

Annette's Struggle to Become More Self-Confident

Annette had no confidence in her looks, abilities, and personal worth, due to incessant criticism from her mother. Below is her own description of her life, followed by a discussion of her pathogenic beliefs and what she needed to do to change. (Quotes from: Missildine, W.H., 1963, pp. 42-47 in: *Your Inner Child of the Past*, Simon and Schuster, New York.)

When her therapist asked Annette to write out how her “inner child of the past” functions within her and affects her life, this is what she wrote:

“My particular ‘child of the past’ has forced me to tear up the last fifteen things I have tried to write because I am ashamed of what I said and the way that I have said it, and also consider them unworthy. This is by way of apology in advance, so as to protect myself. Why am I like this?

“The criticism that has paralyzed my every thought and action is within myself. I am sitting here and judging my every word, judging them to be bad. This reaction to my performance is ever within me whether it be in regard to writing or cooking or driving or walking down the street (an act that is almost impossible for me).

“I believe I can give a description of the ‘child of the past’ in action. Today is Sunday and on Sundays I revert almost completely to my past life. There is no respite from it anywhere. I am, or feel myself to be completely alone in a frightening world that I cannot cope with. Everyone is angry and I am bad and not capable of an action that will please. I have taken my temperature eight times today, watching the red line with great anxiety and feeling relief from the anxiety for only a moment or two when the thermometer says normal, and then a few moments later repeating the procedure again. I am also fat today, although the scale said that I weigh 102 and I am five feet three. I had tried on my tightest clothes and felt no relief from the fear of being fat when they fit as they always have.

“I had company for dinner. My hands shook and my heart pounded because in my opinion the meal was terrible and the people were thinking how inadequate I am, and most terrible of all, how ugly and repellent I am. I actually have no way of telling how I look. To me, every woman in the world is pretty and only I am hideous. I have been told that I am attractive and some men seem to find me so but their words make no impression at all on me or on my opinion of myself.

“As I sit here now, I can remember the words most frequently said to me when I was a child, words I now use on myself when I fail to live up to my expectations. The words? ‘Ugly, fat cow,’ and even as I write this, I cringe as I cringed when they were used about me all of my childhood years. However, the fact that I cringe does not alter the fact that I said them to myself this very day when I cooked the roast too long and when I tried to walk into the drugstore and had to retreat in abject humiliation because of anxiety that threatened to become panic. Shame, anxiety, and self-criticism are almost all of the emotions that I have on Sunday.

“What were Sundays like in the past? What is different about Sunday? On Sundays my mother was angry. When I would wake in the morning and go down to the library I would see her sitting in the tall wing chair and I could tell by one look at her face that she was not going to speak to me today. Her face was a mask of hatred, and I could feel the familiar tightening in my chest and the stomach ache and horrible anxiety about it all and the dull fear of cancer or bleeding to death and the resolve never to tell anyone of this shameful thing. I would try to talk to her, but she hated me today and so I couldn’t speak. I would go into the kitchen and prepare breakfast for my brothers, and my dad. I would listen with fear for a sound of her coming into the kitchen—and soon she would. She would set the table, all the time giving me looks of hatred from under her thick and beautiful eyebrows. I would think, from the few looks I would glimpse of her from under my lowered and ashamed eyes, how beautiful she was and how beautiful she had always seemed to me.

“I would think of how ugly I was and of her hatred when she would tell me how wonderful it would have been to have a tall, thin, dark-haired little girl with blue eyes. A little girl who looked like my cousin and not ‘like his family.’ I could feel her eyes on my fat arms and stomach and I would have liked to hide but there was no escape. I could feel her hatred of me permeate the room, and I could feel the lump in my throat when my older brother came down. She fussed over him, giving him food and attention. When she would do the same for my little brother and, dutifully and resentfully, feed my father, I could hardly control my tears. She would never make any attempt to see that I had anything to eat. Of course, I was dreadfully overweight, a shame and a humiliation to her, and I didn’t and don’t blame her. As I would walk across the room or try, very inadequately, to do the dishes, she would mutter her favorite words about me: ‘Ugly, fat cow!’ The lump in my throat would grow almost balloon-size and then she would mutter, with unconcealed hatred in her voice and face, ‘She’s crying again!’ Then I would spend the rest of the day in the bathroom, overcome with fear and shame. The same thing would be repeated at dinner and at night.

“Yes, there was my father but I knew from past experience what he would say: ‘Pay it no mind,’ or ‘Here’s a dollar. Go to the movies and forget it.’ There was no one I could turn to. I was alone. I was alone as I am today. At nine or ten o’clock I would go to bed. I would lie there and cry with the pillow over my head, so that no one would hear me. The silent tears are what I remember of the nights — that and not being able to sleep. The anxiety would grow greater and greater as sleep would fail me.

“Yet in a way I didn’t want to sleep, because if I did, it would be morning too soon. ‘Please God,’ I would murmur, ‘let me be a grownup.’ But I was only ten and the years until I would be grown were interminable. Still no sleep. At one o’clock, if I could hear the sound of their voices, I would sit outside their door and listen . . . I heard a great many things about me that way. All of the things I heard hurt me. I was a humiliation to her, just as I am to me today. I had no enthusiasm or verve. I was unhappy and a trial to them both, as I am to me today.

“Listening was no help to my self-esteem. At two or three o’clock I would finally sleep, but the awakening was all that I expected. I would hardly open my eyes before the tears would come, and the dread of day would overwhelm me, as every morning it does now. As an adult, sleep is a constantly elusive treasure. As I write now, I thank God for the sleeping pills that I took an hour ago that will enable me to lay this Sunday down and hurry it with a long list of Sundays that I thank the fates have passed. I also am grateful to the pills because they have put the censor of my every act and deed to sleep so that I am able to write of my feelings with more ease and with a ‘what the hell’ feeling. I do not know if I have made the similarities of the past and present clear. I have tried to point out the way the past is still operating. I am no longer a child, but the hurts, the self-devaluation, the terrible phobias remain. ‘In the darkness of Age a child lies weeping.’

“I hope some day to begin anew. The slate will be wiped absolutely clean and there will be no reflection in the mirror at all. I will no longer see me through my mother’s and my own eyes, but will gradually be able to see me as perhaps I really am. If my mother’s interpretation of me is wrong, then in reality I have no existence and will have to be reborn. Certainly that is my hope. A chance to start again. A chance to live for the first time in my life.”

Diagnosis

What is wrong with Annette? Absolutely nothing, genetically speaking, by which I mean that her developmental instincts functioned perfectly when she was a child. Any normal little girl with a mother and father acting as they did would have gained the same distorted view of herself and the same crippling pathogenic beliefs. Children are instinctively led to consider their parents as repositories of expert opinion as to who they are; children have no independent judgment. Their instincts impel them to take to heart whatever their parents say and otherwise indicate they are. That becomes the basis of their personalities.

Annette’s Mother. Annette’s mother was a domineering woman subject to violent temper outbursts. She grew up quarreling with and ordering about her own mother. When she married, she continued the quarrel with her husband, but most of her fury was spent on Annette. She would say to Annette: “You are awkward and ugly. You will never be pretty, not worth looking at. What a stupid, ugly child! What a pity I couldn’t have had a decent-looking child!” This was her day-in, day-out comment.

If angry or annoyed with Annette, she would scream: “You ugly fat little pig! Get out of my sight!” Once, when she took Annette to the seashore, she told her, “Look, the ocean is right there. Why don’t you walk out into the ocean—and just keep walking. Then I’ll be rid of you!”

Annette’s Mother’s Motivations. I recently served as the semiofficial photographer of a wedding involving my wife’s in-laws. A pretty eight-year-old girl was a flower girl at the wedding; she was selected in part because of her beauty. Naturally I wanted to shoot some video of her, but when I tried, she turned away, saying, “Don’t you picture me,

Picture Man.” I later found out that she thought of herself as being ugly and that, as with Annette, her mother played a large role in indoctrinating her in this unrealistic viewpoint.

Why do parents do this sort of thing? The short answer is that it was done to them. That is often true with unwarranted criticism, just as it is with physical and sexual abuse. Abuse victims of every stripe tend to be abusers when they grow up and evade that fate only through conscious effort to reprogram their natural inclinations. Many an adult has vowed to become a better parent than his or her parents were only to find themselves tending to treat their children just as their parents treated them, even to the extent of using the exact same verbal criticisms of their children that were used against them. Annette, for example, would find it natural to tend to shout “You ugly, fat cow” at her own daughter whenever she was displeased with her.

Many religions preach that we humans need to rise above our base animal nature in order to live truly spiritual lives. These calls are usually made to enjoin us to curb our appetites. Typically neglected is the need to rise above the programming that results from our instinctive developmental processes. Were Annette to call her daughter a fat, ugly cow, she would be failing to do exactly that.

Children are instinctively driven to model themselves on their parents to a great degree. This modeling is intended to serve the children throughout their lives, which means that the learning is designed to manifest itself when it is appropriate to current life situations, no matter when the situations occur. Some of this programming shows up right away, as children pick up and display behaviors and verbal phrases obviously derived from their parents. Other programming—that aimed at guiding the children when they themselves become parents—shows up years later as automatic reactions. These reactions may arise unexpectedly as unwelcome intrusions, as when they are recognized as not belonging to the type of person the parent has become. Or they may be seen as appropriate responses. The latter indicates a lack of psychological growth on the parent’s part, in which case the parent’s perception has been twisted by pathogenic beliefs.

I don’t know what motivated the flower girl’s mother to torment her daughter. The motivations operating in Annette’s mother, however, are readily apparent. Annette was the other female in a family that contained three men, and on Sundays all the men were home. That’s what made Sundays special. Annette’s mother saw Annette as a threat, as someone who was so desirable as to deprive her of male attention if something were not done about it. In other words, Annette’s mother programmed her daughter to think she was ugly precisely because she unconsciously saw Annette as being more desirable than she. The mother probably had developed the pathogenic belief that she was less desirable than any other women, which was a life-long belief that prompted the development of defensive strategies of one sort or another to keep other females at bay in various situations. She probably saw Annette as a threat the day she was born and worked to perfect her humiliations from that day on, based on what seemed to hurt Annette most. Her model for doing so was probably how her own mother treated her.

Was Annette's mother evil? Certainly her actions were evil, as were her unconscious motives. Annette said that she didn't blame her mother. I don't either, but for different reasons. At the time she wrote her description, Annette didn't blame her mother because she continued to see herself through her mother's eyes. She didn't blame her because she was still the helpless victim of her programming. As Annette begins to establish a new concept of herself, she will begin to hate her mother, and that hate will frighten her and the fright will slow the pace of her efforts at living a new life. Annette will need to learn that the anger she initially feels is natural and normal and unavoidable, and that it is a temporary reaction prompted in part by being overwhelmed by the magnitude of the challenges she must face in order to change. As she has made some progress, the seeming mountain she needs to climb will turn into a series of rolling hills, at which point the hate will begin to subside. Then she may begin to realize that her mother was a victim, too. It is the way of things that victims victimize, which is why it is so important to end this vicious cycle.

Annette's Father's Role. Annette didn't come to believe that she was fat and ugly and incompetent merely because her mother said she was these things. She believed that everyone who came into contact with her saw her that way. For that to be true, her father must have participated in some way, too. By her account, her father neither helped nor criticized her to her face, although he apparently didn't challenge his wife's assessment when they spoke alone about Annette. It's not too difficult to imagine why. Annette's mother would have gone berserk, had he defended Annette or indicate that his opinion of her differed from that of his wife even in the smallest degree. Leaving Annette undefended was his way of keeping the peace in a bad situation. The same was true of Annette's brothers. They quickly learned that to escape their mother's wrath, they had better stay clear of Annette and not ever stick up for her.

In large measure, developing the skill of psychoanalysis means learning how to think like a child, which means learning to think from the point of view of a child's needs. Annette needed her father and brothers to protect and support her, and when they didn't do that, she was led to search for a reason why. The kind of conclusion a child would draw is that her father and brothers did not stick up for her because they did not love her enough. And they did not love her enough because they saw the same deficiencies in Annette that her mother did. In other words, in Annette's mind, the main difference between her mother and her other relatives is that her father and brothers were too nice to point out her deficiencies to her, leaving her to imagine what they must really think of her.

It was not by accident that Annette married a man who constantly criticized her. Here was a man who at least spoke his mind. She expected the criticism. At least with him, she was freed of the fear that his opinion of her was horribly worse than it seemed to be. This explanation also explains why Annette found it nearly impossible to go out in public without panicking. In her mind, everyone she encountered on the street was thinking about how fat and ugly and stupid she was, even when they didn't let on in any way.

The explanation additionally explains why Annette abused her therapist for months. For example, one day after her therapist merely asked her how she had been feeling since they last met, Annette answered:

“You hate me, don’t you? You wish I would die. I don’t mean anything to you. Don’t pretend I do. You don’t even know me!

“You’re sitting there thinking how ugly I am! I’m not asking you to lie to me. You’re just sitting there wishing this session was over. Why don’t you go home? Don’t you have anything better to do? Do you want me to leave? You poor thing! The great doctor who is such a martyr! Well, you’re not a martyr to me! You’re a fake — a big fake, that’s all. You have no feeling for anybody. You’re just a phony and I can’t stand phonies! “Oh God, I don’t know what makes me talk like this.”

Annette’s Therapy

The verbal abuse that Annette directed at her therapist during the initial months of her therapy was her way of challenging the pathogenic belief that everyone saw her as being fat and ugly and stupid. She was testing the therapist, possibly trying to make him angry enough to tell her what he truly believed. She expected this to be bad but hoped otherwise. By repeatedly refusing to confirm Annette’s fears, the therapist helped Annette by providing evidence against the legitimacy of her programming. To continue to progress, Annette needed to continually challenge the validity of her programming by tests of various kinds. She needed also to start living her life as if her programming were not true. At the time she wrote her description of how she felt, she was not doing this.

The panic that she felt when she was in public was rooted in the pathogenic belief that everyone around her saw her as fat and ugly and inept. At times of panic, what she needed to do was very carefully examine how people were actually reacting to her. She needed to provide herself with the experience of recognizing that the people around her seemed not to see her that way and that perhaps some even were attracted to her. She never did this in the past. The fear would get triggered and cause her to withdraw into the world of her programming; she wouldn’t look for contrary evidence. Finding no evidence of disapproval wouldn’t make the fear go away at first, but many efforts of this type would beat back her fear over time.

It is natural and normal to want to know one’s weight occasionally, but Annette would constantly weigh herself. By giving into the impulse to do that, she was giving into her programming. She needed to stop doing that in every aspect of her life, even in the small matter of weighing herself. Whenever the impulse to weigh herself arose, she needed to fight that impulse and fight the impulse also to try on her tightest dresses.

Annette’s husband was a great obstacle to her progress. One way of coping with him would be to keep reminding herself that he criticized everyone, that his criticisms should therefore not be taken to heart—it was just his mode of operating in general. Making progress within the context of her marriage also demanded that Annette find the courage

to stand up for herself when he criticized her. To do this of course, Annette had to start trusting her own judgment.

Many people start taking such positive steps only to become discouraged by the fact that the old feelings and ways of thinking do not go away immediately. Yet quick success is an unreasonable expectation. A lifetime of brainwashing will not be set aside overnight. Positive experience day after day is the only cure. While it won't take 20 or 30 years of positive experience to erase the effects of 20 or 30 years of brainwashing, it may take months for any results to be seen and certainly a few years for great progress to be made.

What Annette Can Teach You about Your Psychoanalysis

When people start out trying to learn to apply psychoanalysis to their own lives, they initially tend to believe that they have to be extremely clever, when mostly what they need to do is become simpleminded. They need merely to think like a little child in order to guess at the pathogenic beliefs they may have developed from their own childhood experiences. Annette's mother told her repeatedly that she was fat and ugly and inept and no one in her family contradicted those statements, so she — like any child — came to believe that everyone saw her that way and that therefore that must be the way she is. As she was going up, she didn't seriously challenge that notion in her everyday life, so that childhood notion remained in full force even though she was no longer a child. It remained in force because she lacked the courage to test the possibility that her pathogenic beliefs were false.

In your own psychoanalysis, ask yourself how a little child would react to your childhood experiences in developing beliefs about itself. Then look to patterns in your own behavior — particularly with regard to your inhibitions—for supportive evidence that your guesses about your own childhood are correct. If the two don't seem to fit together, start all over again until they do. When you have a pretty good idea of what your pathogenic beliefs are, start looking around for evidence in your everyday life that they are incorrect and begin mustering the courage to test their falsity. Keep it up, and you cannot fail. Experience is the key. Our brains are information processing machines, and the information they process comes from experience. Start gathering positive information about yourself and change is inevitable — you cannot not change.