

# **EXISTENTIAL FAMILY THERAPY: PERSONAL POWER-PARENTAL AUTHORITY-EFFECTIVE ACTION-FREEDOM**

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**ABSTRACT:** The author, who was trained in family therapy by Carl Whitaker and Walter Kempler, feels a moral obligation to both pass on and expand upon ways of thinking and doing family therapy that could very easily become extinct as a result of not knowing the history of family therapy and what may be for lack of any better description the calling of a family therapist to manifest courage in his or her daily work.

**KEY WORDS:** existential family therapy; therapist courage.

## **INVADING THE UNCONSCIOUS TO CREATE AN “EXISTENTIAL SHIFT”**

An example of “invading the unconscious” of the family in a way that has the possibility of creating an “existential shift” (existential shift = moving all or most of the family members in a way that frees them from the psychic bondage of the “protection game”) follows. (The protection game is the protection of a “skewed reality” that is responsible for significant psychopathology in families).

It was the eighth session of family therapy in which I was working with a family. In attendance were a four year-old boy, an eight year-old girl, their mother and father (both in their early thirties), and the mother’s father and mother.

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Two issues were predominant. First, in the war of which family's "skewed reality" was to prevail, that of the husband or the wife, the wife had her mother and father present (the husband's mother and father were dead). So it was "all against one" as opposed to "one for all and all for one." Secondly, the wife's unconscious latent homosexual attachment to her mother along with both parents' support of it out of their conscious awareness was resulting in the husband getting kicked out of the family. In fact, in the previous seven sessions the eight year-old daughter had demonstrated no physical hugging and no emotional affection with her father. This was due to the strength of the latent homosexual symbiotic tie between the mother and the eight year-old daughter. The father tolerated this, although one had the feeling it was "killing him" and he was "secretly waiting to leave" the wife and his family because he could not stand the emotional pain.

During the session, whenever the father put his arms out for his daughter to come to him so he could give her a hug, she would immediately stand by her mother who would claim to be puzzled, while every message she sent was to exterminate this father who was going to leave her (non-verbal messages). The bottom line of this kind of behavior at the unconscious level by the mother is that "there is no wrath like that of a woman scorned" (Gardner, 1993).

During the eighth session I sensed the timing was right for an intervention. I asked the little girl what sounded like a very innocent question, but my intention was to evoke the possibility of "an existential shift" and an entire psychosexual rewiring of a three generational family in one shot! (It takes awhile as a clinician to develop the perspicacity to do this while maintaining a straight face.) I said to the little girl, "When you grow up do you want to marry a man or a woman?" She blurted out: "A woman!" The entire family was in shock and manifesting a feeling of horror, and she looked shocked, not knowing what she had done but knowing it was a very bad mistake because of the tremendous feeling of anxiety that had just soared upward in the room. She immediately retracted her statement and said: "A man!"

The father was almost instantaneously accepted by each of the generations. Perhaps until that very moment they did not see a purpose for him. Now it was clear. He was to preserve the femininity of the daughter in a Catholic family. During the ninth and tenth sessions there was free flowing affection between the father and both children. As things were going reasonably well the family decided to

terminate at the end of the tenth session, and the members were very grateful for what they viewed as my saving the marriage.

To free the family members of the "protection game" and skewed view of reality an intervention was made that "increased the level of anxiety" among all members of the family; and it was only that increase of anxiety (and psychosexual heat) that created enough dissonance with each of the family members' psychological reality and makeup, that enough of a disequilibrium was created to "evoke an existential shift," thereby freeing the family members to be themselves—particularly the eight year-old little girl who would have remained a psychological prisoner to the psychological family script (she already looked very "Butch"), perhaps for the remainder of her life, if I had not dropped the dynamite.

Of course, to do the kind of work in the preceding example, one must have the entire family present. My two mentors in family therapy were Drs. Carl Whitaker and Walter Kempler. Both gave me a sense of what it took to mobilize a family (Bergantino, 1993).

### EFFECTIVE ACTION

To do family therapy one must get the entire family mobilized in the first telephone call or the first interaction. Here is one example of how I have done it. I trained family therapists throughout Australia in 1984, 1986, and 1988. During a 1986 five-day intensive workshop in Brisbane, one woman was incessantly complaining about her husband and the emotional state of her family. Perhaps you can recognize the harsh nasal sound of such hopeless impotent complaining. The Aussies, with their delightful sense of humor, referred to this process as "winge-ing her way to alienation." (The Aussies are proud that their ancestry and heritage began by those that were cast out of England, who had the hawdy courage to build a new country from the building blocks of a prison colony. They consider direct descendants of these original prisoners the blue bloods of Australia. In other words, things have an opposite feeling in Australia in that as a society they reward roguishness as opposed to what we are stuck with, "appropriateness." When an Aussie invites you to go for a beer he says, "Let's go Shout, Mate!" I love this quality in the Aussies. They were always refreshing!)

I said to the family therapist in the workshop, "I have come all

the way over from the United States to do family therapy. It is already the next to last day, and you have one shot left to work with me." She said, "Well, my husband and my children are 300 miles away in the outback." I said, "What's the matter, Australia doesn't have telephones?" She said, "My husband has the day planned with my children." I said, "I thought you said this was important to you! How can I take you seriously that you want to learn family therapy?" She said, "There are no telephones here," and there were not. I said to the man who hired me to come to Australia, "Do you know where we can find a telephone booth when the workshop is over today?" He said, "Yes." I said to the woman, meaning to insure that she did not ask her husband with a hopeless complaining that would turn him off (winging her way to alienation), "I will go to a phone booth with you and coach you if you need help." She agreed. We went to the phone after 5:00 pm. She called. She began to falter. I forcefully said to her in a low voice that her husband could not hear, while closing my right fist as if to put my power in her, "Tell him its important to you! You expect him and the kids here in Brisbane at 10:00 am sharp!" She did it with the same non-psychotic, passion, force, and aggressiveness with which I said it, as opposed to her usual demeanor. He merely replied, "I'll be there with the kids at 10:00 am." He arrived at 9:30 am.

Once the battle for control was won I had the conditions necessary to do the work: All of the family members present! You couldn't very well play a baseball game without the catcher, the third baseman, and the left fielder. Families are the same way. They are together for a reason. Each has value to bring to the lives of the others. It is the family therapist's job to help the family member most capable of mobilizing the family to do it, so the family therapist can then do the job of freeing and helping each of the family members bring value to each others' lives in the ways that their individual strengths permit.

This was an example of a kind of "effective action" I took to help the woman "mobilize her own power" to "mobilize her own family." Her passivity and hopelessness had prevented her from taking "effective action" in her family. Once she had this powerful experience in breaking through her own hopelessness successfully, and then the family therapy itself, there was an imprint made in her brain with indelible ink in a way she would never forget she could do it over and over again, that is, take effective action.

Perhaps the last two essential ingredients in addition to "effec-

tive action" and "freedom of the family members to be themselves" in spite of, or in opposition to "the protection game" are "parental authority" and "personal power." Let us take a look at what may be useful notions for a family therapist to maintain, and to impart to parents so they will feel parental authority.

### PARENTAL AUTHORITY

Parental authority involves a primitive appreciation that I am your father or your mother above all else. I have assumed a job raising you, or inculcating a sense of morality, a sense of human decency, an empathic understanding of you so you will have empathy for others; but above all else, when there is a matter of me as a parent sensing that you are either self-destructing emotionally or behaviorally, I will use anything and everything I can to stop you. It will be against your will! It may be in a totally authoritarian manner! In fact, you may hate me when I do it! It may be years later that you realize I have given you something of value! If I do this job correctly and you develop your own internal limits and boundaries, there is a good chance and a hope we will be friends when you are an adult. In the meantime my job as your parent is first and foremost, and even if it feels that it hurts me more than it hurts you, I, when it is necessary, will take the effective action required to turn you into the kind of person that can move from a "private" in life to a "general" in life, to use a military metaphor. Parents who are not willing to take such a stand, and who do not have the fortitude to take such a position, will cause more problems than they can imagine in and with their children.

The problem is that we now have a society of parents who never knew how to use parental authority and personal power in the correct manner within the family. Many do not know how to take "effective action" to stop their children from self-destructive behavior and self-destructive emotional states. Conversely, they do not know how to take effective action to enhance emotional growth in their children. In terms of learning how to humanely and firmly utilize parental authority and personal power within the family and enhance such among all family members while maintaining correct use of parental authority, perhaps we have "thrown out the baby with the bathwater."

Using parental authority means, that when parents have made

their best judgment call, right, wrong, or indifferent, they are "the boss!" and they are "willing to do what is necessary to make it clear they are the boss!" However, a good boss does not deprive people of personal power that is constructive for their personal growth, otherwise they get rid of him or her as the boss. Thus, the good "Boss" needs to be able to empower family members through "Love."

I want, I don't want, I will, and I won't are important boundary statements for all members of a family to be able to make. Without the development of a solid sense of self in each of the family members, there is no possibility of freedom or the feeling of enjoyment in the family and later in society. There is only a feeling of entrapment and fear of commitment as well as the being and doing of things in response to the symbiotic attachment to parents who have reinforced the grandiose self in the children.

Unless there is a change in the attitude maintained by family therapists to impart through their work to families, we will just raise a society of prisoners in search of freedom. They will be mistaken about what freedom is. They will never enjoy either an internal or an external balance between "concord and liberty." They will be prisoners whether or not they wind up in our ever-increasing penal institutions via primitive rebellion or in "Wall Street straight jackets" being prisoners of another sort.

### THE POLITICS OF THE FAMILY AND OF SOCIETY

The reader of a professional psychotherapy journal may find it strange that I write from a political view of family therapy. Thus, let me share the links with you that evoke me to do this. Dr. Bruno Bettelheim told me two things I shall share here. He said "Freud said the Americans would never understand analysis because they did not understand the purpose of an analysis was to save man's soul." He said, "Wilhelm Reich was Freud's most gifted training analyst." Reich said, "If you can't do politics, you can't do analysis!" Of course, it depends on how far you have grown in yourself and the ways you may want to challenge what is "politically correct" for you to appreciate yourself as a family therapist partially responsible in your treatment for the society that you construct." And if you take your work in the serious vein which Dr. Bettelheim referenced Freud, then there is a lot of the right thing to know how to do, particularly in "saving the souls of the children."

### **THE PROBLEM = THE CHILDREN!**

The children were "born into the skewed reality of their parents." Dr. Carl Whitaker in supervising me described a marriage as "two warring tribes (families), both of which selected scapegoats to go out to reproduce their own families by proving to the other their family's way was the correct one." So you have both the war and the collusion as to what skew of reality is considered safe among the couple.

The parents' insistence on their two world views is how they drive their children crazy, unless their world views and lack of trans-fereential problems make it such that a "protection game of a maritally skewed reality" is not predominant in the perpetuation of madness in the offspring. However, more likely than not, that will be the job of the family therapist.

### **KEYS TO DOING THE WORK: THE LIBERATION OF THE FAMILY THERAPIST**

Dr. Walt Kempler, during training sessions, often said that when he worked he was his obstreperous self, warts and all; that he made no bones about it, and that sense of the way he naturally was gave the family members the necessary friction to bump up against. He contrasted this with family therapists who had a way they thought they should function that may be in contrast to their natural personality characteristics.

Dr. Carl Whitaker did things such as fall asleep during sessions; feed a man sitting on his lap with a baby bottle full of milk while the man chugged that milk down as if it were his last meal; sat on the floor and played with a baby ignoring the rest of the family members as if they weren't there because they weren't.

All one needs to have the courage to do as a family therapist is double-cross this family script of collusion to which all else is intertwined and hope you are skillful enough and well trained enough. It is only in this way that you have a chance to practice family therapy in the spirit in which Freud conceived of the venture of therapeutic work—in saving souls, and in the case of family therapy, more importantly in saving the souls of children who may still have a chance.

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