

Heal Yourself

Some readers questioned the statement in my last column "While no parent deliberately hurts his or her child, most of us acquire some emotional scars while growing up." One reader referred to parental behavior that seemed deliberately mean. Another asked whether it is deliberate if the parents are mentally ill or substance abusers.

I will address these questions as best I can. First I would like to draw a distinction between excusing and forgiving. When I suggest that abuse is not deliberate, I do not excuse it, in the sense of saying that it is acceptable behavior. Step one in the process of healing is to realize that we are wounded. We must acknowledge the hurts we experienced and let the tears flow that we may not have dared to cry at the time. As children, we are very limited in our possibilities to defend ourselves against or escape difficult circumstances. We depend on our parents for survival. Therefore, if they hurt us, we are forced to find a way to cope.

There are many possible coping strategies. One is to do everything possible to please our parents and to earn positive attention. Through this we tend to develop a very conditional sense of our own value as human beings and a disproportionate sense of our ability to influence others' behavior. Another is that we, believing our parents or other authorities such as teachers or religious figures to be infallible, convince ourselves that we must be bad. Otherwise, why would they do this to us? The result of this is often shame, guilt and even denial that the transgressions took place.

As we grow into adulthood and interact with ever widening circles of people, we can put these negative childhood experiences into perspective. Positive experiences with other people will help us reassess what we think about ourselves. We understand more about why people do what they do and how our own parents were driven by their own childhood experiences. We, as adults, can shield ourselves better from verbal attacks and have greater freedom to walk away from situations that are unpleasant or unhealthy for us. If, however, we have internalized negative attitudes or destructive behavior that we experienced as children, perhaps to protect the perpetrator, we do ourselves further injury. For example, if a teacher told me "You'll never amount to anything" and I still believe that as an adult, then I am perpetuating the damage. Even worse is if I feel deep down (perhaps unconsciously) that I deserve to be abused; then I may seek out relationships and circumstances that validate that belief, keeping me locked in a victim role.

Another way to stay stuck in a victim role is to continue, as adults, to blame whoever mistreated us for who we have turned out to be. This can lead to a powerless, self-pitying attitude that may tempt us to ease our pain with substance abuse. Or it can make us bitter and cynical. Resenting the world and our parents for all that they haven't been and done for us, we get mired in bitterness and passivity. We cannot move forward and grow until we let go of this resentment. Feeling sorry for ourselves or envying others keep us stuck.

It can be very liberating to release the anger and sadness we feel about what happened to us in our childhood, but it is not constructive to dump these feelings in a blaming or accusing way in the lap of our parents. Most of us, after all, no longer live with our parents, so what good does it do to lay guilt on them for their trespasses decades past? Switching roles from victim to persecutor does not break the cycle. Unconsciously becoming persecutors and passing the abuse on to our children only creates more suffering and does nothing to ease the pain. As long as we think that someone mistreated us deliberately, we continue to hold onto the pain.

My working hypothesis in life is that everyone is fundamentally good and that it is the myriad forms of pain and desperation that drive people to do horrible things to each other. I know that I am most likely to lash out to my daughter or husband when I am feeling overwhelmed, frustrated and helpless and not out of deliberate maliciousness. It is in those moments that I am most in need of love and support. I assume the more horrible the act, the more horrible the inner pain must be. Therefore, I can view even suicide bombers with compassion. While I do not condone their acts, my concern is not to condemn them for their evilness but to look for ways to improve the dire circumstances that inspire them.

We cannot erase our childhood traumas, but we can use them as an impetus for our choices. We can make sure not to pass on hurts that we may have suffered. We can make sure that we take care of our needs so that we are not dependent on others for our well-being. We can intervene with compassion and offer resources when we see that someone is struggling. We cannot change the past, but we can change how we look at what happened to us. What if we look at it as a gift? Then we can begin to see how the challenges we faced formed us into who we are. We can celebrate our surviving in the face of adversity. We can be grateful for the skills and strengths that we developed through these experiences. Look for the good and you will find it. Look for the bad and you will find it. The choice is yours.

Many years ago I came across a saying that sums this theme up for me: Who you are is God's gift to you. Who you become is your gift to God.