

The Self-Defeating Search for Love



Hanna Colm

Existential Child Therapy

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Living, being human, implies limitations. Each person must come to terms with his limitedness, with the fact that he does not know where he comes from, who he is in terms of his capacities and abilities, and where he will go— his fate and the meaning of his life. This is the over-all existential limitation, the nonbeing in living. In the course of his life, man will make what he can out of the unknown challenge that is given him.

In addition to the existential limitation, there are limitations inherent in the specific situation into which each man is born and which, in the course of his living, he learns to accept. Or, he denies the limitations and strives to achieve the impossible; then, the only avenue of escape is neurotic defense.

In clinical experience, one often witnesses the struggle against limits. This is particularly true of families with adopted children whose personal history and hereditary background remain unknown to parents. Interwoven with the refusal to accept this limitation of not knowing the child's background is the fear of allowing the children to experience any kind of rejection or frustration.

In this essay, I am presenting such a family, a family in which the parents were obsessed and tormented with the anxiety of not knowing where their children came from, of seeing each of the children as a single, loose leaf with the tree to which he belonged missing. They reacted much more severely than natural parents who also have doubts about their children's inheritance.

The adopted child, in turn, does not know his parents and his immediate roots. He struggles painfully with the knowledge that his real parents rejected him and gave him away. His life often becomes a constant struggle to win total acceptance and unqualified trust. The limitations of adoption do not mean that the family is doomed to develop neurotic ways of living. Yet *if* the parents believe that life should be perfect, that life should not have limits, they will be caught up in an endless effort to learn what they cannot know and to make up for what cannot be restored. As a consequence, the child will refuse to accept his own specific limitations and the limitedness with which life challenges every human being. He will strive again and again to prove himself. He will repeatedly test the acceptance of his adoptive parents and will be unable to understand and integrate the primary rejection that came from his real parents. Rejection thus becomes actually and constantly a destructive factor in the living of the adoptive family.

It was precisely this kind of situation that was the focus of my deep and meaningful moments in therapy with Bobby and Gavin X. Both of these

adopted children had developed school difficulties; but because twelve-year-old Bobby had begun to wake up with nightmares, at first, only he came for therapy. Bobby came to me after a bewildering series of family events. His adoptive mother had been married to Mr. Y at the time of the adoption of both boys, but her husband had very suddenly died. In grief and depression, Bobby's mother had withdrawn from the children, leaving them emotionally bewildered and alone for long periods of time. Sometime later, she married Mr. X who, though he tried to be a good father, was at times rejecting of the boys and their problems.

Mrs. X had grown up in a puritanical New England family where there was little display of affection. She found it difficult to express her feelings. She had a gruff, dark voice and often sounded rough when dealing with the children. But the roughness was only surface, for she had a deep concern and identification with the children. She sought to understand their primary rejection and make sure there would be no more of it. She was determined to make a perfect world for her children, to be a perfect mother, to raise perfect children in a perfect, never-rejecting mother-child relationship. Instead, the result was a controlled relationship—unspontaneous and planned—to which the children reacted with problem behavior. Mrs. X did not recognize that the problem behavior was a response to lack of trust in spontaneous living, but rather she blamed it on the children's poor history and poor endowment. The children began to placate for acceptance and repressed their own integrity.

Eventually, however, their own individuality burst forth in rebellion against self-denial of the right to experiment with growing up and living. Their response, which was exaggerated, caused the parents great anguish and doubt as to their adequacy.

Mrs. X's preoccupation with the lack of history of these children expressed itself in a continuous round of having them tested and consulting psychiatrists when problems arose. She explained these problems in many ways, wavering from blaming all the trouble on the death of the adoptive father to the fact that she had withdrawn from the children and was deeply depressed. For this she blamed herself; yet like a dark cloud, the suspicion arose that the real trouble came from a very much deeper layer: poor inheritance? poor intelligence? poor beginning? Immersed in her own gloomy thoughts, she missed what the children's way of living was conveying. When, in response to her anxieties and uncertainties about them, the children began to reach out and compete with each other for her, she was completely blind to their hostile interaction.

Mr. X was the youngest of eight children and had never been faced with the need to compete for a "place in the sun." Perhaps, for this reason, he could accept Gavin's pattern of "I can compete only via poor little me," whereas Bobby's big-mouthed, aggressive way of competing was repulsive to him. He had no understanding of the battle these boys were fighting for sole

possession of their mother, nor the way she led them into these battles because of her feeling that neither must ever suffer rejection.

Mr. X thus found himself in a situation where he was expected to live up to an image of a perfect substitute father. He was very unsure of his feelings about the children; he pitied them but did not really want them around. He gave them many opportunities to find him unsatisfactory and to reject him.

Though I began therapy with Bobby alone, Gavin often sat in the waiting room with his mother during the treatment hours. From the start, it was clear to me that both boys were actively responding to the parents' anxiety about their endowment, by playing on this anxiety.

When I came into the waiting room to get Bobby for his first hour, he looked at me quite reservedly. He was wearing a high cowboy hat, which he kept firmly on his head. "Status symbol," I thought. I casually put my hand on his shoulder on the way to the playroom. He shrugged me off.

Is this your playroom? *(Immediately, he tried to put me on the defensive.)*

Yes, this is my playroom. As you know, you can play with whatever you want.

Shoot at your lamp? Shoot at your windows? *(He caught me with a pretense full of acceptance.)*

No, I would not let you harm my things.

You are not supposed to get mad at me here.

It *would* make me mad if you shot my place to pieces. Therefore, I wouldn't let you.

He aimed immediately at the lamp, picking a fight with me, showing me the "bad boy." I took the gun away from him and pointed out that there were other things to play with if he wished or he could tell me whatever he had in mind. I explained that there were other ways he could express himself than by destroying my things. As a response to these comments, he began to poke around in the play materials with a contemptuous air. He did not start any real play.

Of course you would not let me break all the toys, or even one.

No. I wouldn't. But what in the world makes you try to make nothing but a policeman out of me? I don't really like to act like a policeman.

Oh.

With these numerous provocative challenges, our first hour came to an end. Bobby arrived for his next hour with his hat still on, and, with a tough expression on his face, he bade a contemptuous good-by to Gavin. I put my hand on his shoulder again. He shrugged it off lightly. Once in the room, he immediately began to shoot, a rough cowboy sort of shooting. He still wore the hat and the tough face. But in the midst of the shooting, suddenly there came from him a few tunes of a song—out of his tough mouth, silver clear

pitch. I was touched and acknowledged the gift to me: “Nice song, nice voice you’ve got.” “Yea,” he responded. His gift for *what*; I wondered inside: I had not let him run over me in phony acceptance, but, also, I had not believed his shrugging me off.

The next hour he reported, as if his mother had prompted him not to forget to tell, that he had nightmares about a monster.

Oh. How does it look?

Just green.

Green? Just like envy is supposed to look?

Yeah? Well I don’t really know. *(Pause.)* Well, what do *you* know about monsters. *(He was challenging me a bit contemptuously.)*

Oh, I know from myself that if I dream about a monster or am afraid of one, it’s really something in myself—a monster— that I fear in myself.

Oh, yeah? *(He began wildly shooting at things in the room, not at the lamp and the windows, but sometimes pointing at my eyes for a second as if to test me in a new way. Then he said that he just did not see why they have to have Gavin around.)*

I tell you the truth. I don’t know either, why they got John, my *sec-ond fath-er!*

You call him John?

Yeah, because I don’t want a *sec-ond fath-er*—really a *third!* *(Pause.)* And neither do I know what Gavin is good for, that little *adopted* shrimp.

Huh. *(What a contempt about adopted boys, I thought.)* Is that such a terrible thing for you?

Yeah. Would you like to have three fathers around?

Well, you have only one around now, and you have some fun not to let him be your father. You reject him right and left. *You reject.* Is that better than if you feel he rejects you?

Yeah. He brings home a lot of presents, and I know he tries to buy me but I won't let him.

Good for you! *(Pause.)* But let's not forget that thing about Gavin—that little adopted shrimp.

Yeah!

You don't really want anybody around. You really want to have the field alone.

Yeah, that's exactly what I want. Gavin is a pest. *(Bobby told me then of his cat, who "a-t-e" Cynicism, one of her kittens.)* That's what should happen to Gavin!

(I laughed but immediately grew serious.)

That is a little frightening. What made her do that?

Mom said she could not take care of two.

Oh. *(Pause.)* Do you sometimes wonder what made your first mother abandon you?

I sure do! Do *you* know what made her do it?

No, I don't know either. We often don't know about things and never will. And that is pretty rough, to leave it that way. *(Pause.) (Looking at him, I spoke with a smile of appreciation.)* You must have been a very cute baby.

Oh, yeah!

You seem to doubt that. *(Pause.)* Do you sometimes think she rejected you because you weren't nice, you weren't worth her while?

Of course I do. *(Pause.)* You said it yourself; I am a monster!

Oh! *(Pause.)* You seem to want to prove you are one! Is that easier, if you think you know why she might not have wanted you?

Yeah, then I know it. Why?

What do you do, Bobby, when you try to be a monster?

Oh, I just cut a hole into Mother's new shoes or a hole into the bedspread. And, boy, does she get mad at me!

Well, yes, I can see how much you make yourself a monster and how you *make* her mad then. But does that really make sense? You told me also that you love her, and really want her all to yourself.

Yeah. But what made her get John and Gavin? She does not really love me. I *am* a monster. *(Pause.)* I sometimes kick the hell out of Gavin, and does she run over fast and take dear little baby brother in her arms.

You *make* her, just because you can't believe she can love you. And just because you can't believe she can love two or even three people.

The hour was over. Mrs. X and Gavin, who had waited in the waiting room, left with Bobby. Before I was back to my room, I heard a big commotion in front of the elevator. Bobby kicked Gavin away; *he* would push the button. Mrs. X was just about to take "dear little baby brother" in her arms. I jumped over to Bobby and whispered into his ear, "The monster who makes Mom

protect Gavin?" "Oh, yeah," he responded.

The next hour was a rough one for me. Bobby let himself be touched on the shoulder, I noticed. "Don't forget it," I said to myself. Bobby, with hat still on, started the hour asking me a question.

You're German, or what *are* you?

I was German, yes, but now *(Pause.)* I'm adopted here.

You put people into gas stoves, didn't you?

No. *(Pause.)* I would have been put into one, maybe, if this country hadn't adopted me.

Oh. *(Pause.)* Were you glad to be adopted here?

Yes, a little, yes, that I could go some place. But it also made me real mean. This was not the country I liked, and I first thought nobody really could like me too much. Everyone asked: "Where are you from?"

And when did you start being less mean?

Oh, when I really believed the people really liked me and wanted me. *(Pause.)* And they want me an awful lot now.

I know. They even pay you a lot of money just to see you.

Does that make you doubt what I really feel?

Yes, a little bit. *(Pause.)* You are not really my friend. *(Suspicion about pretenses, I thought.)*

Yes. Your parents will pay me, because I still need to help you a lot, and I have learned to understand kids and that's what they pay for. *(Pause.)* But they can't pay for what I feel about you.

Oh, you really mean you could really like me even without pay?

I think I do.

What about the monster?

Well, I try to help you with it.

Who tried to help *you* with it?

Oh, the people who understood me and liked me nevertheless. *(Pause.)* I love this country now.

More than Germany?

Just as much.

What about the Nazis?

They are monsters. We helped Germany get them sort of tamed.

Yeah.

At this point, using his language, this child and I had been having a full discussion about the question of love “in spite.” We had been speaking of the demonic in him, in me, and in man, of man’s destructive side, man’s struggle with it, and my respect for this struggle.

The monster-dreams disappeared. He stopped asking for presents when

John came home. He began to call John, “Dad.”

The next hour Bobby came in singing in his clear young boy’s voice.

That must be a joy to your mother, your singing like an angel.

She loves me for it. I know she loves me to be an angel anyway.

Ha! *(This expression just came out of me spontaneously. My use of the word “angel” had set up dangerous alternatives.)* You think she loves you only if you are an angel or sing like an angel?

Of course she does.

That’s a bit like what we talked about last time—I like you for the pay.

Oh. *(Pause. Bobby began to tell me that he still is dreaming of robbers, scary dreams.)*

And that says I’m myself a robber? Sort of maybe?

Yeah. If I’m real mad at Gavin or Dad, I just steal money from Mom’s pocketbook. She cheated me!

And you cheat back.

Yeah. I still want her alone, I really do.

I know you do. *(Bobby began playing with the toy cash register; he saw some real pennies in the drawer.)*

Give me one.

O.K.

Can I have another one?

No.

Oh, you really reject me!

What! Give me, give me, give me, or else it's rejection! Where did you get that idea from?

From John—his presents! And Mom, when she says, "Yes, Yes, Yes." She never can say "No."

Oh, *that* really makes you feel rejected every time somebody says "No" to you, or does not go your way, or criticizes you. Huh, what a trap you are in! You told me you hated Dad's toys; you felt he tried to buy you with them.

Yeaah.

Well, you can't make me buy you. (*Smiling and pulling his hat down a bit, he put the one penny back. I looked at him and his hat.*) You still can't really trust me yet. (*Pause.*) All dressed up big. I haven't even seen your hair—the way you really look.

Nope!

O.K.

Next time, he came with his hat on again, but during the hour he casually put it aside. I did not say anything; I just looked up to him, glancing over his hair in a delighted way. He certainly looked handsome. Again, he went to the cash register.

Will you give me a penny? (*Pause.*) Never mind.

What a martyr! How put upon you are. (*Under a rough mask a tiny smile came up as his acknowledgment.*)

Will you read to me?

Yes, I'd like to.

Two chapters?

I don't know yet.

Never mind!

Bang! Rejection! Just when you can't get *all* you want.

Yeah. And if I ask Dad, "Will you do something for me?" and he says, "Later," I just say, "O.K., John."

Yes. That's the same. You got him! It makes you feel like superman, rejecting everybody right and left, if you don't get exactly what you want. I guess it makes you feel *he* is rejected, not you. But I guess it makes you still feel a bit like a superman—even a monster. It's fun; you make John feel guilty. You just made me feel guilty too about the reading. You put that same feeling in between you and me. I don't want to feel guilty about you. I like you. (*Bobby put on his hat, hiding under it, as I continued.*) As if I would not keep on liking you even if you still show me trouble. You think *I* have no trouble left?

Have you? What trouble do *you* have left?

Oh, sometimes getting angry, just like your mother.

You do?

Doesn't everybody get angry at times?

I didn't think *you* would.

Oh, I'm not different from everybody else, in that way.

Oh.

Bobby did not ever bring the hat again. His grandfather became critically ill at this time, and his mother went to New England to stay with him. John was alone with the two kids, and Bobby was obviously appreciative these days to have a dad.

With the death of his grandfather, Bobby opened up the question of dying. He spoke of the death of Mr. Y, with whom he was very close and who had preferred him to Gavin. Then he questioned the value of living.

What's the use, if everybody dies?

What do you mean? It's no use to love people, if then they might die?

Yeah. What's the use?

You mean, you'd rather crawl into the hat and stay very far away?

Yeah.

And what a good time we would have missed, if you had never come here. And you will leave me too, sometime, and still never forget me.

Yeah. But what's the use? (*I had missed something.*)

You mean it hurts, when they die—or when one day you won't come here any more?

Yes.

Well, but that seems to be life: it hurts very much at times, when somebody dies,

but we can still love him. Death is not the end of loving. *(Pause.)* I love this country now.

Yeah. I sort of love Dad now.

If you don't need to be superman and tease him and call him John.

Yeah.

I still love Germany, too, *and* this country.

Yeah. This country a bit more?

No. I don't really think so.

Oh. *(Pause.)* How come you didn't ever want to see Gavin? He looks always so sad when I leave for your playroom.

I thought you loved that sad look. You often make him look sad.

I do. But I feel sorry for him.

O.K., let's call him in. *(Hesitation.)* Is it quite a difficult decision, trusting me all the way? *(Bobby went out and got Gavin.)*

Gavin was overwhelmed with joy and gratitude and pussyfooted around in order not to step on Bobby's toes or on mine. Though his mother did not find Gavin difficult to handle, it was clear to me that Gavin also needed help. His mother and I talked the matter over and decided each child would have a half-hour each week alone and one hour together. "Yeah," Bobby said, "that gets me all cheated, having my hour with Gavin." "Yes! And getting you an extra half-hour alone," I said with a twinkle.

During their first hour together, Gavin continued his pussyfooting, quietly and completely obedient to Bobby, waiting for Bobby's suggestions. Just once I said, "Gosh, Gavin, can't you start any investigating of this room on your own? Is Bobby your boss?" All three of us laughed! "Yeah, I am," Bobby answered.

In Gavin's half-hour alone he timidly tried to shoot at a target game, where a Mr. Magoo would jump up and fall down when he was hit. Gavin shot and hit him invariably, and invariably Gavin found himself exactly on the spot where Mr. Magoo would fall down on him. I remarked, "You are pretty good at shooting him off, but pretty stupid at letting him hit you. Funny!" Gavin did not answer. He smiled, shot again, and jumped away from Mr. Magoo from then on. "What makes you do that?" I asked. Gavin made no response.

Gavin spent the rest of the time investigating a cardboard hen with a hole in it. It was a toy for shooting; when a particular spot was hit, an egg would drop out of the hole. I thought to myself, "*He soon will bring up eggs and questions about his real mother.*"

The parents' and children's reactions to anxieties were beautifully illustrated in a report Mrs. X had given me about going to get Bobby at the end of his first camp experience. Gavin, who was a member of the visiting party, arrived at the camp and, hanging on to his mother's skirts, went to meet

Bobby. He was singing, completely off tune, the songs Bobby usually sang in his lovely voice, the voice which was always so pleasing to Mom. Of course, what Gavin was saying to Bobby with his loud singing was, "I've got her now since you have been gone. Ha! Ha!" The angel-voiced Bobby turned into a little devil. He completely overlooked Gavin—no answer to any of his questions, no hello, no look, no speech. Instantly, poor little Gavin had won the battle. Mr. and Mrs. X were so disgusted with Bobby that they condemned him to bread and water for the return trip. What a guilty victory for Gavin! And what a chance for Bobby to wallow in injustice all the way home!

The same pattern of neurotic interaction emerged in one of my early hours with both boys. It was fascinating to watch it unfold before my eyes. Bobby was a past master at initiating games. He built a big landscape, where enemies could live, hide, and fight. Gavin stood and watched. I stood and watched. And I saw Gavin slowly, slowly moving his foot closer against the big, complicated building that Bobby had just erected for an army barracks. Bang! It collapsed by "accident." Bobby instantly became the monster and threw a stone. Gavin cried out *desperately* and ran to me for protection. Had I not watched the whole thing develop, I would have felt like Mom must have felt a hundred times: "Here Bobby is tormenting poor little Gavin again."

Bobby became defensive immediately, "He is like an idiot. I don't want idiots around!" I said, "Oh shucks, Gavin, that was like with Mr. Magoo the

other day, wasn't it? Poor little Gavin (*pause*) or (*pause*) really like superman? He could wreck even big Bobby's building *and* could make Mom come and scold Bobby and comfort *him*." "Yeah," came from Bobby. An embarrassed and relieved smile came from Gavin. At this point, I gave him a short hug—not before, when he had tried to force me into protecting him.

It was very striking that Bobby was always well dressed, often in a full, expensive cowboy suit and fringed suede jacket, while Gavin came nearly in rags, washed-out and raveled jeans and washed-out shirts with cheap little designs. Mrs. X allowed the boys to choose their own clothes; they chose them according to their "way of being in the world." I had talked with Gavin once about his poor-little-boy, Cinderella clothes. He knew that *he* got the sympathy and protection of his mother and of the guests of the family and that this often made Bobby cruel and mean. And did he know it!

In his time alone with me, Gavin would stand alone and look forlornly at all the toys, not knowing where to begin to play. Now that he *had* what his longing, sad little eyes had told me he wanted when I went off to the playroom with Bobby, he just could not do anything with it. I stood beside him wondering and saying, "It's a bit like with your pajamas. You have some really good new ones, but you'd rather sleep in your shirt and underwear as if you don't really have anything." Gavin would try to play, but I could feel his great effort. Pretty soon he would be clumsy with the toys, as he was with Mr.

Magoo, and he would hurt himself. The only thing he did with skill was shooting, shooting into the bull's-eye or at Mr. Magoo—eight, nine, ten times in a row. I would remark, “My, aren’t you a good shot,” or “That seems to come natural with you, bang, one shot after the other straight into the bull’s-eye.” For a while he did nothing but shoot, earning lots of praise, his eyes beaming back at me. Finally, I said, “Isn’t it really much more fun to be good at something than all this business about ‘poor little me?’” “Hm,” was all he answered. He muttered something in addition, some sort of baby talk. I could not understand it, and asked that he repeat it. His response was to throw a sudden tantrum. It was another form of “poor me,” “poor not understood me,” “poor baby me”; he had managed once again not to be understood. All the different forms of it had to come out before he could agree with me that it wasn’t really so much fun. The fit that had burst out of him today was something new. I told him I was glad that he could get real mad and show that he wasn’t really such a good and meek little boy all the way through. He went back to his shooting, and, lo and behold, no shot went right. He was busy defeating himself. “Are you punishing yourself for the fit?” I asked. He told me that, after he throws a temper fit, he feels that he is a bad boy. His mother does not like him at these times. Yes, that *was* confusing. Mothers like it better without temper, and here I felt good when he showed me strong feelings. But, I wasn’t really so fond of temper tantrums either, but more of real and strong feelings. I explained to Gavin that if he wouldn’t swallow his strong feelings,

all for “poor little me,” they might not have to come out with such wildness.

For the rest of this hour, Gavin stood, holding on to his penis, looking self-conscious and bedraggled. He asked feebly if I had a rope. It was fascinating that Gavin was unable to make use of the many toys in the room but had to ask for something not present. His mother had told me that Gavin was often preoccupied with tying ropes around objects as tight as possible so that they would never come off. Seeing him holding on to his penis when he asked for a rope, I realized there must be a connection. With all his interest in being “poor little not-having me,” he could suddenly get scared that he would go too far and deprive himself of something that he *did* have and did not want to lose. The conflict was in full bloom.

We talked about his holding his penis. He complained that it really wasn't any good—Bobby's was bigger, Dad's was bigger, and his other Dad's penis was enormous. We talked about his attitude, “I must either have the best or have it all. If I don't, it's not any good; I would rather have nothing.” The little superman in him did not countenance any waiting. He had persuaded his mother that any waiting for growing stronger or bigger, any waiting, any place, was rejection, that “no” at any time was rejection. This mother, knowing the children had experienced too much rejection in their early years, did not want them to experience any more rejection. She did not understand that waiting, and disappointments, and “no's” were all part of

growing up. Knowing this, I was very much on the light side with Gavin. “Of course you love to have it all the way you want it (*pause*) little superman (*pause*) but all people have to wait at times, all people don’t get things just when they want them. Are they all poor and rejected?”

I noticed that a glimpse of a smile went over his face when I used the word “superman.” It touched off the real longing behind the “poor me,” the longing to be the strongest and even the super-strongest, especially around Mother. Gavin was creating pity and protection in Mom and making Bobby appear guilty and mean; then he felt like a bad boy who needed to be punished. I interrupted this vicious circle in many, many hours of work with him alone and in other hours where both kids acted out the very circle in detail. Here and there, in my presence, Gavin got Bobby in such a rage that I could not but reach out to protect Gavin, or rather to limit Bobby. I never condemned Bobby’s anger but curbed the degree of its expression. Most of the time, I did not need to interfere and simply could say, “Gavin, here you nearly got me like you get Mom, taking into her arms poor little Gavin, whom mean Bobby nearly killed. But I don’t really feel that you are so poor and pitiful and meek. And I *did* see how superman managed to dig at Bobby till he indeed exploded.”

Slowly, slowly this pattern between the two children changed. Gavin arrived with attractive clothes. One day, he told a friend who wanted to

tumble with him in wet dirty leaves for fun: "I have a new jacket and don't care to have it ruined." He applied himself better in school and even filled out physically. He stopped thriving on irritating and controlling his mother by putting shoes on the wrong way and then limping around or "accidentally" putting shoes on over his pants and becoming the laughing stock of the kids on the street and then coming home with a sad: "Nobody likes me; they all laugh at me." And, indeed, his mother stopped feeling sorry for him and did not need to busy herself trying to prevent the dreaded rejection of Gavin by the neighborhood kids.

Only after his way of handling life failed to be satisfying and successful, did Gavin return to a question he had touched upon in our first hour. This was the problem of the initial rejection in his life: "My real mother did not want me; I'm only an adopted child. From there all my trouble comes." No, indeed, it does not! I wanted to get at his little power man pattern in living with his present family before I could talk about the mother who had borne him and had "not wanted him."

Now he began to be very much interested again in shooting at the hen, shooting out egg after egg. When he got them out, he again investigated the hole from the right side up and upside down and every other angle. I knew this was anxiety around the birth process, which for him was entangled with the problem: "Why did she not keep me?"

One day after a long time of investigation, he asked: "How does it go with people?" He had not been able to ask this question of his mother, because he sensed the painfulness of that for her, that he had not come out of her. He knew the facts, vaguely, but he was anxious about them. We sat down and each made a man and woman in clay. I showed him what people do when they love each other like moms and dads do. It did not seem funny to him and he did not giggle, as other kids sometimes do. All he said was, "Let's show this to Bobby; he does not know about it this way." We called Bobby, who had been sitting with his mother in the waiting room, and, he remarked loudly, "Oh, yeah!" He let us know quickly that he knew all about it. "Did you?" I asked. "Oh, no, not really," he answered, "but I did talk to boys about it." "Sure you did," I said, "but maybe they didn't really know it all, the way it is. They make it, usually, look silly or dirty."

Bobby stated: "It is. What's so nice about it? Mom does not like to talk about it. I know *that*." "Well," I said, "there might be quite a different reason; maybe Mom is sad that she could not be the Mommy who could give birth to you, to Bobby first and then to Gavin. She wanted so awfully much to have two boys and, as she could not have some of her own, she sure was glad that some place there were two women who could not keep their babies and take care of them. She is plain envious of these mothers. Do you blame her?"

At this point, Bobby had lost his pretentious toughness and "know-it-all"

attitude. Gavin sat there with a grin, enjoying how much his poor mother, who could not have kids, must have wanted them! And Mother, envious, just like he had been feeling when he first came to the office!

Still the question that was untouched: “Why did our real mothers not want us?” And Gavin, pointing to the clay figure, was now the one who could ask: “Why did they not want us?” She was certainly not a real person to him, and I could not answer this question in a way that would satisfy him. So, I said, “I don’t really know what made her feel she could not keep her baby. There are people who keep their babies and are happy with them, and there are people who can’t keep their babies and are unhappy about them. There are moms who are longing for a baby and can’t have one. I don’t really know why that is so, but it was good for your mom to find two babies whose mothers could not keep them.” And turning to Bobby, I said: “It was very good for me to have had to leave Germany; it was *the* good luck of my life to become an American then.”

In my comments to Bobby and Gavin, no sentimental attempt was made to explain anything away or to explain it all in a reasonable way. My task was to help them accept that life has dark and unexplainable sides and always will have, that we must make the best of the dark moments, not get bitter or defensive about them, not slip into an attitude like “poor me,” or “I’m not wanted; I’m the bad one,” or “I got to prove I’m perfect against the

condemning facts.”

Bobby, who had been causing his mother anguish by compulsively cutting plants off at their roots, cut off one more and then stated: “This is the end of *that*.” Gavin, who had been compulsively knotting ropes to anything in sight, stopped this preoccupation; he felt secure enough with his mother and could now trust that she had wanted him desperately.

Bobby reported that he had recurrent dreams from which he always woke up with a sense of despair—of an enormous house, where families live in the country up north, where there is room even for grandparents and great-grandparents, and in this house he was all alone, no relatives, no furniture, poor cut-off Bobby. Mom had tried so hard not to have the children experience this rootless cut-off feeling. She had stressed family relationships in such a way that Bobby had become especially sensitive to her concern.

Now he dreamed of a large house full of antiques. And I spoke to him: “Yes, that’s about all one usually knows about one’s grandfather and great-grandfather; they are like the antiques people still have in their homes—some have them, some don’t.” I looked around my furniture: “You see, Bobby, I don’t have any antiques around. I like the new furniture better.” “Yes, I too,” he said. No artificial toughness, no “yeah,” just “I too.” Life does not *necessarily* require that we have antiques around; it can be lived without *known* roots. It

is true that there are no plants without roots—but what does it really matter whether we saw them or still see them or not, if the plant grows strong and self-confident and enjoys growing and is enjoyed in its growing.

The recurrent dream of being lost in an empty old house (*where there was room even for grandparents and great-grandparents*) changed to a dream of a house in which Bobby stood looking, curious about how many open rooms there were—all to be furnished. What a change in this child! And how much future was expressed in this dream in lieu of the lost, forsaken and empty past reflected in the initial dream.

Finally, in a personal situation, I was able to live out with both boys the way they created tension and disappointment in their parents by means of their envy and destructive competitiveness. Christmas was approaching and Bobby kept making remarks about the big present he had received from his first therapist. I countered these hints lightly, explaining that in Germany we had lighted candles the last hour before Christmas for Advent, and that I would do this with them so that they could see how nice a Christmas candle could be. A few days before Christmas, I bought two small toys, a truck for Bobby and a gun for Gavin.

When the time came and the candles were lit, I brought out my presents. How deep was my disappointment to find that not only did they not care for

the candles, but they each stated enviously that he had wanted just exactly what I had given the other. Not wanting to put on a phony front just to save our little Advent celebration, I let them see my disappointment. I wanted them to feel, at this point, what they did to others with their envy. I let them exchange presents, as they wished to do, but I said sadly that I had thought the truck would be just right for Bobby and the cannon for Gavin. Now they made me feel that I just didn't know how to choose the right things for them. This was guilt-provoking —but there *was* guilt to be felt for clinging to the feeling that whatever the other one had was better. To my astonishment they quietly re-exchanged gifts, so that each recovered the one I had originally given him. I ruffled the hair on each head and wished them a Merry Christmas.

Both the parents and the children in this family exaggerated life's unpredictability. There was a lack of acceptance of the negative in living and a failure to recognize that living actually consists of the interaction and struggle between negative and positive forces. Living becomes creative only in the integration and transcendence of the negative. The stalemate develops when parents feel compelled to make good for the obvious limitation in the first love, for the neglect the child experienced in the beginning of his life. As a consequence, the adopted child often responds to this early rejection with insatiable demands and wants, accompanied by feelings of guilt and need for self-punishment, or with an unceasing and futile compulsion to prove himself.

Any child, if he is to grow up, must learn to cope with temporary rejection and learn to experience it as a steppingstone toward learning and growth.

For this reason, it is of utmost importance for the therapist not to fall into the routine of traditionally prescribed patterns of acceptance. All too soon, the child will create a situation that warrants rejection; he is alert and sensitive to controlled, phony acceptance; he constantly tests genuineness. He needs to learn to accept genuine undefensive feelings, both positive and negative; and to distinguish partial and temporary rejection from total rejection. He must learn to know genuine love and to realize when he himself makes love impossible.

In therapy with an adopted child, it is more than ever important to show one's basically positive feeling for him, even though he will shrug it off with disbelief. At the same time, one must be able to accept and set limits, to criticize or "reject," since it is the simultaneousness of the acceptance and the criticism that leads the child to recognize and trust the genuineness of the therapist's feeling. This means that the therapist must be aware enough, if he is temporarily drawn into the child's pattern of provoking unreal acceptance, pity, or protection, to catch this in himself and make it a useful experience for the child and for himself. The weight of therapy focuses on showing the neurotic child, in the interaction with his therapist, how his distrusting search for love has actually created for him the opposite of what he really wants. He

must learn to accept the inevitability of rejection and the limitations in living.

In the adoptive family, history can become a destructive idol, but it also can become a challenge to greater openness and spontaneous wonder and reverence for the child's humanity, as he grows and as he reveals his being. It is far less important to know the roots of the child's family than it is to be open to the formative "now" of interaction between parents and child. It becomes a challenge for parents to follow the *child's* endowment as it emerges in terms of his own self and not in terms of their own wants and needs. Out of a handicap can come not only a strong urge to identify with historic groups, their own family background, church and general national culture, but also a greater awareness of the creative and destructive elements of the present family interaction and an urge to understand *the voice that the child's living behavior speaks*.

To be able to see one's culture and society and family in terms of its history *is* an important angle of our culture; it gives man the feeling of continuity transcending his small self—it gives him meaning. It gives him the feeling of participation, belonging, challenge, responsibility, and commitment to something greater than he is. It also has its demonic possibilities in that it often turns into a symbol of status and superiority and allows prejudice against another society or nation or family.

In our culture, having a family history is often misused to symbolize not only continuity but eternity. The underlying need is a neurotic pattern of omnipotence as proof against man's feeling of mortality, finiteness, and insignificance. Adoptive parents *must* come to terms with this human need for omnipotence and accept the finiteness of life. They must open themselves to the presence of the child's real being. They must concentrate on understanding the immediate voice of being, interaction, and communication toward a deeper, undefensive, and more fulfilling struggle for the future. In this process, the adopted child, in a deep and genuine sense, becomes a child of their own.

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