

THE FAMILY FORUM

SANCTUARY TRAUMA

by Michael Farnworth Ed.D.

For too many of us, our parenting springs from one of two attitudes: Either we didn't mind how we were treated growing up and therefore repeat with our children whatever happened to us. Or we hated how we were treated and parent in the opposite way. Both options are reactionary role-plays—the very thing our children do not need.

THIS IS THE first of a series of columns dedicated to understanding and improving the dynamics of Mormon families. My premise is that we suffer from an exaggerated case of lip service and don't actually afford the family as much devotion as we claim. Sure, in our church meetings, we talk about how important the family is and pass out recipes for happy families. But our actual family lives typically don't fare any better than those of other middle-class Christian groups.

Certainly there are differences. Tim Heaton, a sociologist at Brigham Young University, has found that Mormons don't fool around sexually as much as others do before marriage. Mormons get married more often. Mormons have more children. And Mormon men rank higher in chauvinistic attitudes and behaviors. But in the really important ways, our marriages are not any happier, and our children are no more successful than others'. We experience just as much stress, conflict, and disagreement as do other families; we experience just as much family violence. And all those television ads to the contrary, we don't spend an above-average amount of time with our children. In other words, we are no better or worse than other dysfunctional folk.

But before we can understand our family dynamics, we have to understand our marriage patterns. And before we can understand those, we have to understand why we were drawn to marry our spouse in the first place; and before we can do that, we have to reclaim and understand our own selves. And that is a most difficult task.

LEARNING HOW TO understand ourselves is a challenging spiritual process. How do we start? First, we learn how to be honest. Honesty is often regarded as something straightforward. We just do the right thing, or stand up for what's true, or take back to the store the pack of gum we stole and pay for it. But we're heading into a realm where dishonesty is well hidden, where we can easily—even habitually—misidentify dishonesty as honesty. I'm not talking about the outward, in-your-face kind of dishonesty cheaters and cons use. I'm talking about the subtle inner dishonesty of hiding and pretense—the most dangerous dishonesty we're capable of.

We begin our lives unable to do anything but behave honestly. Children naturally cry, throw temper tantrums, express joy, and spontaneously forgive and forget.

At first, the adults around us, especially our parents, may find this candor endearing, but only because our inner persona—our real nature—isn't making demands on their lives yet. As we get older, our idiosyncratic souls start to become inconvenient. They often run counter to the acceptable values of our culture, which frightens our parents, motivating them to take steps—subtle and not so subtle—to bring us in line with social expectations.

Those expectations grow from our Western Christian past when children were seen as having the devil in them. I am willing to bet that the phrase *beat the hell out of them*, didn't originate in a bar room brawl but in the churches. Children were seen as naturally evil and needing to have their wills broken. Hence the adage “spare the rod and spoil the child”—an attitude still strong within many of us. We have inherited a long, sad history of abandonment, abuse, and violence, all in the guise of socializing children.

According to our Western culture, children should be trained much like a factory worker. Good children, like good workers, are obedient, dutiful, loyal, conforming, passive, respectful and submissive before authority figures but competitive and thus judgmental toward peers. Good children are obedient, have few needs, and make few demands on their caregivers. Bad children do things their own way and make many demands on caregivers, all the while enjoying the attention they receive for this behavior.

As children living in this culture, we begin to understand that putting on an appropriate appearance is more important than expressing our inner reality. We soon learn that telling our parents “no” and disobeying them results in punishment. We are constantly being socialized to obey the adults in our lives. This becomes a problem if, as usually happens, we unintentionally learn to ignore our own sacred center in the process. In gospel terms, the sacred center is the Light of Christ—a divinely appointed feedback system. It helps us know who our essential self is, when it is being violated, and when we are straying from it. Our sense of the sacred center is overtaken by a relentless *role-play* reinforced and promoted by our parents, leaders, and culture. No child could hope to stand up to this socializing pressure, and those who try are treated as disobedient, bad children. The result is a socialized dishonesty—a move away from our sacred center—well described by the phrase “sanctuary trauma.”



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French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas describes sanctuary trauma as occurring when we are made to play roles in which we no longer recognize ourselves. We grow up replacing our own sacred realities and values with those of the dominant culture, eventually becoming adults lost in—yet one with—a world of appearances and pretense.

Then we become young adults; we marry, have children, and the process repeats. But now, instead of being the victims of sanctuary trauma, we become its perpetrators. For too many of us, our parenting springs from one of two attitudes: Either we didn't mind how we were treated growing up and therefore repeat with our children whatever happened to us. Or we hated how we were treated and parent in the opposite way. Both options are reactionary *role-plays*—the very thing our children do not need. And like us, our children sacrifice their inner realities to gain their parents' conditional love. What children need is access to their parents as genuine human beings. But we can't offer them our real selves if we never know who we are. We must reclaim our inner sanctuary. We need to awaken from our cultural trance and confront the trauma that caused us to leave our inner sanctuary so many years ago.

LEARNING OF THIS awakening paradigm, many of us turn away because it is inconvenient and questions our self-concept. It seems to argue that we're like Jason Bourne, the hero of Robert Ludlum's *Bourne Trilogy*, suffering from a past lost to us, chased by inner villains for actions we can't remember committing, finding ourselves capable of atrocious acts. It is easier and much more comfortable to maintain our current idea of ourselves, supported as it is by our culture. However, I am convinced that we do the greatest damage when we are unconscious of our wounds. We are most dangerous when asleep—our potential for hurting others exponentially increases.

We need to awaken to the notion that the spirit of the divine resides within us, not outside of us in yonder heaven. For good reason did Jesus say, "The kingdom of God is within you." Until we awaken to this spiritual truth, nothing else can change. Until then, we will treat our children and ourselves with an air of disassociated objectification. We will ignore the spiritual feedback system in favor of our

culture's agenda. We will barricade ourselves against the compassion that could seep into our heart after we commit yet another inappropriate disciplinary tactic in the name of teaching our children obedience.

HOW CAN we rediscover this sacred center so long hidden? The psychologist Carl Jung provided us with some excellent tools. He identified the major players in our life as our ego, shadow, and Self. In order to start the rediscovery process, we must deal with each of these.

The ego is our conscious control center. It navigates us through our culture. It was the entity that first noticed our parents' and culture's disapproval and approval and worked to keep everything running smoothly by creating checklists and recipes of appropriate behaviors. It encouraged us to suppress the parts of ourselves that didn't fit into the surrounding culture. Our ego marinates in vanity: it sees itself through either the eyes of grandiosity or loathing, two sides of the same coin.

The part of us that our ego suppressed—the underbelly of our personality—is called the shadow. Jung understood the shadow as a moral problem challenging the whole ego personality. Becoming conscious of the shadow requires moral effort and courage. Unacknowledged, the shadow gains strength and perversity, increasing its potential for all kinds of mischief. Most of us live as a house divided. When the shadow sneaks past the ego to make itself known by engaging in yet another repetition of a shameful, secretive behavior we had promised we would never do again, we too often blame a force outside us (i.e. the devil). However, our shadow is an essential part of us. We cannot escape the shadow through good behavior. The opposition that is necessary in all things is found within us. That is the reason we need a Savior.

The shadow can be marshalled for our good if we learn to make peace with its volatile energies. To taste a part of your own shadow, make a short list of really irritating things that other people do (especially spouse and children). For example, I detest self-righteous people. So guess what that says about me? The more unconscious we are of our shadow, the more we project it onto others. The stronger the energy of the shadow, the less able we are to see those traits in ourselves. Your short list could

provide some challenging fodder for self-exploration. When we start to become aware of our own shadow side, we will not be so quick to project, judge, or condemn others for things we are unwilling to confront in ourselves. We begin to integrate our shadow by becoming aware of its presence and by consciously and compassionately observing it in action.

Even though we may be frightened of its paradoxical powers, the shadow has many gifts of insight to offer. I believe the most wonderful one is mercy towards ourselves and others when we awaken to the nature of our own underbelly. For help in understanding the nature of the shadow, read *The Dark Side of the Light Chasers* by Debbie Ford.

In the second movie of the *Star Wars* series, *The Empire Strikes Back*, Luke Skywalker, a budding Jedi, enters a cave where there is great evil. He takes his lightsaber, even though his trainer, Yoda, tells him he won't need it. In the dark cavern, Luke meets his nemesis Darth Vader. Scared for his life, Luke engages Vader in battle, winning the confrontation by severing Vader's head from his body. Then, as Luke watches, Vader's mask dissolves to reveal Luke Skywalker's own face. Luke has just done battle with himself, but he missed the chance to learn a valuable lesson in the ways of the Force. We need to integrate the shadow back into our lives instead of hiding from or fighting it.

IF WE CAN manage to make peace with our shadow—engaging it fiercely and authentically, with passion and compassion, and then integrating it with our ego—we can reclaim what Jung called the Self. The Self is the element of our divine nature that Jung saw fit to capitalize in deference to its sacredness. The Self is all our parts brought into a synergistic whole. When the sacred Self is re-enthroned as the personality control center, we can surrender our self-loathing and learn to accept our woundedness as a necessary condition of life. We learn to say yes to all of it. We learn to trust the sacred center of our being and commune with the Divine in the inner chambers of our soul.

In a Sufi story found in Idries Shah's *Tales of the Dervishes*, royal parents tell their young prince that he must journey from his homeland to alien shores and there find a precious jewel guarded by a monster. The journey requires that he achieve a degree of awareness and enlightenment that he can attain only by making

this journey. After providing him with a special food to sustain him during his exile, the king and queen send their son on his way. But when he arrives at his destination, he falls into a trance that affects just about everyone else as well in this strange, dream-like land. Donning the garb of the country and engaging in an occupation befitting a good citizen, he forgets his true home and mission. The young prince never wins the precious jewel of his true royal Self.

Like this young prince, we sometimes we fall into a trance and get pushed off the path of Selfhood. Sometimes we absorb another person's life and agenda by ignoring our own dreams and desires—and then later wonder why we feel empty inside. If we want to reconnect to our sacred center, we must embrace the vulnerability, fear, anger, sadness, shame, disgust, humiliation, contempt, hurt, and pain of childhood.

This is difficult to do, so I will give you a starting place. Write down some memories from your early childhood. In my parenting class, I required a twenty-two-page paper of each student's memories of the first seven years of life.

The students were predictably resistant, saying there was no way they could gather so many memories. But I promised that as soon as they began the assignment, their body and brain would start restoring the memories—a “write it and they will come” phenomenon. Guess what? The papers often ranged in the end from twenty-five to fifty pages. If you're interested in reading some of these papers, visit the First Seven Years Paper at MFARNWORTH.COM. Click on “Stewardship Parenting,” and then on “First Seven Years Paper.”

You can also engage the remembering process just by making a determination to do so and then writing the memories that arise as you go about your daily life. You



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may be surprised at what surfaces. Reading some of the First Seven Years Papers can also help trigger memories. As you freeze-frame some of your earliest memories, focus on the feelings attached to them. They won't always be pretty. I am reminded of a *Calvin and Hobbes* cartoon strip in which Calvin is in the school yard playing with a ball. A bully shoves him down in the dirt, calls him a weenie, and goes off laughing. Facedown in the dust, Calvin murmurs to no one in particular, “People who get nostalgic about childhood were obviously never children.”

Reconnecting with childhood energies is not an easy process and will take some time. But these early memories with their

accompanying energies are most important in helping you unlock the door to your sacred center. In cases of childhood abuse, you may need to seek professional help. For a jump-start in understanding the dynamics of childhood trauma, get *The Drama of the Gifted Child* by Alice Miller, a short and potent read.

None of us can go back and change our past, but we all have the ability to suffer and forgive. Suffering our sanctuary trauma will change us and heal us, enabling us to forgive those who injured us and ask forgiveness of those we have hurt with our dysfunctional attempts at love. It will make us better partners and parents because it will make us better people.