

# How To Be an Adult by David Richo



## 1. GROWING PAINS & GROWING UP

*The home we leave, the home we build, the home we heal:  
How our childhood experiences affect our adult  
relationships.*

### *Basic Needs*

We are born with inalienable emotional needs for love, safety, acceptance, freedom, attention, validation of our feelings, and physical holding. Healthy identity is based on the fulfillment of these needs. "Only if someone has her arms around the infant . . . can the 'I am' moment be endured or rather risked," says D.W. Winnicott. The origin of our identity is love.

These needs are felt and remembered cellularly throughout our lives, though we may not always be intellectually aware of them. They were originally experienced in a survival context of dependency. We may still feel, as adults, that our very survival is based on finding someone to fulfill our basic needs.

But early, primal needs can be fulfilled fully only in childhood (since only then were we fully dependent). In adulthood the needs can be fulfilled only flexibly or partially, since we are interdependent and our needs are no longer connected to survival.

### *The Adult Whose Needs Were Mostly Met in Childhood . . .*

- Is satisfied with reasonable dividends of need-fulfillment in relationships.
- Knows how to love unconditionally and yet tolerates no abuse or stuckness in relationships.

- Changes the locus of trust from others to himself so that he receives loyalty when others show it and handles disappointment when others betray.

### ***The Adult Whose Needs Were Mostly Not Met in Childhood . . .***

- Exaggerates the needs so that they become insatiable or addictive.
- Creates situations that reenact the original hurts and rejections, seeks relationships that stimulate and maintain self-defeating beliefs rather than relationships that confront and dispel them.
- Refuses to notice how abused or unhappy she is and uses the pretext of hoping for change or of coping with what is unchanging.
- Lets her feelings go underground. "If the only safe thing for me was to let my feelings disappear, how can I now permit the self-exposure and vulnerability it takes to be loved?"
- Repeats the childhood error of equating negative attention with love or neurotic anxiousness with solicitude.
- Is afraid to receive the true love, self-disclosure, or generosity of others. In effect: cannot receive now what was not received originally.

### ***The Child Within***

Our problem is not that as children our needs were unmet, but that as adults they are still unmourned! The hurt, bereft, betrayed Child is still inside of us, wanting to cry for what he missed and wanting thereby to let go of the pain and the stressful present neediness he feels in relationships. In fact, neediness itself tells us nothing about how much we need from others; it tells us how much we need to grieve the irrevocably barren past and evoke our own inner sources of nurturance.

### ***True/False Self: Unconditional/Conditional Self***

Our True Self, with all its free energy, impulses, feelings, and creativity, may have threatened our parents. They, after all, may have been victimized in their own childhood and never came to terms with it. They taught us how to behave in accord with their fear-laden specifications. Some of this led to legitimate socializing. Some of it was violence to our identity.

We then designed a False Self that met with our parents' approval and maintained our role in the family. We felt that safety was possible only within those boundaries. Such "boundaries" became the long-standing habits and patterns that have been our limitations ever since. They were choices that had an origin in wisdom but now may no longer be serving our best interests. They usually please others but diminish us. Alice Miller writes that "the love I gained with such uphill effort and self-defacement was not meant for me at all but for the me I created to please them."

Once we grieve this loss, we release our hidden inner world of unused and unrevealed qualities and notice how much better we thereby feel about ourselves. We lighten up and may even notice that people love us more.

The fear of revealing the True Self is disguised in these words: "If people really knew me, they would not like me." We can change that sentence to read: "I am free enough to want everything I say and do to reveal me as I am. I love being seen as I am."

### ***Relationships in Adulthood***

Love happened for each of us in childhood in a different way. For some it meant being taken seriously, for others' attention, physical holding, giving things to us, doing things for us, loyalty, etc. There is no one objective way love can be shown that will fit for everyone. *Love is subjective: each person reads it best in the language in which she learned it.* "We mark with light in the memory the few

interviews we have had with souls that made our souls wiser, that spoke what we thought, that told us what we knew, that gave us leave to be what we inly are," says Ralph Waldo Emerson.

As adults we feel genuinely loved when someone creates for us a verisimilitude of that same original love we received long ago. Relationships between adults work best when each partner knows his or her own specific ways of feeling loved and tells the other about it. Then the expression of love can be tailored to the unique needs of each partner. As a result we open ourselves to new ways of feeling loved that expand the old limiting ways.

We can, of course, also be seduced into believing someone loves us authentically when he has only happened upon this same special triggerpoint and has no intention of following through on it in the future.

It is always appropriate to ask for love, but to ask any other adult (including our parents in the present) to meet our primal needs is unfair and unrealistic. Most of us emerge from childhood with conscious and unconscious psychic wounds and emotional unfinished business. What we leave incomplete we are doomed to repeat. The untreated traumas of childhood become the frustrating dramas of adulthood. Our fantasy of the "perfect partner," or our disappointments in a relationship we do not change or leave, or the dramas that keep arising in our relationships reveal our unique unmet primal wounds and needs. We try so hard to get from others what once we missed. What was missed can never be made up for, only mourned and let go of. Only then are we able to relate as adults to adults. As Emerson profoundly observes, "when half gods go, the gods arrive."

Healthy adults are not attracted to the negative excitement of relationships in which people are attempting to use them to work out their own unaddressed childhood conundrums. Ironically, this attempt simply recreates the childhood drama anyway. Only personal inner responsibility and griefwork lets the curtain finally fall.

Our body has memorized childhood scenarios of terror or abuse. But this committing to memory is, ironically, a commitment

to secrecy. We cannot now consciously recall or tell what happened. Our automatic cellular reflexes in relationships give us clues and mystify us at the same time. "Why do I pull away when she gets close? Was this kind of closeness dangerous to me long ago? Yet, my mind tells me I always wanted to be loved like this. . . ."

It may take many years and just the right circumstances or person to grant us the liberating opening to know and to tell our story in words. When this happens, the memories come back and we hear ourselves putting them into words for the first time. This profound release initiates us into the heavy and healing ways of griefwork.

The healthy adult can tell the difference between a present conflict with a partner and a restimulation of past unfinished distress. The strong feelings tip her off to the presence of archaic stimuli. She acknowledges openly that the feelings are familiar from the past. She takes responsibility for the severity of her reaction and does not implicate this present person in the tying up of an historical loose end. This is riding the present stress to an original distress and so working on a cause rather than on an effect.

How touching and bewildering is our plight in adult relationships! We are actually trying to hold on and to let go at the same time! We want so fervently to hold on to the love our every cell remembers, the love that goes on consoling. We want so desperately to let go of the hurt that every cell remembers, the hurt that goes on hurting. A working relationship is a crucible in which both of these evolutionary human tasks can be fulfilled. We can be nourished by the love we now receive and work through the pain we once suffered.

The love and the pain of the present are directly connected to the love and the pain of the past. Once we acknowledge the continuity of our condition, we clearly see our personal work. A relationship—especially the first one in adult life—can put us in the best position to do that work. Our partner stimulates the love and the pain and then—optimally—supports us in healthy responses to them. How much we miss when we run from love or from the nor-

mal hurts in a life together! We lose contact with our own history and the healing of it. We lose our chance to capitalize on the here and now and so get past the past to live in the unencumbered present.

### **Mourning and Letting Go**

*What is at first a cup of sorrow becomes at last immortal wine.*

—Gita

Mourning is the appropriate response to loss. It can proceed through these stages, though the order and timing are unique to each person.

I. Reminiscence about any pain, abandonment, perfidy, or abuse we saw and/or felt. This does not have to be a specific memory about what happened. Our bodies remember more reliably than our minds. A sense of our deprivation or loss is enough.

II. Full acknowledgement, experiencing, and expression of feelings (e.g. sadness, hurt, anger, fear), so that resolution (catharsis) occurs. For example, tears that demonstrate sadness but do not dissipate it are not useful in the completion of griefwork.

We can express our feelings directly to the people involved, or in therapy, or by ourselves. It is important to say the word goodbye at this time and throughout the process of grieving.

Betrayal, abandonment, rejection, disappointment, humiliation, isolation, etc. are not feelings but beliefs. Each of these judgments keeps us caught in our story and blinded to the bare fact of loss. Each is a subtle form of blame. Each assuages, coddles, and justifies our bruised ego. Each distracts us from the true feelings of grief. Grievances dislocate grief work. Anger without blame completes it.

III. Healing of memories by reexperiencing them with compassion (for our parents and ourselves) and with power, by imagining ourselves speaking up self-protectively to abuse. This includes a sixfold affirmation with the appropriate feelings for each area of grief, separately for each parent.

### **Here is the paradigm for the healing of memories:**

1. Remembering a loss with sadness and anger. "Loss" includes any specific non-fulfillment of a need or any abuse, humiliation, rejection, or neglect.

2. Thanks that thereby I began to learn self-reliant ways to compensate for this loss. Remember and congratulate yourself for some wise maneuver you found to take care of yourself in childhood. Here we acknowledge the gift dimension of the wounds, since betrayal and hurt, though never justifiable, are nonetheless what every human being needs in order to separate and to develop sensitivity, depth, fortitude, self-reliance and empathy. Joseph had to be betrayed by his brothers before he could achieve his wonderful destiny.

3. Imagining myself speaking up assertively and effectively in childhood. Picture your household in childhood and a scene of abuse or neglect. Now form an image of yourself acting with full assertiveness and successful self-protection in that same past scene. This is reexperiencing with power and no longer as a victim.

4. Forgiveness of my parent(s). Such automatic compassion is the best signal that we have resolved our feelings. Forgiveness can be real only after anger and sadness have been expressed. Paul Tillich says, "Forgiveness is the highest form of forgetting because it is forgetting in spite of remembering."

5. Dropping the expectation that others fulfill this need for me now.

6. Taking care of this need for myself now as abundantly as I just imagined myself doing in childhood.

### **Here is an example of the sixfold affirmation to be spoken and written:**

- I am and feel sad and angry that my parent(s) failed to stand up for me.
- I am thankful that thereby I began to learn to stand up for myself.
- I imagine speaking up successfully in childhood.
- I forgive my parents for failing to stand up for me.

- I drop the expectation of getting others to stand up for me now (though I appreciate it when they do).
- Now I stand up for myself with full power and effectiveness.

IV. A ritual that shows what we have felt and accomplished in our griefwork. A ritual is any gesture that enacts our intention or commemorates our attainment. An example: Write about the whole process, burn it, and plant a tree or flower together with the ashes while saying "goodbye." Distilling your grief process into one affirmation and burying a copy of it with the ashes is also useful.

V. Getting on with our life, not as victims of the irreversible past, but as adults who have engendered an "inner nurturant parent." Now we are no longer afraid to be kind to ourselves, to treat ourselves to abundance, to stop depriving ourselves, to stop absorbing pain. This self-parenting is the best condition for true intimacy because, like all good parenting, it is a bridge from aloneness to the world of relating. It ends dependency and allows us to relate as equals with our adult partner. Now "need-fulfillment" becomes enrichment. Only those who can take care of themselves are free from the two main obstacles to adult relating: being needy or care-taking others. "I will come to you, my friend, when I no longer need you. Then you will find a palace, not an almshouse," Thoreau once said.

The true healing power of griefwork extends to past *and* present. Each issue to be grieved addresses these two areas of concern: the loss or neglect you experienced in the past, and the lifetime habit that may have sprung from the original hurt.

For example, you grieve how your parents refused to listen to you in childhood. Now in adult life, you notice that you still hide your feelings from most people. This secretiveness may be your lifelong over-reaction to an original injunction from parents who were afraid to know you. Now you are afraid to let others know you.

The past is grieved fully only when the present is healed, too. In fact, the energy that had been tied up in past hurts has finally

become available to you for reinvestment in new ways of living. To continue with our example: you now make a choice to reveal more and more about yourself to more and more people. You drop secretiveness and notice that you survive. Some people will reject or betray you for this openness, some will love you more than ever. But their response is secondary because your fear has changed to flexibility. Now you have cleared the wake of a ship that passed long ago, and healed the scarred present with the newfound powers of the healed past.

### ***A Lifelong Work***

The above model can be adapted to any area of mourning. Grief work applies to everything we lose or leave. It includes as normal stages: anger, denial (disbelief), bargaining, depression, and acceptance. These are repeated in different sequences over and over throughout our lives, but each time with less debilitating charge and more personal empowerment. Finally only nostalgia remains, a light grief without the painful sadness. At last we contain our own history—no longer driven or possessed by it.

The healthy adult allows hurtful events from his past to become neutral facts by fully grieving the pain and so letting go of them. In this way, one retains the memories but drops the charged, obsessive thoughts of hurt that keep one attached to the drama of it all and vitiate healthy relating. No matter how fully our grief is processed, however, new levels of realization about the loss continually appear. In this sense, grief is truly a lifelong work.

### ***Conclusion***

Mourning dismantles the illusions we may have harbored and the secrets we may have kept about our childhood. At first this might have seemed a terrifying prospect. But when it happens in accord with our own timing and in the context of griefwork, it

becomes deeply liberating. Once we have allowed ourselves to experience total disillusionment, we will never again know despair.

Mourning is the appropriate response to the loss of what we once had or to the sad realization that we did not have all we needed. We are grieving the *irretrievable* aspect of what we lost and the *irreplaceable* aspect of what we missed. Only these two realizations lead to resolution of grief because only these acknowledge, without denial, how truly bereft we were or are. From the pit of this deep admission that something is irrevocably over and gone, we finally stand clear of the insatiable need to find it again from our parents or partner. To have sought it was to have denied how utter was its absence!

Griefwork done with consciousness builds self-esteem since it shows us our courageous faithfulness to the reality of loss. It authenticates us as adults who can say Yes to sadness, anger, and hurt. Such an heroic embrace of our own truth transforms emptiness into capacity. As Jung notes, "your inner emptiness conceals just as great a fullness if you only allow it."

Our psychological work is to journey from the chaos of our personal unconscious to a coherent conscious integration. Our spiritual path then takes us to the treasures of the cosmic (collective) unconscious and full individuation. Everything in our lives, no matter how terrible, exists in relation to an inner healing force. "The journey with father and mother up and down many ladders represents the making conscious of infantile contents that have not yet been integrated. . . . This personal unconscious must always be dealt with first . . . otherwise the gateway to the collective unconscious cannot be opened," Jung tells us.

Our psycho-spiritual work as adults is thus an heroic journey, since a hero is anyone who has lived through pain and been transformed by it. A universal theme in the myths about the early life of the hero is that he is threatened, hurt, or rejected, e.g. Dionysus, Moses, Christ. But "the divine child naturally always escapes. It is the last outbreak of darkness against something already so powerful

that although newly born, it cannot be suppressed any more," as Marie-Louise von Franz points out.

*People whose integrity has not been damaged in childhood, who were protected, respected, and treated with honesty by their parents, will be—both in their youth and adulthood—intelligent, responsive, empathic, and highly sensitive. They will take pleasure in life and will not feel any need to kill or even hurt others or themselves. They will use their power to defend themselves but not to attack others. They will not be able to do otherwise than to respect and protect those weaker than themselves, including their children, because this is what they have learned from their own experience and because it is this knowledge (and not the experience of cruelty) that has been stored up inside them from the beginning. Such people will be incapable of understanding why earlier generations had to build up a gigantic war industry in order to feel at ease and safe in this world. Since it will not have to be their unconscious life-task to ward off intimidation experienced at a very early age, they will be able to deal with attempts at intimidation in their adult life more rationally and more creatively.*

—Alice Miller