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Our Primary Emotional Tapes – A Case Study

It snowed in Philadelphia last Wednesday night. When I arrived at my office, shortly after noon the next day, the driveway and parking areas were unplowed; no access. With my first client due to arrive in less than an hour, I called the landlord but got no answer. I then called the people that clear our driveway at home. They arrived about 1:15 and got enough plowing done to make the office accessible.

Minutes later, the landlord arrived, prepared to clear the snow. He yelled at me (something he apologized for the next day) and remained angry through an exchange of emails, over the next 24 hours or so, in which we each set forth our positions.

So here is a brief, unpleasant, but not unusual interlude between two people who otherwise have an entirely cooperative business relationship. Why do I raise it? Because it offers an excellent example of how, throughout our lives, key emotional systems, that we internalize in childhood, continue to fundamentally affect our psychic landscape.

In this Reflection, I offer a case study of this phenomenon, with me as the example. Doing so, my premise is that I am an utterly typical human, “just another bozo on the bus” as my teacher, Nedra Fetterman, would reassuringly remind me.

Our primary emotional tapes vary – but we all have them. And throughout our lives, we struggle with their consequences. So while the story I tell is unique to me, I trust that it is emblematic of who we are as humans. Better understanding of the continuing influence of these primary tapes will, hopefully, help us to be more decent to our self and, in turn, to others.

Two key pieces of neurobiology provide the context for this discussion. The first is Hebb’s Theorem: “If it fires together, it wires together.” When, for example, an infant – baby Jeff for example – is startled by a barking dog, a chain of synapses fires. Then, because they fired once, they are more likely to fire again in response to a similar stimulus. Confronted with that stimulus a third time, the likelihood of a repeat firing is even greater, and so on. In other words, my brain – like every other brain – is wired to do in the future what it did in the past.

Hebb’s Theorem influences virtually every aspect of living. But there are certain patterns of behavior that have the added feature of overloading the baby’s system, thereby activating his or her fight or flight brain. These patterns – the ones I refer to

as primary emotional tapes – exercise a special power over us because of the peculiarities of that part of the brain.

As a key physiological mechanism for dealing with danger, fight or flight clicks in quickly and powerfully. Moreover, it wouldn't do for an evolving species, intent on survival, to forget the danger presented by a crouching lion months or years later. As a result, this part of the brain never forgets. When an event triggers an old fight or flight pattern – even decades later – the emotions and bodily reactions we felt back then come flooding back, full force. It is as though time stands still.

Notice, importantly, that we are dealing with danger, as it is perceived by an infant or small child. So, while primary emotional tapes are often generated by an obvious danger – physical or sexual abuse – they may also be the product of much more subtle patterns – a dad's characteristically cutting look, mom's self absorption at moments of crisis, even the smell of grandma's apartment. The key is that the child's system is overloaded, consistently triggering his or her fight or flight response.

So how does this relate to the conversation I had with my landlord? Well, my mother was devoted and loving – and very angry. Warm and funny she could turn dark in a heartbeat, screaming and berating whoever was in her line of fire.

Each of her children dealt with her temper differently. Me? I fought back.

From infancy, I was a screamer. And until I was 10 or 11, if she yelled at me, I yelled back, with our pitched verbal battles often continuing to the point of emotional exhaustion. In the end, I would retreat to my room, sobbing and forlorn. Eventually, I would slink back downstairs, rejoining the family but still feeling wrong and humiliated – and a jumble of other, unresolved emotions.

A big part of my healing and growth as an adult has been to understand this pattern – so deeply burned into my psyche – and to create a more adult script for dealing with anger and conflict. And I have made progress to the point where people will now remark – always a bit of a shock to me – on my calm and soothing nature.

But make no mistake, the struggle with the old pattern continues. So when my landlord yelled at me – 6 decades later! – the old tapes reactivated, just like that. My body tensed, I instantly felt tightness in my throat, chest, and shoulders. My brain was on hyper-alert, ready to defend and counterattack.

At 5, or 10 or 40 I might have done exactly that. But over the years, I have slowly learned to behave better. So, emotionally catapulted back into my old tapes, I was still able to interrupt the pattern. Instead of yelling back, I retreated to my office.

This growing ability to interrupt my programmed responses has been a real plus. It has minimized the practical consequences of my temper. It has also been integral to

the deeper emotional healing I have experienced; a growing understanding, at a gut emotional level, that angry attacks are not my mother reincarnate.

But this recent incident was a reminder that, while the old tapes are muted – and, now, largely invisible to the outside world – they continue to powerfully affect my emotions, physical state and, albeit in more subtle ways, my behaviors.

First, the behaviors: While I didn't yell back at my landlord, I was literally impelled to communicate to him in writing, explaining in detail the reasonableness of my actions. My wife, who is also my business partner, reviewed these emails and confirmed their polite tone. But my compulsion to write them belied my intentions. I was battling back, showing the landlord I was right and, by clear implication, that he was wrong. Using my adult writing skills to mask my true identity, I was really a child, reliving my primary emotional tape – yet again.

Not surprisingly, my physical and emotional state reflected the reassertion of these old tapes. The tension in my body persisted and, even now, a week later, I can still feel its residue. Emotionally, try as I might, the incident – the “injustice” of the landlords position – my detailed defenses – kept flooding my thoughts. In addition, even knowing how minor the incident was, I still felt powerfully at risk and desperate to “prove” that I was right. In other words, the old feeling of being the one who was wrong, the outcast – so integral to the old tapes – was back as well.

One lesson I draw from these events has to do with the relationship we have with our primary tapes. Our control-oriented culture focuses on overt behaviors; implicitly telling us that our work is done once we have learned to manage their visible consequences. But, as important as more functional behaviors are, that should not be our primary goal. Instead, we should be aiming for habits of healing and growth that allow us to live with greater ease, vibrancy and self-mastery.

This latest run-in with my childhood tapes provides an excellent example of pay-offs that can occur when we persist in pursuing this larger goal. After years of self-reflection – and long after I was “cured” of my temper – you would think that I have little to learn from continuing attention to my emotional tapes. But you would be wrong.

In the days following the incident, I employed my usual healing strategies: Support, self-talk, self-soothing, distraction. Then, with my wife's support, I tried a less tested approach: An unqualified apology. To my surprise, it resulted in an immediate and perceptible easing of my pain.

In retrospect, it makes sense. My traditional healing strategies do little to challenge the system my primary emotional tapes activate. And “winning” actually perpetuates it, the only difference being that I become the (temporary) winner. When I apologized, however, I walked away from the old pattern. I was no longer fighting, no longer defending.