

PODCAST #12 –REVISED TEXT--Identification
With the Aggressor (8 min)

The golden rule urges us to "do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

While generally a good guide for our moral behavior, it is also, with a slight twist, the psychological dynamic underlying child abuse. The twist—the dark version of the golden rule-- would go, "Do unto others as was once done unto you."

As most of us know, child abusers were usually, themselves, abused as children.

The problem is huge and the human cost inestimable.

Over 40 million kids in this country suffer abuse every year, affecting all educational and socioeconomic levels, ethnicities, cultures and religion.

More than 1,500 children die each year as a result of child abuse.

But why?

But more specifically---Why is abuse so often found in the backgrounds of those who hurt children or who hurt others who are weaker than them? What exactly is going on?

First, we have to better define abuse. Abuse can come in many forms. It can be sexual; it can include overt physical violence; more often it's emotional. So, for example, severe neglect qualifies as emotional abuse.

But all forms of abuse rest on the same psychological foundation as the overt physical violence typically associated with the term "child abuse."

So, again--what IS this foundation? The key, I think, to understanding this tragic pattern is found in what psychologists call "identification with the aggressor."

Simply put, when a child is frightened and hurt by an adult, that child tends to grow up feeling and acting similar to that adult.

This is what we mean by identification.

NOW, on its face, even if familiar, this pattern may seem a bit puzzling. Why would a child choose, even unconsciously, to become like someone who is abusive?

The reason the child does so is in order to feel safer.

Here's the heart of the matter: In the child's mind, he or she feels safer being the "doer" than the "done-to," the powerful rather than the powerless, and the one who inflicts pain rather than its victim.

The child would rather be a chip off a violent parent's block than be hit in the head with that block.

There's nothing more distressing, nothing more painful and intolerable than helplessness. None of us can tolerate helplessness for very long.

Helplessness is one of the most toxic of human emotions.

Our psyches—the human psyche, in fact--will attempt to do anything to escape being in a helpless position, even if it means turning around and putting someone else in that position.

When the abused child grows up to abuse others, in that moment of violence, or in that moment of emotional rejection, there is a shift from helpless and frightened object to frightening subject ---and THAT SHIFT, from object to subject, from passive to active, FEELS urgent and automatic.

Sometimes the harm done to the weaker person is rationalized or attempts are made to justify it, but the true motive is unconscious and its origins are ancient.

Sometimes the trigger for the abusive adult is something about the child that makes him or her feel helpless. Say, for example, that person's child is obstinate, oppositional, disobedient, or just

inconsolably cranky. The parent's will is being thwarted, momentarily making that parent feel powerless. But for the parent who grew up experiencing helplessness in toxic forms, these old feelings are now re-triggered, -- it's almost like, on an unconscious level, the adult is re-experiencing something that was traumatic from his or her own childhood-- and the adult's solution -- even if momentary-- to this feeling of powerlessness is to become a powerful aggressor. The adult's childhood trauma is re-surfacing and the switch from passive to active, from being the victim to being a victimizer is an automatic defense. The adult, in other words, uses this "identification with the aggressor" to escape dangerous feelings of helplessness and weakness.

Parents have an awesome power and authority over children, an authority that is physical and emotional. This power, inherent in a family, too often offers adults a safe opportunity to repeat the painful patterns of their own childhoods, but this time they're the ones inflicting the pain rather than the ones on the receiving end.

We all know that, ideally, the exercise of this authority must be tempered by love, patience and empathy.

Too often, it serves to protect the adult from feelings of helplessness inherited from his or her own childhood.

Now, there is one other dimension of identifying with the aggressor that makes people resort to this defense growing up. When we identify with someone, we feel closer to that person. Identification with a parent is a way of being connected to that parent. Sharing a character trait enables one to share a precious emotional space with a parent who might otherwise be quite problematic and difficult to relate to. So, even if the parent is abusive, or scary, becoming a scary abuser serves the unconscious purpose of fostering a feeling of belonging, of being in the same boat, of being “one with the parent.”

We can, I think, see this pattern of “identifying with the aggressor” being played out on a social level. We see it, for example, in fraternity hazing and other hazing rituals where older classmates or veterans abuse newcomers in the same way they were abused. And on an even bigger level, social groups often engage in this type of repetition. For example, poor whites, themselves victimized by ruling elites, turn the tables and victimize people of color. These social phenomena all have identification with the aggressor at their psychological heart.

There's a great scene from the film, *Saturday Night Fever*, that, in one 5-second scene, shows this dynamic at work. The John Travolta character, Tony, sits down with his family for dinner. His younger sister speaks out of turn. In an instant, people start slapping each other in the head, almost like they're passing it around the family. Now, obviously, this is an almost playful version of identifying with the aggressor. The reality is usually much more serious and tragic.

The golden rule is a terrific moral guideline. We just have to stop passing on our pain to others in order to follow it.