

Chapter Seventeen

FAMILIES

The family unit is the institution for the systematic production of mental illness.

Ashley Montagu

All of us forever bear the weight of family and cultural history. Our ancestors live in our minds, even as they inhabit the spiraling chains of DNA hidden in every cell of our bodies. It's how we deal with this burden that makes all the difference.

LU

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LU

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LU



CS

The Big Lie

Along the way in your letter, you fashioned a number of insights that resonated with me, including your comment about "the big lie that we tell ourselves, that we are less than we are." I think that is so true.

We are brought up by parents (or others) who almost always have our best interests at heart. Nevertheless, they can give us only what they have, and that is not always what we need. They condition us to their way of thinking, inculcate their own psychological mind-sets into ours, and condition us with their notions of religion, politics, education, goals and values.

It is a form of hypnosis which remains with us forever — unless we can *recognize* how our lives are stunted by the principles they instilled in us. That is, we nearly always grow up believing "we are less than we are." The great struggle of one's life involves the efforts we instinctively make toward de-conditioning ourselves, de-hypnotizing ourselves, waking up (as Gurdjieff so often put it), and liberating ourselves from the ingrained, mesmerizing, programmed sense that we are "worthless," or we are "sinners," or we are "less than we are."

The parents suffered the same from their parents, priests, politicians and teachers, and are not to be blamed. But once we begin to see the light of our own awakened spirit shining on the other side of our suffering, we immediately know we have a responsibility to nourish and fulfill our own potential. That, of course, requires courage, discipline, sustained effort, and proper reading/listening/observing. Ain't easy. But it's certainly possible — and it is a joy when it happens.

JS

Multiple Fathers: Burden, or Blessing?

If your son, M, had problems with multiple fathers (your various lovers), well, that's the way the cards were dealt to him. If his need for "normalcy" was strong, perhaps stronger than his appreciation for the incredible variety and amazingly interesting men that came into his life because of you, then it was his problem, not something for which you should be faulted.

Flash, dash, originality, uniqueness, experimentation and variety in life require a certain intelligence, courage and vitality to enjoy. Most people want and need security. They want to live in a kind of emotional temperate zone, a luke-warm place where everything looks normal and acceptable to the neighbors.

Understandably, M may have felt that way, especially in his earlier teen years — most teens want to conform more than anything else, be part of the gang, be "normal" in the eyes of their peers.

M was lucky to have you with him throughout the many changes that took place around both of you. Yes, the men came and went in your life, but you remained with him, and he was lucky as heck to have had some extremely colorful, interesting, intelligent male figures in his life.

No matter what the situations might have been, M would have found ways to complain, not because he was ungrateful or unable to see things, but simply because that is what kids do: they rebel against whatever is there. If a father is there, they hate and criticize him for any and everything he says and does. If a father is not there, they hate and criticize him for not being there, the way Jeff Buckley criticized Tim.

In a sense, parents always get the short end of the stick, no matter what they do or don't do. It's understandable that kids are miserable when the parents are selfish, mean, or inconsiderate. But it's also true that kids are miserable even under the best of conditions. Look at Buddha — he was a prince. He could have been a king. He grew up surrounded by beautiful women, musicians, the best food, clothes, art

works. He said, "Fuck it," left home, became a beggar. It's pure chance that he became famous, respected, and globally influential. He could have easily died in the gutter cursing his father for being a sonofabitch king and politician.

You had your life to live, too, and it was a life of exceptional color, spontaneity, variety, excitement, energy, creativity, juice, passion, intensity and joy. If M couldn't come around to seeing that, well, hey, too bad — he missed a wonderful opportunity. If he regarded it as a burden rather than as a blessing, then that is his tough luck — and his choice. No matter what his evaluation of your mercurial ways, you did what you had to do, you did it your way, and your way was thrilling, beautiful and full of love's music and magic. For whatever it's worth, I don't think you should feel the least bit guilty if M had a few reservations about his fathers. If he couldn't handle the lifestyle you gave him, that was a considerable loss on his part, but so what? We all have our burdens to bear.

Personally, I would have been thrilled to have a mother like you. So would any of a thousand writers, painters, musicians I could name at the drop of a hat. He was incredibly fortunate to have had you in his life. If he missed, boo-hoo, his loss — but definitely not something for which you should feel deficient, inadequate or guilty. You were a grand lover, a grand woman, a grand talent — and you still are. The world could use a few more bright-eyed, smiling, laughing, dancing, painting, singing women like you. We'd all be better off!

JS Not For The Faint of Heart

I'm not sure you are getting the points I was trying to make for you.

On the one hand, you expressed a concern about your having troubles with men. My reply was an effort to bolster you about your own self-worth in relation to the men you have been involved with.

On the other hand, regarding your late son, M, you expressed concern for his confusion about himself and you in relation to several fathers. My point, in a nutshell, was "For whatever it's worth, I don't think you should feel the least bit guilty if he had a few reservations about his fathers."

As for being a so-called "good mother," you will be fine if you don't feel guilty about not being a traditional Ozzie-and-Harriet mom who could offer M the conventional comforts of an orthodox middleclass life. If you hold the conventional "apple pie" notion of motherhood as an ideal, you will only come up short. If you celebrate the creative liberated mother that you were in fact, all will be well. If M understood and appreciated you, great. If he didn't, it was his loss, not your concern for guilt.

As I suggested more recently, you might want to examine your reasons for choosing the men you chose. If some of the men were tyrannical or "unloving," as you indicated, why did you pick them? Did you have a difficult time with intimacy? Did you feel inferior, worthless, and filled with low self-esteem? Did you pick them so on the one hand you could feel superior and needed, and on the other hand you could be treated poorly, punished, made to "pay" for being a "bad girl"? Is it possible you picked men who self-destructed because you yourself feared success and didn't feel worthy of it, or strong enough to handle it, or deserving of it?

Gets tricky in here, doesn't it.

If you presume to write about your life seriously, these are among the questions that you must examine if you want to create a book that has depth, integrity and truth in it. Writing is not for the faint of heart.

SL **Not Suited For Parenthood**

I tip my hat in respect to you for choosing not to have children (rather than being the victim of one of nature's blind tricks and having children by accident or through pressure). As a fellow named Michael Levine once said, "Having children makes you no more a parent than having a piano makes you a pianist."

Indeed, not all of us are cut out for parenthood, and it is the wise, kind, conscientious, and extremely smart person who recognizes that quality in him- or herself (as did I, and you, and a number of my friends). A life devoted to creativity, exploration, and examination of self, others, and nature is infinitely preferable for those such as you or myself.

I, for one, would be a terrible parent, regarding the whole messy business with fear and loathing and resentment. I love to see kids in restaurants or in the supermarket (unless they're throwing one of those uncontrollable, outrageous, howling hissy fits). When they are cute — from a distance of three feet or more — they are absolutely delightful. As for the rest of it — diapers, squalling nights, ball and chain demands — money, time, emotional expenses — forget it. I'd rather read Thoreau, Wilber, Osho, and dozens of others (including you :-)).

Meanwhile, people like Sonia's son Alex love parenthood, as did Sonia (two sons and a daughter). Bless them. Let them take care of the squalling little tyrants while I write poems and play piano in a room far removed from anybody's nursery. All of this by way of saying, "Good for you!"

As for your parents having children while not being remotely suited for parental duties, my heart goes out to you. It's the luck of the draw, isn't it? Too bad, for sure. In very different ways, my parents weren't suited either (although they were neither crude nor violent nor demeaningly critical, for which I regard myself as lucky).

We all are stuck with whatever cards we were given. Seems to me you and I have done well with less than a royal flush.

SL No Hallmark Christmas Cards

The period between Thanksgiving (a holiday which, of course, you don't have, being Brit and all) and Christmas has always been a bit of an obstacle course for me.

Years ago when I was a teenager, I used to feel extremely depressed from Thanksgiving through New Year's season. I found myself walking neighborhood sidewalks in the winter chill, following my breath-clouds, looking across lawns into the brightly lit living rooms of Christmas revelers, strangers I would never know or see in person. I loved the colored lights, the Christmas carols, the spirit of friendship and good cheer.

As I walked those sidewalks of my odd, double-dimension youth, glancing into the happy-rooms with people talking, laughing, singing, I always felt an enormous sorrow, a deep emotional pain, an unanswered cry for that same sense of family, of love and trust, of unity, support and hopefulness that I saw in others. And so I turned to escape from sorrow. Nothing dramatic, just booze, drugs, sex, athletics, music, anything to release me from that intense, unfulfilled yearning that sparkling colored lights and traditional songs exacerbated.

Later on, I could see that a lot of people get crazy, even suicidal, during this season because of its connections with family in general, parents in particular. The season just ain't like it appears on Hallmark Christmas cards with snow and sleigh bells and smiles and rosy cheeks at the dinner table, and that disparity drives a lot of folks into the pits.

To be sure, there remains for me "a small amount of torture." I mostly miss what I never had — the kind of family closeness I yearned for but rarely felt in my childhood. After many years and great effort, I managed to pass through that darkling forest. There came a time when I could accept my parents and relinquish the various angers and disappointments of my own that separated me from them. In fact, I feel that warm closeness today, at my advanced age and my parents' extremely advanced age, far more than I felt it as a lad.

Well, hello.

Things since those earlier years (when I still had hair and a future) have been much better during these winter months when clouds settle in the mountains, and yellow-red-green Christmas lights sparkle in the mist.

I still yearn for a perfect sense of love, security, and understanding, something neither I nor anyone else will ever have, but I don't let that remnant of yearning push me into fear, desperation, and the irresistible swoon of darkland oblivion.

To the contrary, I've been willing and able to welcome friendship and a degree of happiness into my life during this strange season. And if and when those moments arrive when the surges prove too much, there is always music. I can disappear inside the piano. I am happy to say the Christmas melancholy has not overwhelmed me for many years now.

SL A Family Outing

Sonia's daughter, Susan, visited during this past week. She stayed at Alex's house . (Alex is Sonia's younger son). Alex invited Sonia and me over, and Sonia's elder son, Aaron (from Petaluma), along with one of Aaron's friends. What with Alex's wife and three little kids there as well, we had quite a family gathering.

We piled into three cars last Sunday and drove to the Merced River, up near Yosemite National Park. Along the river there is a wonderful swimming hole, with lots of people — men and women of all ages, children of all ages, dogs — picnicking, soda pop, beer — a holiday for everybody.

It was one of those marvelous scenes right out of a 19th Century painting — a high mountain in the background, the river below, rocks from which the kids jumped into the clear blue-green water. Looked like a blend of pointillist Georges Seurat, Impressionist Camille Pissarro, and the American painter Norman Rockwell. The kids went swimming, and a good time was had by all.

Later, back at Alex's, Aaron and Alex cooked up chicken, steaks and hamburgers on Alex's brand new barbecue grill. We sat around a long table, toasted the family. I had a warm, fuzzy, love-vibe feeling about the whole thing. In this setting, the family experience was terrific.

Then Susan came to our house and stayed for three days. That was good, too. Sonia and Susan converse by phone once a week, but it felt good for both of them to be in each other's presence. They spent a good deal of time talking together. It warmed my heart to see what a close, loving relationship they have, even as this particular family experience touched me deeply.

See? There was a time when I thought it could never be done, at least not for me. But it can. Isn't that terrific?

Much luv,

L