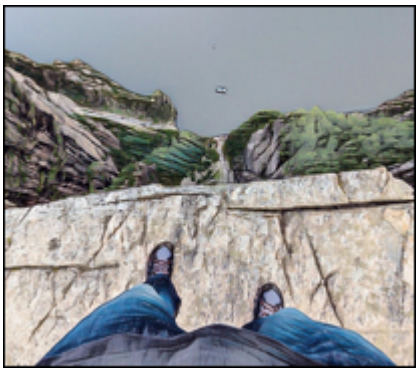
EXPLORING YOUR FULL SEXUAL POTENTIAL, PART 34: BEYOND ENMESHMENT LIES THE VOID





The term *enmeshment* describes a relationship where no boundaries can clearly be distinguished. The relationship takes on the form of a unity like two adjacent vine plants who appear to have become a single flourish of green and color. When a whole nuclear family does the same, then boundaries evaporate, or no boundaries may perhaps ever come into being at all.

There is no *'you'* and *'me'*, but there is *'us'* at all times. When individuals do happen to separate from one another, they cannot do so without experiencing tremendous anxiety, anger, and emotional distress. They cling. They are attached: *'your feelings are my feelings, we understand each other as no other does.'*

The upside of this situation is a cosy feeling of homeliness, the downside comes along in the very moment when a family member breaks away. A son who is still enmeshed with his mother and who has still not gotten rid of the psychological umbilical cord which attaches him to her, can feel an emptiness, a nothingness, a void when he is asked or compelled to finally let go. It is then that it creeps up on him: the fear of the void. This may morph into a haunting underground current, disturbing all peace of mind.

1. Rodney

I had been corresponding with Rodney about this. He writes,

> "*Hi Job,*
>
> *Today I'm feeling miserable and I want to share some things with you. I have been working very hard on sitting with that 'void' you described that I feel when I separate from my mother.*
>
> *I am consciously making an effort nearly every moment to make the separation known to me. It is working at times; then, when I focus on something else for even a moment,*

> *it's gone and I'm back to the unwanted enmeshment with mum. 100% of me wants to make the separation. Yet I hold on… why oh why?! I think I'm going about it the wrong way…*
>
> *I feel the void. You mentioned that is the reason. In that space I am telling myself it is okay to feel this way. I am in contact a lot with dad. However, I still don't feel I am being brought into his world entirely. What could I bring up with him that may help when I call? He knows that I struggle with self esteem and confidence and feeling like a wimp. I have told him. What is wrong with me?"*

Well, Rodney is certainly on the right road, although at this stage it does not feel that way for him. He is realizing that letting go of the mother image means crossing the tight rope that we explained in the previous article. At the other side of the imaginary rope in infancy, there should be that other parent, the father or father-figure. But there is no one home. It is the tight rope connecting the historically first identification figure (the mother) with the ultimate goal for a boy, namely his genetically induced maleness.

What does it feel like to be enmeshed with the mother, and when the father (figure) is not there, or not perceptable? What if you feel nothing even if he is nevertheless physically present?

2. Dorian

Dorian explained it well when he wrote,

> "*When I think back to that period of my childhood, I have memories of ALL of my family, EXCEPT my dad! I remember my mother, brother, aunt, uncle, neighbours, the friends I played with, and my uncle's mother and father (whom I called Grandma and Grandpa, because my own 'real' grandparents were back in Greece). Yet I cannot recall ONE memory of my dad. Where was he??"*

The father-figure should have been available for the child, and in a healthy relationship, his presence goes without saying. The problem is, though, how did the child experience it? More often than not, the way the child has feelings about all this are not known to the parents. Perhaps the child has a distorted view of the situation, and most usually, a complete loneliness can be seen.

3. Dima

Dima who comes from a family with an alcoholic father (quite common in the Ukraine where drinking Vodka is a sign of masculinity) wrote,

> *"One of my earliest memories from my childhood is like a nightmare. It all happened one night. I don't remember how old I was, but I woke up because I heard my mum's voice. She was screaming. They just returned from a reception and I don't know what happened earlier but I think my mum wanted to return earlier. I entered the living room and I saw my mum lying on sofa and there was my father who wanted to strangle her. I was screaming and my sisters woke up. I just felt that the only protection from world was my mum and only she could protect me. Rest of the world wasn't a good place to live. Mum then told us to go to bed."*

Personally, I presume that his father was quite drunk at the time. It certainly sounds like it. Was he strangling her or was he trying to make love to her on the sofa, being very drunk after the reception and not knowing when to stop when his wife asked him to? And did he cover her mouth as a signal to be quiet because of the kids? But drunk or not, were Dima under these circumstances to let go of this original identification with his mother, the identification with the other parent (the father) is clearly no option. This small event turned out to be extremely traumatizing for him. It sank into his mind and inner soul, and it was never touched upon again until I had been probing for answers about his childhood memories from way back then.

4. Chuck

A variation on this theme can be seen in the answers that Chuck gave to similar questions about memories of dad that I had posed to him by email:

> *"My father was a workaholic and a rageaholic. He seemed different than other men I knew growing up. His life revolved around his jog, and when he was home, it revolved around doing things around the house. He only was interested in me when he wanted help with something. If I didn't want to help, he would frequently blow up about it. Mom was a go-go when that happened and I knew she would protect me from him. She would fight with him to protect her son."*

Chuck began to loathe the man and to fear his outbursts. His father probably had difficulties controlling his primary emotions and keeping his temper. One should always be cautious with emotions around children because you never how a child will experience them.

The same happens if you yell your head off around the new kitten that the children got just the other day. After that, don't expect that little cat to come around and purr around your ankles. That may take quite some time. Often, a kitten in that predicament can even become an attic cat, retreating to the (peaceful and safe) attic for no obvious reason at all.

An explosive dad? Let me guess. Perhaps his father was in a phase of getting a burnout or

worrying about the promotions that he is not getting despite all his efforts. Perhaps the family was in money trouble. All these subjects are not expressed to little children and this leaves them trying to recover from an incomprehensible situation. Dad is there, but *"he is not there for me"*.

5. No pull from the father-figure

In all these instances, we see how the father-figure is not exerting any pull on the boy to get him away from Squaw Camp, the world of the females, and to welcome him into the exciting world of men, the boy's future home-sweet-home. On the contrary, the young boy feels no attraction whatsoever.

Is the father pushing the boy away? Not really; we witness no rejection of the boy, but we see no evidence of reaching out to him either. There is nothing for the boy to look forward to, at least not with this man. It is as if the father does not grasp the fact that being a dad should be more than just caring for the family in a physical way (the food, the housing, the money).

In these examples, he appears not to understand that more is expected of him in terms of being an identification model. He doesn't understand the emotional aspect of being available. And if he did, then he has an awkward way of showing it.

So now the boy has nowhere to go. He cannot move forward at an age when identifying would have been easy. If his mother in such a situation does not stimulate his moves towards dad and even appears to welcome him back, then there is a great risk that he may become enmeshed with her and with her world, since there is no male identification figure beckoning him into the world of men.

Enmeshment does not necessarily have to take place under all circumstances; much depends on the way that the mother reacts towards her son. But if there are enmeshment tendencies, then it will be a whole lot more difficult for a boy to avoid enmeshment because there is apparently no quick and easy alternative.

She is not a bad or malignant person, by the way. It depends on the mother's ability to recognize and maintain boundaries with others. For decades, therapists have noticed that men who sexualize their same-sex attractions can have mothers who are overly close, protective, or domineering.

6. Dr. Joe Nicolosi Sr.

In his book *'Reparative Therapy',* Nicolosi writes:

> *"An abnormally close mother-son relationship has been found in the early childhoods of homosexuals by many writers (Bender and Paster 1941, Fenichel 1945, Freud 1922, Jonas 1944, Jung 1917, Socarides 1968, West 1959). Due to the binding nature of this mother-son bond, the relationship is likely to be not only close, but highly ambivalent (Kronemeyer 1980, Scott 1957)."*

The closeness is called enmeshment (the fading away of boundaries), the ambivalence is actually the genetically induced urge to identify with the father and with maleness. So, in this situation, the relationship with the mother is old, well-known and comfortable like some sort of home-sweet-home, but it also feels like some sort of sticky glue: you cannot break free.

7. Self-esteem

What does this do to a boy's sense of self-esteem? In terms of frustration, he is compelled by his genes to make his way to maleness but it turns out to be an extremely frustrating business, and he therefore maintains his original mental umbilical cord with his mother. But remaining with her is also frustrating because it feels like being caught in a flytrap.

The drama is complete when a child reaches two separate conclusions from this situation: towards men and maleness, he may feel: "*Oh well, let's just forget all about it*". He gives up under the circumstances. It gets extremely tricky when he takes it one step further and mutters to himself: *"I never needed you in the first place"*. We call this defensive detachment, that is to say: he detaches in order to push this situation out of mind. He becomes indifferent, and sometimes even hostile toward maleness.

At the same time, he also feels extremely uncomfortable in the enmeshed situation with his mother because it is not really pleasing or satisfying. She and perhaps her sisters may be over-affectionate, overprotective, overindulgent, possessive and controlling. If that is the case, then negative feelings arise next to positive homely feelings. He may find himself secretly detaching from the women's world, albeit only in his mind. Outwardly, he plays the role of the sweet lovable boy who is doted on, but innerly there is a voice becoming louder by the year: *"let this never happen to me again".*

The grapes of love have turned sour. And so his defensive detachment now is extended to his mother, aunts and all the females who find him so cute and lovable. He becomes indifferent and hostile toward the idea of being in an emotionally dependent position with women as a grown-up.

8. Dangling above the void

In terms of the tightrope metaphore, he is now dangling in the middle of the tightrope with

two emotions. In direction *'A'* to maleness, he says *"I want you. On second thoughts, let's just forget about it. I don't want this any more; I fail to see how this is going to work".*

In direction *"B"* towards femaleness, he says *"It was great while it lasted, but do me a favor and get off my back. Woman, get from under my skin".*

And to complete the drama, these basic feelings are all covered in shame since there is hardly a foundation for the sense of self-esteem to grow upon.

But the kid is clever: perhaps self-worth can be acquired by achieving something, by doing something, by being seen after a great effort is indulged into, like playing the piano really clever or being artistic. But he observes that self-worth does not come about by just being.

Doing something means there is an achievement to behold, but just being somebody doesn't ring a bell.

9. Conclusion

At the beginning of this article, we saw Rodney writing:

> *"Today I'm feeling miserable and I want to share some things with you. (Dad) knows that I struggle with self esteem and confidence and feeling like a wimp. I have told him. What is wrong with me?"*

Well, there is nothing specifically wrong with Rodney. He possesses a full sexual potential just like everyone else, he is not "a homosexual" or "gay" since there is no separate sexuality predisposing a person for these feelings; separate sexualities do no exist. Since 2019, we know scientifically for sure. Being 'gay' is an outdated label still lingering on from the 19th and 20th century.

Rodney stems from a family pattern that can be found in very many families, a sort of Lego-land if you will with different colored elements that apparently have come together. Those elements have been described above, and they can be pulled apart and re-arranged at a later age.



Personal growth is the essence of human life and it never ends, as we will see in coming arti-

cles when we expand further on the pull and push forces to and from maleness, and to and from femaleness.

You are never too old to become who you might have been.

To be continued

Job Berendsen, MD.



