

Parenting and leadership

Essay initially written for the Institute for Creativity one-year leadership programme

Introduction -- I'm not a parent -- or am I?

The thought of associating parenting with leadership filled me with horror and despair. One of the most significant things I have not been in my life so far is a parent. And of course there is a strong self critic who says, "what the fuck do you know about parenting -- if leadership involves parenting better to give up now!" As far as I can remember, I have never wanted to be a parent -- and sadly, this has done in some promising relationships in my life. Although this has always been a firm conscious decision, the drives behind it have not been quite so conscious. This has much to do with the way I was parented. Apart from frequent verbal and occasional physical violence from a very angry father (and the existence of an angry and violent introject in me as a result), my experience of parenting was of having absolutely no value, the only value was that which my parents added to me if I did things their way. And this conditional love, this "direction without seeing" was also presented as a very effortful process -- as it undoubtedly was. Childhood seemed to me to be a training course in which most of the rules were unwritten and all of them waiting to trip me up. Alice Miller writes eloquently and at length about the damage that parents do to children.

It seems to me however that this is only one side of the equation. The trap in reading Ms Miller is that one can get into the sort of victim role which says "I'm damaged, it's all my parents' fault and all I can do is to become an angry victim". What is missing is the other side to the equation, the fact that we are actually born as a unique soul with unique abilities, strengths and weaknesses and an agenda all of our own. James Hillman in his book "The Soul's Code" describes this unique aspect of ourselves as an "acorn" or "daemon" and argues very convincingly for this. It is important to remember that it is the task of parents to discover, nurture and guide this unique person -- not to create something from scratch!

When I think about parenting in this light, I realise that one facet or subpersonality that I have, which has operated significantly in my life, is "the teacher". It seems to me that, although the educating role in teaching tends to be the most obvious, the inspiring, guiding and nurturing bits of teaching are just as important. I have often joked that my students were my children but I feel that this has probably been more true than I had thought. Finally, in work counselling students (and as an older man), not unnaturally many of my clients projected "Father" on to me (see *Transference and Projection* below) and again, provided that I was aware that that was what was going on, it was frequently a useful aspect of the therapeutic relationship.

So, I seem to have been working as a parent whether or not I decided to have children. I still find it difficult to spend prolonged time with children*, especially when I see them given the sort of space and loving attention that I never had. In a word, at least some of my difficulties with children are because I am jealous! In spite of this, it seems that I have been using parenting skills anyway. In this light, the association of parenting with leadership becomes less terrifying.

What has parenting got to do with leadership?

I read somewhere recently that parenting consists largely of three tasks, nurturing, educating and limit setting. In my training as a psychotherapist, we used to talk about "Mother therapy" and "Father therapy". Mother therapy being the nurturing, containing, supporting, accepting aspects of the therapeutic process which are balanced by Father therapy which includes the challenging, educating, journeying, exploring parts of the process. Assagioli, the father of Psychosynthesis speaks of the basic attributes of Love and Will needing to be in balance and I can see this reflected in the aspects of mothering and fathering that form good parenting. Of course, I'm not talking about rigid gender roles here, these are both aspects needed by parents of whatever gender. I regard myself (as a man) as being just as good at mother therapy (at least in the counselling room) as father therapy.

These different pictures of parenting seem to map just as well on to leadership (especially of Mastery type workshops) as on to the rearing of children. One of the features of the Mastery is that it discovers or uncovers hidden strengths within participants. These are strengths precisely because they are facets of the Hillman's acorn rather than the (less genuine but occasionally still useful) personalities that we have developed in order to survive within our family and culture. The role of parents is to support and elicit the qualities of this acorn rather than to impose something from outside -- it is fairly obvious that the leadership role in personal development workshops is much the same.

* ... with some notable and much loved exceptions!

Modelling

One of the things that a good therapist, a good parent and a good workshop leader have in common is that they "model" good parenting, especially good self parenting. One of the most important things in successful personal development is the emergence of a good internal parent who will look after us, see we get our needs met and heal the wounds of the unsatisfactory parenting that we have all received to some degree. This modelling is quite subtle -- it is not a question of "do as I say", or even "do as I do" but a way of being in relationship with oneself and others which, frequently at an unconscious level, presents a picture of good self parenting which can be internalised (again often unconsciously) by clients or participants.

Parental projections in workshops

Projection and transference are complex concepts about which entire books have been written. However, because they are so important in terms of parenting and leadership, I must mention them here. One way of looking at projection is that it is, quite simply, the way we learn by experience. If, when I first meet you, you remind me of my father, mother or other significant figure in my life, my best strategy is to treat you as if you were that person until I have sufficient evidence that there is a difference. This would be fine if it occurred at a conscious level. Unfortunately it doesn't. This all goes on outside of our conscious awareness and influences our behaviour without our even knowing it. One of the tasks of adult development is to develop the self awareness which will pick this up quickly so that we can have a conscious choice in the matter. Projection is not something which only happens in the therapeutic relationship or even in a workshop. It goes on all of the time in normal life.

Another way we use projection is to deny the unacceptable bits of ourselves. We transfer on to others the good and bad bits of our own personalities which conflict with our picture of who we are. Making the leader into an ogre or putting her or him on a pedestal may be us putting outside of ourselves the good and bad bits of ourselves we are unwilling to accept. An awareness that this is going on can help us enormously in our relationships with ourselves and others.

So, under the circumstances of a workshop, as a leader, what am I going to bring from my family of origin? Will I project inappropriately on to participants who remind me of my parents, on the other hand, will I project the bits of my parents (for example the angry abuser) that have become incorporated into the complex family of subpersonalities that is me. I really need to know who I am bringing to the workshop!

For their part, participants will project onto the leader. Of course, a leader is an authority figure and, guess what, the first authority figures most of us had to deal with were our parents. So, as a leader, we are going to appear as good mother or father (or bad mother or father) depending on the life experience of the individual participant -- and remember that this is all going on at an unconscious level. Positive projection (good father, good mother) is not necessarily a bad thing. Certainly, in short-term therapy it is a good predictor of a successful outcome to the therapeutic relationship. Of course, the journey should be towards the "real" relationship but positive parental projections can help people feel safe and trusting in the early stages of a workshop as well as in a therapeutic relationship. Bad or negative parental projections can also be useful of course -- they often lead to conflict which, if properly handled can lead to more self awareness and eventual healing. This does however take more time and in the relatively short duration of a weekend workshop, negative transference needs to be handled sensitively but occasionally firmly.

And what about parental countertransference? Countertransference is what happens in my subconscious in response to your transference. A self aware therapist or leader often experiences strong feelings towards a client or a participant which are generated in response to transference. If I find I am becoming unreasonably angry with a participant, or judgemental, or protective, or rescuing and so on, this might just be good information about what's happening with the participant, what they are projecting onto me and by inference how other people probably react to them as well. The great thing is not to express these feelings inappropriately but neither to feel guilty about them -- they are simply information about the relationship.

Parenting, needs and abuse

If we define abuse as "the use of someone to meet my needs without their knowledge or without their consent," then if I don't know about my needs and I haven't done a good enough job as an internal parent, it is entirely possible that I will abuse participants without intending to or even being aware of it. The need for good prior internal parenting then becomes very obvious.

Achieving balance

I must be very certain about the difference between parent and adult. While I might be modelling good internal parent, I must also model good external adult. One of the less useful aspects of taking a parental role is that there is a power difference. It is authoritarian and hierarchical. I'm not saying this is necessarily bad, but it is real -- there is a power difference between the leader and the participant and this should be acknowledged. I remember an eminent workshop leader explaining the difference between "power over" and "power to take care of". Having acknowledged this, there are plenty of opportunities for a leader to try to level the playing field as much as possible. To find opportunities for saying "and we are equally valuable human beings on equally valuable journeys and I get confused and upset too".

I must also be able to balance the nurturing aspects of parenting with the challenging and limit setting roles. This is where sensitivity of perception (and good intuition) is absolutely essential. On the one hand, the leader is responsible for providing the nurturing and safety which will enable participants to take risks and respond to challenges. On the other hand, the leader must be able to judge in the moment whether nurturing or challenge is appropriate. A useful word for inappropriate nurturing is rescuing. I must be able to judge whether I am nurturing or rescuing and to be able to hold back from rescuing someone when perhaps another couple of seconds of discomfort may lead to them taking charge of their life. Challenge however must always be balanced by a perception of how good the participant's internal and external support systems are. If a leader (or a therapist for that matter) challenges beyond someone's ability to respond, it can have a very negative effect indeed.

Conclusion

So, as a leader, I must be aware of my parental responsibilities and roles. I must be able to create a safe space. I must be able to balance the roles of mother and father, of nurturing and challenging and I must take responsibility within the framework of the workshop for the ultimate task which is the discovery of the uniqueness which lies in each human being.

I need to be a good internal parent. Not only to model this for participants but also to make sure that I don't use them to meet my needs. I also need to be aware of the pitfalls of an authoritarian form of parenting, to know the difference between parent and adult and to seek opportunities to meet participants in an adult to adult relationship.

I must also be aware of parental transference and countertransference both in myself and in the participants and of the need to journey from a transference to a real relationship during the course of a workshop. I recently read bits of a parenting psychology book by Gael Lindenfield called "Confident Children". If we can give the gift of confidence to our workshop participants, then that is parenting indeed.

Bibliography

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