

## **Harry Guntrip: The Disowned Self and the Healing Relationship**

(Adapted from my manuscript, *Failed Parental Love and the Lost Self*)

We are shaped by our experiences from the day we are born. Who we become and the way we relate to the world have much more to do with our early childhood experiences and the kind of emotional nurturing we receive than our biology. We tend to give too much importance to the role of our genetic makeup in determining the development of our personalities. Research is revealing that even our genes are subject to the influence of the environment. We are not born to be axe murderers or humanitarians, or world leaders or panhandlers, or drug addicts or missionaries. Whatever biological vulnerabilities and dispositions we may have, our environment will influence their expression.

How parents express their love is crucial to the emotional and personal development of the child. When parents, however well-intended they may be, fail to value the emotional self of the child, when they fail to be attuned to his or her uniqueness and individuality, the child is at risk of entering adulthood as a casualty of failed attachment, that can result in feelings of depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and an inability to experience close, satisfying interpersonal relationships.

The internationally recognized psychoanalytic psychotherapist, Harry Guntrip, was a victim of failed parental love. The damage done by his parents shaped the course of his life. As a child Guntrip learned to survive in a world without love, but at the cost of being unable to freely experience his emotional self. The very core of his being was disowned and pushed underground, becoming lost and inaccessible. As a result, in his adult life he was deeply emotionally disconnected from others. He was in treatment for many decades to repair the emotional damage done by his parents.

Guntrip's strong desire to understand himself and his deep feelings of disconnection from other humans was the motivation that drove him to become a psychologist. The pain of his childhood found a positive, creative outlet in his chosen field of study, in which he

sought not only to better understand his own psyche, but also to help others who were emotionally damaged victims of their childhoods.<sup>i</sup>

Over the course of his life, he became a recognized authority in his field and developed his own theory of psychopathology and psychoanalytic treatment. Ultimately, however, at the age of 71 near the end of his life, despite his many theoretical contributions to the field of psychology, Guntrip made the rather startling admission that in the realm of psychological treatment “Theory is only a schizoid defense. It doesn’t lead to change. This only occurs in an enduring personal relationship.”<sup>ii</sup> Guntrip came to this important realization through his own experiences as a patient in treatment. It was a profound insight that all psychotherapists should take to heart.

In his practice as psychologist, Guntrip was deeply committed to his patients, and yet, as his psychoanalytic biographer, Jeremy Hazell, revealed, for much of his life Guntrip was troubled by the painful emotional memories of a childhood bereft of love and marked by physical and mental cruelty.<sup>iii</sup> As a result of his early traumatic experiences, Guntrip had recurrent episodes of overwhelming depression and exhaustion. So deeply was he damaged by the lack of emotional bonding in his childhood, he was unable as an adult to feel truly attached to other humans.

Guntrip’s childhood was harsh. His mother was strong-willed and energetic, but she had an embittered and domineering personality, and a bad temper, these features having their origin in her own dysfunctional family. She was a selfish woman, who was interested only in her own needs, and who routinely resorted to beatings to obtain submission from her son. Guntrip’s father was kind, but he was a passive figure, submitting to his wife’s rule. Neither of his parents ever called him by his first name, and Guntrip could recall no physical intimacy with his parents. In her advanced years Guntrip’s mother confessed to him, “I don’t think I ever understood children. I could never be bothered with them.”<sup>iv</sup> Whether she recognized it or not, her confession was a tragic admission of her failings as a parent.

Love in Guntrip's home was based on him being what his mother wanted him to be. In her presence Guntrip's young emotional self was not allowed room to breathe and grow. He experienced only punishment from his mother when he dared to allow his emotions to surface. Over time his inner emotional needs for intimacy became cut off and disowned. This was his young mind's unconscious way of protecting itself.

Guntrip's younger brother died when Guntrip he was three and a half. The sudden death of his infant brother, who had been under the care of the same cold mother he knew, fixed in Guntrip's young imagination the mortal danger of revealing his emotional self. The vivid memory of his dead brother in his mother's arms haunted his memory in his adulthood. Following his brother's death, Guntrip came down with an undiagnosed illness, perhaps related to the trauma of his brother's death. He eventually recovered from his illness, but around the age of five he began to withdraw from his mother, and within a few years, as a way of surviving, Guntrip had learned to repress the emotionally isolated child inside. He came to use intellectualizing at the expense of spontaneous feelings to defend against his mother's controlling influence.

Having never been allowed to be himself, having never been seen as a "person" in his mother's eyes, Guntrip entered adulthood feeling a stranger to himself, as well as feeling disconnected from others. His emotions were unable to flow spontaneously. At a deep level he felt emotionally cut off. Guntrip described his emotional reality this way: "My feeling self does not live in this world...I know I could catch myself 'looking through' or 'looking over' people. A really sociable personality was something I desired rather than possessed, and in practice was more forced than felt."<sup>v</sup>

Guntrip first entered psychoanalysis at the age of 35, recognizing that he needed help in repairing the emotional damage that had been done to him as a child. He was in treatment with different therapists for many decades, finally ending his long stretch of analysis at the age of 68. Guntrip was treated by two well-known object relations theorists for a number of years: first by Fairbairn, at the age of 48, and then by Winnicott at the age of 61.

On reading Hazell's detailed exploration of the hundreds of hours of psychoanalysis that Guntrip received over a span of more than thirty years, much based on Guntrip's own meticulous notes of his treatment, one is left with the clear impression that Guntrip's emotional healing would have been much accelerated if the treatment approach of his therapists had been less dependent on theory-oriented interpretations, and more focused on "real" spontaneous exchanges, inviting Guntrip's fragile, disowned emotional self to emerge and engage with the other human in the room. Instead, what occurred was that treatment sessions, by centering on arcane Freudian related notions of aggressive and libidinal drives, had the unintended negative effect of annoying Guntrip and amplifying his feeling of emotional disconnection—the very problem for which he was seeking help.

Fairbairn, Guntrip's earlier therapist, was particularly prone to relating in an intellectually distant way, with the unintended effect of impeding progress in treatment. What Guntrip had needed was not intellectualizing—a skill which he had developed in his childhood, and which had served as a *defense against his inner feelings*. What Guntrip needed was a genuine engagement with a therapist that would in certain ways provide him with what had been denied him by his parents: uncritical acceptance of his personhood. As a child Guntrip had learned how to hide his feelings. He had never learned how to express his true feelings without fear of devaluation and punishment. The consequence was that his core emotions became alien to him. What he needed was a therapist who would invite the unfolding of his inner self. What Guntrip needed to learn was how to live "in" life, how to connect emotionally.<sup>vi</sup>

In the course of his lengthy psychoanalysis Guntrip came to realize that in the healing process, *insight alone is not sufficient for change*. From his own experience in treatment, Guntrip came to regard the quality of the therapeutic relationship as crucial in promoting emotional growth. To help the client access and experience the split off, hidden part of himself, he needed a therapist that engaged with him in treatment in a "real" way. What Guntrip wanted was a more real, personal connection with his analyst, which would allow him to grow as a person and learn to experiment with the threatening, split off

emotions inside him that aroused fears of rejection, abandonment, and annihilation of his inner self.

Late in his life, Guntrip finally found that special, engaging therapist he was seeking. The therapist was Winnicott—a person who had a warm, personable manner. In the presence of Winnicott’s natural, spontaneous, more “real” style of relating, Guntrip was able to experience himself in a new way.<sup>vii</sup> He was allowed to see Winnicott’s “humanness.”<sup>viii</sup> He felt he was being related to as a real person—an experience denied him in childhood.

In treatment with Winnicott, Guntrip was gradually able to experience the security of being himself, an experience which his mother never gave him.<sup>ix</sup> The split off part of Guntrip’s self, that emotional part that he had never learned to experience as a child, began to emerge. It was through the relationship itself that Winnicott showed Guntrip the way to healing.<sup>x</sup> With Winnicott he learned to be “alive and creative.”<sup>xi</sup> With Winnicott, Guntrip felt valued for who he was.

As children, we all want to believe that our parents love us. On the path to his recovery, the hardest truth that Guntrip had to face and accept was that his mother had never loved him. It took him almost half a lifetime to accept that awful reality. Until his very late years, he had continued to rationalize his mother’s actions toward him. Even Winnicott, despite his more personable, honest approach in treatment, had unwittingly conspired in sustaining Guntrip’s wishful belief that his mother had loved him, and that only financial circumstances had shut off her love.

After he had ended his treatment sessions with Winnicott, Guntrip, on his own, continued to explore his inner emotions, and eventually came to the painful emotional reality that his mother had never loved him. Guntrip came to this *emotional truth* through a series of dreams in which the stark, sinister coldness of his mother opened up before him in a way he could no longer rationalize or deny. By opening himself up to the emotional pain of his childhood Guntrip was able to finally release himself from the emotional clutches of

his mother and be true to himself. Only then was he able to feel reconnected with his disowned emotional self, and feel more alive and connected with other human beings.

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<sup>i</sup> Hazell, *H.J.S. Guntrip: A Psychoanalytical Biography* (1996, p. xi)

<sup>ii</sup> Landis, *Discussions with Harry Guntrip*. (1981, p. 114)

<sup>iii</sup> Hazell, *H.J.S. Guntrip: A Psychoanalytical Biography* (1996)

<sup>iv</sup> Guntrip, *My experience of analysis with Fairbairn and Winnicott*. (1975, p. 149)

<sup>v</sup> Hazell, *H.J.S. Guntrip: A Psychoanalytical Biography* (1996, p. 65)

<sup>vi</sup> Hazell, *H.J.S. Guntrip: A Psychoanalytical Biography* (1996, p. 89)

<sup>vii</sup> Guntrip, *My experience of analysis with Fairbairn and Winnicott*. (1975, p. 146)

<sup>viii</sup> Hazell, *H.J.S. Guntrip: A Psychoanalytical Biography* (1996, p. 263)

<sup>ix</sup> Guntrip, *My experience of analysis with Fairbairn and Winnicott*. (1975, p. 155)

<sup>x</sup> Hazell, *H.J.S. Guntrip: A Psychoanalytical Biography* (1996, pp. 75, 149)

<sup>xi</sup> Guntrip, *My experience of analysis with Fairbairn and Winnicott*. (1975, p. 153)