

Every Stick Has Two Ends

WILLARD BEECHER, WASHINGTON, D. C.

I never saw the child himself, but his parents told me the whole story. After an illness he had become quite dependent on them. He was not yet strong and had developed an intestinal disorder diagnosed as intestinal spasticity. The parents were obviously worried, not only about the physical condition, but also about his increasing dependency. When they sent him to school, the disorder became worse. There was also some sibling rivalry in evidence.

The father was a clinical psychologist. He had considerable insight into the situation and had been trying to increase the child's courage so he would detach himself from the home and feel comfortable in the outside world. This encouragement had done no good at all, for the child was growing more dependent as time passed. It was evident that the anxiety of the mother was strong. She did not trust the child to stand alone, even in some situations where there would be no danger. Both parents were certain that nothing more could be done by "psychology." They prided themselves on knowing all the techniques—and they really were well informed.

What the parents did not see was that they considered themselves in the "superior" position and were trying to "play gods" and work a miracle on the child. They were trying to "do something to him" that would wipe away the problem. But—they were defeated.

Individual Psychology teaches us not to make this mistake. We have no right to "master-mind" another person—not even a child. He must have both the freedom and the *necessity* to find his own solutions for his problems. This is what they had denied him. Their anxiety prevented them from trusting him. And their feeling of intellectual superiority made them unwilling to give up their control over him. He blocked their aggressions by vomiting when under pressure to "be courageous"! They were left holding the responsibility.

It was not difficult to show the parents that they were far from being in the "superior and strong" position. He was the master, and they were his slaves. A symbiotic relationship had been created between the adults and the child. Their secret desire to "feel strong" fitted into his desire to "lean" on others. It came as a distinct shock to the parents to learn that they were in the weak position—contrary to what they had "felt" about the matter.

When this was pointed out, the mother confessed that her anxiety about the physical symptoms prevented her from letting him stand more on his own feet. This betrayed the falseness of the basic situation. In effect, the parents were urging the child to be more "courageous" *than they dared be themselves!* This was the right moment to "spit in the

mother's soup" as Adler used to say. She could not rightly expect more of a child than she was able to do.

This changed the whole aspect of the problem. Instead of urging the child to be "courageous," it became evident to the parents that they had to change their own behavior as the first step in helping the child. Until they reduced their own fears, nothing could be expected of the boy.

The parents were shown that they had to "win their freedom" from the boy's domination. "Win your freedom" was the slogan given to guide them when they had to act or decide an issue in relation to the child. This put the work on their shoulders and allowed the boy to experiment with life without parental anxiety and advice to block his steps.

The parents were a bit shame-faced to discover that their God-likeness was only personal vanity and that it had led them into slavery. They determined not to make the mistake any longer! And within two weeks, the child was going to school, running errands to the grocery store, getting along with siblings—things he would not have dreamed of doing previously. The growth in the courage of the parents was reflected in him. And, too, since he no longer had anyone on whom to lean, it *served his purpose* better to learn to stand alone.

This case is mentioned as a reminder, rather than to present an original technique. Too often we may forget and grasp the wrong end of the stick. We forget, often, that the "weak" individual is the one who is in the stronger position. It is useless to ask him to give up such a favorable spot—as long as his "slaves" remain willing or intimidated into his service.

No one can exist long in this world if he is really weak, or in a weak position. If no one furnishes artificial support, then the "weak" one is obliged to *find* strength—to survive. When someone is found who has remained "weak" over a long period of time, we may be sure that he has trained someone (not himself) to be "strong" in his service. He has found a way to be the master and is using someone as a slave.

In some of these symbiotic relationships, the exploited individual, even though he sometimes complains against the "weak" one, does not want to end the superior-inferior relationship. In such cases, the "master" secretly "feels weak" in relation to the outside world in general and likes to surround himself with those who are *much weaker* so that he can feel sure of a dominant position in a much smaller "side show" of his own creation. He is afraid of the main arena of life. These people are often the "complaining martyrs" of this world. They like to tell us how badly they are used and how much they do for others—and how little appreciation they get. If we heard only their words, we might imagine they got nothing out of life and less than nothing out of the relationships of which they complain. The whole side show is their "reward" and their vanity is fed lushly by knowing that "weaker

individuals" are looking up to them for support! They get a feeling of elevation that they do not believe they can win otherwise in the outside world.

It is not easy to break such a symbiosis. Neither party to the plot wishes his freedom, and any effort to get either one to move independently of the other is met by an attack from both! This situation does not change until one or the other finds "better picking" elsewhere. He then sets up the same relationship with a new partner. The "abandoned" one can sometimes be helped at such a crisis, but this does not often happen.

In the symbiosis described between the child and his parents, the adults felt more adequate in relation to the outside world, so they had no real desire to be held back by the dependence of the child. In such cases, pointing out the mistake usually arms against its repetition, and the dependent one is allowed to gain his own real level of self-support. This offers him an excellent reason for "giving up his weakness" and he is obliged to make honest efforts to solve his problems when he finds that his tricks no longer serve to enslave others.

In this way, it is often possible to secure rapid improvement in what appears to be a stubborn case. When one party of a partnership moves forward, the other has no choice but to move, lest he be left behind. An excellent example of this is shown in the following incident:

While I was walking with a friend and his young son on the beach, the lad insisted on trailing far behind. His father would stop frequently and call to him to hurry up a bit. When the child came closer, we would walk along, and soon the boy was lagging so far behind as to be almost out of sight again. Finally the father became irritated. Threats did not improve matters.

I suggested that we change our approach to the problem. Instead of walking more slowly and having the boy lag more and more as our reward, I asked the father if he would be willing to double our pace and see what happened. As was certain to happen, the child soon saw that we were rapidly getting out of sight. He began running as fast as he could and calling for us to wait. Since we paid no attention, the rest of the walk was taken in peace, for he dared not *let us get away* from him!

One is often so impressed with the behavior of the "weak" individual he fails to notice the *one on whom the weak one leans!* Dramatic results often follow if the "weak" one is ignored and the reeducation is directed toward the other party to the crime! If we remember that every vine must have its trellis, we may save a lot of useless work for ourselves. The answer to a difficulty more often lies in the *situation* than it does in the person! Adler always directed attention to the situation. We must remember that no individual is "alone."