

Book Extract

The Secret Language of Fear: How We Live Our Family's Traumas The Four Unconscious Themes (Chapter No. 4)

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"The most powerful ties are the ones to the people who gave us birth ... it hardly seems to matter how many years have passed, how many betrayals there may have been, how much misery in the family: We remain connected, even against our wills." — Anthony Brandt

The essential life force that flows to us from our parents is given. There's nothing we need to do to claim it. Our only job is to receive it. It sounds so simple. And yet that force in so many of us is diminished.

When the connection to our parents is blocked or constricted or interrupted, we can feel the effects at our core. Vitality can drain out of our relationships, our career, even our physical bodies, without our ever recognizing what lies at the source.

Visualize the life force as the main wire that feeds electricity into a house. All the other wires that branch off into the various rooms depend on the main wire for power. No matter how successfully we wire our house, if the main wire is compromised, the flow will be impacted.

Now let's look at four ways the 'main wire' can be affected.

The Four Unconscious Themes that Interrupt the Flow of Life

The four themes are common to each of us, yet they are unconscious in us. They can limit our ability to flourish, and our ability to achieve the goals we set. They can limit our health and

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our success. They show up in our behaviour and in our relationships. They appear in our words.

The four themes are relational, in that they describe aspects of how we relate to our parents and to others in our family system. If we understand the themes, and know how to look for them, we can identify which ones are operating in us and blocking us from having the fullness of our life experiences.

A disconnection from the parents underlies three of the four themes, and is the first place to consider when we are struggling with life.

The four unconscious themes are:

1. We have merged with the feelings of a parent
2. We have rejected a parent

3. We have experienced a break in the early bond with our mother
4. We have identified with an excluded member of our family system

There are also other interruptions to the life force that limit us from having our full life experience, but these interruptions do not stem from how we unconsciously relate to our mother or father or to a member of our family system. One such interruption comes about when we have experienced a personal trauma. A significant personal trauma can severely limit our life force. We might be aware of the trauma's effects upon us, and still be powerless to resolve it.

Another interruption occurs when we feel guilty for an action we have committed. Let's say we made a decision that hurt someone. Perhaps we left a relationship in a cruel way, or took something that didn't belong to us, or purposely or accidentally took a life. Guilt can freeze up our life force in unimaginable ways. Our guilt, when not owned or resolved, can extend to our children and even to their children.

The Four Questions

Let's look at four questions that can reveal how one or more of the four themes are operating in our life. Think about your family.

Did you merge with the feelings of a parent?

Have you judged, blamed, rejected or cut off from a parent?

Did you experience an interruption in the early bonding process with your mother?

Are you unconsciously identified with a member of your family system?

1. Did you merge with the feelings of a parent?

Think back. Did one of your parents struggle emotionally, physically or

psychologically? Did it hurt you to see them suffer? Did you want to take their pain away? Did you try? Did you ever side with the feelings of one parent against the other? Were you afraid to show your love to one parent for fear of hurting the other? In your life today, do you struggle in a similar way that your parents struggled? Do you recognize your parents' pain in you?

Many of us unconsciously attempt to take on our parents' pain. As small children, we develop our sense of self gradually. Back then, we had not learned how to be separate from our parents and be connected to them at the same time. In this innocent place,

The emotions, traits and behaviors we reject in our parents will likely live on in us. It's our unconscious way of loving them, a way to bring them back into our lives.

we imagined that we could alleviate their unhappiness by fixing or sharing it. If we carried it along with them, they wouldn't have had to carry it alone. But this is fantasized thinking, and it only leads to more unhappiness. Shared patterns of unhappiness are all around us. Sad mother, sad daughter... disrespected father, disrespected son... the relationship difficulties of the parents, mirrored by the children. The combinations are endless.

The last thing our parents would ever want to see is us suffering on their behalf. It is inflated, and perhaps even disrespectful, to think that we are better equipped to handle our parents' suffering than they are. It is also out of tune with the order of life. Our parents

existed before we did. They provided for us so that we could survive. We did not as small children provide for them.

When a child takes on a parent's burden, he or she misses out on the experience of being given to, and can have difficulty later in life receiving from a partner. A child who takes care of a parent forges a lifelong pattern of overextension and creates a blueprint for swimming against the current. As Bert Hellinger has observed, those who come before us must carry their fate alone, regardless of its severity. We must not attempt to share or carry our parent's burden. By doing so, we will continue the family suffering and block the flow of life force that is available to us, and available to the generations that follow us.

Even when we care for ill or elderly parents, providing what they cannot do for themselves, it's important to preserve and respect the integrity of the parent-child relationship, where we do not diminish our parent's dignity.

2. Have you judged, blamed, rejected or cut off from a parent?

Do you reject, blame or judge a parent for something you feel he or she has done to you? Do you disrespect one or both of your parents? Have you cut yourself off from either of them?

Let's say that you blame or reject your mother. Let's say that you blame her for not giving you enough of what you feel you should have received. If this is true for you, have you also asked yourself what happened to her? What event had the power to interrupt the flow of your relationship? Did something occur that separated the two of you, or separated her from her parents?

Perhaps your mother carried a wound from her mother and so could not give you what she did not receive herself. Her parenting skills would be limited by what she could not receive from her parents.

If you reject your mother, it is likely that a traumatic event stands between you and her. Maybe your mother lost

a child before you were born, or gave a child up for adoption, or lost her first love in a car accident, the man she had planned to marry. Perhaps her father died when she was young, or her beloved brother was killed getting off the school bus. The shock waves from such an event would affect you, but the actual event would have nothing to do with you directly. Instead, the trauma would tie up your mother's focus and attention, no matter how great her love for you.

As a child, you might experience her as unavailable, self absorbed or withholding. You might then reject her, taking her depleted flow of love personally, as if somehow she had made a choice to keep it from you. The greater truth would be that the love you longed for was not available for your mother to give. Any child in your birth order might share a similar experience or receive a similar type of mothering.

If you cut off from your mother, you might blame her for not responding to all the love you gave to her when you were a small child. Maybe she was depressed and cried a lot, and maybe you attempted to make her happy with your love. Maybe you took care of her, and tried to take her pain away. Maybe one day you realized that all your good efforts had failed, that your love could not make your mother feel better. And so you distanced from her and blamed her for not giving you what you needed, when it was really that you felt unseen for all the love you gave, or felt disheartened that her love would not be returned in the same way. Cutting off from her may have been the only option you knew. Cutting off can make you feel free at first, but it is the false freedom of a childhood defence. Ultimately, it will limit your life experience.

Maybe you blame or judge a parent, because he or she was at war with the other parent, and you felt forced to take sides. Often, a child will be openly loyal to one parent, but secretly loyal to the other. The child may form a covert bond with the rejected parent

by adopting or emulating what's judged as negative in him or her.

Let's look at that again. The emotions, traits and behaviors we reject in our parents will likely live on in us. It's our unconscious way of loving them, a way to bring them back into our lives. On a physical level, a rejection of the parents can be felt as a pain, tightness or numbness in the body. Our bodies will feel some degree of unrest until the rejected parent is experienced inside us in a loving way.

We don't even need to know the exact family history to understand what triggers the rejection. Clearly, something happened that kept the two of you from being close. Perhaps your mother's own mother died when she

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was young or she lost a sibling or was left by the great love of her life. She may not reveal her history and you may never know it. Even so, healing your relationship with her will help you to feel more whole inside yourself. Something clearly happened. That's all you need to know. And this something blocked your heart or blocked her heart, or both.

The first experience we have of loving another is with our mother. When that love is disrupted, it can limit the amount of love we feel toward ourselves and toward another. Remember, our relationship with our mother is the template upon which our later relationships are forged.

One of the hardest steps in restoring our ability to love is to shift our focus away from our mother and on to ourselves. This step frees us to

own the part of the shutdown that continues to live on in us, and opens the door toward a true resolution. Without our attention riveted on judging and blaming our mother, a new image of her can arise.

Exercise: Visualizing your Mother and Her History

When you think of your mother, does your body open with compassion or contract with resentment? If your answer is that your body contracts, it's important to realize that the work to open is now yours and not your mother's. Now let's widen the lens, and think of your mother again. This time, visualize her surrounded by **all the traumatic events she experienced**. Even if you don't know exactly what happened to her, you have a sense of her family history and how she might have struggled in her life. Take a moment to really feel what it must have been like for her.

Close your eyes.

- Recall all the stories from your mother's family history, and let all the tragedies you know come to mind.
- Visualize your mother as a young woman or a small child or even a small baby tightening against the waves of loss, trying to protect herself from the onslaught of pain.
- What does your body feel as you sense into what she might have felt?
- What are the sensations and where do they arise in your body?
- Can you feel or imagine what it must have been like for her?
- Does this touch you? Can you feel your compassion for her?
- Tell her in your heart, "Mom, I understand." Even if you don't fully understand, say the words again. "Mom, I understand."
- How does it feel to say that?

- What happens in your body when you tell her this?
- Is there any place in your body that lets go, opens or feels softer?

Did you experience an interruption in the early bond with your mother?

If you reject your mother, it could be that you experienced an interruption during the early bonding process with her. Not everyone who experiences a break in the early bond will reject his or her mother. What is more likely with an interruption during this period is that you experience some degree of anxiety when you attempt to bond with a partner in an intimate relationship. That anxiety could translate into a difficulty maintaining a marriage or even not wanting to be married in the first place. It could also translate into making the decision not to have children. On the surface, you might complain how raising a child involves too much time and energy. On the deeper level, you might feel ill-equipped to supply a child with what you didn't receive enough of yourself.

Here are some of the questions we ask when looking for an interrupted bond.

- Were you adopted or separated from your mother shortly after birth?
- Did something traumatic happen while your mother was pregnant with you?
- Did your mother lose a child or pregnancy before you were born?
- Did you experience a difficult birth? Were you born premature?
- Did you experience a trauma or a separation from your mother during the first three years of life?
- Were you or your mother ever hospitalized and forced to be apart (maybe you had to have your tonsils removed, or your mother needed to have a surgery or experienced a complication from a pregnancy, etc.)?
- Did your mother experience a trauma or emotional turmoil during your first three years of life?
- Was your mother's attention pulled to a trauma involving one of your siblings (a late-term miscarriage, a death, a medical emergency, etc.)?

A break in the mother-child bond in earlier generations can impact your connection with your mother as well. Did your mother or grandmother experience an early separation from her mother? It would be difficult for you to receive what your mother didn't receive from her mother.

If your parents are deceased, you may never know the answer to these questions, especially if you were very young when the break occurred. Early interruptions in general can be difficult to discern due to the fact that the brain is not equipped to record and archive our experience in those first few years of life. The hippocampus, the part of our brain that allows us to remember events, is not fully

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developed until somewhere between our second and third year of life. The experience of an early separation would be recorded in the body, and stored in the form of word fragments, sensations, images and emotion, rather than as clear memories that can be pieced into a story. Without the story, our emotions and sensations can be difficult to understand.

Following an interrupted bond, a child can be hesitant when it's time to re-establish the connection with the mother. The way this connection is restored can significantly impact bonding and separating in future relationships. If the mother and child do not fully re-establish their connection, the child can remain hesitant when bonding with a partner as an adult. Conversely, a temporary separation like a simple business trip can generate considerable anxiety and even feel catastrophic.

Sometimes the break in the bond isn't physical. Sometimes we will experience more of an energetic break from our mother. She may be physically present, but emotionally inconsistent. The constancy that a mother is able to establish during the first years of life is instrumental for the child's psychological and emotional well-being. Psychoanalyst, Heinz Kohut describes how "*the gleam in the mother's eye*," when she gazes at her infant, is the vehicle by which the child feels validated and affirmed and can begin to develop in a healthy way.

If we experienced a break in the emotional bond with our mother, we may have to piece together certain clues arising from our mother's history, as well as from our own history. We have to look back and ask: Did something traumatic happen to our mother that affected her ability to be consistently loving and attentive? Was she present or preoccupied? Was there a disconnection in how she touched us, in the way she looked at us, in the tone of her voice when she spoke to us? We also ask ourselves: Do I experience difficulty bonding in a relationship? Do I shut down, pull away or push away from closeness?

As infants, we perceive our mother as our world. A separation from her is a separation from life. Experiences of emptiness and disconnection, feelings of hopelessness and despair, a belief that something is terribly wrong with us or with life itself – all these can be generated by an early separation. Too young to process the trauma,

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we experience feelings, beliefs and body sensations that live on inside us without the story that connects them to the past. It is these experiences that will infuse the many hurts, losses, disappointments and disconnections we will encounter as our life unfolds.

The Negative Memories of Childhood

Many of us cannot see beyond the painful images of our childhood and are unable to remember the positive things that happened to us. As small children, we experience both comforting and unsettling times. However, the comforting memories, memories of being held by our mother as she fed us, cleaned us or rocked us to sleep, are often blocked from surfacing. Instead, we seem to only recall the painful memories of not getting what we wanted, not getting enough love.

There are reasons for this. When we, as small children, experience our safety or security being threatened, our bodies react by erecting defenses. These unconscious defenses then become our default, where our attention orients toward what's difficult or unsettling, and does not register what's comforting. It's as though our positive memories live on the other side of a wall just out of our reach. Only able to reside on one side of the wall, we can truly believe nothing good ever happened to us.

It's as though we have rewritten history, keeping only those memories that support our primitive defensive structure, defenses that have been with us so long, they feel like they are us. Beneath the unconscious barricade we have erected lies a deep desire to feel loved by our parents. Yet, many of us can no longer access these feelings.

For were we to recall the loving and tender memories we shared with them, we would feel vulnerable and risk being hurt again. Thus, the very memories that could bring us healing are the very memories we unconsciously block.

Are you unconsciously identified with a member of your family system?

Sometimes, our relationship with our parents is strong and loving, yet we still find ourselves unable to explain the feelings we carry.

Todd was nine when he began stabbing the couch with a pen. Within a year, he assaulted a neighbor boy with a stick, resulting in a gash that required forty stitches. Todd spent the next several years receiving both medication and psychological treatment, yet the aggressive behaviors continued to persist. What the family hadn't considered was Todd's unconscious connection to his grandfather who had stabbed a man to death in a bar room brawl.

Megan married Dean at 19 and thought it would be forever. Then one day, when Megan was 25, she looked at him across the kitchen table and felt herself go numb. Her feelings for Dean were gone. Within weeks, Megan was filing for divorce. Megan's grandmother was only 25 years old when her husband, the love of her life, drowned while fishing at sea. Grandmother raised Megan's mother on her own and never remarried. Once Megan realized that she was repeating her grandmother's deep loss and numbness, her feelings for Dean returned.

Not all behaviors expressed by us originate from us. They can belong to family members who came before us. We are merely carrying them or sharing them. We call these feelings and urges identification feelings.

To determine if we're identified with a member of our family system, we ask:

- Could we be feeling like, behaving like, suffering like, atoning for, or carrying the grief for someone who came before us?
- Do we have symptoms, feelings or behaviors that are difficult to explain in the context of our life experience?
- Did guilt or pain prevent a family member from loving someone or grieving his or her loss?
- Did someone do something that caused his or her rejection in the family?
- Was there a trauma in the family (an early death of a parent, child or sibling, an abandonment, a murder, crime or suicide, etc.), an event that was too terrible, painful or shameful to talk about?
- Could we be connected with that event, living a life similar to the person no one talks about?
- Could we be repeating this family member's trauma, by reliving their feelings as if they were our own?

How the Unconscious Four Themes Get Triggered into Motion

First, a tragedy occurs. Let's say that **your older brother died when you were two**. It's a painful thing to imagine, but if that happened in your family, it could activate one or more of the four themes. For example:

You could reject your mother or your father. In their grief, either your father or your mother could lose the will to live. Maybe they would begin drinking or spending more time out of the house in an attempt to distance from the pain. Perhaps being together would only intensify the grief they can't manage. Maybe they would blame themselves for something they imagined had contributed to your brother's death. Or secretly, they might

blame each other. Accusations like, "You didn't get the right doctor" or "You should have been watching him more carefully" might brew under the surface, but probably wouldn't be spoken. Whatever the story, you would feel your parents' spiralling emotions. The rages, the self-incriminations, the shut downs – it could feel like the world around you has suddenly collapsed or disappeared. In response, you might split off or armour your body from the overwhelming feelings in an attempt to protect yourself. At two, you wouldn't understand the magnitude of the tragedy. Instead you would feel the loss of your parents' attention. Later on, you might blame them for the fear, frustration, hurt or distance you felt, not taking into account the bigger picture.

You could experience an interrupted bond with your mother. The shock of your brother's death would likely shatter your mother's heart and might even affect her will to live. Forlorn and despairing, your mother might disappear for weeks or months into her

grief, fragmenting the tender, energetic bond the two of you share. An event like this could disrupt the bond you might have experienced up to that point, interrupting the crucial neural,

you would feel is that she was shining her light toward you one moment, and shut down the next. You might then become mistrustful of her, fearing her inconsistency, wary that she could "disappear" on you again at any time.

The greatest challenge of the four unconscious themes is that they typically operate outside of our conscious awareness.

psychological, emotional and relational development taking place at this time. At two, you wouldn't understand the enormity of the tragedy that caused your mother's attention to shift. All

You could merge with your mother's or father's pain. If your older brother died, you might experience the weight of your mother or father's pain as if it were your own pain. The cascading effects of grief could rigidify the entire family. In a blind attempt to ease your parent's pain, you might try to carry your mother's depression or your father's grief as though you had some magical power to take it away. It would be almost as if you were saying, "Mom, Dad, if I carry the pain with you, or if I carry it for you, it would make you feel better." Your attempt, of course, wouldn't succeed. It would only extend the grief into the current generation.

Children who share their parents' pain generally do so unconsciously. They operate from a blind fantasy that



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they can save their parents. These unconscious loyalties can then be carried over several generations, rendering the family legacy a legacy of unhappiness. In his book, *The Healing Power of the Past*, Bertold Ulsamer states: *"Children seldom or never dare to live a happier or more fulfilling life than their parents. Unconsciously they remain loyal to unspoken family traditions that work invisibly."*

You could become identified with your dead brother. When a small child dies, a blanket of grief shrouds the family. The intolerable waves of pain block expressions of aliveness and happiness. The living children might even begin tiptoeing around the grieving parents so as not to upset them further. In an attempt to avoid the pain and senselessness of the death, family members might try to not think about the dead child and even resist speaking his name. In this way, the dead child is excluded, creating a fertile ground for an identification to take root.

Hellinger teaches that a later child in the system, even one from the next generation, can express what a family has suppressed. That means that you could find yourself feeling depressed or lifeless, split off from your essence like you don't exist, similar to how the family perceives your dead brother. You might feel like you're ignored or not seen in the family, or that you're not important or that you don't matter to anyone. You might even begin to take on the traits of your dead brother, expressing facets of his gender, personality, illness or trauma. Unconsciously identified with him, you might find your enthusiasm diminished, the amount of life force you take in limited. It could feel as though, joined together in sympathy, you are saying: "If you couldn't live, then I won't live fully." Those of us who unwittingly live in sympathy with a family member who has suffered must ask: Whose trauma am I actually living?

Identifications like these can significantly alter the course of our

lives. Unsuspecting and unaware, we re-live aspects of our family traumas with startling consequences. As Hellinger reminds us, these experiences are not uncommon.

The greatest challenge of the four unconscious themes is that they typically operate outside of our conscious awareness. Without the source in sight, they can be difficult to diagnose, and our interventions might only scratch the surface. However, when we know what we're looking for, we can take a dramatic step in the direction of life itself, and say a conscious "yes" to the great gift we received from our parents.

Editor's Note:

As this is a book extract, American spellings have been retained.



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