the nature of retrieved childhood memories: How seriously can we take these memories as scientific data? An excessive readiness to accept such memories as

“real” can derail the whole psychotherapeutic process and have the effect of reinforcing those very pathological misconceptions we are trying to debunk.

An instructive example of this on a large scale was observed in the recent “epidemic” of victims so-called traumatic sexual attack in “remembered” encounters with family members. These “memories” were typically elicited with the help of hypnosis and heavily influenced by the theoretical orientation of the “therapist” (Doctrinal Compliance, Ehrenwald). This epidemic resulted in many family break ups. It was properly compared to the ill-famed Salem Witch Hunt Trials. The epidemic subsided rapidly after several practitioners of this “therapeutic” approach were successfully sued in court.

That my mother’s illness limited her ability to mother me is clear. By the time I was an adult I understood that. For the most part I made peace with it. In that reasonable light the intensity of my emotional response to her photo seemed inexplicably excessive. Without a doubt it had a positive transforming effect on me. It was surprising only that it erupted so late in my life. I cannot exaggerate the almost hypnotic trance state of my visual feast. I thought then that a picture is indeed worth a thousand words and that

perhaps we should make more use of childhood pictures in reconstructing the childhood history of our adult patients. And, unexpectedly for me I found myself thinking suddenly of some childhood memories from a primal scene point of view. I will cite a few.

A. There is a story by Mark Twain called *The Mysterious Stranger*. I read it long ago and for the most part I did not recall its content. All that remained with me was the haunting title of that story – *The Mysterious Stranger* – Who was he? I remembered him as a giant in size, but a naughty boy in appearance and behavior. By comparison (this is how I recalled it) a gathering of humans around him seemed Lilliputian in size. And like a mischievous boy playing with insects he would pick up these tiny struggling people and pull off their arms and legs, as if they were insects, and then would crush them underfoot when he got bored with his game.

On many Saturdays my father came to Verona to spend the weekend with my mother. Meanwhile my sister and I visited our siblings in Newark. When my mother died my grandmother, who lived with us, mounted a fierce campaign against my father, blaming him for my mother's death. Did I blame him too? And was he the Mysterious Stranger who visited with my mother in Verona?

B. A recurrent dream after my mother's death dealt with a man and three boys.

In my dream the man seemed to be my father and the two older boys my brothers. I watched in horror as they stalked my father with manifest intent to kill him. I wanted to prevent this but I was paralyzed in my sleep and felt shame that I could not act to save him. (My army Dog Tags)

C. In my third memory (an actual event) I persuaded a neighborhood friend, (like myself about 10 years old), to join me in a seat on the curb of a street with heavy traffic rumbling over its cobblestone surface. I set my friend to work with me. Armed with a pencil and a pad of paper I urged him to join me in writing down as many license numbers of passing cars as we could. I convinced him that our data could be used by the police to catch a man in flight from a murder and who, I imagined, drove past us while we collected our numbers. I am not a detective story writer nor am I an avid reader of that genre. However, I did find in psychoanalytic studies of murder stories that the one in pursuit of the murderer (as writer or reader) turns out in the end, in his fantasies, to himself be the murderer and to absolve himself from guilt by reminding himself that it is only a story. (Rycroft, 1957; Pederson-Krag, 1980)

ADDENDUM

(Postscript) Because I read *The Mysterious Stranger* so long ago and since I remembered so little of its actual content, I decided to reread it. The librarian came up with a long book that told me how Mark Twain struggled over this story for most of the last ten years of his life. He rewrote it several times and there are unauthorized versions based on the recovered fragments of rewrites that are a far cry from Mark Twain's final version of the story. For Mark Twain it was a time of much suffering and deep gloom. His final authorized version of the story revealed a cynical and even a bitter anti-religious point of view. He also arrived at a tripartite model of the mind in which he identified the waking self, the dreaming self, and the amoral self, ideas which delighted me in terms of my own ongoing attempts to formulate a tripartite model of the mind.