

RAPPROCHEMENT BETWEEN FATHERS AND SONS

Breakdowns, Reunions,
Potentialities

Louis Rothschild



For my father, Sidney, and my son, Quinn

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About the author

Louis Rothschild, Ph.D. is a clinical psychologist in Baltimore County, Maryland. Specializing in psychoanalytic psychotherapy, he also provides supervision, writes, and occasionally reviews manuscripts. His publications have ranged from quantitative to qualitative, social-cognitive to psychoanalysis, and clinical to philosophical. Most recently, he penned an epilogue for Salman Akhtar's edited book *Truth: Developmental, Cultural, and Clinical Realms*, and co-edited *Precarities of 21st Century Childhoods: Critical Explorations of Time(s), Place(s), and Identities* with Michael O'Loughlin and Carol Owens. Outside of his professional life, Louis has a fondness for tennis, triathlon, and chasing a rather elusive sourdough starter in the kitchen.

Introduction

In 1977, the poet Adrienne Rich wrote that as long as women remain the only nurturing source for children, women will be considered the sole source of compassion, and that, as a result, women will be simultaneously clung to and resented. Ten years later, the psychoanalyst Gavin Smith (1987) cited Rich's observation to argue that effective fathering implicates the emotional and economic lives of men, women, and children, and that too few men take the complex issues of attachment, separation, and individuation seriously. Consider for a moment the extent to which a father's alienation may be felt throughout a family. Specifically, young infants, attuned to the emotions of those around them, develop implicit relational understandings about the concept of love (Gopnik & Seiver, 2009). To the extent that nurture is siloed to women, children will encounter an emptiness or lack of warmth in fathers that renders emptiness as an embodiment of relational traditions in its own right (cf., Cushman, 1995). As a tradition, emptiness facilitates a failure to witness, and/or a normalization of the adverse experiences that make children's brains grow up too quickly (cf., Tooley, Bassett, & Mackey, 2021). Decades after Rich's suggestion that men could be nurturing, some changes are notable for increasing awareness of what is lacking. For example, a need for a strong and emotionally nurturing father is

found in the Emmy Award-winning show *Ted Lasso* (Goldstein & Hunt, 2020). The character Ted depicts a divorced father and coach who is having panic attacks due to memories of his own father's suicide, which is triggered after witnessing a father abuse one of his players for being fallible on the field of play.

Over forty years after Rich urgently considered the need for the cultivation of emotional literacy in men, and three decades after amplification by Smith, the clearly stated and problematic idea of integrating nurturing capacities into conceptions of masculinity remains an idea that, while recognized, is too often sidelined and repudiated. As trauma persists, statistics suggest that it is mostly boys grown into identified men who continue to feel and act on an implicit sense that embodying the traits of traditional masculinity remains valued by other men (Iacoviello et al., 2021). However, holistic social analyses find a wider explanation to account for the perpetuation of hegemonic masculinity in the superordinate factor of disintegration which is a failure to integrate doing and being (Winnicott, 1961) that implicates fractured community relations (Wachtel, 1989) that, in turn, perpetuate insecure attachments (Matijasevic, 2021), and regardless of gender identifications, find favor in an atomized and defensive autonomy that devalues relational factors such as dependency in both men and women (cf., Layton, 2004a, 2004b).

To this fractured, individualistic end, psychological explanations run the risk of uncritically affirming a practice akin to a myopic cult of personality or a solipsistic navel-gazing in which the benefits of relational continuity and dependency are denied in preference for a narrow and constricted preoccupation with personal attainment (cf., Paras, 2006). Perpetuating the belief in the importance of the rugged individualism found in traditional masculinity is the persistence of a representation of a mature (typically idealized as male) self as a static, fixed, and all-or-nothing entity (Waling, 2019). To put it bluntly, as domination remains attractive, an aggressive wish that the big and powerful really do not cry haunts the present.

My reason for writing this book is simple: We need to continue to labor to make a case for the civilizing implications of freeing compassion from a sexist nomenclature that persistently devalues vulnerability and being. The basic argument explored throughout is that a static

conception of masculinity amounts to a mirage reinforced through a shared repudiation of feelings such as longing and anxiety, and that the effects of such disavowal are found in experiences of emptiness and expressions of aggression. This is a mirage that threatens not only our respective humanity, but all of life on Earth.

In an effort to deconstruct a static conception of rugged individualism, this book focuses on a father's ability to hold and let go as acts that aid the developmental integration of autonomy and dependency, as an antithesis to a static conception of autonomy that attempts to deny dependency. As a defensive response to feelings of dependency, static reifications of an unflinching masculinity are old. For example, originally spoken of as a chip of flint, the phrase "Chip off the old block" was uttered by a Homerically influenced Greek poet in the third century BCE in an attempt to provide reassurance about a son who was away (Theocritus, 2002). The popular phrase attempts to inoculate worry by denying difference and fallibility. Despite lip service to keeping calm and carrying on, longing, or a pain found in a wish for reunion, haunts our respective literatures and consulting rooms. Often, in play like peekaboo, pleasure is found in breaking and return.

Rapprochement is about looking back and risking heartbreak and loss in expressing a need to re-find and re-fuel through delight in discovering the other while forging a self. This is not easy work. A biblical command to not look back finds Lot's wife turned into a pillar of salt. In Greek mythology, Orpheus' looking back in order to celebrate return from the Underworld severs his connection to Eurydice. As an idealized example of success in reunion, the parable of the prodigal or wasteful son has persisted for centuries. The story of an open-hearted and nurturing father who chooses an embrace over rejection appears in Luke (15: 11–32, cf., Snodgrass, 2018). The story is one in which a negligent son returns to be recognized by his father when, due to the son's behavior, it is almost too late for any reunion to take place. Also, within the homilies or midrash contained in the Jewish *Pesikta Rabbati* (44.9), written in the first centuries of the Christian Era, is a version in which the prodigal son struggles to return home, and the father meets him half way (cf., McArthur & Johnston, 2014). In the *Lotus Sutra* of Mahayana Buddhism, the father's attempted reunion frightens the son away as the prodigal son does not recognize his father, so this father

decides to patiently wait for his son to return and to one day tolerate being recognized (Lai, 1981). To the extent that these stories remain idealized spiritual parables, there remains a need to continue translating the hunger for relational security into terrestrial practices.

In the chapters that follow, good-enough fathering is defined as a function that helps a child find or develop their autonomy while also avowing dependency. A parent of any gender can consider how their presence impacts a child's identifications and dis-identifications with the adults involved in child-rearing. However, such a task is fraught with breakdown. In the simultaneity of looking forward and back, rapprochement also implicates struggle. As alienation remains a casual factor in pediatric and adult mental health, breakdowns are explored throughout this text.

While I think that the writers of *Ted Lasso* agree with Adrienne Rich on this point, aggression and reactivity remain all too often naturalized and subsequently enacted in narratives of justification. Psychoanalytic explorations attempt to move beyond the simplicity of the oft used phrase, "It is what it is." To put matters somewhat differently, despite popular reference to the prodigal son as a beautiful parable, hegemonic masculinity remains an impediment to actual loving reunions. Rapprochement between males carries assumptions of homophobia, alienation, and violence.

Consider the following thought experiment. A patient, a successful father and businessman, is describing his narcissistically preoccupied parent who failed to nurture him during a lonely childhood. Do we hear this differently when the cold and preoccupied parent is a father and not a mother? Should a mother naturally know better? How about a father? Why? How about a gay or trans dad as opposed to a straight or cis dad? And, should a daughter be more compliant, which is to say domestic, in locating nurturing capacities than a son? If a son happens to be drawn to domestic pursuits, does it make him less of a male than a "butch" sister who dreams of being a firefighter? In order to further trouble gendered identifications with nurturance, intimacy, aggression, and alienation, the following chapters are centered in literary subjects assumed to be heteronormative males. In recognition of non-binary identifications in sexuality and gender, I hope that I have, to some degree, managed to illuminate qualities of intersubjective mutuality

that transcend specific roles and identifications in a manner helpful to any human.

In addition to Freud, there is a long tradition of turning to stories in order to illuminate psychological wisdom (e.g., Bettelheim, 1975; Warner, 2014). Writing in 1930, Ella Sharpe suggested that psychoanalysts could be assessed for competency in regard to knowledge of literature and mythology in addition to knowledge of psychoanalytic theory (Sharpe, 1930, in Covitz, 2021). For patients and analysts, myths serve a function as transitional objects that afford a sense of security in working with feelings of destabilization and imbalance (cf., Said, 2003). In such a spirit, this work labors to traverse a tradition of rigorous and critical thinking through engagement with multiple disciplines aiming to make our thinking relevant to the facts of human behavior (cf., Meehl, 1973). Such a critical and pluralistic attitude also aims to revitalize a period when scientists and poets were in better conversation (Holmes, 2009), and considers that such a conversation is not only vital to a balanced education, but to the human endeavor (cf., Snow, 1959).

In working within a psychoanalytic tradition, my interpretive effort is one that runs shy of causal explanations of the human condition (cf., Nagel, 1979), and in so doing affirms a distinction between causal explanation and cultural interpretation (cf., Bruner, 1990). This is an effort to acknowledge that interpretation is not excavation, as interpretive acts alter what is held in a manner that necessitates working with what is distorted in order to appreciate what is handed down across generations (cf., Sontag, 1966) in order to affirm that multiple voices comprise our myths and ourselves (cf., Mulhall, 1994). A clinical perspective affirms a need to listen carefully and faithfully, as stories that beg to be told place us in contact with a moral imagination that can serve to provide guidance (Coles, 1989).

In addition to some classics, the stories that follow are those that stood out during my childhood, and also in time spent reading to my son while he was young enough that such activity was sought with a desire for closeness and a curiosity that marked adventure. The characters encountered are notable for their not being respective chips of flint. In literary, clinical, and personal selections, I have in mind a spirit similar to that of a hospital department's morbidity and mortality

conference. In this, my focus is on the material that has left me shaken in some manner. I am grateful for such experiences, and also that much of life, and some of literature, is less challenging. When clinical material is brought into this text, I have taken pains to alter any and all identifying information in order to respect the sanctity of those who have risked free speech and passionate feeling in pursuit of situating themselves in my care. Consideration of what goes well and somewhat easier is also important, and in what follows there are, in addition to challenging moments, also moments of grace that accompany subjective distress. A desire to work productively with such variation serves to normalize experiences of holding, letting go, and situating return, and in itself is a compelling reason to initiate treatment.

Part I: Fleshing out fathers and sons in familial contexts begins with a previously published paper (Rothschild, 2009) based in analysis of fathering and separation and individuation as depicted in the film *Finding Nemo* (Stanton, 2003). There, development, including masculine development, is considered a lifelong process that hinges on negotiations between an ideal and what is real. Additionally, the work of parenting is considered an action conducted by mothers and fathers that implicates contemporary challenges in fractured generational continuity and a simultaneous press for social role flexibility. The next chapter places Max, the protagonist in Maurice Sendak's (1963) *Where the Wild Things Are*, within a historical frame in which conceptions of family are assumed stable despite centuries of precarity. Historical analysis finds a focus on child welfare that includes examination of psychoanalytic history in which father moves from being an essentialized biological parent to being simply another attachment figure (Target & Fonagy, 2002) who helps a child see themselves in the eyes of others (Blatt, 2008). Furthermore, though examination of Max, rapprochement (Mahler, 1968) is considered to be an active process of seeking good-enough resolutions in distinguishing internal subjectivity and the external world in a fashion that implicates creativity across the lifespan. Next, terrestrial embodiment and ethics of the outside are explored in relation to *The Giving Tree* (Silverstein, 1964). There, the failure of a boy to appreciate a tree's point of view makes problematic a distinction between hospitality and annihilation in which narcissism

is considered a function that actively denies feelings of insignificance by finding decay everywhere in manner that through disembodiment threatens to destroy succeeding generations and life on Earth.

Challenges to a son's feeling real and being constructively creative are explored throughout Part II. This section begins with Stephen Mitchell's (1988) appraisal of Daedalus' narcissism as the significant factor in Icarus' death. A psychoanalytic autopsy reveals that a failure to link mastery to experiential processes that include affect is a failure to integrate doing and being. Accordingly, a metacognition that affirms working with the sort of experiential fluctuations found in a youth like Icarus is considered a Dionysian (Nietzsche, 1967) or poetic attitude that is able to contain and situate illusions in a fashion that enables success in flight. Coercive elements between a father and son are further explored in the next chapter through consideration of *The Lego Movie* (Lord & Miller, 2014). There, Donald Winnicott's (1971) idea of a Z dimension, which is comprised of a moment or moments in which a chronic lack of parental recognition alters the developmental trajectory of a child, is considered a functional grain of sand that produces this pearl of a story. The main point of this film is that it matters how one cultivates creative capacities, and to that end the film is considered an attempt to situate threats of stasis contained in neoliberal assumptions. The next chapter turns to Mark Twain's (1982) *Mississippi Writings* as a scaffold from which to explore the developmental tasks of separating what is real from what is imaginary that includes cultural analysis of race and gender. Additionally, Erik Erikson's (1968) concept of a psychosocial moratorium is considered a component of separation and individuation that requests time and engagement to facilitate psychological transformation in a manner that punctures idyllic assumptions of childhood. Further analysis of inter-generational cultural transmission is found in the following chapter's exploration of challenges in the utilization of negative capability (Keats, 2014) in my own adolescent desire for junk food in relation to my foodie father through comparison to *In the Night Kitchen* (Sendak, 1970). Sándor Ferenczi's (1912) conception of a clever baby illuminates *Peter and Wendy* (Barrie, 1911b) and *Frankenstein* (Shelley, 1818) to round out the last chapter in this section. Of concern here is the idea that the work of integration may be denied.

Part III revolves around consideration of the question: What sort of father can help to facilitate creative movement? Genesis 22, the binding of Isaac, is considered to illustrate the danger of aggression, and a chronic and multicultural wounded union revealing that tradition appears to necessitate repudiation. Working simultaneously with thinking within psychoanalysis and philosophy, an argument is made that what has been repudiated within the repetition of tradition may be situated in a prosocial manner. Working with the implications of situating emptiness and aggression as dissociated elements of tradition, I turn to the idea of homecoming through the *Iliad* (Homer, 2004) and the *Odyssey* (Homer, 1998) to further address the idea of a hospitable environment. In this, Odysseus or Ulysses is considered a representative of an indecisive history and interminable present who functions as a projective stimulus. This approach to Odysseus' story of departure and return facilitates thinking on the identity of an unhoused cosmopolitan family man in which return itself is partial. Finally, ethics of subjugated responsibility are further explored through a reading of Elwyn Brooks White's (1970) *The Trumpet of the Swan*. There, through considerations of Lacan's (1977) emphasis on the subjectivity of animals, a good-enough father is considered one who is willing to encounter and engage in serious play with the uneven rhythms found in the human dimensions of misreadings and uncertainties that may be considered symptoms facilitating breakdown and recovery in our most precious relations.

In divergent manners, each of the chapters that follow point to an indeterminacy that runs through our closest relations, and in addition, to our respective need to challenge and accept these limits felt throughout daily life.

Part I

Fleshing out fathers and sons in familial contexts

CHAPTER 1

Finding a father: Repetition, difference, and fantasy in *Finding Nemo**

Over a decade ago, a shift occurred within a majority of the public men's bathrooms in the United States. At issue was the appearance of Koala Bear Kare Tables, otherwise known as changing tables. In response to the appearance of these tables, Calvin Trillin (1995) wondered within the pages of the *New Yorker* if the presence of a cooing baby being changed by a soft, sensitive father would alter the traditional edginess found in men's rooms. Trillin's observation of traditional edginess and his curiosity regarding contemporary softness depict significant features of the social representation and compromise formation that characterize a general psychology of masculinities.

Edginess may be understood as an enactment of the belief that masculinity requires a clandestine, if not adamant, renunciation of traits marked feminine coupled with a lived inability to banish feminine identification from psychic life. A task-oriented steadiness that attempts to bypass the conflict of compromise by devaluing experiences marked

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feminine has been referred to as “pathological arrhythmicity” (Kupers, 1993). Within psychoanalysis, such wishful pathology has long been observed and illustrated from Little Hans’ fear of being bitten to the tragedy of Sophocles’ Oedipus. In these studies and stories, we see experiential dread over the thought that masculine security may be an oxymoron. Put somewhat differently, due to the partiality of defense, an active doubting is a part of masculinity—what Judith Butler (1992) has playfully called “penis size envy.” Such doubting appears to often lead to a homosocial enactment of desperation for approval (cf., Connell, 1990; Rothschild, 2003).

Engaged fathering heightens a pragmatic need for a psychological security that can comfortably acknowledge uncertainty and flexibility (cf., Diamond, 1998; Ducat, 2004; Herzog, 2001). This need may be attributed to a normative trend in which dual-income families require that men perform work previously categorized as women’s work that is now referred to as “second shift work” (Marsiglio & Pleck, 2004). Such a trend might afford enhanced sex role flexibility (cf., Diamond, 1998). However, diapering in the men’s room, or any second-shift labor for that matter, could equally be understood as a ritualized “womb envy” (cf., Munroe & Munroe, 1994) that reactively thwarts such flexibility via compartmentalization and disavowal.

A Kleinian formulation of womb envy (Ducat, 2004) posits that men disavow a feminine identity and transfer their envy of devalued and relegated traits to women’s subjective desire. In this transfer, men’s womb envy becomes women’s envy of masculine social roles (cf., Layton, 2004a, 2004b). Such defensive disavowal would serve to inoculate the explicit identification with a feminine softness experienced by an edgy (read anxious) man. Taken as a generalized social representation that is experienced in particular compromise formations, mothering in the men’s room warrants a critical evaluation of whether a contemporary heterosexual father is different from a traditional father in terms of degree or kind. By addressing father/son matrixes as depicted in the popular film *Finding Nemo* (Stanton, 2003), I aim to show that this tale of a father and son’s quest for relatedness may be understood as a move beyond and something of a perpetuation of the edgy distancing that has been considered a primary ingredient of “father hunger” (Herzog, 2001).

This popular film affords an opportunity to assess contemporary negotiations between an ideal and what is real. As with any artistic creation, this film is approached below as a mechanized artifact that simultaneously perpetuates hegemony while creating a space in which a new experience might occur (Fischer, 1963). Framing this evaluation is what might now be considered a substantial outcropping of work on fathering within psychoanalysis. Diamond (1998) notes that when a good-enough father is available, a reassurance may be found that allows a boy a space in which identification with mother, and therefore softness, need not be disavowed. Similarly, Ducat (2004) states that apron strings may adhere to both mother and father in a manner that values mothering and fathering by mothers and fathers. Yet, Diamond (1998) has also noted that, despite social changes such as enhanced sex role flexibility found in contemporary culture, fathers are typically portrayed in an idealized fashion—not as real people—and that our view of development continues to be matricentric.

In regard to contemporary portrayals of fathering, *Finding Nemo* is refreshing in that it conveys a narrative of masculine development as a lifelong process in which *softness* and uncertainty are as primary as assertive *hardness*, but the film's cathartic end suggests that true completeness and certainty are possible while simultaneously devaluing women in a manner that is consistent with the womb envy of hegemonic masculinity described above. Additionally, the film's narrative illustrates structural and psychological changes within a subset of contemporary nuclear families now headed by people born into the cohort referred to as Generation X, that is, born between 1960 and 1980, and such changes have implications for hegemonic masculinity.

A personal frame

In regard to the post-baby boomer cohort referred to as Generation X, Carlo Strenger (2005) has noted that fathering is fraught with uncertainty, as one's frame from which to act is altered in a social world in which marketability, and therefore a tantalizing transience, are viewed as inherently more valuable than the continuity of cultural tradition. Similarly, Milan Kundera (2007) has noted that one sign of modernism is that comfort with the status quo is comfort with continual change.