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## The Secret Life of the Wounded Child

And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love [caritas] I am nothing. (1 Cor 13:2)

For some people the very idea that childhood can be meaningfully associated with joy and so in any meaningful way carefree is unrealistic. A significant number of children have experiences of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, and others are neglected. Some may have experienced a restrictive illness or disability, or been exposed to loss or upsetting situations by the adults or by friends or siblings in their lives. A difficult or damaged childhood will cast a long shadow and can lead to an inability to trust and problems in later relationships. The lack of trust can lead to a sense of reluctance to relinquish any control with others, and so in the context of religious experience it can mean it is hard to accept simplicity and dependence in any relationship with God.

In chapter 2, we discussed Donald Winnicott's idea of the mirror as the precursor of the mother's face. A similar sort of experience can happen in relationship with God. In his "Spiritual Canticle" St. John of the Cross (1542–1591) expresses this insight in the following way:

When you looked at me;  
your eyes imprinted your grace in me;  
for this you loved me ardently;  
and thus my eyes deserved  
To adore what they beheld in you . . .  
and let us go forth to behold ourselves in your beauty.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> John of the Cross, *Collected Works*, 476.

As Richard Rohr expresses it, St. John of the Cross was far ahead of his time in the spiritual and psychological understanding of how love works and how true love changes us at a deep level. The mystic speaks of “divine love as the template and model for all human love, and human love as the necessary school and preparation for any transcendent encounter.” Therefore if one has never experienced human love, Rohr believes it will be very hard for the person to access God as Love. He writes, “If you have never let God love you, you will not know how to love humanly in the deepest way. Of course, grace can overcome both of these limitations.” In this contemporary adaptation and translation of a Canticle by John of the Cross the very process of love at its best is described:

You give a piece of yourself *to* the other.  
You see a piece of yourself *in* the other (usually unconsciously).  
This allows the other to do the same in return.

You do not need or demand anything back from them, because you know you are both participating in a single Bigger Gazing and Loving—one that fully satisfies and creates an immense Inner Aliveness.

(Simply to love is its own reward.)  
*You accept being accepted—for no reason and by no criteria whatsoever!*<sup>2</sup>

For the child who feels unacceptable and has been treated in an unacceptable way it can be hard to believe that they are fundamentally good. The twelfth-century Cistercian Bernard of Clairvaux understood this equally well and wrote about it in his treatise on the four steps of love. He could see that the first step was to love oneself and from there it was possible to move through a series of states of mind with the second about loving God for what he gives us, then to love God for who he is, and in the fourth and final step to love ourselves for God’s sake.<sup>3</sup> In the next chapter psychological and spiritual healing is explored especially for those who feel that they cannot even reach the stage of self-love, in other words they hate themselves and find it hard to believe in their own redemption.

It has to be said, however, that most people have experienced issues of loss and separation, and feelings of anxiety and insecurity during their childhood; for in reality everyone knows about envy, anger, and fear. These are all experiences from early childhood. Such feelings are about being human because a certain amount of lack of care, frustration, pain, and even

2. Rohr, adapted from *Naked Now*, 140–41.

3. Gardner, *Four Steps of Love*.

torment is inevitable in the course of everyone's growing up. These are the wounds that unavoidably encroach on every child's innocence. For all the vision of beauty, paradise eventually becomes obscured and veiled. However for some children these universal experiences can become cumulative, and so be too much to cope with. For some children, especially those exposed to apparently wilful parental indifference or cruelty of sufficient intensity and regularity to be traumatic, the enchanted early childhood world of pure dreams can quickly become a nightmare.

While everyone has damaging experiences during childhood, some wounds are more extreme than others and so may need longer to be understood and partially healed. Over time the human need to love and to connect, and so learning to love and to love others, becomes part of the process of moving beyond the shadow of repressed feelings and the disguise of the person we present to the world into the freedom of the spirit of the child. To move beyond the shadow and the disguise is not possible until both have been recognized and explored. In this process the shadow will become partially integrated and the need for the disguise relaxed. In other words what has been kept in the confines of the cellar is brought up into the living room. The ways to do this through psychotherapy or spiritual direction or indeed through grace are explored in the next chapter.

## A Secret Life

All happy families resemble one another. Each unhappy family is unhappy in its own particular way.<sup>4</sup>

Many of the most damaged children lead a secret life, hiding their true self for protection, and this tendency is carried into adulthood so affecting all relationships. For those who have experienced trauma and trouble as small children the world becomes contaminated by their experiences, which remain in some form throughout adult life. Early childhood can go wrong for a number of reasons: there are unfulfilled longings, terrible frustrations, the ignorance, heartlessness, and cruelty of parents and adults, and experiences of cumulative indifference to sensitivity, beauty, and tenderness. This means that subsequent emotional development for children who have these experiences is profoundly negatively affected, and there may be a tendency to repeat aspects of the injurious past either within themselves or towards others. As has been said, children to whom these sorts of experiences happen often have a reluctance and wariness to trust others. This can make

4. Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, 13.

genuine trust in God difficult to maintain and the capacity to love others limited.

“Soul murder” is one way of describing how the child is left after damaging experiences early in life often feeling sad and perhaps less able to feel natural joy in being alive. It has been defined as the destruction of the love of life and as killing the capacity for joy in another human being. As a character in a play by Ibsen puts it:

You have committed the one mortal sin! . . . You have killed the love of life in me. Do you understand what that means? The Bible speaks of a mysterious sin for which there is no forgiveness. I have never understood what it could be; but now I understand. The great unpardonable sin is to murder the love of life in a human soul. . . . You have killed all the joy of life in me.<sup>5</sup>

One of the other common effects of a traumatic childhood is a sort of brainwashing where the child needs to suppress awareness of what has happened in order to keep alive some ideal of good parenting. In other words to survive the child adopts the parents’ propaganda and version of events, and will carry the guilt and responsibility for what took place. For example, the child might rationalize what has happened in this way: I was hit because *I was bad* and deserved it; I was neglected and rejected because *I am unlovable*, and so on. My parents have separated and divorced and it is *all my fault*. Taking on the guilt and responsibility for the difficult and bad things is also a way of managing and defending against all the mixed feelings including repressed rage about what has happened, and this can contribute to a deeply ingrained but unconscious need for punishment.

In religious life this might lead to an exaggerated feeling of great sin and worthlessness. This is a distorted and false type of humility because it lacks insight into the motives for the depths of such feelings. One example is found in Thomas Merton who writes at the start of the autobiography of his early life, “Free by nature, in the image of God, I was nevertheless the prisoner of my own violence and my own selfishness, in the image of the world into which I was born. That world was the picture of Hell . . .”<sup>6</sup>

Not being sufficiently cared about or recognized as a separate human being can mean being deprived of what we all really need, which is essential nourishment based on feeling accepted and loved by the mothering person. It is hard for a child to maintain any joy or much sense of identity in the face of not feeling cared about, or recognized as a person in their own right,

5. Ibsen, *John Gabriel Borkman*, 331.

6. Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 11.

or even hated by their mother or father. Everything and everybody is then approached with some degree of fear and “such dread that children only can feel” to quote a line from the novel *Jane Eyre*.<sup>7</sup>

One example of a child who knew about this dread was the poet Rudyard Kipling. His experiences have been described as like being an occupant of one of God’s concentration camps. The difficulty he discovered is that such feelings are not forgotten though they can be explained away or pushed to the back of the mind. After six years of parental love in India, Kipling was sent with his three-year-old sister to England and did not see his parents for a further six years. Kipling was disliked and persecuted by Auntie Rosa, the name of the foster carer in an establishment that he named “the house of desolation.” He was regularly beaten, exposed to extreme physical cold and to arbitrary and unreasonable discipline, and repeatedly reminded of his parents’ desertion. How do children explain such treatment? Often the parents cannot be blamed for what happened—often it is important that they stay as good figures. And if God is good then whose fault is it? In psychoanalysis this is known as splitting. Kipling later as an adult was still torn by this dilemma as he angrily defended (so holding on to a belief in the powerful adult figures who had let him down) Britain’s imperialist past.<sup>8</sup> Despite this Kipling’s writing also contains the child’s view of relationships in the natural world, based on his early happy six years in India, and his stories describe a world full of liveliness with connection to all other creatures. The relational consciousness he remembered from his early childhood shines through his tales.

In circumstances involving abuse or neglect often the true self of the child has had to take on a secret life and become hidden. Beyond the normal bruising, the child can become estranged from the center of their being, finding a way of behaving or a compliance that is more acceptable to their circumstances. This then becomes the persona, discussed earlier, which is the polished defense of the disguise where all the feelings of anger, loss, and upset are repressed and become part of the shadow of the person. Such sadness, such wounded aspects of the child, whether distorted ways of feeling and behaving or hidden and repressed, can restrict and damage the adult, and there is often a longing for deep healing and integration. This is a place of critical hurt, a repository of deep damage, meaning that the child grows up partly at war with their basic self. The adult, even in old age, may need to reach back into their infancy to bring this part of their self into conscious awareness and back into the stream of life.

7. Bronte, *Jane Eyre*, 52.

8. Jarrell, “On Preparing,” 146.

R. D. Laing, psychoanalyst and psychiatrist, aimed to make madness intelligible. He revolutionized mental health treatment by his belief that the seriously mentally ill had something important that they were trying to convey, and in the 1960s he set up Kingsley Hall in London as an alternative to the then standard treatment in mental hospitals, allowing patients to explore their madness and so rediscover themselves. His autobiography shows how he also drew on his own experiences from early childhood to understand the experiences of his patients and how therapeutic intervention might help. In particular he drew insights from his complex relationship with his over-possessive controlling mother. He wrote about deception, dissimulation, and compliance, and he thought he had been “deep-programmed . . . against *living*.” In reflecting on his own experience he hoped that in the future children might find someone sympathetic in whom he or she might honestly and openly confide. As he expressed it, “without having to worry that it would be held against one, in some way, if one told the truth quite candidly about how one felt about life.” However Laing reflects on his own decision as an older child to keep out of trouble just for the sake of a quiet life at home. One of the prices he had to pay for this sense of suffocation was frequent bouts of asthma. There were also implications for his life as an adult. For example, he recounts going out for a walk with his father when Laing’s oldest child was just beginning to walk:

She toddled a few steps ahead of us on her own and fell down. I ran forward and picked her up. My father turned to me and said, “You know, your mother would have given you a good spanking for that.”

I do not remember those days myself, but my father’s remark fits with my feeling that if I fall down, in any way, I’ve done something wrong, it’s my fault and I will, or will deserve, to be punished for it. It’s still my fault if I catch the flu; or it is to teach me something: maybe that it’s not my fault.<sup>9</sup>

Laing explored how even the biological basics are deeply socially programmed and so also subject to disturbance.

Sleeping and waking, eating, drinking, digesting, urinating, defecating, and breathing are biological basics. These basics are deeply socially programmed. . . . They are conditioned by injunctions made effective in many more ways than straight commands and prohibitions, rewards and punishments and more subtle quasi-hypnotic procedures. One need not be told to go to bed. One need not be told to be tired. One is told one *is* tired.

9. Laing, *Wisdom*, 46–47.

Later one is tired when one was told one will be, without having to be told anymore.<sup>10</sup>

The psychoanalyst Alice Miller also wrote about how children are trained and treated “for their own good.” She acknowledges how often parents have experienced something similar in their own childhood and writes from her own experience as a child about her parents:

Since they were not allowed to feel or, consequently, understand what had once been done to them, they were unable to recognise the abuse as such and passed it on to me in turn, without even the trace of a bad conscience.

This is known as destructive entitlement—it didn’t do me any harm! Thanks to her own questioning of her childhood, Miller writes that she then grasped what so many adults must ward off throughout their lives. She understood that there were serious implications of failure to confront the truth of repressed feelings and that this affected society. She writes that such people are:

preferring instead to plan self-destruction on a gigantic atomic scale, without even recognising the absurdity of what they are doing. These are the same people who, like all of us, entered the world as innocent infants, with the primary goals of growing, living in peace, and loving—never of destroying life.<sup>11</sup>

## Loss and Loneliness in Thomas Merton’s Childhood

In his early autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain*,<sup>12</sup> Thomas Merton traces his infancy and childhood. It is an account of cumulative losses and constant emotional and geographical upheaval. Some of these are given in extracts and described below. His parents were artists, his mother American and his father from New Zealand of Welsh descendants. Merton remembers his mother as “mostly worried” with “great ambition after perfection.” He notes that the diary his mother kept of his infancy “reflects some astonishment at the stubborn and seemingly spontaneous development of completely unpredictable features in my character.” This is perhaps a wry comment and observation on the need for compliance. Many years later Merton wrote

10. Ibid., 25.

11. Miller, *Drama of Being a Child*, x–xi.

12. Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, extracts from 13, 20, 24–9, 65–66, 78, 91, 103, and 162.

that perhaps solitaries are made by severe mothers. Here could be an initial suggestion of the secret life of the child needing to protect the true self from both impingements and criticism.

A year after Merton's birth the family moved to America as it was no longer safe to be in Europe at a time of war. They stayed near Merton's grandparents, whom he called Pop and Bonnemaman. His grandparents remained a stable part of his life until adulthood. Two years later his brother was born, and so with his brother only a baby and no other children to play with, Merton remembered his own imaginary friend Jack with his imaginary dog Doolittle. Merton records that his mother was eager for him to learn to read and write and he remembered "one night I was sent to bed early for stubbornly spelling 'which' without the first 'h': 'w-i-c-h' I remember brooding about this as an injustice. 'What do they think I am anyway. After all, I was only five years old.'" A year later Merton's mother became seriously ill but Merton was not told.

And since I was destined to grow up with a nice, clear, optimistic and well-balanced outlook on life, I was never even taken to the hospital to see Mother, after she went there. And this was entirely her own idea. . . . Her sickness probably accounts for my memory of her as thin and pale and rather severe.

The two boys went to live with the grandparents. Merton was one day given a letter by his father:

My mother was informing me, by mail, that she was about to die, and would never see me again.

I took the note out under the maple tree in the back yard, and worked over it until I had made it all out, and had gathered what it really meant. And a tremendous weight of sadness and depression settled on me. It was not the grief of a child with pangs of sorrow and many tears. It was something of the heavy perplexity and gloom of adult grief, and was therefore all the more of a burden because it was, to that extent, unnatural.

Merton writes about the day of the actual death. He was six years old and left in a hired car at the hospital while the adults went in:

The car was parked in a yard entirely enclosed by black brick buildings, thick with soot. On one side was a long, low shed, and rain dripped from the eaves, as we sat in silence, and listened to the drops falling on the roof of the car. The sky was heavy with mist and smoke, and the sweet sick smell of hospital and gas-house mingled with the stuffy smell of the automobile.



But when Father and Pop and Bonnemaman and my Uncle Harold came out of the hospital door, I did not need to ask any questions. They were all shattered by sorrow.

Merton in his memory emphasizes the rejection by his mother but at the time visits by children to the hospital were not allowed. On returning home Merton remembered his father weeping by the window and his grandmother weeping upstairs. Some months later he went to the coast with his father who as an artist wanted to paint for the summer. Later they went to Bermuda, while John Paul his brother stayed with the grandparents. This pattern of upheaval and travel with his father set the pattern for the next few years:

It is almost impossible to make much sense out of the continual rearrangement of our lives and our plans from month to month in my childhood. . . . Sometimes Father and I were living together, sometimes I was with strangers and only saw him from time to time. . . . Things were always changing.

Aged ten, Merton and his father returned to France after his father had suffered a strange illness that brought him close to death. They ended up in the South of France where eventually Merton went to a boarding school. Initially bullied and begging to leave, he found he got used to it:

Nevertheless, when I lay awake at night in the huge dark dormitory and listened to the snoring of the little animals all around me, and heard through the darkness and the emptiness of the night the far screaming of the trains, or the mad iron cry of a bugle. . . . I knew for the first time in my life the pangs of desolation and emptiness and abandonment.

Writing in more detail about the school Merton wonders what happens to individuals who seem fine away from the group but:

When they were all together there seemed to be some diabolical spirit of cruelty and viciousness and obscenity and blasphemy and envy and hatred that banded them together against all goodness and against one another in mockery and fierce cruelty and in vociferous, uninhibited filthiness.

In this extract it is possible to see the need for Merton as a child to protect his inner self from the unpredictable attacks from other people, especially from a community group. At least the state of abandonment is safer and more familiar to him. Finally, after two years at the French school, Merton's father decided to move to England and there he came to the school

to tell his son, "How the light sang on the brick walls of the prison whose gates had just burst forth before me." Merton then lived in Ealing, West London, with a distant relative, and attended a preparatory boarding school before at the age of fourteen being sent to Oakham School in Rutland in central England where he remained until his schooling had ended. However before entering Oakham, Merton writes about events that had happened "to complicate and sadden my life still further." Merton's father was ill, and though they went in the summer to Scotland on holiday, once again Merton was left with comparative strangers when his father's health deteriorated, and he had to return to hospital in London. After a particularly distressing incident Merton writes:

I sat there in the dark, unhappy room, unable to think, unable to move, with all the innumerable elements of my isolation crowding in upon me from every side: without a home, without a family, without a country, without a father, apparently without any friends, without any interior peace or confidence or light or understanding of my own—without God, too, without God, without heaven, without grace, without anything. And what was happening to father, there in London? I was unable to think of it.

Merton describes the pain of one visit to his father when his grandparents and brother came to Europe to visit:

But the sorrow of his great helplessness suddenly fell on me like a mountain. I was crushed by it. The tears sprang to my eyes. Nobody said anything more.

I hid my face in the blanket and cried. And poor Father wept, too. The others stood by. It was excruciatingly sad. We were completely helpless. There was nothing anyone could do.

The responsibility for Merton's welfare was taken on by his English godfather and wife who lived in London. While his father's death left him sad and depressed for some months Merton then recalls imagining he was free, and from his account of the six years leading to his conversion we read of his life of drinking and fun, and later of the disaster of his time at Cambridge where it has been suggested that he possibly fathered a child with a chambermaid. This, alongside his lack of academic progress, led to his godfather sending him back to the United States. Merton was left full of self-hatred, thinking that all that had seemed to promise much had left him, "vain, self-centred, dissolute, weak, irresolute, undisciplined, sensual, obscene and proud. I was a mess. Even the sight of my own face in a mirror was enough to disgust me." From an analytic point of view one might here see

the projection of the critical mother as Merton looks at himself, and also the feelings of guilt and responsibility with the associated need for punishment.

So here is a childhood with cumulative trauma and serious loss. There is great upheaval and little stability. Others have attempted, in a somewhat unsatisfactory way, to analyze what took place and to wonder how someone with such experiences, especially of parental abandonment, could move to become such a great spiritual writer and director. The extracts above show that Merton, like all traumatized children, associated himself as the cause of the trauma, “a man with veins full of poison, living in death.” His autobiography, written a few years after entering the monastery contains little compassion or self-awareness for his pain as a child, but speaks with the fervour of the newly converted and as a man saved from further damage in and by the world.

All children develop ways of coping with the demands of the family and the world, and the idea of the development of the persona or false self in the child is central to analytical thinking. Later Thomas Merton wrote extensively about the need for awareness and a stripping away of the false self in developing spiritual maturity. While the persona enables the child to function in the world and present a managing front real feelings are masked. The self that the child and later the adult presents to the world can hide or protect the inner being or true self from further attack or trauma. Merton appreciated that in many ways the persona or disguise is a very transient form for our psyche. This understanding is echoed by the Jungian analyst Fay Pye who writes of the persona: “And in its arrogance it is an impertinence in the face of the cosmos and the Ultimate,” a cheap substitute for the “pearl of great price.”<sup>13</sup>

## How Trauma can Affect the Spiritual Story

Carl Jung understood the supreme importance of acknowledging feelings. He sometimes used the term “affectivity” to describe our emotional states, and as the Jungian Donald Kalsched writes, “The essential basis of our personality is affectivity where thought and action are, as it were, only symptoms of affectivity.”<sup>14</sup> He thought that affect was the central organizing principle of psychic life because it linked all sorts of other aspects of the mind by lending each of them a common feeling-tone. This means that if there is early trauma with strong affect it can become a central complex affecting all sorts of other later experiences. It has been said that severe

13. Pye, “Transformations of the Persona,” in Tuby, *In the Wake*, 45.

14. Kalsched, *Inner World of Trauma*, 88.

trauma always leaves in its wake “a lifelong disturbance of affectivity” which feeds into unconscious fantasy.<sup>15</sup> So, for example, reflecting on the account from Merton’s autobiography, it is possible to see traces of these feeling-tones recurring in later less traumatic times, some of which are noted above, and the way that specific emotions become differentiated, and gradually with the help of language become feelings that can be communicated both to oneself and to others.

There is often a reluctance to really think about childhood difficulties; sometimes people say: “I had a wonderful childhood, I was very happy,” but their expression or the tone adopted suggests something different. Perhaps when people are a bit too insistent about what fun it all was there is resistance to thinking about the shadow side of their experiences. For many the past does not feel relevant to the present; this can either mean that there is a preoccupation—perhaps an unconscious preoccupation with the past, or that it is repressed from conscious awareness. However, whatever the rationalization, early experiences both good and bad tend to emerge in present relationships and in behavior.

Jung appreciated that all these sorts of feelings would also inevitably be linked to primal religious experience, which he saw as a defining aspect of the human and so present in everyone whether acknowledged or not. Looking at this insight in the context of Christianity it is clear that if this is about a relationship with a personal God who loves us and who can only be encountered personally, then all the dynamics, commitments, and risks associated with relating to other people will come to the fore. One possibility is that God can take on the attributes of the all-powerful tormentor who punishes at will. Through such distortion and projection of expectations there emerges a critical, punishing, vengeful God. Then the relationship may become based on compliance, with the false self to the fore, guilt the cornerstone, and self-punishment as primarily the means of control. In such a constructed spiritual narrative, God may become a split-off all-good being leaving the all-bad located in the believer. This level of belief links to an early childhood way of placating and controlling the all-powerful adult which is called “magic thinking,” where if the child was very quiet and good, he or she might escape further trouble or pain. The personal effect of all this is that it is difficult to believe that one can be loved for who one is. While in this process the adult is reduced to nothing—extinguished for the benefit of God—this is a false humility and stripping of the self because the benefit is secretly of and for the traumatized child in the adult and the false self remains intact.

15. *Ibid.*, 89.

For some adults, feelings have become dissociated or detached, and then a relationship with God may follow a habitual but totally non-reflective path. This would be a form of psychic numbing where emotions feel dangerous or overwhelming and God is felt to be far away and needs to be kept in that position at all costs. In this state God is also put in the position of being detached, calm, and demanding, unconnected to emotion and pain.<sup>16</sup>

One of the suggestions in this book is that no matter what has happened either in childhood or as an adult there remains hidden within each person the spirit of the child. There remains the potential “to become.” Another suggestion is that in the relationship with God this spirit of the child is needed, for it brings inherent creativity, spontaneity, and the capacity to live in the moment without self-consciousness. Christ is an exemplar for what is being called in this book the child mind where the spirit of the child meets the adult experience to produce a new perception. We are asked to become like Christ, we are invited to step out of our prison and to become free. Part of leaving captivity is to release the hidden or secret life of the wounded child—there is an invitation to be born again. If the past can be repaired, at least in part, then there is freedom to live in the present.

16. Gardner, *Journeying Home*.