

From Lightning Rod to Thunder Being

Thomas Merton Brightman

When there is an intimacy vacuum between parents, children of the union get sucked into a void with no option but to meet the needs of the their mother or their father. Childhood development is skewed to the emotional deprivation of the persons through whom children come to this planet. Generational dysfunction takes root.

The process is often so subtle as to leave children believing that it was their idea. It leaves wounds of spirit that can occupy the rest of one's life in seeking the centeredness of one's own true self. And, when the process is undiscovered and perpetuated, the society we comprise wobbles as a world out of balance in covert incest as damaging as the ultimate taboo.

My mother chose me. My father chose my sister. My brother was caught between the two of them. The Oedipus and Electra complexes were alive and prospering. I used to question these theories more than I do today. Whatever their eventual truth or falsehood, there is a tentacle that reaches the test of my experience. My further acceptance was impacted one day when a small boy looked up at his father as they stood side-by-side urinating and actually said, "Whoever pees the furthest gets Mommy."

Each of my parents was the youngest child in their family of origin. They spent much of their childhoods left to their own devices. My mother in an orphanage for a time, my father turned over to self-adventure sometimes overseen by older children. He was from the North. She was from the South.

They did the best that they could as inheritors of the same ancestral intimacy vacuum that was to so affect me. Today, I believe and accept that they were doing their destiny and I was part of the evolution. Yet, I could not conceive in the midst of the pain that my suffering would be my salvation.

I was born into a family of repressed feelings and into a society in the midst of radical change. The year of my birth was 1943. My father is of English and Dutch stock; my mother is of Irish



and Swedish heritage. The Rhode Island colony was the American root of the Brightman tribe. My mother's southern roots are lost to current awareness in the trauma of her family dislocations.

My father's ulcers were the unnamed children in our family. Their acting out far exceeded that of the rest of the three children. My mother was the long suffering, internalizing, stabilizing factor in the family. I was my mother's oldest daughter. My father used me as a lightning rod.

The short of it was that as the family drama progressed, I drew most of the lightning bolts. My parents were growing up as I grew up. I expressed what they couldn't and they didn't like the mirror. In the emotional mix, I was caught in a loop.

My father would direct his anger at me, and my mother in defense would withdraw from him. As she withdrew from him he directed more anger at me. The more anger he released upon me, the more she would withdraw. My protector was my unconscious persecutor.

Then, unwilling to release her own repressed feelings, I even became her lightning rod. I was utterly devastated one day when she beat me while telling me that she was doing me a favor because it would be worse if my father did it to me.

No. The worst was that she did it, since I clung to her as my only source of protection. I expected my father's rage. The release of her rage upon me was unbearable. That is one of my deepest wounds and it surfaces even to this day. I hid out in defiance and anger against my father's explicit anger, only to realize when I resolved much of my father work, that mother stood behind the veil of implicit anger.

My father tells me how he and mother must sometimes limit their time at my sister's home because my mother gets tired of hearing my sister bang cupboard doors. Then my sister tells me that she must sometimes limit her time at our parents' house because my mother bangs cupboard doors. This echoes the music of childhood.

And I used to wonder why on Friday night as I sat in an airplane tired and vulnerable from a week away from home that I would wince and get upset as an attendant came down the aisle banging the overhead luggage doors closed. I often see and sense these things in others before they come home to roost. Now, I smile. But I still hear the banging doors.

One day, I had done something to upset my mother. She prepared me over the course of the day for how she was going to tell my father and let him punish me. I had all day to think about that eventuality. Then, father did come home. It was never safe after five o'clock, but this night nothing was left to my imagination. I knew she would tell him. I knew I would be beaten. I thought a lot about that.

We had dinner in almost complete silence after he informed me that he'd deal with me after supper. The others stared mostly at their food as the tension built. First my brother left the table. Next, my sister left the table. Then, my mother left. Now there were just the two of us. I was thirteen. I was getting bigger. I had been staring at a knife on the table.

He started in on me. I grabbed the knife and went up against the wall. I screamed through the tears that I'd kill him. He came at me anyway. I can still feel the heat of his body as he turned away from me an instant before I would have plunged the knife into him as hard and deep as I could. I was shaking, crying, terrorized and traumatized.

This occurred in New York State in the depth of winter, but I knew that I could not stay in the house. I bolted out into the cold and the waist high snow. I tried to run but could only push through the drifted snow. I exhausted myself and fell into a snowdrift too deep to move through. I went as far as my fear could drive me. I fell into the snow and just wanted to die. I begged to die. I couldn't take anymore. The snow began to feel warm.

For a long time, the memory ended there. Someone rescued me. I was too traumatized to know who. And, of course, we never talked about such things after they happened. The prevailing attitude was, "That was then and this is now and never the twain shall meet . . . get yourself together and get on." In no way did this help my sickness of soul, searching for a home of peace and sanity.

I began taking jobs whenever I could. I stayed away from home as much as possible. I avoided any close quarters with my father. I never trusted my mother or my brother and sister after they abandoned me at the dinner table. Mother set me up. They took care of themselves. After that event, I took care of myself. I prayed for the time that I could get enough money to leave.

This legacy of survival set me up for continuing struggle in the outside world. I remember a psychiatrist I used for marital counseling telling me that it looked like I had handled that episode pretty well so that we would just go on to other things. My repression was so deep and his sensitivity so shallow that we mind-fucked each other. Left to bottom out on my own, I did.

When I was using therapy and other methods to recover my lost parts of innocence and to literally re-member my dismembered self, my father continued to deny that the event ever occurred. He would deny it even in the face of my mother telling him that he did do as I said. He'd just stop talking and leave the room.

Then, 35 years later, when driving my father to bury his oldest brother, he acknowledged the event. I retold the story hoping to open a dialogue before he died. When I concluded the telling, he astounded me by ending the story.

"I now understand why you didn't know who rescued you from the snowdrift. It was me. You really scared me that night. But I scared myself more. I was totally out of control. That scared me. And, as I realized what had happened, I knew I had to find you or I wouldn't have been able to live with myself. During my fifties I began to recall how I'd been when I was younger."

Even as tears formed, part of me was still judging him for waiting 35 years to help me understand the family insanity. We sat in silence before I spoke. "It makes sense. My mind obviously could not accept that my father who nearly killed me was now rescuing me. I can see

why I shut that out. And I can see, just as obviously now, that I didn't want to deal with the part of me that would have killed you.

“Now that you're in your sixties, I hope we can talk and find a new understanding before you die. Not talking about things that really matter makes it awfully hard for me to put my life in perspective and to break my destructive patterns. To the best of my ability, I am doing with my children everything that we didn't do. But before I woke up to my own mess, I had done my own damage. Now it's my turn to let them be angry at me. I've broken some of the family patterns and I've perpetuated others.”

Life with my parents goes on. There has been some healing and there continues to be denial. Even after this healing, I received a letter from my father following an attempt by me to further break down family denial. One of his most explicit sentences was, “Anyone who thinks that our slightly immature parenting could have any lasting impact is either drunk or has an overly active imagination.” So much for trying to change my parents.

Now I say that with a smile. I think I've stopped trying to change them. They are not the people today that they were during my upbringing. I can wish them the benefits of the recovery that I am experiencing, but I know not the lessons they need to learn nor do I know the purpose of their lives. That is up to them and their Creator. God and I have our own dialogue. It is quite enough for me to deal with me and my relationship to the Divine.

Today, many see me as a thunder being. I have vivid memories of being a lightning rod. In moving through life from submission to surrender, I moved closed to my true source and was given the gift of thunder as a wounded healer. I weave through life today as a walker between worlds.

And I recall the words that a kindred soul put to paper, “Sometimes I go about pitying myself, and all the time being carried on great winds across the sky.”