

The Integrity of Failure

As children we are all affected by family messages and expectations, especially around success and achievement. These messages can be openly stated and obvious, or they can be subtle; communicated through behaviour, through silence and lack of acknowledgement, or via family culture, reading matter, and interests that convey an unstated norm.

Perhaps we come from a family where there is pressure to succeed, to achieve the “right” marriage qualifications, or career. Obvious pressures can be constant vigilance of school results, or criticism and disapproval when we don’t make the grade. Perhaps our parents or siblings exhibit anxiety, competitiveness and a work driven, goal orientated lifestyle, or we may have been groomed as Mummy’s “little prince” or Daddy’s “little princess”, the “golden child”, the “special one”.

Families that strive to achieve often desire to give their children the chance they lacked, or it may be that the family feel the need to maintain their sense of status. I grew up in a post-war period when the struggle to “better oneself” through education, was paramount. The opportunity to break through the class structure had gathered momentum. My parents lacked the means to pay for education to give them qualifications and a passport to respectability, so they desired their children to achieve what they could not.

Alternatively, we may come from a background with low expectations around success, perhaps through lack of means, or low self- esteem. Again this can be openly stated through put-downs such as “you’ll never amount to anything!” or via subtler messages such as complete lack of interest or encouragement. In the case of the post war class struggle that I mentioned earlier I have also come across attitudes where education and interest in “culture” was seen as a betrayal of working class origins.

Whatever our background, we devise ways of responding to expectations and build our identity accordingly. Our responses may start as conscious decisions but they invariably become unconscious patterns; like Topsy, we just seem to grow that way. Perhaps we feel comfortable and thrive on our family attitudes, this can be true of families which encourage and expect success. However, family expectations can also pose a threat to our sense of individuality.

We can respond by conforming in order to meet family approval. We become the good daughter or son, striving to fulfil the family image of success in whatever field the family holds dear. Jokes about “my son the doctor”, “my son the lawyer” are well known in certain cultures. In the case of messages of low expectation then conforming would mean lack of achievement, and a self image of failure. Our self-belief is low and we and we might not even bother to try.

Alternatively we can rebel by choosing a direction that disagrees and disappoints family expectations; instead of university, I opted to go to Drama School and become an actor, a most uncertain career. Instead of being a lawyer we become a nurse or a photographer. The very first talking picture famously illustrated this theme; the central character in “The Jazz Singer” is a gifted singer but instead of following his father’s wishes for him to use his gift in a religious role; he risks his father’s wrath to follow a jazz career. If in contrast, we were expected to fail then we might determine to prove them all wrong and forge a career, or follow a path of study. We have the will to achieve but on our own terms.

Another way of rebelling against high expectations is to continually fail, get poor results, or even play truant and “fall into the wrong company”. This is often the case when another sibling becomes super-achiever. Sibling rivalry, or jostling for our own sense of being special within the family, is a universal experience. It is a way of maintaining the balance of the family system, and it might just be the only means our psyche can devise to assert our individuality. Someone I knew had a string of illnesses and accidents that prevented him from taking exams or completing courses. Just before his GCSE’s he

had a moped accident with head injuries that put him in a coma and gave him memory loss for months. Needless to say his elder brother was academically successful.

Another strategy is a kind of middle way; a bit like a seesaw, one end goes up the other goes down, but if you sit in the middle nobody can tell if you're going up or down. It is a subtle and passive form of resistance through procrastination and ambivalence; or ducking and diving. This strategy is about neither openly failing, nor fully achieving. Nobody can blame you, but you are secretly resisting family demands. You might appear on the surface to be trying, but you never really reach your potential.

Many are the ways we devise to be true to ourselves and some appear on the surface to be the very opposite; in other words self-destructive and obstacles to self-expression. They all represent our psyche's attempts to preserve our integrity by the best means we could adopt at the time. However, they do come at a price. Trouble often appears later in life when we want to set our own goals and purpose and our strategies have become a prison, blocking our progress.

As I have said, our patterns operate unconsciously, automatically and it is confusing when we try to make conscious choices which then get sabotaged by something inside us and we can't figure out why. It is as if someone downloaded a virus onto our hard drive. What can happen is that they finally run their course and we hit a crisis of some kind; like the driven career person who comes off the rails in mid life, through redundancy or bankruptcy. Conversely there is the person who longs to achieve, but who is dogged by lack of self-belief, and who becomes chronically depressed; and then there is the one who is frustrated and dissatisfied by their passivity, who is paralysed by indecision, procrastination and lack of motivation.

What is achievement? Is it academic qualification, a shelf full of sporting trophies, fame and fortune, or marrying the right person and having children? Vincent Van Gogh, one of the greatest artists of all time, died having sold only a handful of his paintings and believing himself a failure. J.K. Rowling describes how, at the time she wrote the Harry Potter books, she was out of work, a single parent and totally convinced she had failed. Could it be that achievement is simply becoming the person we feel most natural being, someone confident enough to be true to themselves and to live from that truth?

We need to uncover the history of our patterns around achievement, and try to understand and appreciate their part in asserting our individuality and our need for love and approval. We need to recognise that what was once self preservation may now be an obstacle to our sense of authenticity and wholeness. We are adults who have the right to let go of being dependent on others' expectations. Life has its way of giving us opportunities through crisis of some kind: break up, redundancy, illness or depression. Crises provoke a turning point, encouraging us to review the expectations we have maintained and sometimes the crisis gives us permission to change the rules. This then becomes the birth of a new start; a new direction more befitting to our authentic self. The bankrupt businessman is then liberated to pursue a less pressured, more measured pace of life, someone who left school at fifteen finds the confidence to go for a degree in their fifties and the passive housewife finally resolves to break free and claims her power.