

## THE ILLUSIONS OF LOVE

Symbiotic Entanglement & The Trans-Generational Nature of Trauma  
(Based on the research findings of Professor Franz Ruppert)

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This article is possible due to the work of Franz Ruppert, with whom I have been a student for some five years. My thanks go to him.

### **Introduction**

Trauma fosters illusions, particularly in our ability to love and to be loved. My aim here is to present an understanding of why the presence of trauma will always distort our perception of ourselves and of those with whom we try to come into loving contact.

In order to understand the multi-generational impact of unresolved trauma on ourselves and our clients, we need to understand bonding processes and trauma processes. Professor Ruppert, a German psychologist and psychotherapist, in his research into bonding and trauma over the past fifteen years, has combined a scientific perspective with practical work using the methodology of systemic constellations as a means of understanding the psychological dynamics of people.

### **Bonding**

Our initial bonding is a deeply spiritual, emotional, psychological and physical process that probably begins at our conception and where, in this first instance, we are not separate from the person with whom we bond. Our primary bond is with our mother, and the secondary bonding is with our father. From the beginning, our sense of safety and survival is absolutely linked to our sense of belonging and bonding with our mother and our family. All our later relationships in life will reflect and be influenced by this initial bonding. A good bonding creates in us the ability to love and make relationships. It is the foundation upon which we can move into individuation and autonomy.<sup>1</sup>

### **Loyalty and Guilt**

Our belonging also requires that we comply with the norms and rules of the family system, many of which are unconscious and rarely or never discussed, and are often connected with unresolved traumatic events in the family history. Loyalty is the powerful force that holds us within any system to which we belong, particularly our family. Feelings of guilt are often stimulated when something happens that jeopardises our safe sense of belonging. As a newly born infant we would not survive if we didn't belong. Our safe belonging in that early vulnerable time provides us with nourishment, physical and emotional contact and protection, without which we would not survive. In some way to a system, and this sense of our survival being completely tied with belonging persists throughout our lives. Mostly these processes are unconscious or semi-conscious.

### **Trauma**

Trauma is a situation where the affected person is completely helpless in the face of overwhelming forces, which are experienced as life threatening. Fight or flight, in this instance, are not possible (one is not helpless if one can conceive of fighting or fleeing), so the only option is freezing and fragmentation<sup>2</sup>. Freezing is a primitive response similar to a prey animal playing dead in front of a predator. The fragmentation is of a very specific type where

the emotional component of the trauma (shock, terror, rage or extreme grief) is split off into the unconscious. In this moment of utter helplessness where we perceive our survival is at stake, there is no place for emotional expression. All energies must go to surviving the moment. Feelings at this point are an extraneous luxury.

Types of trauma that Ruppert identifies<sup>3</sup>:

1. **Trauma of existence:** a perceived or actual mortal threat, e.g. severe accident, torture etc.
2. **Trauma of extreme loss:** usually an un-anticipated loss of a closely bonded person, e.g. loss of a young child, or of a parent when one is a child; loss of a son or daughter by accident or war.
3. **Trauma of bonding:** the bonding process between mother and child is a traumatic experience for the child.
4. **Trauma of the whole bonding system (family):** usually after some initial event, which may have some criminal or severe anti-social element, that in the attempted suppression is persistently restimulated and re-enacted over generations, e.g. systemic abuse, violence, incest.

Other types of trauma may include witnessing persecution, terrorism or abuse, and the perpetration of these (the trauma of the perpetrator).

Ruppert proposes that in situations of such trauma the psyche splits into three components:

1. The Traumatized part
2. The Surviving part
3. The Healthy part

The characteristics of these components are:

Personality Component	Function	Characteristics
<b>Traumatized Part</b>	Holding the trauma feelings and the memory of the trauma.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is always the same age as the time of the trauma</li> <li>• Is constantly engaged with the trauma as if it is still happening</li> <li>• Can unpredictably and suddenly be triggered – re-traumatization</li> </ul>
<b>Survival Part</b>	Constructing and guarding the splits by developing survival strategies. Preventing the trauma from breaking through. Denying and suppressing the trauma experience. Producing new splits to maintain the suppression.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoidant behaviour*</li> <li>• Inappropriately aggressive behaviour</li> <li>• Controlling behaviour</li> <li>• Compensating behaviour</li> <li>• Dissociation</li> <li>• Somatisation</li> <li>• Fostering illusions and delusions</li> <li>• Inability to make good bonds and relationships</li> </ul>
<b>Healthy Part</b>	Being in contact with reality without illusions. Attempting to integrate the trauma experiences – and so is in direct conflict with	<p>These characteristics are compromised by the existence of the split personality.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Openness to truth and reality</li> <li>• Capable of expressing and regulating feelings</li> <li>• Capable of genuine empathy**</li> </ul>

	the Survival aspect.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is able to make safe bonds</li> <li>• Is able to resolve destructive bonds</li> <li>• Sexual desire and behaviour is appropriate</li> <li>• Has a good memory of their past</li> <li>• Capable of self-reflection</li> <li>• Is able to be self-responsible</li> <li>• Seeks clarity and truth</li> <li>• Desires integration within self</li> <li>• Is confident and makes good contact</li> <li>• Feelings of guilt are situation appropriate</li> </ul>
<p>* All or any of these can be seen in any kind of addiction or compulsive behaviour, as well as in the more severe forms of mental illness. ** As opposed to compulsive and merged empathy.</p>		

Common feelings that indicate that our trauma has been re-triggered include: panic (including panic attacks), extreme anxiety, distress, despair, helplessness, hopelessness, intense loneliness, suppressed terror, rage or grief, fear of death. Depression and even psychosis can also be seen as forms of suppression of these feelings.

### **Implications for bonding if mother has suffered trauma**

So what is the situation in the bonding process with her child if a mother is traumatised? What follows will also hold for the father/child bonding, but since it usually comes later, we tend to see the mother/child bonding as the primary bond.

The child can only bond with his mother as she is, and so bonds with her internal psychological splits. He merges with her trauma feelings along with other feelings. He merges with her survival strategies and the compulsion to suppress the trauma. And he merges with her healthy abilities, as they are possible for her. He can do no other.

The mother in turn cannot regulate what aspects of her being her child connects with, and since her trauma is unconscious, she does not know it anyway. She can only be who she is. Ruppert has said that trauma destroys the ability of the traumatised person to bond properly.<sup>4</sup>

So the child takes on his mother's unconscious trauma component along with other aspects of her.

### **Symbiotic Trauma**

'Symbiotic trauma' is a term recently devised by Professor Ruppert in his new book due for publication in German in the Autumn 2010.<sup>5</sup> It refers to the traumatic experience of a child who bonds with a mother for whom the bonding process itself re-stimulates her own trauma feelings, forcing a split in the child very early in his psychological development.

What we need to understand here is that *any* move towards intimacy and feelings for a traumatised person will also, always, re-connect them to some extent with their unconscious trauma feelings, stimulating some of the feelings given above. This helps in understanding why many of us find intimate relationships so difficult and painful, and will compulsively push people away when they come too close. Any form of intimacy is likely to re-stimulate these painful and frightening feelings. So when a traumatised mother holds her child, as the trauma feelings arise she will immediately go into her survival strategies, which will include creating distance and deflecting contact. This makes the bonding process traumatic for the child, which

is compounded by his merged connection with the mother's split-off trauma to create a complex trauma situation for the child.

### **The Child's Dilemma**

The child's dilemma is this: "I want to get close to my mother, but when I do I see/sense her terror and must protect her from her feelings by staying away from her. But being out of contact with her is very painful and makes me fear for my survival."

The consequences for the child are an inability to distinguish between his own feelings and those of his mother. He will tend to idealise the mother and identify with her survival strategies and her split-off trauma, and all his other relationships will replicate this entanglement.

Ruppert has asked an interesting question: Why is it that many of us remain in unsatisfying, entangled relationship with our mothers for our entire lives?<sup>6</sup> Why is it that above all, we find it hardest to understand and resolve this relationship with our mother? Could it be that because trauma that is unconscious, and so efficiently protected by our survival strategies, is so difficult to access that as yet we have not found a way of doing so?

### **Implications for the therapist**

In his book on trauma and bonding (see note 6) Ruppert discusses what he calls "trauma blindness". This is the understanding that, because we all have very good survival strategies to keep our own trauma unconscious, we may be blind to another's trauma. As the other person's trauma feelings surface, our own difficult feelings may surface, just as outlined above in the mother with her child. This has profound implications for us as therapists and counsellors.

### **What kind of healing is involved here?**

Essentially two steps are required:

1. The disintegration of the reified split structure, thereby bringing the fragmentation into full awareness.
2. Followed by integration – bringing the split-off aspects of the person into good contact and relationship.

Of course, this process will require many steps and cannot happen all at one go. In addition it can probably only happen if the therapist fully understands the dynamics involved and his or her own trauma.

Ruppert has also observed that it is likely that, since the symbiotic trauma is the primary trauma of our lives, our ability to bear any other personally experienced trauma later is dependent on the intensity of that initial trauma. Additionally, it is likely that we cannot properly unravel later trauma experiences without having first untangled this initial trauma.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Constellations Process as a Means of Working with Trauma Issues**

Systemic Constellations<sup>8</sup> emerged in Germany in the late 1980's as the work of Bert Hellinger, and presented us with a powerful and strange new way of working. On the surface the constellations method looks similar to psychodrama or family sculpts, but the underlying power of the work is in the fact that the representatives (or role-players) are not given any kind of script, attitude or preordained idea of behaviour<sup>9</sup>. Instead their experiences in the role, which are often very distinct and strong, are assumed to have some relevance to the

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issue presented. We have come to call this 'the representative experience'. It is hard to explain this in rational thinking terms, but over the time that constellations have been practiced (some twenty years), facilitators have come to trust it. So the basic premise of the constellations method is this assumption that the representatives' experiences will have relevance to the issue at hand and as such will help the client move towards integration and resolution of their issue.<sup>10</sup>

The constellations process is the process I know. There may be other methods that can reach the kind of depths that I am discussing here, but I can only talk about this method. The constellations method works well with these processes for the following reasons:

- It is an embodied experience, and so reaches a more holistic sense of truth than talking.
- As an embodied experience, the necessary experiences and expression of feelings is more possible and more likely.
- It enables the splits of the psyche to be embodied separately by different representatives (disintegration of the reified splits).
- It enables the client to have others represent some of his internal complex experiences for him which can be relieving.
- It shows graphically the nature of the relationships of the split components to each other by how the representatives are placed by the client in the constellation.
- The representatives' experiences give valuable information about the needed processes for the split components to come into better contact (integration).

### The Representative Experience

A word about this strange phenomenon: the representatives in a constellation seem to be able to connect with experiences that are acutely relevant to the element/person they represent, and thereby to the client and his issue. This phenomenon is the basis of the success of the constellations process. It is not possible to understand the representative experience with our intellect; it uses our more right brain, intuitive, interconnected sense. One can only begin to understand this process by being a representative in another's constellation and experiencing it for oneself.

### Conclusion

The more I work with Franz Ruppert and learn from him, the more I am convinced that we are on the threshold of a very important shift in our understanding of trauma processes, and particularly how symbiotic trauma is likely to underlie most of our personal and relational difficulties. I hope that this may stimulate your interest to explore these things further.

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<sup>1</sup> For the initial ideas about attachment Ruppert was very influenced by the work of John Bowlby.

<sup>2</sup> For more on these dynamics refer to *Waking the Tiger* by Peter Levine and *The Body Remembers* by Babette Rothschild.

<sup>3</sup> Ruppert, F. (2008) *Trauma, Bonding & Family Constellations: Understanding and Healing Injuries of the Soul*. Green Balloon Publishing, Frome, Somerset.

<sup>4</sup> Personal communication.

<sup>5</sup> Ruppert, F. (2010) in German. *"Symbiose und Autonomie. Symbiosetrauma, symbiotische Verstrickung und Liebe jenseits von Trauma*. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta Verlag.

<sup>6</sup> Personal communication.

<sup>7</sup> Personal communication.

<sup>8</sup> Also known as Family Constellations or the Orders of Love.

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<sup>9</sup> It is possible for the representatives to have no information about who or what they represent at all. These are called blind constellations.

<sup>10</sup> The phenomenon of the representative experience raises interesting issues as to the nature of our interconnectedness, and must have some relevance to our understanding of transference, counter transference, projection and projective identification.