THE MYTH OF INDEPENDENCE

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ABSTRACT: Literally or symbolically, a generation of children have been left on their own a great deal to fend for themselves and have grown up believing that independence and autonomy are the cornerstones of mental health, while dependence is pathological. In fact these notions are pure myth. The very nature of human existence, steeped as it is in the fear of aloneness and insecurity, is one of human interdependence. Indeed, it is the myth of independence, that masks the reality that one's life force turns out to be all the other people in one's life. Unwittingly imbuing children with false independence prepares them for any separations or detachments, issues that child and youth workers must address as they help children build their identity and character.

Everyone of us, probably, has questioned a friend about the proverbial desert island circumstance: Whom would you want to be with? What would you take? How would you live? Millions of us for years watched a television show, which turned these terrors into allegedly comedic situations. We ask these questions and laugh at answers because they distract us from the intense almost unthinkable fears of aloneness, abandonment, and independence with all the safety nets of society and culture stripped away.

Yet beneath our thoughts about being stranded on a desert island lies the subject of this essay: We are concerned here with the myth of independence perpetrated by a culture that unthinkingly demands independence when in fact it is not possible to achieve. Yet despite this obvious fact, children and adolescents are constantly being taught the value of independence by their parents and teachers, and then having this value reexamined if and when they engage in some form of counseling.

Put simply, one of the fundamental concerns of human service worker is the degree to which children exhibit dependence on others, peers or elders, and furthermore, whether this dependence appears to be, somehow, pathological. But notice the difficulty facing the professional if he or she has never thoughtfully considered the validity of the concept of independence, really the myth, in the first place. Granted, we all hope for degrees of autonomy in our family members, friends and clients. But is it possible that some of us, parents, teachers and workers alike, rush too quickly to the idea that any form of dependence and lack of self-sufficiency bespeak pathology that has to be "corrected" if the young person is to grow into a healthy adult? Do we not often speak of something called transference which may indeed at times be genuine dependence of a client on a counselor, a dependence which could be perceived as utterly normal and healthy?

Essentially, the essay rests on a definition of independence insisting that people remain resistant to the influence or control of others. But it is our purpose to suggest that the very nature of human existence is one of human interdependence in which inevitably, as Heidegger (1966), Levinas (1982, 1989) and May (1983) have suggested, our very lives are defined in great measure by the influence and yes, control of others, a fact that workers must seriously consider as they help young people "work through" matters of independence, dependence, and self-sufficiency. Making an already complex matter even more difficult, is that those working with the young necessarily engage not only in the narrative of their clients, but the cultural narratives (Ochs & Capps, 2001) from which both client and worker derive personal definition. Indeed, there are moments when it may be absolutely normal and expected that a worker finds himself or herself somewhat dependent on the client. Putting all psychological variables aside, is it not the case that workers depend on their clients for their very livelihood?

Not surprisingly, the desert island fantasy, replete with endless fables, actually bespeaks the fundamental terror of living alone, friendless. One thing the myth of independence surely provides is protection against the fear of dying *and* living alone. Granted, our relationships live inside us as part of what Heiddeger (1966) called the *Mitwelt and Eigenwelt*. But the objects of our relationships very definitely live outside us as real people, many of whom share our most profound intimacies. After all the jokes about desert island ship builders subside, what is it really that we tell our lovers: "I don't want to be on this earth without you." Within a minute of my father dying, I watched my mother bend down and kiss his forehead. Her head then lifted slightly and looking at him through tears, I heard her say, "I'll join you soon."

Indeed, we are joined to the hips of others, connected, united, attached, wedded, tied, stuck. Some of us never recover from the loss of a friend, a lover, a family member—what is the difference! Someone who is quite literally part of us is gone, and we discover that they have taken a part of us with them. The poet advised us that it is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all. In our distracted culture, we seem to be saying, "Don't ever forget, I'm my own man who's dead without you!"

It is true that the myth of independence masks the reality that my life force turns out to be all the other people in my life. Why would one wish to experience blessed moments without those special ones, or merely want to go on without them? What is there to go on for? We inevitably ask following the loss of a loved one. But if we're so independent and self sufficient, why these questions at all?

Baby boom children grew up steeped in the ideas of America's false worship of independence, which they experienced directly as the independence of their parents from one another as well as from the children. As soon as the words and concepts were mastered, many parents set about to teach their children to be able to play, spend time, work, study,

entertain themselves *on their own* (Roberts, 1994). Literally or symbolical-
ly latch key children, a generation of people grew up believing that being
on one's own was tantamount to developing a healthy sense of individu-
alism and, of course, the omnipresent essential known as esteem. At the
same time, it was only logically alleged that independence was necessary
for survival, even though this assertion is open to all sorts of questions.

   Notice that word survival. Like esteem, survival seems to be on the
lips of every American (Savin-Williams & Demo, 1993). Little wonder that
so many people recounting stories of personal unhappiness on television
refer to themselves as survivors. At first hearing, the word seems melo-
dramatic, exaggerated, but clearly it is meant to capture this phenomenon
of battling the world on one's own while desperately needing the assis-
tance of others, particularly those who have abandoned or abused and
thereby betrayed you. And the idea of battling is also not an exaggeration,
for at stake here is a sense of life and death. Somehow, the Darwinian
notion of survival of the fittest has come to encompass a generation of
people who learned early on that they would not be closely safeguarded
and guided, but would have to make it on their own, as if anybody real-
ly can. So when they do, they genuinely believe they have escaped the
claws of deception and death, and survived. They have come to us from
that desert island—or is it the island of emotional and/or physical deser-
tion?

   The notions of surviving and being on one's own have perfectly con-
crete aspects: children in America are left on their own a great deal to fend
for themselves (Wollons, 1993). Or they are left in the care of people other
than their parents, or to care for others who are equally dependent on
someone else for survival. The six year old 6-year-old sits for the three
year old 3-year-old, both of them frightened, the older one, probably,
more so since she has a remarkable responsibility to fulfill. She yearns,
one imagines, for others older than herself to perform the very function
she now performs. Still, there is no sense complaining as long ago the
child learned that no one was around to help in this genuine survival
struggle. Distracted America somehow eschews the notion of supervi-
sion. Every child, we learn, is far more mature than its chronological age.
Every child, but especially girls, are eleven going on twenty- five. And so
it is reported that 50 percent of America's 11-year-old children return from
school to an empty home. Earls and Carlson (1993) have it right. Adults
constantly transform the "technologies of parenting," but the needs of
children haven't changed in centuries. And one of these needs is simply
to have adults around to nurture, guide and supervise.

   We know this to be true merely by studying the normal terrors of chil-
dren who almost never are left alone, except at night in bed. All of us as
parents hear their periodic wailing and rush to their rooms as weeping or
bawling, they describe the monsters under their beds, the sound of the
thunder outside, the bugs creeping inside the walls, the ghosts in the clos-
ets. If children in average and predictable home environments are terri-
fied of aloneness, what must be going through the minds of children who,

years from now most likely will label themselves survivors, but who presently live these night terrors in the mornings and afternoons as well, and rarely if ever are comforted? (I would never pretend to know the answer to that proverbial question about whether a tree falling in the forest makes a noise if no one is around to hear it? But I do know the sounds each of us would make if stranded on a desert island. They are the same sounds made by children, late at night, who awake terrified, screaming for the safety of their parents' queen sized boat.)

While I have no verification of the notion, I tend to believe that the preoccupation with horror films and terrifying movies generally, which young people go to in droves, their faces buried in their arms during the ghastly scenes, are physical and emotional rehearsals or reprises for the genuine terrors they experience, both physically and emotionally. The films, in other words, are warm ups for or emotional replications of all too real events and feelings. If the emotions can be mastered, or as the psychologist would say, regulated, in darkened movie theaters by viewing films over and over again, then the child just may develop the strength to get through the everyday terrors experienced in aloneness, abandonment and outright abuse.

The myth of independence plays another role in the child's life. Unwittingly, imbuing a child with (false) independence prepares him or her for any separations or detachments, or more likely divorces that may occur, divorces that many children refer to as nightmares. Best I not depend too heavily on people (or on the connections between people) if there is any possibility they may not be around (for me) forever. The only one going to be around forever is me, so best I look out for number one.

Many parents will argue that the most important lesson for a child is to learn how to live an independent life. Interestingly, some parents start this instruction so early, the child couldn't possibly see the purpose of their teachings. Some parents even advance the notion that curfew laws instituted during adolescence preclude the development of this sense of independence; impose too many regulations on children and you detract from their power to make good judgments on their own. And so, children wander about the streets of their home towns, scoffing at pathetic friends who must be home by ten or eleven, or short of that, are required to telephone their parents if they anticipate being late. If not established in wholly punitive contexts, the curfew, beyond establishing boundaries for the child, stands as a constant reminder that parents do care for children. How is the child to know, for example, that total freedom shouldn't properly be interpreted as disinterest (Adler, 1991)? And hold in mind that permissiveness is perceived by the child as disinterest, which in turn leads to children growing up disliking themselves (Baumrind, 1991). Hold in mind as well, Erich Fromm's (1941) notion that when parents withdraw from children, the children become destructive. (Similarly, when parents act destructively toward children, Fromm alleged, children withdraw.)

It seems obvious that most young people dislike the notion of (false) independence that their parents seek to create in and for them. We need

only note how many popular songs speak to young peoples' need for attachment and the pain of separation. Obliged to act independently, many young people mourn the loss of attachments in their family, but remain unable to speak about these matters except to one another, and even then they may do so with shame and a sense of having betrayed their families (Cottle, in press).

Adding to the burden of many of these children is the fact that they must act in public as if their attachments to their family were perfectly normal, so that the public will perceive their family as perfectly normal (Cottle, 1980). On second thought, it is the nature and style of the attachments of family members one to another that people employ to assess the "normality" of the family in the first place. Perhaps the one time children seek a facsimile of independence is in reaction to overbearing or smothering parents, but this is but another survival technique meant to prevent children from being swallowed up by overly needy parents.

Granted, many teenagers demand independence and act as if they truly were living free and clear of their parents. But the name of one of many adolescent games is to practice living independently of one's parents (Erikson, 1950, 1968). So, like children on roller skates unable to skate backward, they push against the walls of their parents and by doing so propel themselves in some direction, at least for a while. When they get to the next wall, they merely turn around and push off all over again. Independent? Without the walls, there isn't much direction for the energy. Take the walls away, and you terrify the child, if not stymie her altogether.

So parent and child dance the dance known as the independence sham, in which parents complain of all the rebellion, children complain of all the resistance and oppressive attachment, and secretly, in healthy families at least, parents enjoy the child's attempt to stand on his or her own feet, and children remain thankful they don't have to pay room and board, and that the walls, Mom and Dad, aren't going anywhere.

Children's attempts to regain security often takes the form of erasing differences between themselves and others, seeking to become exactly like one's special peers by conforming to all their styles, costumes, appetites, linguistic traits and requests. Not so incidentally, Erikson (1950, 1968) theorized that the fundamental strength of the adolescent was not love, but fidelity. Parents often are saddened by these behaviors as they appear to mean that the child has sacrificed his/her entire personality for the sake of inclusion and security. But the story could be worse, as Americans have discovered in recent years. For Fromm pointed to other more extreme psychic mechanisms for regaining security that take the form of authoritarianism, or the worship of it often in an allegiance to Nazism, masochistic and sadistic strivings–what psychologists call the "acting in" and "acting out" of pathology–, abnormal dependence on groups (characteristic of so-called "proactive aggressive" young people, a desire to see others suffer, outright destructiveness and the goals of eliminating people, like one's fellow students and objects, as in the destruction of school buildings).

What, then, are we to do as we engage the young person struggling with issues of dependency, autonomy and self-sufficiency? We may begin by rethinking the very values and messages our society literally hurls at the young, and not merely through the mass media. We may begin to question the very nature of what is required of persons in order for them to become what we often unthinkingly label a "productive" member of society. A worker might consider definitions of healthy dependency that involve care, concern, and love for others, definitions suggesting that a healthy person, young or old, must be devoted to others, and must help others define themselves by dint of the degree of responsibility they take for these others. This, after all, is the essence of the Steiner (2001) position that says you are what I employ to measure and define my self. As David Hartman of the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem recently observed, "We fulfill our own tradition in the presence of the other" (in Carroll, 2002). In this context, one must seriously explore the very nature in which we all define our selves in terms of our relationships with others, professional youth workers included. This is essentially what George Herbert Mead (1934) described in the so-called "looking glass self," and what Heidegger (1966) had in mind when he defined the *Mitwelt* as the world with others, the world in which much of our inner most being comes to be defined. We never wrestle with ourselves without the presence in our minds of all the interactions with significant others.

We are forever dependent on those others. They build the homes, the schools, the offices, the streets, just as they build the foundation of our inner worlds and narratives. Granted, no culture lives without its dominant and lesser myths, all of which come to be part of the human drama we share with our fellow citizens. But if we are to genuinely understand, and appreciate, much less counsel the young, we must understand the structural flaws and misleading directives inherent in these myths. Then we must understand how these myths play into the identity formation of those we seek to guide, those young people, albeit living among millions of others, who reveal to us a sense that they are barely surviving on desert islands all too frequently created by others.

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