JOURNEYING IN THE WAY OF LOVE

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A PERSONAL REFLECTION...
... finding meaning in intimate relations ...
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INTRODUCTION

I view all of life from a Christian worldview, and as such, tend to shy away from stage theories. Why?... because it tends to put people (and God) into “boxes”. I must admit, I gravitate towards Erickson psychosocial stage theory based on its universality and as it seems to capture some central issues in my life. Levinson’s “season’s of a man’s life” theory appealed likewise. But I just can’t bring myself to see lifespan development as a series of crises to be overcome or benchmarks to be achieved. Instead, I think development hinges one fundamental need — that of relationship. James Fowler (1981) maintains that a lifelong quest for meaning begins when infants learn to trust their caregivers. Henry Cloud (1999) concurs:

“Relationship or bonding... is at the foundation of God’s nature. Since we are created in His likeness, relationship is the most fundamental need, the very foundation of who we are. Without relationship, without attachment to God and others, we can’t be ourselves.”

Furthermore, Fowler’s provocative theory makes another point very convincingly: no matter what our age, we seem to need to impose some sense of meaning on life. As social beings, we can only find that meaning in intimate relationship.

According to Clinton and Sibcy (2002, 23), our attachment styles [relationship rules or our internal working model wrt Bowlby (1969)] develops our core beliefs; a set of basic assumptions about ourselves and others. These basic tenets: (a) shape our expectations about current and future relationships, and that these early social experiences can leave a lasting stamp on later development over our entire lifespan; (b) colour the way we see the world generally and how to behave in it [in close relationship]; (c) impose a sense of culturally and historically relevant meaning, and (d) are deeply, morally engrained.

Accordingly, I will analyse my own life along gross developmental periods, namely infancy & childhood, adolescence, early adulthood and middle adulthood; not adhering strongly to any one stage theory, but to make sense of my life in terms of some of the more pertinent ethological (attachment), humanistic, and contextual-dialectical theories [after Riegel (1976)] with relationship as the focal point.
MY INFANCY AND CHILDHOOD

I don’t recall many memories of my life prior to age six. I suffered a major trauma at five, which hospitalized me for 11 months in an acute burn unit. Heavily sedated for most of that time, I likely suffer from retrograde amnesia — a neurological safeguard against pain-filled memories of intense trauma. Freud’s (1938) “infantile amnesia” may also play a role. Whatever the reason, my memories of these years are fleeting at best, and may be questionably influenced by strongly entrenched parental narratives, leading me to suspect that some may be “false” memories as described by Loftus (1993).

Memory accuracy aside, I’m beginning to appreciate that our entire lives are determined, in varying degrees, by our relationships with others, as identified in object relations and attachment theory. The security of our relations, first with our primary caregivers and then in subsequent relationships, deeply affects our ability to direct our own actions; to act instead of react and ultimately to foster stable, intimate relationships in life.

Intimacy has always been an issue for me, even as far back as my infancy. Siefert, Hoffnung & Hoffnung (2000, 161) write: “Newborn infants…who experience discomfort during feeding and elimination, and who do not communicate their needs clearly often are difficult for their parents and are more likely to experience problems in developing close relationships with them.” I was a “choleic” (and choleric) baby and didn’t attach well with my mother. According to Ainsworth & Bowlby (1991), “The achievement of object permanence is thought to be an important basis for separation anxiety and attachment development.” Siefert et al. (2000, 172) also remind us that “Attachment patterns in infancy are predictive of attachment in childhood, into adolescence, and adulthood, and the attachment relationships parents experienced in their own childhoods are related to the attachment relationships they develop with their own children.” Such is my legacy, as I developed an avoidant (insecure) attachment with my mom, who was very likely insecurely attached to hers. As a less securely attached toddler (2-3 yrs), I didn’t tend to learn well from my parents. Avoidant infants are said to often respond with indifference and resistance to their parents’ attempts to help or teach them (Seifert et al., 2000, 166); this was an obvious childhood trait of mine.
Furthermore, Dowling (2000, 24) points out that “we all need others to help us learn and children need adults and other children. A child’s ability to form good relationships not only helps their personal development but helps them to progress intellectually.” I was a “wall-flower” most of my young life; books, not kids, were my friends. From early in life, my ability to form good relations was stunted; in part, due to my struggles with poor self-image and lack of confidence.

Katz (1995) suggests that early experiences mould our confidence: “Young children’s levels of confidence are coloured by their early experiences… the thoughts they have about themselves and other people’s reactions to them.” Dowling (2000, 2 & 4) adds:

“a person’s confidence is linked closely to three factors: self-concept, self-esteem and self-knowledge… even babies build a picture of themselves from the way they are regarded and treated, especially by the people who are closest to them. One of the most important things we can give our children is a positive view of themselves. Without this they will be flounder throughout life and be constantly seeking reassurances from others as they cannot seek it from within.”

I’ve never held a positive self-view. Object relations theory tells us that young children only value themselves if they have experienced unconditional love of a parent -- children who are not so sure of being loved can be anxious and demand attention. This anxious behaviour can invoke disapproval or dismissal from the parent, with the ultimate consequence of the child’s self-image further diminishing. Because a child cannot separate it’s Self from its behaviour, the child gets the message, “I’m not liked” or “I don’t matter” (Dowling, 2000, 9). My entire life has been a continual search for acceptance and reassurance; that I am indeed lovable.

Middle childhood began the period of “unpopularity” and endless game of “people pleasing”; Siefert et al. describe this part of my childhood with stinging accuracy:

“Because [unpopular children] lack the social skills needed to successfully join and participate in peer groups, they are blamed by peers for their own deviance and are often actively disliked and excluded from activities... Children who are rejected by their peers and have no good friend by age 10 have lower levels of aspiration, participate in the few organisations and activities, have a less active social lives and experience more psychological problems, including depression and anxiety in adolescents and early adulthood...”

My disposition for performance was strongly entrenched during these years: who I was mattered little, what I could do (particularly academically) mattered most. Dowling
(2000, 76) explains, “... children who are exhorted to compete with others and to complete tasks in order to gain adult approval, are not likely to be disposed towards learning but rather to perform...” As an approval addict, my emotional wellbeing was contingent upon how well I could do against other students in school. This, I believe, was the crucible for my perfectionist tendencies, which continue to plague me to this very day.

My father’s strong Protestant work ethic and his desire for me to have more in life than he had, placed additional performance pressures on me. Art was emotionally distant; in fact, the only emotion he ever showed the world was anger; modeled well by him, my primary emotive response to most any stressor is anger. His Presbyterian upbringing made him a strict disciplinarian and I never heard my father say he was proud of me or that he loved me. Seifert et al. (2000, 228) point out that “Children of authoritarian parents tend to be relatively distrustful of others and unhappy with themselves, and to have poorer peer relations, poorer school adjustments, and lower school achievement...” Motivated by fear of his anger, these fears kept me from saying “No” to others as I became compliant. Approval seeking continued to drive me; when someone wanted something from me, I had a need to give in (or “sell out”) to please my symbolic “father”.

MY ADOLESCENCE

Sigelman & Schaffer (1991, 315) state that “the concept of identity is slippery, but refers mainly to self-definition – a firm and coherent sense of who you are, where you are heading, and where you fit into society.” But since I’ve never felt like I “fit in”, and not having ever possessed a true sense of where I was headed (especially not then), I can’t say I’ve ever succeeded at forming a coherent sense of identity. This is where Erikson’s psychosocial theory of development gains credence with me. Why? Because identity formation is the keystone of his personality development theory, further refined by Marcia’s (1966) identity status paradigm drawing heavily on Eriksonian criteria of self-exploration and commitment.

Like Erikson, Marcia viewed adolescence as a time of major changes in self; confirmed in my own life as well. I went from a painfully shy, awkward pre-teen from a neglected social status (Sigelman & Shaffer, 1991, 422) to a rebellious, thrill-seeking sex maniac (with no change in social status). These same authors (1991, 317) report that the
four identity statuses or types identified by Marcia (identity achievers, identity moratoriums, identity foreclosers, and identity diffusers) are age-related; admittedly my identity wasn’t fully achieved before by 35th birthday — certainly not during adolescence. The process of individuation [something I think I’m still working on], or becoming a separate and independent person, appears to follow fairly predictable pattern, according to Seifert et al. (2000, 415): “differentiation, practice, and experimentation, rapprochement and consolidation of self. Identity formation involves selectively keeping and integrating certain aspects of one’s early childhood identity and discarding others. Successful resolution of the identity conflicts typical of adolescents depends in part on having adequate opportunities to experiment with different identities and roles.” My experimentation did not seem to permit successful resolution.

My adolescent emotional state lined up with Dusek & Flaherty’s (1981) idea that “most adolescents emerge from this period of life with essentially the same degree of self-esteem they had at the outset.” Deeply craving my father’s unconditional love and acceptance, but never really allowed close enough to truly experience it, I’ve always felt inadequate. I blamed myself for not being worthy enough to warrant his love. Psycho dynamically speaking, this perceived inadequacy lead to deep-seated feelings of inferiority: during adolescence, I built a “false” self around the son I thought he wanted me to be, erecting “ego walls” to hide my low self-image and to cover up my woundedness. This concept of “false” self played a big part in my adolescent development; Siefert et al. (2002, 379-80) quoting Josselson (1990) helped me to understand that I was the teen who engages in a false self, trying to impress and win the approval of the opposite sex, firstly, then my peers, and lastly my parents:

“Josselson’s ideas about individuation dovetail with Erikson’s theory, which holds that the major task of adolescence is to resolve the crisis of identity successfully. In forming an identity, and adolescents selectively accepts or rejects the many different aspects of herself that she acquired as a child and forms and more coherent and integrated sense of unique identity... An adolescence increasing capacity for abstract thought and self-understanding plays a central role in this process. As adolescence experiment with different roles in their search to create a coherent sense of identity, many experienced a sense of false self, that is, a sense that one is acting in ways that do not reflected one is true self as a person, or the “real me.” Teens who engaged in false-self behaviour as a healthy way to experiment with new roles reported more positive feelings about themselves, high self-worth, greater hopefulness about the future, and more knowledge of the true
selves than teens who engaged in false self behaviour to please, impress, to win the approval of parents and peers.”

Unfortunately, my adolescent friendships, instead of hinging on “mutual intimacy and self disclosure” and instead of involving like-minded individuals who could confide in me and me in them, were strained by the lack of trust (self-disclosure was difficult), hangover shyness, and negative blows to my ego from peers consistent with the reinforcement-affect theory (Clore & Byrne, 1974).

Another arena that seemed crucial to my development was my morality. I found Kohlberg’s theory of moral development hollow as it “focuses so much on moral reasoning that it almost entirely ignores moral affect and moral behaviour... providing an incomplete (bias) view of moral development.” (Sigelman & Shaffer, 1991, 395) As I had no religious background or teaching, my moral development was contributed to mostly by my parents through being (adequate) role models, reinforcing moral actions and punishing immoral actions. In their own way, they used “the discipline or technique of induction so that their children might understand why our misbehaviour was wrong” (Sigelman & Shaffer, 1991, 398) which didn’t always yield the desired effects with me. At age 17, I recall experiencing “cognitive disequilibrium” where, as a junior uni student, I experienced discrepancies between my own thinking about pre-marital sex and that of my parents, and other individuals in my dormitory. Seifert et al. (2000, 360) explain it this way:

“Adolescents evaluate their actions on the basis of principles of some sort... these principles are rather conventional; they are borrowed either from ideas expressed by immediate peers and relatives or from socially accepted rules and principles, whatever they may be. If friends agree that premarital sex is permissible, many teenagers are likely to adopt this idea as their own, at least as a general principle. But if friends or family believe premarital sex is morally wrong, teenagers may adopt this alternative belief as the principal. (Note, however, that whether a teenager actually acts according to these principles is another matter. Moral action does not always follow from moral belief.)”

I wasn’t able to wrestle with or come to terms with my entrenched morality until after I became a Christian at 32 years of age.
MY EARLY ADULTHOOD

Biblically, early adulthood is all about the notion of “leaving & cleaving” (Gen. 2:24): the focus is once again on relationships and their changing nature. Establishing independence requires gaining emotional independence from parents as well as setting up a separate residence. The safe-base function parents provide for the adolescent shifts during early adulthood -- to a significant other, a spouse, or a friend.

I reckon my early adulthood was a continuing “journey” of self discovery, personality and morality development. I aimlessly wandered “the Road Less Travelled”, attempting to find the suitable path and the right “life mate”, making ill-informed decisions about marriage and children. Peck’s psychodynamic theories about ego boundaries, identity and “risk of loss” make a lot of sense to me. Peck (1978, 86) was the first to admit the development of ego boundaries is a process that continues through childhood, into adolescence and even into early adulthood, but he thinks the boundaries established later are more psychic than physical. But, he spoke directly into my life when he wrote:

“… it’s lonely behind these boundaries. Most of us feel our loneliness to be painful and yearn to escape from behind the walls of our individual identities to a condition in which we can be more unified with the world outside ourselves… reality can be known only by the oneness experienced through a giving up of ego boundaries. Ego boundaries must be hardened before they can be softened. An identity must be established before it can be transcended. One must find one’s self before one can lose it.” (Peck, 1978, 87, 97)

Attachment theory, it’s perceptions of love, commitment, openness and differentiation are strongly poignant during this by-way of life’s pathway. I discovered that my attachment type left me predisposed to what Peck defines as dependency; as I “never felt ‘full-filled’ or had a sense of completeness. I always felt ‘a part of me was missing’. I tolerated loneliness very poorly. Because of my lack of wholeness I had no real sense of identity, and defined myself solely by my relationships.” (Peck, 1978, 99) The Vaillant’s (1977, 1990) theories on adaptive mechanisms (Grant Study at Harvard) also shed some light on my discoveries from early adulthood. Siefert et al. (2000, 466) explain it this way:

“[The Vaillant’s] came to three basic conclusions about adult development... First, growth and development are a lifelong process. The men in the study clearly showed evidence of personality and moral development after age 20
and at least up to age 50. Second, isolated events, unexpected or traumatic as they might be, rarely mould individual lives; rather, sustained relationships with other people are what shape lives. Third, the adaptive mechanisms, or coping styles, that people used to adjust to life events determine their level of mental health."

The Vaillant’s propose a “Normative Crisis” stage theory, which tends to confirm both Erikson’s adult life patterns of *intimacy versus isolation* and Peck’s views on dependence and freedom to love. I see that as I adopted unhealthy adaptive mechanisms, which led to many repeated failed attempts at relationship. My avoidant attachment style seemed to regulate my emotions, as Clinton & Sibcy (2002, 179) suggest: “persons with avoidant attachment tend to keep people at a distance, avoid true intimacy… are also quite prone to addictive behaviours, which serve as a substitute for intimacy, and they tend to keep feelings at a distance…”

Early adulthood, for me, became a time of self-examination -- of deepening moral reasoning (belief systems) and significant changes to my personhood. Change found its roots in the intimacy I craved with my first wife, Corrine, and in sustained relations with my in-laws; both were life-changing experiences which led me to a moral cross-roads. The choices I faced then were not just choices between adaptive mechanisms, but a choice between a pathway to healing and the pathway to continued pain. I discovered that the first step to knowing which fork in the road to take was to face the absolute truth about myself and what brought me to where I was. My journey to healing, which ultimately lead to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, involving me in what Clinton & Sibcy (2002, 262) refer to as “a corrective and relational experience, a journey at the centre of which God lives and works.”

**MIDDLE ADULTHOOD**

My “CROSS-road experience” came in middle adulthood when Corrine asked me for a divorce in 1997: an identity crisis ensued, propelling me inexorably toward the life-changing nexus that prompted me to challenge even my most fundamental beliefs. I began examining my entire life, morally and otherwise through each experience; realizing that I was trying to live up to what others wanted me to be, having lost touch with who I
really was in Christ. It was this incongruence that lead to confusion, tension, anxiety, vulnerability and defensiveness in past relationships (Jolley & Mitchell, 1996, 419).

Siefert et al. (2000, 15) explain that “a moral sense is never formed completely, but deepens steadily throughout the lifespan, at each new age borrowing and incorporating ideas and commitments from all of a person’s previous experiences.” I revisited my motives and morals: revising my relationship rules to replace the old ones I had learned as a child, so that now my relationship behaviours promoted more closeness and intimacy. My moral goals gradually became reconciled with self-identity — who “I” was became increasingly defined by what I believed to be right and wrong (good or bad). I began aligning my “real self” with true self (my moral ideals), in true Rogerian fashion, which promoted harmony between my self concept and my experiences and feelings; toward what Rogers called congruence. All the while, I grew closer to God and others as I learned to stop hiding; I gave up on my ego defences and on isolation — all the while gaining a greater appreciation of Peck’s (1978, 67) words:

“… for as we negotiate the curves and corners of our lives, we must continually give up parts of ourselves... most people... elect not to continue with their life journeys – to stop short by some distance – in order to avoid the pain of giving up parts of themselves. For... growth... to occur, a proportionate amount of “the old self” must be given up.”

I had to give up most of what I believed, to allow for further faith development.


“Through serious questioning and analysis of alternative beliefs and values, some adults find sense of meaning that is their own unique philosophy rather than one they have adopted quite uncritically form other people.” According to Fowler, this transition is unlikely unless a person is uprooted form their familiar environment and exposed to new ideas… so it was with me, as I got remarried, shifted to Australia from Canada, left everything I knew behind and returned to Bible College to study for the ministry! Fowler found that adults can fit into any of the stages from 2 to 6; I find myself squarely in stage 4.

From these experiences, I know I was most motivated to find God when I became aware of my earthly helplessness and vulnerability. When I held an insecure attachment style, my fears and unwillingness to face myself directly
deadened me from living life to its fullest. But as Clinton & Sibcy (2002, 157) exhort, I am no longer “... crippled by this insecure attachment style, shrinking away from fully investing [myself] in meaning, intimate relationships and failing to be motivated to carry out God’s purpose [for my life].” Instead, God is now my principle attachment figure; God and His heaven is now my ultimate secure base. Jesus’ death on the Cross has bought my freedom by handing me the keys to the eternal throne room, and to unlocking the secret to loving and lasting relationship; for the first time in my life, secure attachment is possible.

The sense of identity and the accompanying personal strength allows me to form stronger values and to commit myself more fully to others. It is the internal glue helps me to decide what I like and what I don’t like. It has also helped the “who am I now” to remain stable over time and across various situations. With a stronger sense of identity, I’m able to stick to my commitments, to my relationships, goals and even to the precepts of my faith.

As I look forward to the latter half of middle adulthood, and beyond into old age, I trust the Lord will assist me to further understand my purpose and the meaning to life; and I trust He will show me my purpose as a counsellor as well.

CONCLUSIONS

After examining critically the literature against my own life, I’m forced to adopt a quasi-organismic (contextual) perspective of human development; one that regards human development “as an ongoing drama or interplay between changes with the organism and changes n the environment, or in the physical, social, and historical contexts in which [humans] are embedded.” (Overton, 1984)

This ‘journal’ obviously expounds a dialectic perspective: one which varies with major issues surrounding human developmental theory and one which accepts: (a) John Locke’s theory, that as infants we are born “tabula rasa” [a blank slate], waiting (anticipating) to be written on by our experiences; (b) nature and nurture, siding with Locke again and seeing human development as fluid, taking many different forms depending on which specific events we experience over our lifetime [biological and environmental factors hold equal importance]; (c) that although we are indeed shaped by
our environment, we are unequivocally active in our own development, especially as adults where we take charge of our lives, influencing those around us and actively producing developmental changes we experience; (d) cognitive and humanist assumptions about human development occurring in a variety of ways, sometimes stage-like and at other times continuous [incremental or gradual] and quantitative; (e) that different people undergo different sequences of change and timetables of development widely differ; and finally, (f) lifespan development can only be best understood if changes in one period of life are viewed in relation to changes during other periods of life [the continuity principle].
REFERENCES


