

Thin-Skinned and Thick-Skinned: The Story of a Relationship

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“Death ends a life, but it does not end a relationship, which struggles on in the survivor’s mind toward some resolution which it may never find.”

-- Anderson, “I Never Sang for My Father (1968)

“Don’t tell Mom!”

“OK, but get off me. You hit my eye!”

“I didn’t hurt you! I only sorta fell on you, and my elbow only touched your eye for a second.”

“You fell on top of me. Mom told you not to bother me. I was just lying here on my bed reading.”

“Uh-oh, it looks like the skin under your eye is turning colors. You look funny. Your eye looks pink too. “You’re not going to tell Mom, are you?”

“No, but she’s going to know as soon as she comes home from the store. Is it getting worse?”

“I think so. I’ll be right back.”

“Where you going?”

“To get a steak from the freezer. Maybe the cold will keep your skin from turning more colors.”

“Hurry! Mom is going to kill us for fooling around. Actually, she is going to kill YOU!”

My brother, Meyer, was about ten years old, and I was about seven or eight when he panicked about almost giving me a purplish-black eye. I don’t remember if my skin actually turned colors or if my mother found out and “killed him” for not listening to her directive, “Don’t bother your sister!”

This kind of command was not unusual and the harshness of it trickled down from my brother to me. I imagine he told himself: 'I was here first. This is what I learned and - I am in charge of you.'

Here are some of the unspoken house rules from my childhood, sprinkled with what I envision he believed and then demonstrated, thinking only about his perspective:

- 1) Mom is the only one who gets to yell. I am the oldest and the son and anything Mom gets to do I get to do- especially if she is not around.
- 2) Mom is the only one who gets to tell us what to do. But I get to tell you what to do.
- 3) I know it is ok to hit you because Mom hits you.
- 4) I am not supposed to ask any questions or disagree with our parents. Children are to be seen and not heard, but I am going to take over the family business and my day will come when I'm the one to be heard.
- 5) I am not supposed to tell Mom that I don't want to go shopping with her. Mom embarrasses me in public all the time and when she does, I will take it all out on you.
- 6) I eat first, you get what's left.
7. As your older brother, I am entitled to make fun of you and tease you as I see fit.

I recognize that what I am describing is not uncommon, at least when I was growing up in the forties and fifties. This was the traditional family where the oldest son – the chosen one — ruled.

This familial understanding is in part about power and, perhaps, it was my undying wish for his attention and love that kept me in this intimate, skin-to-skin relationship well beyond the time when another, less familiar connection would have been severed. I hope to tell the story that

explores the impact of early relationships that may never find a resolution. I invite you to bear witness to my experience of this significant connection in the hope that you, or someone you know personally or professionally, will be understood and not feel alone.

I thought of him affectionately as my “brubby” when I was a little girl even though he bossed me around. I couldn’t think to defend my position or identify how I felt when he tormented me. Not until I was an adult could I disagree over how he interpreted any rule. All of his life, he generally spoke over anything I could say or do to contest his authority.

It has now been over twenty years since his early death at the age of fifty-four from a massive heart attack. I don’t think of my brother, my only sibling often; but when I do, I can locate a place deep inside my body that holds the melancholy knowledge of his actual death, the understanding that he was unable to reciprocate my affection, and, at times, memories of the torment I often felt as a result of his behavior toward me.

He came into our family about two years before me, but after the newborn death of our parents’ first child, our older brother. I don’t know how much time passed between these two events, the birth of one boy and then another; but my brother seemed to resent me, I imagine, from the time I was born. He was my “brubby,” but to my parents he was their second-born and I the third. I suspect that my mother, who had lost her first-born, needed both of us to be perfect to demonstrate her flawlessness. She also needed to control both of us so she wouldn’t have to endure any further loss. His life was one characterized by intense conflict between his raging mother and himself. He disobeyed, fought with, and disappointed her until the day she died. As I have said earlier in this paper, I can only conjecture about how Mike (as he liked to be called) felt about himself, but I certainly observed my mother's control of him when we were children. Scenes come to mind when she made him wear knickers: pants for boys that ended just below

the knees, designating his younger age. He was also overweight as a young boy and was forced to shop in the "Husky" section of department stores with my mother. I remember her pulling school-age peers off our neighborhood street to, then, insist that my brother hit the boy who had hit and /or bullied him on their way home from school.

Perhaps one of the more difficult times was during adolescence when my mother discovered that Mike found a book on sex in the attic. She was enraged at his act of unearthing this, clearly embarrassing (to her), volume, and then subsequently locked him out of the house when he came home late. He slept in the car overnight and so it went. My brother continued to stumble: he was expected to take over the family business after completing college. Instead, he quit school after one quarter and tried the business for a short time before getting married at age 21 and fathering two sons while in his mid-twenties. Tragically, Mike and his wife's first son died at birth, but I never knew how he felt about his loss or lived through this tragedy. He experienced various business failures (some under questionable circumstances), his first heart attack at age 30, and a failed marriage in his early forties. However, I also remember socializing in a group of young couples, including Mike and my sister-in-law, spending a great deal of telephone time discussing our common enemy, our mother, and being available to him and his family at the time of his first heart attack.

And me... I observed my mother and brother fighting, particularly as he reached adolescence. I attempted to be the peacemaker, which always failed. My next strategy: I withdrew trying to develop a thick outer skin and hiding from both of them as best I could, vowing "to get out of here someday." When my brother was well into his teens, he didn't pay any positive attention to me. Although, I remember one incident during my early adolescence, that struck me as questionably positive at best. I came home late one winter evening from a

movie. Evidently, my mother was furious (frightened) with my late arrival, and my brother told me I was in trouble. I don't know if he was warning/protecting me or if he was gleeful at the knowledge my mother was about to attack. That last option was certainly more in accord with his interpretations of the rules. I think the idea he wanted me to get into trouble is what hurt me so much — my inner thin skin apparent to him as he attempted to humiliate me time and time again.

So, while my father kept a distant presence, my brother and I had a series of complicated experiences with each other and with our mother, sometimes in the background, creating an environment of hostility and trauma. Years later during an analytic session, my analyst suggested that my brother probably hated me from birth. Indeed I imagine that he and my mother, alone as a dyad until I was born, formed a relationship that could be characterized as one where “the initial dyadic relationship with the mother is not sufficiently secure before the sense of the ‘third party’ arrives on the scene” (Britton, 2004, p.49). The British psychoanalyst, Ron Britton, tells us that this results in a “hyper-subjectivity” that keeps the person (my brother in this scenario) from “mentally accepting this triangle...” (p. 51). This is the complex narrative that I confronted when I was born. I came to know and love my brother as my “brubby,” because that was how it was. But my warm feelings were not to last. Perhaps as I grew up, my voice and accomplishments became more of a challenge for him, our lives took on a new trajectory: his life became as unknown to me during this time as mine was to him, and yet at the time, I didn't really think a great deal about the increasing space between us. Anyway, there was not much I could do to narrow the growing psychological and physical gap. We were not confidants, collaborators or co-conspirators. If there was love between us, it was mostly unnoticeable.

Thinking about my brother and our relationship, I return to Britton, who writes: “What I have found in my work is that inside every thick-skinned patient is a thin-skinned patient trying

not to get out, and in every thin-skinned patient is a thick-skinned patient who is usually giving himself a hard time..." (p. 50). I can use Britton's thoughts as a way to know that Mike was highly vulnerable to his failures and developed his thick skin to survive, rarely displaying his weaknesses. Yet, I remember feeling startled when I called to tell him that our father had died and he said to me in a quiet, plaintive voice that a child might demonstrate, "Now, why did he go and do that?" At another time, probably the last time I ever spoke to him, he told me during a long distance phone call, that he thought about our father every single day of his life. At that point, Dad was dead twenty plus years. I, on the other hand, was more openly exposed, but tried not to be with Mike, or anyone who reminded me of him, lest I become traumatized again. With Mike and people like him, including my mother, I attempted to maintain a thick skin to avoid appearing an easy target. And yet, many times, I felt victimized.

My way, as an adult and an analyst, is to explore autobiographical material with literary and theoretical perspectives within a context of feelings that still surface from time to time. Now, from that perspective, I am left with several ideas that help me find a way forward when my intellectualizing quickly turns emotional as our relationship difficulties come to mind. Hopefully, as I have said, some of these will speak to others who are also struggling with unresolved relationships. In this presentation, the relationship is a brother-sister one, but the ubiquity of disconnected attachments demonstrates that we often face disappointment, loss and abandonment. Maybe the only way to find some peace with this specific painful disconnection is to attempt to find a degree of meaning.

How to consider my brother's life, then, which developed a downward path toward his early death? He was unable to face the "injury and disturbance" inevitable in life, forming a thick, abrasive skin to conceal his wounded internal self. We were children; yet now, I can look

back and know that I certainly had no capacity to think about his aggressive actions and what they may have meant. As a child, I didn't have a great capacity for self-reflection. Minimally, I attempted to verbally react to his hostility and grew to be disappointed in my sibling. I didn't understand that his vulnerability resided just below his arrogance, his ever-developing desire to perpetrate his sense of self-importance over me. Often angry with him, I was only silenced by my fear for his health as he had several more heart attacks, bypass procedures, and other cardiac interventions. Eventually, his constantly reappearing stabs at humiliating me led to a resurfacing of my anger. He continued to demonstrate a stance of demeaning, dismissive hostilities up to the time I got a phone call telling me that Mike had died of a massive heart attack at age 54. Yet, what I could not really know at the time was that he lived a shame-filled life.

Andrew Morrison talks about the "language of shame" (Morrison, 2008, p 67), where shame means worthless, flawed, incompetent, defective, weak, failed and as smallness, insignificant, trivial, and different. He says shame comes from the distance between the ideal (wished-for) and the actual (experienced selves). Most importantly for the purposes of this paper "Shame is frequently 'defended' against by familiar manifestations of rage, withdrawal, grandiosity, or depression depending on its level of unbearability" (p. 79). My brother exhibited many of these characteristics. To him, others were the problem, had a problem, or were to be ignored. His poor health, failed love relationships, and increasingly desperate financial status had to contribute to his diminishment and failure to come to terms with his life. But, by that time in our relationship, I had minimal contact with him. I can only surmise what his life was like in the last years.

This sad description of my brother's life has often reminded me of Arthur Miller's character Willy Loman, in the playwright's award-winning, memorable play, "*Death of a*

Salesman" (Miller, 1949/1977). Like Willy, my brother's life largely represented "the daily universal drama of a life imperfectly lived... A life of fragility and shame" (Wellek, 1993, p. 213). Although Mike did not commit suicide as Willy did, I wonder how much "...his mercurial nature, his temper, his massive dreams and little cruelties" coupled with his heart condition and "human experience of fragility and shame" contributed to his death (Wellek, p. 213). Also a failed salesman, involved with different partners and in various, solitary business ventures, he, like Willy, never achieved personal or professional success.

I don't want to diagnose my brother by using the DSM; but from my observations and direct experiences with him in our adult lives, I can describe him just as Wellek does so well regarding Willy Loman. My brother, too, was someone who barely managed "the enduring pain of those depleted souls who suffer the empty depression of unmirrored ambitions and unrealized ideals." Using the theory of Heinz Kohut, the psychology of the self, in Wellek's article, Willy is termed the Tragic Man. So, too, was my brother. That is, "...the despair, the *guiltless* despair, I stress, of those who in late middle age discover that the basic patterns of their self, their ambitions and ideals, have not been realized" (1977, p.241). My brother did not have a solid sense of himself, which contributed, to his lack of a "comfortable balance with (his) ambitions, ideals, and skills" (Wellek, p. 215). I propose that two factors kept the balance from developing: his innate constitution and the misfortune of not having appropriate, influential caretakers. I don't believe my mother or my father had the capacity to nurture him so he could go beyond their ambitions and expectations for him so as to better define himself. Instead, Mike was the replacement child who had to assuage their grief and fulfill their hopes. All three were disappointed with each other.

Kohut writes, “the developing self organizes around mirroring and idealizing functions of caretakers which must be internalized and structuralized into self functions” (Wellek, 1993, pps. 216-217) to establish what Kohut calls a cohesive self. The term implies a solid orientation in time and space, appropriate reality testing and good self-observation. The basically cohesive self requires “lifelong reinforcement by empathic contact with significant and valued others who are available for response, recognition and repair...a prime motive in life is the wish to preserve and enhance wholeness of the self. If that self is fragile, and cohesion unreliable, shifts in self-esteem and mood cause difficulty.” Thus, Kohut’s term Tragic Man (1977) is used to define someone with a tenuous self-esteem.

Willy Loman had his characteristic behavior and my brother had his: taunting, teasing, mocking, shaming, demeaning, and dismissing. I don’t really know what response he got from others; but I certainly learned to defend myself, withdrawing in both anger and sadness, certain that he did not even know (or did he?) his impact on me.

Many questions came to mind as I was writing this paper. What did my brother think about himself and the role my parents played individually in his fragility? Certainly I know he demonstrated little empathy for others. Kohut tells us that “when the self is in danger, when it is basically fragile, there is no capacity for empathy. The first order of business is to shore up the crumbling self, however possible” (Wellek, p. 218). Like Willy, who had to figure out a method to take care of his own overwhelming needs, my brother (whose health and financial state increasingly deteriorated) needed to do the same. Those days were filled with rage, impatience, insults, and atrocious behavior, especially toward our mother. It is painful even now to describe his desperate conduct. In fact, I received a phone call from a credit card company asking about charges on my recently deceased mother’s card. Clearly, Mike’s financial and physical instability

were overwhelming. By that time, because I wasn't sure where he was living, I looked for him while I was driving, shopping, socializing. My analyst at the time told me to act as though he were dead. But, I knew he wasn't. All I knew was that he seemed to have vanished. After a few months of no communication, Mike contacted me with a few letters and one phone call informing me that he had moved to another state. I also discovered in a conversation with a paternal aunt, that he lived the rest of his life, dying about 18 months after my mother, in what I would term shameful secrecy.

I recently began to wonder if Mike were living now, how would I relate to him? How would we relate to each other? I can't imagine his not being the Tragic Man with all of the attendant characteristics. I do know I understand him better from a psychological, theoretical perspective. According to Eigen (2004, p. 7), Bion believed there is "emotional nourishment that comes with seeking the truth about ourselves, albeit use of truth in a compassionate or hateful way makes all the difference." Yet, I am left with realizing that in our lives together, I, for the most part, only experienced, without understanding, hurt and angry feelings. Now that I have discerned a great deal more about him, I suspect he would not be much different. I don't think he had the capacity or the solid foundation necessary to help him traverse life's turbulences without his continuing to feel depleted, vulnerable, and shameful — exhibiting the same failed behaviors of grandiosity, rage, and antagonism. Our skins were not able to touch in any positive, loving, or meaningful way. We couldn't ever heal our wounds. I feel sad for him and for myself.

As an epilogue, I will add that several hours after having completed this paper, I remembered a conversation in the book *A Shining Affliction: A Story of Harm and Healing in*

Psychotherapy by Annie G. Rogers (1995). The author and her current analyst are discussing the way Dr. Roger's prior therapist, Melanie, left her patient. It is the words uttered by the current analyst that comfort me as I think about the last time Mike and I talked, not having seen each other for well over a year. "Melanie is really blind to you. She left you without ever recognizing you. That's not a goodbye, Annie; it's just leaving" (p.273). I know this and I am saddened once again.

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