

Abandoning Those You Love
Family as Neurosis
by Todd F. Eklof (12-01-02)

The Swiss have a story about the owner and manager of a bank who one day calls his children and reminds them of the proverb, "a fish always rots from the head first." He insists that they be frank with him when it becomes apparent he is no longer able to perform his duties and the time comes for him to step down and relinquish his control of the family business. Years pass and the man's children realize their beloved patriarch is no longer as sharp as he once was. Reluctantly, but dutifully, they come to him as he had instructed and tell him the time has come for him to step down. He looks up from behind a pile of papers he's been neglecting on his desk, smiles at his children and replies, "Too late!"

This lighthearted story makes the point that even the most well intended parents are conflicted when it comes to relinquishing the control they have over their children. For that matter, children, even in adulthood, sometimes have trouble assuming authority for their own lives. To paraphrase an old saying, "You can take the child out of the family, but you can't take the family out of the child." No matter how far or how long we have remained away from the home of our upbringing, we often remain stuck in our family milieu, sometimes repeating, even as adults, the same dysfunctional habits we've attempted to leave behind. Our habits, after all, are really an extension of our habitats, and few habitats influence our behavior more than those we grow up in.

By the time we have become adults we have, to some degree, internalized our parents so that even after leaving home, or after our parents or surrogate parents die, we have their voices in us telling us what to do and reminding us how we ought to behave. Part of the power our ancestors have over us comes from the internal controls they instill us with early on. Duty, responsibility, loyalty, obedience, respect for our elders and their old ways—these are the control mechanisms handed down from generation to generation so that our ancestors can maintain their influence in our lives far beyond the grave.

This is not to say our parents and our ancestors were all a bunch of control freaks (although most of them probably were). When we teach our children to look both ways before crossing the street, for instance, we are hoping to instill in them a habit that will protect them and keep them safe the rest of their lives, even when we're not around to hold their hands. When we cryptically warn them that children cannot live on candy alone, we do so out of concern, not control. Indeed, it may be precisely this sort of learned behavior, necessary for their survival and welfare, that makes human children stand out among other species. Most other creatures come into the world with everything they need to survive genetically hardwired into them. Human civilization, however, is far too complex for this. Our genes simply don't have the storage capacity to carry all the information we need to survive and thrive in our world. Instead, we have evolved into a species that passes on information memetically, that is, through the sharing of ideas. Who knows, it may be the almost instinctual need parents have to control their children is a

genetic mechanism designed to assure they pass on vital inorganic information to their offspring?

Children are born into the world with fully functional imaginations but no experience. In order for them to distinguish between the sometimes dangerous world in which they live and the fantastic world of their imaginations, they must depend on the transfer of experience from older adults, such as their parents and teachers, through instruction, ideas and rules. The boundaries they learn from others begin to define the world they grow into, the world their once unlimited imaginations are eventually contained in.

This process is necessary and it is uniquely human. But it is also often the case that our ancestors don't actually have our best interest at heart. Just as genetic information attempts to live on by reproducing itself in new host organisms, people sometimes selfishly attempt to satisfy their desire to live on, the archetypal quest for immortality, by extending themselves into the lives of their children by passing on their ideas and values through coercion, emotional and psychological manipulation, domination and other forms of mind and behavior control. When these are the sort of parents we have, we usually end up walking around with an overbearing father inside us, or, perhaps, a smothering mother.

Whenever this is the case it becomes possible for our parents to control us through neurotic behavior. This shouldn't surprise us because we're all at least a little neurotic. Simply put, neurosis is the tendency to treat the present as if it were the past. When receiving advice from others, for example, some neurotics behave as if they're being criticized by their parents, blowing a simple statement way out of proportion. Carl Jung once spoke of a forty-five year old patient who really didn't want to be cured because he'd been living on what he himself defined as "Happy Neurosis Island"¹ since he was seventeen. "This is an excellent formulation of the peculiar psychology of the neurotic," Jung tells us, "[One] lives as if there were no time, as if nothing had yet come off and everything were still to come... The neurotic cannot or will not occupy the new place for which [to] declare [oneself] entirely responsible for better or worse."²

Jung held out little hope for this patient because he was content to live as if he were a seventeen year old living in a forty-five year old body. But Jung's patient is not alone. A recent statistic claims that a third of all men living in the United States and a quarter of the women would choose to stay permanently between the ages of fifteen and nineteen if they could.³ The reason so many of us would rather remain stuck in the past, obeying the commands of dead ancestors, is because we've grown accustomed to living this way. It may be neurotic, but it is, as Jung's patient put it, a "happy neurosis."

After all, we hearken back to our earliest years and remember how confusing and scary the world seemed. And there we were, with no experience to speak of, left only with a wild and limitless imagination to comprehend it all. We actually believed Santa Claus was a real person with elves and flying reindeer, and that teddy bears were as alive as the rest of us. Thank goodness for our parents who slowly began putting it all in perspective for us. The boundaries they gave us made the world seem much less confusing. In many

ways they were like gods creating order out of chaos. In some cases we worshipped our parents, giving them our minds and hearts, our trust and obedience, sacrificing our very futures by faithfully adhering to the path they laid before us, the path that always leads us back to them, to their rules and their thoughts and their values. And so, through this sort of ancestor worship, parents are able to live on by controlling the ideas and values of their heirs.

Not only does ancestor worship make us comfortable by creating order out of chaos, it also helps to fulfill our narcissistic needs. We want desperately to obtain the love and acceptance of our parents. So, even as adults, long after we have left home, and, in some cases, after our parents have died, we continue to seek their love by obeying the voices they stuffed down inside us. Love and order—how much better can it get?

Nowadays there are those who seek to assure a place for their parents well into the future by promoting *family values* to society at large. But this is really nothing new. The family unit has been used throughout history to indoctrinate future generations into the ways of the ancestors. About 2500 years ago, for example, China entered into a 300 year period of chaos known as the Warring States period. It was a period wrecked by strife, civil war, suffering and the emergence of competing philosophies. Eventually Chinese society seemed to settle on the moral philosophy of Kung-fu-t'zu. Confucius, as we call him today, based his conservative ideas on the fanciful belief in a Golden Age during the reign of the Chou Dynasty about 1100 B.C.E.

For Confucius the Chou kings had received their mandates from heaven. So he set out to define a legalistic system of rules and rituals for every possible occasion in life in an effort to reestablish the good times indicative of the Chou period. If the people strictly obeyed the rules and carefully adhered to the rituals, heaven would flow through them and through their society. This would be a pretty happy neurosis if it weren't for the fact that the unyielding rules and rituals were almost impossible to keep. In one example the rule is, "the master won't sit on a crooked mat." Can you imagine living in a society where you can't even sit down unless your chair is perfectly straight?

In Confucianism the family was believed to be the cornerstone of moral perfection. As Stephen Karcher explains this tradition, "As Heaven and Earth have a strict hierarchical relation, so must the members of the family: the wife is subject to the husband, children are subject to their parents, and young siblings are subject to older. You must internalize the rites, responsibilities and ritual behaviors that govern these relations."⁴ While western culture may be a little less strict than ancient Confucian culture, our notion of traditional family values is very similar. Here we expect the father to be both the head of the household and a pillar of society. In this way he is to hold up the patriarchal social order by maintaining control of those who are under him, his own family.

Fortunately a Chinese hippie named Lao T'zu appeared on the scene to react against the restrictive culture promoted by Confucianism. The strict Confucian would have likely considered Lao T'zu a lazy good-for-nothing because he taught his followers that they shouldn't do anything, that they should stop trying to obey so many damned rules! Peace,

love, harmony, sitting still, loving life and taking it easy is the true Way. "Now this propriety of yours," said the Hippie Master, "is nothing but the empty husk of loyalty and faithfulness. It is the beginning of all confusion and doubt."⁵ For Lao T'zu, leaving his parents was accomplished by abandoning the social precepts forced upon him as a child through the cultural mirror we call *family*.

In light of all this, we should not be surprised that some of us, like Jung's patient, remain emotional and psychological teenagers. It is usually during our teen years that we exert the natural tendency to rebel against the authorities, including our parents. Adolescence is the phase between childhood and adulthood during which we begin taking responsibility for our own lives, exploring our own ideas and seeking our own values. But if our parents, or their surrogates, have dominated our psyches so completely that we dare not challenge them, then we have great difficulty ever fully maturing into adults.

On occasion, fortunately, the youth in a society ban together and really shake things up, as happened in this country during the 1960's. When they complained about the Vietnam War, the Dominator culture countered the counterculture with the slogan, "America, love it or leave it." This is the same mindset that enables a dominating parent to say to a budding adult, "it's my way or the highway," or, "as long as you're living under my roof, you'll do as I say." Such naked statements make it clear that we are social outcasts if we don't agree with the powers that be, and that our childhood homes are not really ours, but belong to our parents. If we are going to find our own home, we must leave our parents.

In some cases, this means abandoning those we love, which is difficult because we are ever enmeshed in the desire to receive parental praise, affection and acceptance. Yet leaving home and those we love behind seems to be Heaven's first mandate on the road to discovering our *own* truth—by this I mean the truth we own for ourselves, the truth that is uniquely our own, not our parents'. Jesus, for example, repeatedly disassociates himself from his family in the gospels. In Mark, when he is surrounded by a crowd of strangers, informed that his family is standing outside, he asks, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" Then, identifying the crowd, he answers his own question, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my mother and my brother and my sister."⁶ Here Jesus indicates he has abandoned his biological family in favor of a spiritual family, that is, a family that shares his sense of morality. Elsewhere he even goes so far as to say, "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword... and one's foes will be members of one's own household."⁷ By this, Jesus seems to indicate it is his full intention to break up the family that traditional culture clings to as the very hub of social order. "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me."⁸ If you want to live in the past, at home with your parents, you can be of no service to the way of Heaven. "Let the dead bury their own dead... No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."⁹ Incidentally, the term "bury my dead" was a legal term which indicates Jesus encouraged his followers to shirk their responsibility toward maintaining social order as well as the family.¹⁰

Jesus is not the first or only spiritual teacher to abandon his family. Those who recall the story of young Prince Siddhartha will remember that on the night he left the walled palace his mother and father had constructed for him, he quietly looked in on his sleeping wife and newborn son. He wanted to kiss them good-bye, but knew if they were awakened they would convince him to stay, tethered to his comfortable life in the palace as husband, father and Prince, forever avoiding his true destiny. Instead, he quietly left the palace, shaved his head and traded in his splendid garments for a beggar's rags, the first steps on his path to becoming the Buddha. This, again, emphasizes the point that it is difficult to leave home because we feel protected and comfortable in the paternal kingdom. We're safe behind the triple thick walls constructed for our own protection so we don't experience the suffering in the world beyond the boundaries our parents set for us. It is Happy Neurosis Island!

This is also the case in the legendary story of Moses who, as an infant, was placed in a basket then sent floating down the river. Eventually the basket was recovered by none other than the Pharaoh's daughter who adopted the infant and raised him as her own. Like Buddha, Moses could have had a safe and comfortable life as a prince of Egypt. But he felt a deeper destiny calling him. He knew he did not belong to the royal family and, in fact, had a spiritual responsibility to liberate those who had been enslaved under Pharaoh's tyranny. So Moses left his comfortable home and took his place among the Hebrews, among slaves and outcasts.

Those who choose to enter into the priesthood, or into the monastic life, both in the East and the West, must first choose to abandon their family, and the potential for having a family with children of their own. Thomas Merton, Mother Teresa, Thich Nhat Hanh and the Dalai Lama are contemporary examples of spiritual leaders who chose to forsake biological family. I suppose Martin Luther King and Gandhi also abandoned their families in choosing to live a life that put them at risk instead of choosing the safe and comfortable path. Here we are not only talking about abandoning our parents, but our children as well, Just as the Buddha had to do. Perhaps those who find the inner fortitude to truly leave the parental fortress, the Palace of the Child, more easily recognize the importance of not placing the same sort of heavy restrictions on their own children that they have themselves abandoned. They know that it is possible to love children without dominating them. They know that domination is, in fact, the opposite of love. It is selfishness and an attempt to cling to one's own life by sacrificing the future of our children. They also know that it is important to teach our children that there is much more to the world than the walls of family life, and they do so, most often, by example, in being distant, absent and preoccupied with the world outside the family. Each of us has a path to follow, a destiny to fulfill, a truth to discover. But we must leave home to find it.

1 Jung, Carl, *Dream Analysis*, Bollingen Series XCIX, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1984, p.669.

2 Ibid.

3 Hillman, James, *The Force of Character*, Random House, New York, NY, 1999, p.125.

4 Karcher, Stephen, *Ta Chuan: The Great Treatise*, St. Martin's Press, New York, NY, 2000, p.32.

5 Karcher, *ibid.*, p. 38.

6 Mark 3:33-35.

7 Matthew 10:34&36.

8 Matthew 10:37.

9 Luke 9:60&62.

10 See Genesis 23. The repeated use of the