

Dancing Dragons: Working With Couple's Core Wounds

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Acknowledgment: While I am responsible for the writing, it is important to acknowledge these ideas have evolved over 35 years of clinical work in collaboration with my wife Chris Armstrong. We have worked as solo practitioners and as a co-therapy team with many couples. We've had the luxury of having each other as consultants-at-our-fingertips. Herewith, is the first pass at offering some of the fruit of that collaboration.

This perspective evolved from a search to understand the intransigent conflicts couples present in therapy. "We have the same fight and never seem to get anywhere with it." Early in our careers it became clear that simply teaching partners to use "I" messages in their communication, negotiating rules for fair fighting, or teaching negotiation/communication skills more generally, as important as these skills are, was not getting the job done.

We kept observing that some deeper dynamic would invariably derail/sabotage these very reasonable approaches. Something decidedly unreasonable and irrational was crying out for attention. The cry took the form of resilient repetitive patterns of conflict. While we certainly include these communication methods/techniques in our repertoire of therapeutic interventions, we came to believe early on what has become a core axiom: enactment trumps education. Another way to say this is that unconscious material, unless attended to, will undermine the best interpersonal tools, despite everyone's good intentions and genuine efforts. We are particularly interested in the unconscious patterns that grow out of each person's core wound. Since we are all raised by humans, no one escapes childhood unscathed. Some of us have it better, some of us have it worse. Some of us have it far worse, but we all carry wounds. Wounds are inevitable. To be wounded is to be human.

Dragons

From the attachment perspective (Bowlby/Wallin) we know that connections with caregivers are essential to our survival. The quality of presence that we encounter as newborn infants is profoundly formative. Long before we have words, how we show up and how our caregivers show up begins to shape both our emerging self and the behaviors and attitudes that insure our survival.

From the beginning, our needs for proximity, a secure base, and safe harbor engage in an intricate dance with our caregiver's capacity to provide accessibility and emotional responsiveness. We are calling the steps and style we bring to this dance between our needs and our caregiver's capacities our dragon. The image of a dragon is a way to personify the way we shape ourselves to participate in this complex, essential relationship. We all have a dragon. Thank God for that.

Dragons embody powerful energies. They breathe fire. They are capable of inflicting serious damage. They can incinerate others. It is important to note that in the dance between ourselves and our caregivers, the damage can go both ways. The dance with our caregivers often foreshadows the dance we make with our intimate partners as adults. One of our working axioms concerning love is that we cannot open our hearts to love without also exposing where we have been wounded in love. So we necessarily must encounter our own and our partner's dragon if we are going to grow closer.

Dragons begin their development as visceral experience before there are words. Soon enough, the experience of repetitive patterns between us and our caregivers accrue, language arrives, and our dragons begin to author a compelling narrative about who we are, what we can expect from the world, and how we need to be in order to survive. Our dragons are concerned with assuring three basic interpersonal elements for survival. "Proximity", from an evolutionary perspective, is a matter of literal survival. If I am set apart from the group I am vulnerable to being picked off by a predator. "Secure base" refers to the caregiver's availability to provide protection and support; one could say their ability to provide an emotional sense of a safe place from which to turn outward and engage the world in which we must live. "Safe haven/safe harbor" refers to the caregiver's capacity to provide refuge in the face of dangerous or threatening circumstances; the person we turn to when it appears that things might be going south.

Dragons are born out of a combination of our essential nature (one could say our inborn constitutional style-I prefer to imagine this aspect as our unique soul nature) and the behavioral repertoire provided by evolutionary necessity to assure our connection to the caregivers who will help keep us alive. Like the Greek gods and goddesses our dragons have unique personalities. Each dragon has an expressive style partly rooted in the rich variety of temperaments that come into the world e.g. the quiet calm/mellow baby that seems to handle adversity with ease, the inconsolable, colicky baby who seems in perpetual protest, the baby who doesn't want to go to sleep at night, as if they don't want to miss the party, the baby who is ready to play at first light, the baby who seems to have an air of seriousness about them, or the ones who are quick to smile and ready to laugh, or the oppositional one ready for a fight, to name a few.

Dragons are often found mythologically in relationship to treasure, whether that treasure be found in the back of the cave, or beyond the temple threshold which they guard. Their job is to protect the gold; in the most fundamental sense the continued existence of our essential self. Our dragon has both a defensive/protective function as well as a proactive function that supports our engagement with the world in which we must make our existence.

Our little dragons encounter the more highly developed dragons of our parents and other family members. It's not a fair fight. For example, imagine the fussy baby with a caregiver who feels insecure about their ability to soothe. The baby fusses and the caregiver tries to soothe without immediate success. If the caregiver's dragon has learned to protect their painful insecurity by projecting blame on to the one triggering that wound, they might react with a hostile punishing response ("Stop crying or I will give you something to cry about.") The baby is now in a quandary. The one who is supposed to provide safe harbor has just turned into a threatening presence. Now, the baby's dragon may learn to cut off their own experience of distress in order to present a more agreeable face to their caregiver, attempting to reassure them and hopefully evoke a more positive response. One scenario would have this baby evolve a very accommodating style of dragon who might never the less need to manage the frustration and rage generated by unmet needs by crafting a varied repertoire of passive-aggressive retaliatory measures. We could say this dragon might learn to be a master of stealth fire.

The first order of business is to survive. At the instinctual level, our dragons evolve to negotiate the need for proximity and connection. Our dragons also protect our inevitably wounded hearts. At a higher order, we hold that people want to be seen and known, which provides a form of emotional safety/security, the sense that 'someone knows who I am and has my back'. From the existential perspective, being known offers a counterbalance to the existential abyss. ('If someone knows me and

loves me, I am not totally alone'). Our dragon, by virtue of it's presence, also points to the hidden treasure we might long to share.

Wounded Hearts

Each life arrives longing for a loving welcome.
Before words or ideas,
only protest and melting.
Reaching for food or comfort,
met with a nurturing embrace, or maybe not.
Maybe anxious fumbling, cold indifference, or even violent rejection.

Each called to traverse the narcissistic arc
from the center of the world
to a self with a center in the world.
The other comes into view by way of disappointment,
some would say through betrayal.
We must all fall out of Eden into the world, into the dark ocean,
and like Markandeya, swim.
Each carrying our gifts.

The Dance:

We are calling how each person in the partnership organizes around their core wound their dragon. The interplay of those dragons creates a dynamic system, we are calling a dance. Dragons favor dance steps like blame, accusation, and attributions of malevolent motives, or they can make an inside turn, shaming, undercutting confidence, or promoting self doubt to encourage a retreat into some remote inner refuge. We can connect dragons with the attachment perspective by noting that dragons have different attachment styles. For example, 'an anxious-preoccupied' dragon might be more inclined to make provocative moves, attempting to engage their partner for reassuring contact. A 'dismissive-avoidant' dragon might prefer various distancing moves in order to achieve the space they associate with safety. To the degree that each person's core wound remains unconscious, the dance has a remarkable resilience that can withstand the most skillful and insightful attempts by the therapist to persuade partners to be more loving towards each other. The hurtful dance that develops between partners arises from the core wounds of each partner, more specifically how each person has organized themselves around their core wounds. Within the dance metaphor, we can say each partner arrives with their own steps. When dragons are dancing, partners are stepping on each other's toes, and it hurts. Some of the therapeutic work involves recognizing the mutually destructive dance moves and learning new collaborative moves.

Dragons are defensive. They guard the temple doors or the golden treasure at the back of the cave. They are also involved in a quest for healing. You might say dragons will insist on continuing to breathe fire until the core wound they are protecting is recognized. They continue to call attention to the wound until it receives some healing attention. If the dragon is on a quest for healing then it follows that the dragon dance is a call for mutual healing.

Commonly, when couples arrive in therapy, they have been doing their hurtful dance for some time, in some cases for many years. Each partner brings with them a detailed dossier on the other, that is, a legal brief detailing the crimes of the other. From the point of view of the dragon dance, the briefs contain legitimate factual evidence. The other has behaved like father/mother. "See this? I can prove it!". Typically, and unfortunately, it is easier to recognize the other as offender and far more difficult to see oneself as an equal offender. By equal offender I am not saying the same. Rather, there is an equivalence. My behavior is wounding to you in a way that is comparable to how your behavior wounds me. The mystery for us lies in how often partners elegantly mesh in a mutually reinforcing way. The way my dragon will attack your core wound in order to protect my core wound mimics precisely enough how you were wounded in the first place and visa versa. ("You really are just like my father/mother.") Anecdotally, we've observed that people find partners who will accurately poke each other's core wounds, provoking their partners' dragons in specific ways that have the potential to open a path to healing. The therapist's ability to identify and empathize with each person's core wound and the value of each person's dragon is a crucial resource here. The idea of a dragon dance is a helpful conceptual frame for us to be able to hold the empathic middle ground, and begin to introduce a more collaborative, mutually satisfying dance.

The image of dancing dragons has been very helpful to make sense of the phenomenon of every day mundane events/interactions triggering core wounds. This image points to the possibility of bringing a healing awareness to the tender vulnerable wounded core of each person.

An example:

They are a blended family. He is frustrated and angry that her children aren't doing regular chores. She gets defensive of her children and criticizes him for letting his own children off the hook (a double standard). When he is triggered by this issue (it could be a cereal bowl left on the counter), he is likely to be righteously and aggressively indignant, cataloging in detail perceived indulgences of her children (dragon dance moves). Beneath his frustration he feels abandoned and very frightened (core wound). Her defensive discourse includes the threat of taking her children and leaving, because she is no longer going to allow her children to be subject to such unfair criticism. Beneath her threat, she is feeling hurt and alone; invisible (core wound). When we inquire more deeply into his experience of abandonment, we find an overblown sense of responsibility and what can be described as a flooded emotional state in which he is awash in confusion and anxiety. He describes it as feeling overwhelmed, and there is a fierce assertion that it's not fair. We can trace this to having grown up in a chaotic world in which mother divorced multiple times. During his elementary school years his stepfather at the time was physically and emotionally abusive. Mom was ineffectual. He felt it was his job to keep mom safe. No wonder he felt overwhelmed, confused, frightened, and that the whole situation was unfair. With this awareness of his past experiences, he could begin to recognize that his emotional response was out of proportion in the present situation. When he was calmer, he could admit that generally speaking, her children were considerate and willing to help much of the time. So, his personal work was in part to recognize and contain his intense early trauma based emotional reaction. His partner, in spite of now knowing about the tender core of his reactive behavior seemed either unable or unwilling to extend any compassion towards his wounded core. Her stance (at her worst) was a contemptuous dismissive rejection. "Grow up! You are making a big deal out of nothing" (dragon dance moves). We got curious about what was underneath her contempt. She seemed mystified herself. She admitted that her parents were very disappointing. Mom was a shallow person and very self-involved. Dad seemed to have more substance, but was remote, mostly not available to her. She asserted that she had come to terms with their limitations. At this point she didn't expect anything from them and was content to not interact with them at all. Her self-assessment was that she was over her parents (As if to say her

reactions to her partner didn't have anything to do with her personal history. He was just being an aggressive jerk). In the course of her description, she remarked how her mother always nagged her about chores. This comment came in the context of describing how mom never took any interest in her. Our client was an accomplished athlete. The iconic image of her experience of neglect was when her team won a championship. Not only did mom fail to attend the game, she never asked about it. When our client used the word "nagged" we both noted the tone, and wondered if there wasn't a bigger story here. In this case, the tone was a mix of resentment and exhaustion, with a flourish of condescending dismissal. The word and the experience of being nagged about chores was the tip of the iceberg. Further inquiry revealed that the greater part under the surface was a pervasive experience of neglect and invisibility (core wound). When Chris and I reviewed this part of the session afterwards, we discovered that we both had had the image of Cinderella in mind at that moment in the session.

Their dance now made more sense. His resentful, aggressive, critical complaining about her children was evoking her nagging, neglectful mother. She was responding with the cold-hearted contemptuous teenager self that had kept her safe in her family of origin. Her contemptuous dismissal in turn left him feeling once again frightened and alone. Having identified their dragons and the hurtful dance moves resulting from them has helped each partner respond to the other with more empathy and tenderness.

We believe it is important for partners to have some detailed sense of their own and their partner's core wound. The word/concept of 'abandonment' or 'neglect' is only a starting point. What is the narrative thread? What are the specific images of each person's experience? These are the details that provide a visceral sense of each person's tender core, which makes a deeper empathy possible.

Safety:

Attachment approaches have rightly given much attention to safety. For most of us, the longing for an intimate partner with whom we can feel secure and find safe harbor is self-evident. Often this promise appears to have been fulfilled in the so-called honeymoon phase of relationship. I worked with a couple once who had experienced a 15 year honeymoon which only ended when the weight and pressure of resentment built up over many years of accommodation, him to her, finally caused the bubble to burst. Up to that time, she was secure in the experience of actually having found the unconditionally loving parent. Now, he was making his resentment known, and he was no longer always agreeable to her agenda. She had always seen herself as taking him into account, albeit on her own terms. She was indignant when he insisted on his terms, especially if he did so with a tone insinuating that she had been inconsiderate. Needless to say they both felt bitterly betrayed by this turn of events. However, this loss of safety initiated an important conversation between them. They became more aware of their different needs, and the importance of considering each other, each in their own terms. For most of us, sadly, the honeymoon ends much sooner.

Once the honeymoon ends, safety can no longer be taken for granted. It must be forged again and again. We think of this as the necessary move from naive trust, in which mutual idealizations rule, to a more mature trust that consciously embraces risk and uncertainty. The process of tempering steel to make a fine sword is an apt metaphor. Untempered steel is brittle, unable to hold a sharp edge, and prone to simply breaking in a fight. The process of tempering involves repeatedly heating, hammering out, and cooling the blade. What eventually happens is that the molecules in the steel line up in such a way that the steel can both hold a keen edge and be flexible. The sword's strength lies in its flexibility and capacity to make a clean cut. These are important qualities that contribute to effective repair, when safety has been disrupted in a relationship. Flexibility has to do with the willingness to be open to the

other's experience and engage creatively in finding a way through. If repair is going to be a mutual endeavor, then being able to accurately discern who is responsible for what is critical. Note that the metaphor involves the heat of conflict and the struggle to find some mutual understanding. Enduring safety depends on a couple tempering their bond by repeated experiences of engaging the fire of conflict, hammering out their respective boundaries around needs and responsibilities, and finding the cooling waters of shared understanding, and mutual empathy. In this way, enduring safety depends on conflict. To clarify: we are not talking about safety in any absolute sense, rather, to paraphrase Winnicott, we are talking about creating a relational field which is 'safe enough'.

Rupture/Betrayal:

The fact that partners trigger core wounds means that the issue of betrayal is inevitably present in intimate relationships. Using the term betrayal might seem exaggerated, but we find it helpful to think this way, because it explains why seemingly mundane events can evoke such intense emotional reactions. Like a filter on a camera lens, the lens of betrayal helps us highlight and validate the intensity of each partner's subjective experience. The present dynamics echo the formative betrayals (wounds) of childhood. The salt in the wound derives from what seems an almost universal, albeit unconscious, fantasy that my beloved will somehow make right what my disappointing/wounding family did to me. They will never hurt me like my family did and I will finally be safe in the world. James Hillman in his essay titled "Betrayal" (Loose Ends) points out that we can return to Eden through any close relationship. That is to say, we can enter a state of 'primal trust' which imagines absolute safety, where I am completely known, loved, and protected. We can imagine this fantasy as a recapitulation of infantile omnipotence. When the bubble bursts, the bitter salt of disappointed hopes is added to the primal betrayal.

Betrayal by its nature is first experienced as a "victim-perpetrator" equation. Something egregious has happened, and it's happened to me. There is an interpersonal situation. Harm has been done, which brings us to the issue of guilt. Martin Buber in his chapter titled "Guilt and Guilt Feelings" (Knowledge of Man) makes a useful distinction. Guilt feelings are more in the territory of neurosis e.g. I have sexual fantasies and I have guilt about it, because the church taught me that was bad. So-called neurotic guilt can also appear in the form of a self involved preoccupation with my own guilt such that I screen out/hold off any experience of any genuine regret/remorse for the harm I've caused the other. To put it another way, this is guilt employed as a defense against the experience of appropriate regret/remorse. Existential guilt arises because I have caused harm to myself or others in some way, either by an act of commission or omission, and I recognize my own participation in the event, and accept the experience of appropriate regret/remorse.

James Hillman in his essay titled "Betrayal" (Loose Ends) comments that every betrayal contains some element of self-betrayal, so guilt will come into play on both sides of the equation. This is not to say that victims are not being victimized and perpetrators are not perpetrating wrong but that psychically, the experience of guilt will be in the mix. In the dragon dance of intimate relationships there are no innocent parties. Typically, each partner has had a hand in stirring up and adding fuel to the fire. Here Buber's distinction is vital. Coming back to the metaphor of the sword, it is important to know how we have contributed to the fire, so as we 'pound out' some understanding between us, we know which portion of guilt is rightfully ours. This apportionment clarifies what remorse is ours to carry, and what forgiveness is ours to offer.

Breakdowns cover a wide spectrum of severity. Forgetting to take out the garbage or pick up milk on the way home from work can be addressed with a simple apology and quick trip back to the store. The arrival of children is a common stress point causing rupture or breakdown for many couples. Father's are frequently shocked to discover they have been supplanted by their infant child, even if they have been told this will happen. If they are secure enough in themselves, they are more able to stand in relation to the new situation with some presence and grace. If not, and we all have our moments, then resentments can take over. Vulnerabilities organized around our deeper wounds e.g. abandonment, exile, punishing shame can call out our dragon. Does it breath hot fire: attacking, devaluing, blaming, maybe physically abusing? Is it cold fire: silent distance, icy resentment, passive disengagement, indifference? Mothers rightfully turn to their child, and imagine their partners will do likewise. If they are secure enough in themselves, they can turn away from their partner to their child without guilt, knowing that is a deeply legitimate instinct. If not, and we all have our moments, then resentments can take over. Vulnerabilities organized around our deeper wounds e.g. abandonment, exile, punishing shame can call out our dragon. Does it breath hot fire: attacking, devaluing, blaming, maybe physically abusing? Is it cold fire: silent distance, icy resentment, passive disengagement, indifference? The disruption to the couple relationship that inevitably arrives with the arrival of children can often give rise to a dance that we have come to refer to as 'dueling deprivation'. Sleep deprivation seems to be ubiquitous, so mom and dad are on a short fuse from the start.

In spite of the incisive work of feminist thinkers to deconstruct and challenge traditional male and female roles, our anecdotal observations often see men feeling added pressure to perform as providers, and women are often still in the role of primary caregivers to their children, even if they are engaged in work outside of the home. The one who carries the primary provider role can feel deprived of the priority position which they previously held. Depending on the nature of their core wound, this natural displacement can be very painful and dis-regulating. If their dragon reacts with hostile, critical, punishing behavior, or resentful withdrawal, the partner in the mothering role can be deprived of both emotional and practical support at a most vulnerable time. First time mothers especially can be overwhelmed by the 24/7 needs of their infant. They need a partner who can empathize with the intensity of demands they face and who can provide practical support and relief. If they are met instead with a critical and/or withholding partner, and depending on the nature of their own core wound, they can in turn become critical and/or withholding. When each partner attempts to get their needs attended to be proving to the other that their deprivation is the legitimate one, we have a 'dueling deprivation' situation. The iconic exchange sounds something like this:
"You have no idea how hard I am working and how much pressure I feel having to close deals, put up with an abusive boss, etc. so you can just sit around here and hang out with the kid!"
" Oh yeah? You have no idea what it is like to be stuck with a baby hanging on you all day and night with no adult conversation in sight. You get to be out there having a life!"

At the other end of the spectrum we find relationship threatening betrayals, so called deal breakers. Extra marital affairs are probably the prototype, but there are other moves that can be equally damaging. Consistently choosing the family of origin's priorities to the detriment of the intimate partner can be lethally corrosive to trust and love. Failure to show up, be present and accounted for, in the face of a serious illness or a life threatening injury can be a fatal crossroads for a relationship. External events; financial crisis, or a toxically intrusive in-law can stress partners capacity to collaborate/cooperate to such a degree that good will erodes to the point of collapse. In between, where much of the therapeutic work takes place, are the seemingly mundane daily interactions of life together. Across this entire range, each person's dance moves can mimic painful patterns from childhood, causing various degrees of harm.

The unconscious dance, in which we all participate, often ends up landing on each other's big toe, the core wound. When each partner reacts from an unconscious place in themselves, a negative feedback loop begins to roll. Each one's dragon is called to battle. Over time, good will can be worn very thin. In this condition, our dragons are fearful of holding back their fire. Their duty is to us. If they fail, we will surely die. The critical move, which in couple's therapy we as therapists often contribute to the conversation initially, is the step of empathy; empathy for the vulnerable treasure the dragon is protecting, and respect for the dragon who is doing their job. A crucial part of our work as therapists is helping partners learn to make this move with each other.

The harm can be minimal or egregious. A simple example to illustrate: I am distracted and forget to stop at the store on the way home to pick up bread for dinner. My partner has been preparing a special meal, and the particular bread I have been tasked to get is a key ingredient. How many ways might this scene unfold? If my partner and I are doing well, that is, our relationship is in a state of trust and good will, it might be a simple situation. My partner is understandably a little irritated to not have the bread, and I realize it's my bad, so I jump back in the car and go get the bread. But let us say I have a history of forgetting the bread, (dance move alert). Combine that with my partner who grew up in a family where they were consistently overlooked and neglected. Now their reaction to my forgetting might take a variety of forms, depending on the style of their dragon. An aggressive style might result in a fiery attack: 'You're such a loser! Can't you remember anything?' A more reticent style could result in a sullen withdrawal and very cold, quiet evening, even if I did go get the bread. Behind either of these reactions lies a wounded child. To carry the example further, if I forget on a regular basis because my dragon has a passive-aggressive style forged in the context of growing up with a narcissistic intrusive mother, then my forgetting is woven into a complex emotional fabric. My 'forgetting' enacts a struggle for autonomy, and the rage against being psychically violated. The resilience of my forgetting makes sense in the context of my existential struggle to preserve my autonomous self (the gold). However, my partner might experience/interpret the resilience of my forgetting as a willful act (and, unconsciously speaking, it is). Not only are their needs being neglected, they are getting the message (subliminally) that their needs are a vile intrusion, perhaps echoing the resentment their neglectful parents harbored towards them. Now, they feel not only more deeply abandoned/neglected but denigrated in the bargain.

Repair

As the attachment perspective has shown, the rupture and repair of emotional connections is a central feature of intimate relationship. Dragons react self-protectively to rupture, and they are also involved in the search for repair. Repair is an essential skill in relationships generally, and especially important between intimate partners. We are in relationships with other humans, so friction and discord is inevitable. Our own bad moods, preoccupations, and anxieties will certainly lead to moments of insensitivity/misattunement. We all see the world through our own eyes, so navigating the seas of misunderstanding to find safe harbors of mutual understanding is the nature of the voyage. Not all conflict in relationship involves dragons. They are more likely to come into play when core wounds are involved. When core wounds are awakened, the stakes are much higher, so dragons are called to action. When core wounds are awakened, the subjective experience of betrayal is afoot.

James Hillman argues that trust, betrayal, and forgiveness are archetypal givens, and further that they require each other. Put simply, without trust there is no betrayal, and without betrayal no need for forgiveness. Without forgiveness, trust remains naive and superficial. That is to say, that trust

tempered with the recognition and acceptance of the possibility of betrayal deepens to include the uncertainties and disappointments that are part of being human. Deeper trust is not idealized. Deeper trust gives us the flexibility and resilience to be close to another human; to trust ourselves to discern where our own limits lie and how far we can trust another, all the while remembering that “where ever there is trust in a union, the risk of betrayal becomes a real possibility. And betrayal, as a continual possibility to be lived with, belongs to trust just as doubt belongs to a living faith.” (“Loose Ends” p. 66).

Another axiom for us is the idea that trust follows risk. This axiom applies to repair, because restoring trust after a rupture requires that we risk being vulnerable again to the one who has hurt us, and that we risk sitting in the experience of remorse. We must risk an honest, open-hearted expression of our experience; not simply our anger, or explanation but also our hurt or regret.

Desmond Tutu (“The Book on Forgiving”) argues that the risk that life calls out to us to take is the risk to reach for forgiveness. Archbishop Tutu citing the word “Ubuntu” which literally translates as “humanity” makes a similar case as Martin Buber (“I and Thou”): that our fundamental humanity is grounded in what happens between us.

In South Africa, ‘Ubuntu’ is our way of making sense of the world. The word literally means humanity. It is the philosophy and belief that a person is only a person through other people. In other words, we are human only in relation to other humans. Our humanity is bound up in one another, and any tear in the fabric of connection between us must be repaired for us all to be made whole. This interconnectedness is the very root of who we are.

Archbishop Tutu acknowledges that the path of forgiveness is not easy. James Hillman goes so far to as to say forgiveness does not come from the ego, rather it appears as grace. Hillman’s perspective suggests that transforming betrayal requires moving beyond a victim-perpetrator dyad (in which each is an isolated other) to a third point of view in which we each have roles in a larger archetypal drama. For Hillman the focus on reconciliation may not necessarily be between the actors, but certainly with each actor reconciling with the event that has occurred between them. Archbishop Tutu, by invoking Ubuntu makes a similar suggestion, by pointing to a healing path anchored in an awareness of my humanity existing in you, and your humanity existing in me. The path of forgiveness can restore our mutual humanity, even if our relationship comes to an end.

Dragons breathe fire, protesting the wounding of tender vulnerabilities. This fiery display can also be understood as an implicit request/demand that the awakened wound be seen, understood, and cared for in ways that make sense to them.

It turns out that core wounds are not like an unsightly mole that can be surgically removed by a skilled plastic surgeon. They are more akin to chronic illness or disabling injuries that one must learn to live with. It’s not quite that grim, because while neuroscience research has shown how core wounds are hardwired in neural networks, the good news is that the brain is plastic. Dragons can learn to hold back their fire, and learn new moves. Healing is a real possibility.

Archbishop Tutu outlines a path towards forgiveness that aligns with key elements that we have discovered to be useful in our clinical work with couples. James Hillman has identified five dangers associated with betrayal that, in our experience, aptly describe the major potholes along that path.

Hillman identifies five dangers that arise out of the experience of betrayal. In our experience, these seem to be natural human responses that people commonly have in reaction to an experience of betrayal. The common thread that runs through these different reactions is that they are attempts at self-protection. They are templates that our dragons can and sometimes do incorporate into their repertoire of dance moves. What makes these responses dangerous is when they harden into a rigid stance. Hillman organizes his list in order of increasing danger. The danger has to do with an increasing withdrawal and alienation from love, and ultimately life.

1. **Revenge:** The impulse to seek revenge is a natural consequence of feeling hurt. You hurt me. I want to hurt you back. On the benign end of the spectrum this can show up as petty bickering, like tit for tat, name calling. More egregious iterations include, taking a self righteous punishing attitude towards the other, or actively sabotaging the well being of the other. Hillman's concern with revenge is that it narrows consciousness by focusing on getting your pound of flesh from the other, rather than focusing on finding the meaning of the betrayal for yourself. Acting from revenge cultivates resentment, and Chris likes to say: Living in resentment is like eating the poison and waiting for the other person to die. Gandhi summed it up well: "An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind."
2. **Denial:** In his use of the world denial, Hillman is referring to the move of denying the value of the other. That is to say, when we shift our perception from a more idealized view of the other to one in which we are demonizing the other, we are denying their full humanity and, by implication, our own. It is a natural reaction to see the worst in the one who has hurt us. Their good qualities recede into the background, and all their negative qualities become vividly apparent. The danger here lies in the one-sidedness of this perception, which denies the ambiguities and contradictions, the strengths and weakness that we each embody as human beings. From Desmond Tutu's perspective, the danger of denial is that it blinds us to the humble wisdom that 'there but for the grace of God go I'.
3. **Cynicism:** While revenge and denial operate primarily in the context of an interpersonal relationship, cynicism ups the ante, by making love and trust themselves the problem. Now we have shifted from this person or this situation (eg a particular organization or cause) being the problem, to a stance where believing in or trusting anyone or anything is a fool's errand. Some would call this "realism", but it is a cold, alienated place from which to live. Getting caught in cynicism leaves a person detached and isolated from the human connection and warmth life has to offer. A person caught in cynicism can end up seeing relationships more through a manipulative, dog eat dog eat lens. For example, a person caught here might be inclined to organize themselves interpersonally around the questions: what can I get, and what can I get away with?
4. **Self-Betrayal:** Here, we might say Hillman is talking about cynicism turned inward. Now, instead of being cynical about those 'out there' we become cynical about our own essential nature. In this state, a person has turned on themselves. They come to see their loving nature, their creative inspirations, their idealistic ambitions as something petty or ridiculous, perhaps even meaningless. It is by extending our tender loving self that we set ourselves up for betrayal in the first place. So, it is understandable that we want to protect ourselves from this kind of hurt happening again. Getting caught in self-betrayal is getting caught in living defensively. For example, if it was my easy going loving nature that led me to this hurt, then I am going to put that part of myself in a back closet and lock the door. I am not going to live from that part of myself any more. "Self-betrayal becomes nothing other than Jung's definition of neurosis, inauthentic suffering. One no longer lives one's own form of suffering,....but through lack of courage to be, one betrays oneself." ("Loose Ends" page 74)

5. Paranoid Orientation: Hillman is not talking about our usual understanding of paranoia where I am caught in delusions about what nefarious things others might be saying about me, or what conspiracy might be afoot. The paranoid stance doubles down on living defensively. Now, one is dedicated to eliminating all risk. The intention is to banish the possibility of betrayal from life. Interpersonally, this stance manifests in loyalty oaths, and demands for proof of love and devotion. It might show up in an exaggerated possessive attitude, where power over and control of the other are the guiding values. This stance is in sharp contrast to a relationship based on love, which is grounded in trust and risk rather than power and control.

Betrayals start early. Parents might be intrusive or controlling. They might be insecure and fearful. They might be disinterested or distracted. They might be addicted. They might be harshly critical or physically violent. Our dragons will often incorporate some synthesis of these dangerous stances in their dance moves. For example, a child faced with harshly critical demeaning parents might learn to protect themselves by denying their natural exuberance and spontaneity. Their dragon might create a pleasing, accommodating style built on the sacrifice (self-betrayal) of their naturally energetic nature. Another child, facing similar conditions might go a different way. Their dragon might become a master of revenge, creating an array of capoeira-like oppositional moves designed to confound and frustrate their harshly demanding parents. This style might preserve the spirit of that child, but later in life, that person may find it difficult to have access to their more tender, vulnerable feelings in a way that supports them to open to a trusting loving connection. Yet a third child might be worn down to the refuge of cynicism. "If I can't trust my parents, who can I trust?" Their dragon might cultivate the moves of a master manipulator; 'If I am the only one I can count on, why not? It is every man for himself anyway'.

Desmond Tutu emphasizes the importance of forgiveness for the sake of the one who has been betrayed. In his own way, he is saying something similar to James Hillman; that to get stuck in one or more of the dangerous places ends up doing more damage to the one who was wounded in the first place. Another way to say it is that finding forgiveness for the one who has done us harm is important for our own well being and peace of mind. For Tutu, the context was often one where the perpetrator was not available or if they were, perhaps unrepentant; those victimized by the myriad of atrocities of apartheid, or parents who lost a child to terrorist violence for example. In the context of couple's therapy were are of course attempting to enable a healing conversation between partners.

In our work with couples we have observed four interrelated tasks that, taken together, can result in a healing conversation. Both partners have equally important work to do, work that requires emotional risk.

1. The wounded one must be willing to communicate the nature of the hurt they have experienced. The risk here has to do with revealing your vulnerability to the very one who has hurt you. This task coincides with the first two steps of "The Four Fold Path" articulated by Demond Tutu: telling the story and naming the hurt. We have observed that if a partner keeps bringing up an old betrayal, and it seems the "offending partner" is genuinely taking responsibility and expressing remorse, then it could be that this first task (Tutu's first two steps) is in some way incomplete. The wounded partner will typically begin telling the story with anger, and it may take many tellings before the salient details are revealed. Even then a bigger risk is required; naming the hurt. Again, this often begins in anger, but at some point the wounded one must risk dropping into the depth of their pain in an open and vulnerable way, in order to fully reveal the extent of the wound. In this

way the wounded partner can know that the wounding partner has witnessed the full depth of their pain.

2. The wounding one must be willing to listen, to take into themselves the impact they have had on their partner. The risk here has to do with being willing to open yourself to experience the pain you have caused your partner. The challenge is to stay with the sting of knowing you have caused hurt, resisting the impulse to explain or plead no ill intention. This task can be especially difficult for a person who carries a lot of shame, because they feel at risk of their own self being annihilated. Being vulnerable in this way makes it possible to have a deeper empathic knowledge of how you have affected your partner. That deeper empathy is validating and reassuring for your wounded partner, letting them know that you 'get' how you have affected them.
3. The wounding one, grounded in that empathic knowledge must find their regret/ remorse and offer that in an apology to the one they have hurt. Here, the vulnerability lies in acknowledging the wrong without expectation of acceptance or absolution, but simply out of a humble respect for the truth. This step aligns with the steps in 12 step work of taking a moral inventory and making amends, in this case, in relation to your partner. The challenge, from an existential perspective, involves standing in the uncertainty about whether your apology will be received. This step is not about what you will receive, but about what you are giving, without any strings attached.
4. The wounded one must make the move of forgiveness. They must take the risk of accepting the apology, and open their heart again to the one who hurt them. This step can take some time, and coincides with steps 3 and 4 of "The Four Fold Path": offering forgiveness, and renewing or releasing the relationship. Desmond Tutu stresses that forgiveness is not easy. James Hillman holds that forgiveness is more an experience of grace, rather than a decision arising from the ego. Several of the examples cited by Tutu exemplify Hillman's point.

Some betrayals are deal breakers, infidelity being a prototype. Forgiveness might be found, but the relationship might not survive. In the broad territory where core wounds are inevitably triggered, Hillman's point about the need to understand the event in a broader context is essential. Interpersonally speaking, when the wounding partner can demonstrate not only a deeper empathic understanding of their impact, and, as well, a greater consciousness of where their hurtful behavior originates in themselves, the wounded partner can have a greater confidence in opening their heart once again.

To be continued.....

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