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The Melancholy Self

In my book *Men, Religion, and Melancholia* I focused on four authors—all men—who wrote texts that have been central to the course I teach on the psychology of religion.¹ These men and their texts are William James, author of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*; Rudolf Otto, author of *The Idea of the Holy*; C. G. Jung, who wrote *Answer to Job*; and Erik H. Erikson, who authored *Young Man Luther*.² I use these texts in my course on psychology of religion because viewed together they provide students with a sense of what counts as important work in the psychology of religion, of what its major preoccupations have been, and of how the psychology of religion has been shaped by modern Western religion, reflecting its preoccupations.

I also suggest to students that they read these four books as, in a sense, autobiographical, because the four authors appear to be writing about issues that concern them personally. Unlike most texts—and certainly textbooks—in the psychology of religion, these four seem to have been written with considerable self-investment. Their authors were not simply writing *about* religion but struggling to articulate their own stake in religion, its personal meaning and significance for them. While these books are not overtly autobiographical, I suggest nonetheless that we look for what Erikson calls “the sense of ‘I’” in them,³ to discern the ways each author locates himself in the text. What makes this proposal natural is that I always start the class

1. Capps, *Men, Religion, and Melancholia*.

2. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*; Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*; Jung, *Answer to Job*; Erikson, *Young Man Luther*.

3. Erikson, “The Galilean Sayings and the Sense of ‘I.’”

with James's *Varieties* and point out that James included autobiographical material in his chapter "The Sick Soul" but concealed his identity, so that his original readers may not have known that the account was his own.⁴ This serves to illustrate my point that the authors are *in* their texts, but often surreptitiously or in disguise.

This illustration, however, enables me to make another, related point. James begins his autobiographical account with the claim that "the worst kind of melancholy is that which takes the form of panic fear," and suggests that the case he is about to relate is "an excellent example."⁵ Over the years leading up to the writing of *Men, Religion, and Melancholia*, I had been slowly evolving an argument that I presented in the book alongside the four authors' own arguments regarding religion, one that derived from the view that these texts reflected the personal interests and struggles of their authors. This argument consisted of two interrelated points. The first is that each author was struggling with the relationship between religion and psychopathology, but, more specifically, the psychopathology they knew as *melancholy*. For reasons that I made clear in the course of the book, I indicated my preference for the word *melancholy* over the more contemporary term *depression*. I also suggested that when one discovers the "sense of 'I'" in these texts, one finds that this is a melancholic I, one that is acquainted not only with sadness and a sense of loss but also with feelings of abandonment, despair, rage, fury, and perhaps even hate.

The second interrelated point of my argument was that the melancholy may be traced, ultimately, to the author's relationship with his own mother. The sadness, despair, and rage characteristic of melancholy have an object, and in these four cases this object is the author's mother. This point is more difficult to establish, as none of the authors writes about his relationship to his mother. But this, I suggest to students, is precisely where their own capacities as psychologists of religion come in. It becomes their task to try to understand how religion serves as a stand-in for the mother, or for the son's relationship to his mother, and how, within his mature views on religion, there is a personal prehistory, as it were, that has to do with this relationship. Thus, a book in the psychology of religion needs to be read psychologically, and one way to do this is to read it as a text in which the author is searching in religion for the lost object who is his natural mother as he experienced her in infancy and the earliest years of childhood. An assumption that lies behind this argument is that one would not have become so personally

4. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 149–51.

5. *Ibid.*, 149.

invested in religion had one not experienced as a child the emotional loss of one's intimate relationship with one's mother.

I also argued that for these four authors this emotional loss of their intimate relationship with their mothers when they were small boys had complications that, while not unique, are not necessarily the experience of all children. There were traumas associated with the loss that were perhaps more severe, or more deeply felt, than is usually the case. A commonplace of the developmental literature is talk about the boy's separation from his mother in early childhood, and it is typically noted that the boy's separation may be more decisive or thoroughgoing than the girl's, as he needs to achieve gender differentiation from his mother and to identify with his father instead. Thus, separation is assumed, and it is considered normal, therefore, that all boys will feel a sense of loss. But I believe that this natural separation process was more traumatic for these four boys than is normally the case (for example, Jung's mother was hospitalized for several months when he was three years old), and that the trauma of separation disposed these four boys to melancholia, on the one hand, and toward a certain receptivity to religion, on the other.

In *Men, Religion, and Melancholia*, I suggested that the boy experiences in fact two losses in this regard. One is that the boy experiences a loss of his mother: even though she is still present, and the two of them continue to relate to each other, he has in a sense lost the mother he had previously experienced, the mother who held him close and made no effort to help him achieve the separation. The other loss concerns himself as the boy who has lived in the aura of his mother's unmitigated love and has experienced himself as her beloved son. In the process of separation, this self-image proves untenable and altogether too simplistic. The boy finds it necessary to separate from the original boy so as to become a different boy, a boy who will not take his mother's unmitigated love for granted. The new boy feels—and rightly so—that his mother's love now needs to be earned, that her love is no longer an unconditional love. If the separation is fraught with unusual anxiety, the loss both of his original mother and of his original self will create a disposition toward melancholia.

I believe that Erik Erikson is correct when he observes that young adulthood allows for a return to one's origins, and especially for a revisiting of the separation process, in search of grounds for trust and reassurance. At this time, the fact of the young man's disposition to melancholia may become evident to himself, whether or not he uses the actual word *melancholia*. He discovers within himself an unexplainable sadness, exacerbated, but not fully accounted for, by broken relationships, difficulties in finding what he wants to do with his life, and so on. He also discovers within himself

a silent anger, even rage, he did not know was there, and he has great difficulty understanding its source, because the frustrations he encounters in his struggle to come into his own do not seem to warrant such depth of feeling, such negative affect. However, the way he now relates to his mother, if she is still living, is a clue to its source, as he has feelings toward her that are disproportionate to her actual provocations. Such feelings are rooted, I suggest, in the early separation process, when he lost her unconditional love, and experienced the unbridgeable gulf that separated him from the child he was before the separation.

The argument that I am making here raises an issue that needs to be addressed with the utmost sensitivity. At the time I was writing *Men, Religion, and Melancholia*, various authors were cautioning us against the tendency of an earlier generation of psychologists to blame mothers for whatever may have gone wrong in a child's formation. While her role in such formation is certainly formidable, the tendency to blame mothers for "poor outcomes" (however defined) was being challenged—and appropriately so, for we know so little about what makes a child turn out well or badly. This explicit or implicit attack on mothers was being recognized for what it was: a social and cultural prejudice against women and against the social involvements and responsibilities typically associated with women. Also, as all four of the male authors discussed in the book had succeeded in life, the issue of where to place the blame was, in a sense, beside the point.

Yet, the issue of blame could not be so easily dismissed, because it had importance *within* the mother-son relationship itself. Whether mothers are to blame for how their boys turn out was, in my view, a nonissue, a fallacy I did not wish to perpetuate. But the issue of blame was a very important one in terms of the relationship between *this* mother and *this* son, as there *is* explicit or implicit blame in the very ways these four authors wrote about their mothers or in the ways they related to their mothers in later years. Moreover, the issue of who is to blame is at the very core of the melancholic condition, for, as Freud makes clear in his famous essay "Mourning and Melancholia," the core issue in melancholia is that the sufferer has a "plaint" against another, that is, the lost object.⁶ Rightly or wrongly, legitimately or not, the sufferer blames his mother for his plight or, if he finds it too threatening to cast blame on her, he internalizes the blame in the form of *self-reproach*.

Melancholia, then, is a condition in which the sons cannot bring themselves to blame directly the one against whom they have a grievance but instead internalize the object of blame and punish that aspect of the self with which the object is now identified. In a sense, this is a very reasonable

6. Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 169.

thing to do. In *Young Man Luther*, Erik Erikson discusses William James's portrayal of melancholy in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Here Erikson notes that the growing child feels guilty over the fact that he employs his gradually maturing organs and his muscular growth in the service of his autonomous strivings.⁷ Thus, if his mother is devoting herself to the project of helping her boy become independent in order that her son will identify with persons of his own gender, the boy is also initiating his own bid for autonomy. Attributing the loss of his original relationship with his mother to his own actions instead of his mother's enables him to repress his feelings of having been ill treated by the mother he thought he knew and whose unconditional love he enjoyed prior to the separation.

FREUD'S "MOURNING AND MELANCHOLIA"

In *Men, Religion, and Melancholia*, I devoted several pages to a discussion of Freud's essay "Mourning and Melancholia." A reprisal of this discussion is necessary here because it provides the basis for the argument of this book: that melancholia is the condition out of which the resourceful self emerges. In "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud explores the similarities and differences between the normal grieving process ("mourning") and the psychopathology known to the psychiatric community of his day as "melancholia." He warns that this exploration may not bear much fruit, in part because the psychiatric definition of *melancholia* is so uncertain. Yet he believes that a correlation between mourning and melancholia is justified because they have the same cause: Both are reactions to the loss of someone or something that was deeply loved. We assume that mourning will end and that the loss will be overcome in the normal course of time, whereas melancholia is a pathological condition that may require medical treatment. How to account for these very different outcomes?

In Freud's view, the distinguishing features of melancholia are a profoundly painful dejection, diminished interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of one's self-regarding feelings to such a degree that one engages in self-reproach and self-reviling, often culminating in a delusional expectation of punishment. Many of these characteristics also occur in mourning. But in the mourning process, there is little if any of the self-reproach invariably present in melancholia. Nor is there the anticipation of impending punishment. In mourning, the loss is deeply painful, yet it is experienced not as punishment but as integral to life itself.

7. Erikson, *Young Man Luther*, 120–22.

Why this loss of self-esteem in melancholia? Why this self-abasement? Why this “delusional belittling” of self? Why this expectation of punishment and chastisement? That some of this self-criticism is justified cannot be doubted. After all, the patient is as lacking in interest and as incapable of love and of any achievement as he says he is. Moreover, in his self-criticisms, he has a keener eye for truth than do those who are not given to melancholia; for others cling to views of themselves and human nature that are much too positive and sanguine. The issue, however, is not whether the melancholy person’s distressing self-abasement is justified in the opinion of others but whether he is in fact correctly describing not only his experience of himself but also the underlying reasons for it. If he has lost his self-respect, which seems to be the case, is there some good reason for this, as he seems to believe there is? This, and not others’ objective assessment of him, is the issue, and the more he protests that he has lost his self-respect for good and unassailable reasons, the emptier these self-assessments seem to be.

Given his loss of self-esteem, it might seem as though melancholia is the very antithesis of grief: for grief involves the loss of an object in the external world, whereas melancholia involves the loss of self. But, says Freud, this difference is only apparent, and further probing reveals why. Like the griever, the melancholy person has experienced the painful loss of a loved object. But while the griever mourns the loss of the loved object who has been taken from him, the melancholy person experiences the loss of the object with considerable ambivalence, as he feels that the loss he is now having to endure is the object’s own fault; he feels that the object has abandoned him. This, however, is not a feeling that he can openly acknowledge, because the feeling of abandonment is more painful than the feeling, in grief, of bereavement, where the loved one has been taken away against her will. So, the reproachful feelings he has toward the lost object are turned against himself. The lost object is not relinquished and released, as in grief, but is internalized, becoming an aspect of the ego, so that the ego itself becomes the focus of reproach, the focus of delusions of future punishment.

Freud suggests that this is how conscience comes to be created. Reproaches against the external object are redirected against the self. Thus, in the clinical picture of melancholia, dissatisfaction with the self on moral grounds is by far its most outstanding feature, and the self-criticism much less frequently involves bodily infirmity, physical appearance, or feelings of social inferiority. By viewing the self-reproaches of melancholy persons as the reproach of the lost object turned against the self, Freud suggests that another puzzling feature of melancholia becomes more understandable. This feature centers on the fact that the melancholy person exhibits little if any signs of shame before others. We would assume that anyone who

genuinely feels himself to be worthless would shrink from the gaze of others. But this is not the case with melancholy persons. On the contrary, they perpetually take offense and behave as if they have been treated with great injustice. These reactions and behaviors are indicative of the fact that the melancholy person's underlying attitude is one of revolt expressed through vengeful feelings toward the lost object. His revenge, Freud suggests, is the pathology itself. His illness is the means by which he torments the one who has forsaken him. Such tormenting of the other is possible because, unlike a person being mourned (who is dead), the person who occasioned the injury to the melancholy person's feelings—the person against whom his illness is aimed—is usually nearby, in the neighborhood, so to speak, and, most likely, a family member. Thus, the melancholy person's relationship to the lost object has a twofold fate: the internalization of the object, which then takes the form of self-reproach, and the punishment inflicted on the actual object by means of the pathology itself.

As a therapist, Freud takes great interest in the question of whether or not melancholia is curable. He notes that melancholia is more complicated than mourning because the lost object evokes such highly ambivalent feelings. Therefore, the melancholy person experiences many single conflicts in which love and hate wrestle together. Also, unlike in mourning, where the object is finally relinquished, in melancholia the release of the object is greatly complicated because the object has become so self-identified, which means that the melancholy person is unconscious of the causes of his pathology. On the other hand, just as the work of grief enables the ego to give up the object in time, so in melancholia each single conflict in which ambivalent feelings wrestle together loosens the fixation to the object. Thus, it is possible for the process in the unconscious to come to an end, either because the fury has spent itself, or because the object is abandoned as no longer having value. Which of these two possibilities is the more typical one in bringing the melancholia to an end is impossible to determine. What seems indisputable, however, is that the melancholia ends as the sufferer experiences the sense that he is superior to the object, thus indicating that reproach of the other was in some sense justified.

It is important to keep in mind that the object in the case of melancholia is the internalized other, who bears only a partial resemblance to the other in real life. The struggle is an internalized one, in which the ego (or *I*) wrestles ambivalently, experiencing both love and hate, with the internalized other. That the struggle is internal helps to explain why the melancholy person typically experiences symptoms both of mania and of depletion. The mania is usually associated with the sense of triumph over the internalized other while the depletion is the sense that the ego is weak and unable to hold

its own against the superior power of the internalized other. When the ego feels strong, it has the ability to “slay” the object, bringing the melancholia itself to an end. Therapeutically speaking, the goal is to strengthen the ego so that it may defeat the internalized object, thus achieving, in an admittedly violent manner, what grief accomplishes without the need for violence.

Although Freud does not identify the lost object as the mother, the very intensity of the melancholic reaction suggests that she, the boy’s first love object, is the object who has been lost. This would explain, for example, why one important feature of melancholia is its role in the formation of a conscience and in the fear of punishment for wrongdoing. The melancholia has roots in the boy’s belief that he has done something to warrant the loss of his mother’s unconditional love: that if he makes certain reparations and promises to amend his ways, he might then win her back. Because, for reasons of gender differentiation, the son’s separation from his mother is more decisive than the daughter’s, he is also more likely to form a false conscience, one more delusional as to his own personal culpability for the initial separation and the failure to restore the original relationship.

If the mother is the original lost object, all subsequent experiences of loss for reasons other than death (where grieving is possible) will be reminiscent of the loss of the boy’s original relationship with his mother and will evoke similar feelings of shame and rage, guilt, and remorse. These subsequent losses may involve other persons (for example, women with whom he falls in love) or desires symbolically linked to his mother (for example, the desire to pursue a career in art, music, or caregiving). To assert that the lost object is the mother—that is, the mother who had nothing but love for her son—is therefore consistent with Freud’s analysis of melancholia. Melancholia is a reaction to the palpable fact that this object has been taken away, replaced by a mother whose love is perceived *not* to be unconditional but dependent on the son’s capacity and willingness to be a certain kind of boy, one whom only she is in the position to declare acceptable to her. To regain the lost object, he will do whatever is in his power to make himself acceptable in her eyes. He promises to be good, and tries valiantly to keep this solemn promise.

While all this is going on at the conscious or preconscious level, something else entirely is occurring unconsciously, outside his conscious awareness. The lost object—the mother who has nothing but love for her son—is internalized, and this object now becomes the focus of his ambivalent feelings of love and hate. He loves the perfect mother, the mother of his fondest and most beautiful visions, but he also detests her, because she has betrayed and forsaken him, and in so doing, has caused the demise of his image of himself as inherently good and admirable. His struggle with her

may continue indefinitely, even long after the mother of real flesh and blood is dead and mourned.

Given the role that conscience and fear of future punishment play in melancholia, the paradigmatic experience that triggers this plunge into melancholia is the mother's punishment of her son for misbehavior. But although this punishment scenario may be paradigmatic, other experiences may serve as catalysts for the shattering of the perfect image of his mother. In fact, where melancholy seems especially pronounced or intractable, we should look for other experiential causes besides the punishment scenario, or some combination of punishment and other factors, such as his mother's prolonged physical absence, her preferential treatment of a sibling, or a situation where she appears to her son to place her own self-interests ahead of his, as when she accedes to his father's beating him lest she be beaten herself.

ERIKSON'S REFLECTIONS ON MELANCHOLIA

Unlike Freud, Erikson did not write an article on melancholia. But, as I noted above, he devoted a few pages of *Young Man Luther* to the topic. His study of Martin Luther focuses especially on Luther's relationship to his father. But he also considers Luther's relationship to his mother and relates melancholia to the mother-child relationship. Erikson acknowledges that relatively little is known about Luther's mother. What *is* known, however, indicates that in contrast to his father, who "seems to have been standoffish and suspicious toward the universe," his mother "was more interested in the imaginative aspects of superstition."⁸ This fact leads Erikson to surmise that Luther may have received from his mother "a more pleasurable and more sensual attitude toward nature, and a more simply integrated kind of mysticism, such as he later found described by certain mystics." Erikson also notes that historians have guessed that she "suffered under the father's personality, and gradually became embittered," and that "a certain sad isolation which characterized young Luther was to be found also in his mother, who is said to have sung to him a ditty: 'For me and you nobody cares. That is our common fault.'"⁹

Aware of the paucity of information about Luther's mother, Erikson acknowledges that "a big gap exists here, which only conjecture could fill," but

Instead of conjecturing half-heartedly, I will state, as a clinician's judgment, that nobody could speak and sing as Luther did if his

8. Erikson, *Young Man Luther*, 72.

9. *Ibid.*, 72.

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mother's voice did not sing to him of some heaven; that nobody could be as torn between his masculine and his feminine sides, nor have such a range of both, who did not at one time feel that he was like his mother; but also, that nobody would discuss women and marriage in the way he often did who had not been deeply disappointed by his mother.¹⁰

He cites in this connection Luther's comment that when he was a boy his mother whipped him "for stealing a nut until the blood came," then added that such "strict discipline drove me to a monastery although she meant it well."¹¹ Erikson wonders if she was acting on his father's behalf or acting on her own initiative. As for Luther's related comment that he entered the monastery against the will of his father, his mother, God and the devil, did she object to his decision on her own or in deference to one or more of the other objectors? It is impossible to know, but what is clear, in Erikson's view, is that something went awry in Luther's relations with his mother, and this happened at an early age.

Erikson suggests that Luther later found in the Bible, especially the Psalms, a resource to compensate for this loss of intimacy with his mother. He suggests that "in the Bible Luther at last found a mother whom he could acknowledge: he could attribute to the Bible a generosity to which he could open himself, and which he could pass on to others, at last a mother's son."¹² Erikson also notes in the epilogue that religions help to awaken "dim nostalgias," and that one of these is

the simple and fervent wish for a hallucinatory sense of unity with a maternal matrix, and a supply of benevolently powerful substances; it is symbolized by the affirmative face of charity, graciously inclined, reassuring the faithful of the unconditional acceptance of those who will return to the bosom.¹³

Suggesting that the maternal estrangement evoking this wish for unity occurred in the second stage of life—that of "autonomy vs. shame and doubt,"¹⁴ Erikson adds that in this symbol of the affirmative face of charity "the split of autonomy is forever repaired: shame is healed by unconditional approval, doubt by the eternal presence of generous provision."¹⁵ Clearly, in his view,

10. Ibid., 72–73.

11. Ibid., 64.

12. Ibid., 208.

13. Ibid., 263–64.

14. Erikson, *Childhood and Society*, rev. ed., 251–54.

15. Erikson, *Young Man Luther*, 264.

something went wrong for Luther in the second stage of life, the stage corresponding to the child's second and third year.¹⁶

How did this estrangement between mother and child occur? What precipitated it? Erikson poses this very question about halfway through *Young Man Luther*, in his chapter titled "Allness or Nothingness." Here he asks: "But what destroyed our infantile past, and what destroys in the depth of our adult present, the original unity which provides the imagery of our supreme hopes?" The answer, according to "all religions and most philosophers," is the human will—"the mere will to live, thoughtless and cruel self-will."¹⁷ In support of this view, he quotes two full paragraphs on melancholia from William James's chapter on the sick soul in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.¹⁸ I will not quote these paragraphs here but simply note Erikson's observation that the mood they evoke is that of "severe melancholy"; Erikson adds that James "is clinically and genetically correct, when he connects the horror of the *devouring will to live* with the content and disposition of melancholia," for, in melancholia, "it is the human being's horror of his own avaricious and sadistic morality which he tires of, withdraws from, wishes often to end even by putting an end to himself."¹⁹

Then, Erikson relates this devouring will to live to the developmental stages of life. He points out that the devouring will for life does not surface in "the orality of the first, the toothless and dependent stage," but in "the tooth-stage and all that develops within it, especially the pre-stages of what later becomes 'biting' human conscience."²⁰ In effect, this is the second stage of the life cycle, of autonomy vs. shame and doubt. Continuing his reflections on the tooth stage, Erikson suggests that, on the face of it, there would seem to be "no intrinsic reason for man's feeling more guilty or more evil because he employs, enjoys, and learns to adapt his gradually maturing organs, were it not for the basic division of good and bad which, in some dark way, establishes itself very early."²¹

Thus, even as the image of a paradise of perfect innocence is part of the past of the human species, so too is this sense of the division of good and evil a part of the past of each and every individual. In fact, the individual's loss of this paradise of innocence is analogous to the loss of paradise for the species. In the case of the species, "paradise was lost when man, not satisfied

16. Erikson, *Identity and the Life Cycle*, rev. ed., 67–77.

17. Erikson, *Young Man Luther*, 120.

18. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 163–65.

19. Erikson, *Young Man Luther*, 121.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

with an arrangement in which he could pluck from the trees all he needed for upkeep, wanted more, wanted to have and to know the forbidden—and bit into it,” and thus “came to know good and evil.” After that, he was condemned to work by the sweat of his brow, but “he also began to invent tools in order to wrest from nature what it would not just give.” In other words, “he became autonomous at the price of shame and gained independent initiative at the price of guilt.”²² Note, here, that Erikson introduces the psychodynamic conflict of the third stage of the life cycle (initiative vs. guilt).

However, because the nurturing mother is the initial victim of the growing child’s ability and urgent need to bite, the greatest price one pays for this expression of autonomy is the loss of the original unity with the nurturing mother—the person whom the child had earlier experienced as “the affirmative face of charity, graciously inclined,” the person who represented to the child the very reassurance of “unconditional acceptance.”²³ Now, the child knows that there are strings attached to that acceptance, and in addition to the emergence of gradually maturing organs one experiences the emergence of a conscience—an accusatory voice—deep inside oneself.

Perhaps it is not surprising therefore that Luther recalls having been whipped by his mother for stealing a single nut. To be sure, he wanted what was forbidden—the word *stole* suggests as much—but he feels that the punishment by a severe whipping resulting in bleeding was excessive. He does not deny that he did wrong. At the same time, he questions the adults’ moral code, and, no doubt, begins to notice their own violations of this moral code and the fact that many such violations go unpunished.

Consistent with his suggestion in *Young Man Luther* that it is “the *de-vouring* will to live” that destroys the original unity with the nurturing mother of one’s infantile past, Erikson later, in *Insight and Responsibility*, identified *will* as the human strength that develops in the second stage of the life cycle. He defines *will* as “the unbroken determination to exercise free choice as well as self-restraint, in spite of the unavoidable experiences of shame and doubt in infancy,” and suggests that the challenge the *will* poses for parents is how to help the child acquire “a measure of self-control” while learning “to control willfulness, to offer willingness, and to exchange good will.”²⁴ But, he adds, no matter how successful the parents may be in this regard,

In the end the self-image of the child will prove to have been split in the way in which man is apt to remain split for the rest of his life. For even as the ideal (“pre-ambivalent,” as we say) image

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*, 264.

24. Erikson, *Insight and Responsibility*, 119.

of the loving mother brought with it the child's self-image as reflecting that mother's true recognition of the child as hers and as good, so does the ambivalently loved image of the controlling parent correspond to an ambivalently loved self, or rather selves. From here on, the able and the impotent, the loving and the angry, the unified and the self-contradictory selves will be a part of man's equipment: truly a psychic fall from grace.²⁵

Thus, with the emergence of the *will* in early childhood, the threat of maternal estrangement becomes a reality. But so does the sense of *self*-estrangement, of being at odds with—or within—oneself.

ERIKSON'S "SENSE OF 'I'"

To this point, I have painted a rather dark if not hopeless picture of the human condition as reflected in the writings of Freud and Erikson on melancholia. Now, however, I want to draw on a very important point that Erikson makes in *Identity, Youth, and Crisis* in the section headed "I, My Self, and My Ego"²⁶ in his chapter titled "Theoretical Interlude." He is concerned here with the "sense of 'I'" to which I alluded earlier. He notes that the very idea of the *I* and what it means or entails has been discussed at length by philosophers and psychologists, and that these discussions reveal how obscure this subject can be. He also notes that persons who work with autistic children know how desperately these children struggle to grasp the meaning of saying "I," because "language presupposes the experience of a coherent 'I.'"²⁷ He also notes that persons who work, as he does, with deeply disturbed young people are often confronted with the awful awareness that the patient is unable to *feel* the *I* that is cognitively present but evokes little if any emotional reaction or response. Freud's description of the symptoms of the melancholic patient in "Mourning and Melancholia" reflects this very inability to feel that one is, in fact, an *I*.

However, Erikson goes on to note that if one is able to reflect on one's sense of *I*, one cannot escape the impression that one consists, as it were, of various selves that make up one's composite Self. Some are more associated with one's sense of having a body or being embodied. Others are more related to one's sense of having a personality that in turn has identifiable characteristics or traits. Still others derive from the fact that one has ascribed or self-chosen social roles. He adds that there are constant and often shock-like

25. Ibid., 119–20.

26. Erikson, *Identity, Youth, and Crisis*, 216–21.

27. Ibid., 217.

transitions between these selves, and notes the difference between the nude and the clothed body, between the excited and the enraged person, and between the patient in the dentist's chair and the rider on horseback.

An especially significant contrast in light of our concern here with melancholia is a contrast Erikson also draws between what he calls "the impotent self" and "the competent self." If we consider the symptoms of the melancholic patient that Freud describes—dejection, diminished interest in the world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, loss of self-esteem, expectation of punishment—we cannot avoid the conclusion that the melancholic patient is an impotent self. One also senses that the melancholic patient provokes a sense of impotence in the therapist, as his situation seems so utterly hopeless. On the other hand, as we have also seen, one of the reasons—perhaps the major one—for why the boy has become susceptible to or the victim of melancholy is that he has begun to exercise his maturing organs and muscular development toward the realization of greater autonomy from parental influence and control. And these autonomous strivings, as Erikson notes, are responsible in part for the very fact that he feels—and is made to feel—guilty. In other words, there is a profound connection between his melancholia on the one hand and his autonomous strivings on the other.

Erikson concludes his paragraph on the various selves that make up our composite self with the observation that it takes "a healthy personality for the 'I' to be able to speak out of all these conditions in such a way that at any given moment it can testify to a reasonably coherent Self."²⁸ Thus, he does not suggest that the healthy personality is composed only of selves that we would consider positive, strong, effective, and so forth. Rather, the healthy personality is simply one that can testify to "a reasonably coherent Self." Therefore, in terms of his own distinction between the impotent and the competent self, we would not expect that the impotent self would need to be entirely eradicated in order for a person to be able to testify to a reasonably coherent Self. On the other hand, we *would* expect that the impotent self would not be so predominant that the competent self is largely dysfunctional—as is clearly the case with Freud's melancholic patients. We may even consider the very real possibility that the impotent self might play a positive role in the development of the competent self, especially if the experience of impotence is so painful or distressing that one finds within oneself the resolve or will to empower the competent self.

I suggest that the melancholic situation in which the young boy finds himself may be the catalyst toward the development of a *resourceful self*.

28. *Ibid.*, 217.

The four authors discussed in *Men, Religion, and Melancholia* proved to be unusually resourceful in their adult lives, and this resourcefulness was due, to a significant degree, to the fact that they experienced unusual difficulties in their emotional separation from their mothers. These very difficulties could have left them feeling paralyzed and unable to cope with the challenges of life, but, in fact, this was not the case. To be sure, they experienced the resurgence of their melancholia in their young-adult years, but this very resurgence reawakened their resourceful selves, with the result that they were able to deal creatively and effectively with the inevitable problems, difficulties, and challenges of life.

This book, then, is about the resourceful self, which is, as it were, the mirror image of the melancholy self. I use the term *resourceful self* rather than *competent self* because the word *resourceful* has a double meaning, one that, in effect, picks up on Erikson's observation that autistic children who struggle to grasp the meaning of *I* also struggle to grasp the meaning of *you*, and that deeply disturbed young people who are incapable of feeling the *I* have similar difficulties in feeling the *you*, both of which are cognitively present but not emotionally so.

The term *resourceful self* emphasizes, in a way that the term *competent self* does not, that the resources available to the self are personal qualities—capacities and strengths on which one may draw; but they are also persons and other sources of assistance to whom one may turn. An indication that one is truly resourceful is that one does not rely only on one's own personal or inner resources but also reaches out to others for help. The resourceful self is reflected in the life of personal fulfillment, in the realization of one's potentialities and aspirations.

The chapters in this book focus on cases—mostly of males but not exclusively so—that Erikson presents in his writings over the span of some fifty years. They illustrate the fact that he was especially aware of the effects of the emotional separation from one's mother in early childhood on one's subsequent life, and they also illustrate the role of one's inner and outer resources, and their interactions, in the development of a capacity to counter these effects and to develop a healthy personality, one that is reflected in a reasonably coherent Self.

ERIKSON'S PERSONAL STRUGGLE WITH MELANCHOLIA

I have suggested that in the cases of the four men considered in my *Men, Religion, and Melancholia* there were circumstances that exacerbated the

normal effects of the emotional separation between the mother and her young three-to-five-year-old son. A brief account of these circumstances in Erikson's own case will enable us to see that he had a personal investment in the issues we have been discussing here, that he would have had a natural proclivity toward melancholia himself, but that for this very reason he was sensitive to its presence not only in young children but also in young adults, because his own melancholia resurfaced for an extended period in his late teens and early twenties. This account will also indicate that he was a resourceful person, both in the sense that he had personal capacities, many of which were the direct result of his melancholia, and in the sense that he was the beneficiary of resources from others at the very time that he was greatly in need of them. Because he was resourceful, he was especially attuned to the resourcefulness of others, especially to the children and adolescents who were the primary focus of his work as a psychoanalytically oriented psychotherapist.

Erikson was born near Frankfurt, Germany, on June 15, 1902. His mother, Karla Abrahamsen, a Danish Jew, had traveled from Copenhagen to Germany several months earlier, after she discovered that she was pregnant. Her marriage at age twenty-one in 1898 to a twenty-seven-year-old Danish Jewish stockbroker, Valdemar Salomonsen, had ended on their honeymoon, apparently because he had disclosed to her that he was involved in some financial irregularities that required him to flee to either Mexico or the United States. His name was listed on Erikson's birth certificate as the father, but he could not have been Erik's biological father because his mother had had no direct contact with her estranged husband for several years.

Throughout his life, Erikson was convinced that his biological father was not Jewish. His own physical characteristics supported this belief. But the identity of his biological father remained a mystery. His mother never took him into her confidence on the matter, and conceivably she herself did not know his father's identity. There were persistent family rumors that his biological father was named Erik, and that he was artistic, either a painter or a photographer. Through painstaking research into family records, documents, and memories, Erikson's biographer Lawrence J. Friedman narrowed the field to two candidates, both named Erik and both involved in artistic endeavors. He presented the material to Erikson in June 1993, a year prior to Erikson's death in May 1994, in hopes that Erikson could settle the question with the aid of these new research findings. But Erikson merely glanced at the material, taking little interest in it. However, he did take note of a photograph of his young mother, and as a smile crossed his face, he remarked, "What a beauty!" At that moment Friedman realized that

Erikson's own "lifelong quest to discover the identity of his father would remain unfulfilled."²⁹

Four months after Erik's birth, his mother learned that her husband had died and that she, now a widow, would be free to marry. She settled in Karlsruhe, Germany, and she and her son lived alone. Her friends were artists working in the folk style of Hans Thoma of the Black Forest. In his autobiographical essay, Erikson notes that he received his "first male imprinting" from these artists.³⁰ When Erik was three years old, his mother married the local pediatrician to whom she had taken her son for medical examinations and treatments. His name was Theodor Homburger, and when he formally adopted her son as his stepson, Erik became Erik Homburger. When Erik became a naturalized United States citizen in 1939, he took the name Erik H. Erikson, the middle initial standing for his former surname.

In his autobiographical essay, Erikson notes that his mother, at her new husband's insistence, told him that Dr. Homburger was his real father. She did so, he believes, "so that I would feel thoroughly at home in their home." As he and his mother had moved into his stepfather's home together, the phrase "their home" seems to suggest that young Erik felt like an outsider and that the fact that he and his mother had lived together for three years made little difference in this regard. In any event, Erikson says that he "played in" with the idea that his mother's new husband was his biological father and "more or less forgot" the period before the age of three when he and his mother lived alone.³¹

On the other hand, he notes that it was incumbent on him, as a young boy, "to come to terms with that intruder, the bearded doctor, with his healing love and mysterious instruments," and that knowing that he himself was "different" from his stepfather, he took refuge "in fantasies of how I, the son of much better parents, had been altogether a foundling." Since he and his mother had moved into Dr. Homburger's home, Erikson's use of the word "intruder" is revealing. In this case the word's use could only mean that Dr. Homburger disrupted the relationship that Erik had with his mother. Later, he notes, he "enjoyed going back and forth between the painters' studios and our house, the first floor of which, in the afternoons, was filled with tense and trusting mothers and children."³² He is referring here to the fact that his pediatrician stepfather's office was on the first floor of the house where he

29. Friedman, *Identity's Architect*, 19.

30. Erikson, "Identity Crisis' in Autobiographic Perspective," 27.

31. *Ibid.*

32. *Ibid.*

and his mother were now living. In contrast, the painters' studios offered a calm and quiet atmosphere where he could truly be at home.

As Erikson grew older, he “became intensely alienated from everything my bourgeois family stood for” and “*set out to be different.*”³³ His reference to his bourgeois family suggests that his mother had adopted the lifestyle of the wife of a respected physician and a leader in the local synagogue. Erikson also observes that “identity problems sharpen with that turn in puberty when images of future roles become inescapable,” and indicates that in his case he was confronted with the discord between his stepfather's expectation that Erikson would become a doctor like himself and his own desire to become an artist. But what also contributed to his sense of alienation from his family was the fact that his mother never revealed the truth concerning the identity of his biological father. Friedman points out that when, years later, Erikson recalled his unsuccessful search for his father,

He sometimes charged that “MOTHER DECEIVED” him. This was an obvious reference to her failure to nurture and sustain him with a sense of himself and his past. At times, he underscored “how many discordant signals she must have given me as to my origins!”³⁴

Friedman also notes that when his mother died in Haifa, Israel, in 1980, Erikson “had never found a way to open up to Karla concerning his sense of disability because he had not come to grips with his paternity”; nor had he “broached with Karla his memories of how she had seemed to shunt him aside when she met his stepfather.”³⁵

Clearly, the emotional separation that typically occurs between a three-year-old boy and his mother was exacerbated by the fact that Erikson's mother remarried, that she misrepresented her new husband as his biological father, and that she thought that this deception would work despite the fact that he was “blond and blue-eyed, and grew flagrantly tall.” He adds, “Before long, then, I was referred to as ‘goy’ in my stepfather's temple; while to my schoolmates I was a ‘Jew.’”³⁶

Later, when Erikson graduated from *gymnasium* at the age of eighteen, he briefly attended a local art school but then took to wandering. The traditional year of wandering after graduation was extended for several years, during which he viewed himself as an aspiring artist. He enjoyed

33. Ibid., 28 (*italics original*).

34. Ibid., 39.

35. Friedman, *Identity's Architect*, 299.

36. Erikson, “‘Identity Crisis’ in Autobiographic Perspective,” 27.

making woodcut prints (pictorial sketches drawn and engraved on wood), and through this medium, he was connecting emotionally with the artists he had known as a small boy, as they worked in the folk style popular in the region at the time. He spent a little less than two years in Munich to study artistic technique at the famous Kunst-Akademie, but then left for Italy. In Italy, he felt that his woodcuts of large fields with rocks, hills and other objects resembled at least thematically Vincent van Gogh's scenes of nature. But he also knew that daring use of paint and color had been central to van Gogh's work, and he bemoaned the fact that he had great difficulty in developing a facility for the use of color and paint, adding that this "was where the inhibition was."³⁷

Thus, by the time Erikson eventually settled in Florence, he had already forsaken a career as an artist. As he notes in his autobiographical essay, this was a time of severe "identity confusion" whose "pathological" features he chooses not to describe; rather he says that they "assumed at times what some of us today would call a 'borderline' character—that is, the borderline between neurosis and adolescent psychosis."³⁸ He carried a sketchbook around with him, but instead of drawings and sketches, it mostly contained jottings that were abstract, philosophic, and random, with no perceptible thematic unity. He wrote a four-line poem in which he celebrated the balanced life—"Content dies, balanced form lives on / Body dies, beauty lives on / Actuality dies, truth lives on / The person dies, the I lives on"—and in his related jottings he noted that one of the most important balances was that between the masculine and feminine qualities of the self, a balance that he recognized in Goethe's writings and Leonardo da Vinci's art.³⁹ Here in this poem we can discern intimations of his later formulation of the life-cycle schema with its various polarities.

Erikson's inaction and despondency continued after he returned home to Karlsruhe in 1925 at the age of twenty-three. A photograph taken that year of Erik sitting on a bench with his half sisters suggests that he was quite downcast. According to Friedman, he appears "gaunt, tired, tense, and unable to summon a smile." Later, Erikson observed that he was "in many ways a nonfunctioning artist," suffering from a serious "work disturbance," and he admitted that "there were simply months when I couldn't work at all and didn't feel like putting anything on paper." In fact, he "did not feel like doing anything at all."⁴⁰

37. Friedman, *Identity's Architect*, 46–47.

38. Erikson, "Identity Crisis' in Autobiographic Perspective," 26.

39. Friedman, *Identity's Architect*, 53.

40. *Ibid.*, 56.

In early 1927 Erikson was considering but not acting on the possibility of becoming a local arts-and-crafts teacher when Peter Blos, an old Karlsruhe friend, wrote to invite him to Vienna to sketch portraits of Dorothy Burlingham's children. Burlingham, with the encouragement of Anna Freud, Sigmund Freud's daughter, had offered to help Blos, who had been her children's tutor, establish his own school. This was to be a school for children who were psychoanalytic patients, children of psychoanalytic patients, and children of Viennese psychoanalysts. The invitation extended to Erikson to sketch Burlingham's children would enable her to decide whether to accept Blos's recommendation that his friend Erik might join him as a teacher at the newly established Hietzing School. Erikson later wrote of Blos's invitation, "Nietzsche once said that a friend is the life saver who holds you above water when your divided selves threaten to drag you to the bottom."⁴¹

Erikson went to Vienna, sketched the portraits, and was offered the position. Thus began his association with Freud's circle. Anna Freud encouraged him to consider a career as a psychoanalyst, and in 1929 at the age of twenty-seven he began his training analysis with her. He remained her protégé until 1933, when he and his young Canadian-born wife Joan, whom he had met in Vienna, immigrated to the United States with their two small sons. In his autobiographical essay, Erikson notes that he experienced Anna Freud as "a liberating agent and as a potential indoctrinator, as an identity model and yet also as a powerful personality from whom one must learn to differentiate oneself."⁴² He observed at the conclusion of his analysis that he had repeated the "childhood which I spent with my mother alone."⁴³

One of the tensions in Erikson's relationship with Anna Freud was related to the fact that his wife, Joan, whom he had married in 1930, did not think that his psychoanalytic sessions with Anna Freud were doing him much good. She was upset by Anna Freud's disapproval of Erik's "permissive" approach to teaching. Joan also became angry when Anna Freud dismissed his belief that his biological father was from an aristocratic family as "a family romance," the title of a brief essay by Anna's father.⁴⁴ In the essay, Freud suggested that the primary motivation behind a family romance is the desire to free oneself as one is growing up from parental authority. He noted that a child who is both neurotic and highly gifted will employ his imagination in "getting free from the parents of whom he now has such a low opinion and of replacing them by others, occupying, as a rule, a higher

41. Ibid.

42. Erikson, "'Identity Crisis' in Autobiographic Perspective," 25.

43. Friedman, *Identity's Architect*, 77.

44. Freud, "The Family Romance."

social station.” He added that, although the family romance is typically the work of very young children, it is not uncommon for it to persist far beyond puberty. Freud also pointed out that a child may create such a fantasy in order to place himself in a more privileged position in relation to his siblings or to eliminate a prohibition if he is sexually attracted to one of his sisters.

So when Erikson would mention to Anna Freud what he had pieced together about his biological father, she would dismiss it, pointing out that adopted children tend to fantasize about their real parents. She also warned him that he was transforming his father’s betrayal into a life myth. He later recalled his hurt and anger when he brought to an analytic session a photograph supposedly of a Danish aristocrat, claiming that he had found it among his mother’s possessions, only to have Anna dismiss the claim. Quite possibly she believed that Erikson’s view that his father was a Danish aristocrat was an implicit repudiation of his Jewish identity. Perhaps she felt that Erikson needed instead to place greater value on his stepfather’s adoption of him and on his stepfather’s desire that Erik would be viewed and treated as his very own son.⁴⁵

Joan Erikson also felt that her husband needed a male analyst to help him work through the issue of his missing father. Conceivably, an equally strong case could have been made for his need to be psychoanalyzed by a woman who was considerably older than Anna Freud, only seven years his senior. A woman closer in age to his mother (who would have been in her early-fifties when he was in psychoanalysis) may well have been able to help Erikson work through his feelings about his mother relating to the fact that the two of them had lived alone together the first three years of his life and that all of this changed when she remarried. On the other hand, at thirty-four years of age when she became his psychoanalyst, Anna Freud would have been just a few years older than his mother had been when he experienced the emotional separation from her, and this may well have made it possible for him to work through some of the unresolved feelings the separation had evoked in him as a young boy.

In any event, Erikson viewed the fact that he was accepted by the Freudian circle as a “truly astounding adoption” and as offering him “a kind of positive stepson identity.” He felt that in becoming a disciple of Sigmund Freud, “a mythical figure and, above all, a great doctor who had rebelled

45. In *Identity and the Life Cycle* Erikson mentions his own case of a high-school girl of Middle-European descent who created a Scottish identity for herself. He notes that the bit of reality on which this identity was based was her attachment, in early childhood, to a neighbor woman who was from the British Isles. When he asked her how she had managed to marshal all the details of Scottish life to make her story credible, she responded in a Scottish brogue, “Bless you, sir, I needed a past” (rev. ed.), 141.

against the medical profession, he was being accorded “the kind of training that came as close to the role of children’s doctor as one could possibly come without going to medical school.” Moreover, something within himself that “responded to this situation was, I think, some strong identification with my stepfather, the pediatrician, mixed with a search for my own mythical father.”⁴⁶ Prior to this adoption by the Freudian circle, however, it was evident to Erikson that he was paralyzed by his “divided selves,” thus experiencing the inner split whose origins were traceable to the period in his life when his mother remarried and he was forced to leave the artists’ colony and move into the home of the bearded doctor.

Although brief, this account of Erikson’s early years provides sufficient evidence to suggest that if he had been a psychoanalytic patient when he was in his early twenties, a diagnosis of melancholia would have been entirely appropriate. The symptoms that Freud identifies in his “Mourning and Melancholia” apply to Erikson. Although he was the primary victim of his melancholia, the pathology may also have been, in part at least, an indirect way of punishing his mother (who sent him money to support his artistic career without informing her husband that she was doing so) for what had happened to him in his early childhood.

But, in any event, Erikson’s situation began to change. Through the intervention of his friend Peter Blos he became a teacher of young children, a member of the Freudian circle, and a husband and father. External resources joined with his personal resources, and he became a new person. It is not surprising, therefore, that when he became a child analyst he did what he could to evoke the child’s own inner resources to address the difficulties and challenges of life. He knew what it was like to be paralyzed and immobilized by feelings of frustration, self-reproach, inhibition, anger, and fury, but he also knew what it was like to become reactivated and responsive to the world around him. The resources identified in the various chapters in this book reflect the fact that, as Erikson discovered, it is possible to prevail over the melancholia resulting from the loss of unity with the person that one knows as mother, and that, in fact, there is a sense in which she, in at least one of her various guises, sponsors the determination to prevail. However, Erikson also discovered that one is unlikely to prevail if one relies wholly on one’s own inner resources. Against all odds, this struggling but ineffectual artist was adopted into the Freudian circle, and even he—or, rather, *especially* he—found such adoption to be “truly astounding.”

46. Erikson, “‘Identity Crisis’ in Autobiographic Perspective,” 29.