

Chapter 7: Family Power Relationships

Where love rules, there is no will to power, and where power predominates, love is lacking. The one is the shadow of the other.

Carl Jung, *The Psychology of the Unconscious* (1943)

They weren't very good at being parents, and I wasn't very good at being a son.

Edward Albee

I spent my whole childhood looking for an escape.

Dennis Rodman¹

It has interested me, writing about my childhood, how many times I referred the reader to this then-unwritten chapter on family power relationships. These relationships were clearly formative not only of my childhood but of the adult I have become. And yet, now that I sit down actually to write this chapter, it is striking how little hard data I have about it. In part this is because power relationships were rarely talked about explicitly, among other reasons because of the ideology my mother so ruthlessly enforced that we were a “normal” happy family. I remember clearly that there was a lot of conflict, but I cannot call many specific examples to mind now, all these decades later. No doubt I have repressed a lot of unpleasant memories, but still this makes me doubt the accuracy of my recollections. And yet I am in no doubt that the central issue of my childhood, which has carried over unhelpfully into my maturity, was my attempt to assert my autonomy and my mother's attempt to suppress it in favor of her dominance. The savage lengths to which she went in the end to achieve this will appear in Chapter 8.

I say my *mother* rather than my *parents* because there were two key relationships here – mine with my parents, and theirs with each other. Their relationship was the foundation which allowed my mother to inflict her excesses on me without challenge. For my mother was a top, and my father was a bottom.

I use the language of dominance relationships deliberately. I know that my mother liked to dominate, and I believe my father liked to be dominated, at least by her. That was the dynamic, I think, behind their apparently successful lifetime bond, and it is also the dynamic which allowed her to control our household. I am reminded of what Frances Donaldson (1907-1994) said in her biography *Edward VIII* (1975) about that classic

¹ Dennis Rodman is a famous (now) basketball player and public madman. I mention this in a note because I doubt he will be remembered in 2319, while Carl Jung and Edward Albee will still be familiar names.

top/bottom pair, Wallis Simpson and the Duke of Windsor: “Most of all, he loved her authority.”

My mother’s authority was just what I most did *not* love about her, and yet that was her main means of expression within her family, at least as far as I could see. I could not see very far as a child, but that was because I felt continually threatened. Therefore my first thought was always to protect what autonomy I had, and to extend it as much as I could. If I had been treated respectfully as a child, perhaps I would probably not have formed such a defensive attitude toward the world, and my life would have been quite different.

- Or I could say, with equally imagined accuracy, perhaps if I had not been so obsessively protective of my autonomy, I would not have felt so threatened, and my life would have been different for *that* reason. The truth about this will never be known.²

My parents had a strong bond, founded I believe on this mutually satisfying dominance relationship. I never heard them fight or even argue. The ideology was that they were always in perfect harmony. Whether this was true or not behind closed doors I am in no position to say. But they used the ideology of harmony defensively against their children – certainly against me. I can understand this. If a child perceives any daylight between his parents he can exploit it to his advantage. It is in the parents’ political interest to deny the child this advantage, which could erode their dominance. In the face of their solidarity and believing in their unanimity, the child has nowhere to turn and resistance becomes more difficult.

I am aware that there is a certain grotesque quality to writing about the dynamics of a nuclear family in terms of such stark *Realpolitik*. And yet that is how I perceived my childhood environment, not only then but now. I remember complaining to my father, at the age of perhaps seven or eight or maybe earlier (I know I was younger than 11 because it was at the Fifth Avenue apartment) about the unfair absoluteness of his power over me. “If you wanted to,” I said to him, “you could force me to push a peanut up Fifth Avenue with my nose.” He said, of course, that he would never do such a thing. But the point was, I insisted to him, not whether he *would* do it or not, but that he *could* do it if he wanted to. And if I refused, he could call on the police to enforce his order.

The example was a bit extreme. I see now that if he *actually* ordered me to push a peanut up Fifth Avenue with my nose, the police would not back him up. But the theory was right. Their authority over me was backed by the threat of force, if they wished to apply force (and they often did). If I resisted their use of force, then a policeman would use

² “Everything else you grow out of, but you never recover from childhood.” Beryl Bainbridge (1933-2010). The quotation is taken from her obituary in the *New York Times*, July 3, 2010.

state-sanctioned force to back them up. I understood completely at that age that my subjection to my parents' authority was a *political relationship*, that force is pivotal in political relationships, and that ultimately the party with access to coercive power is stronger and can use it to enforce his dominance over the weaker party (which of course was always me). I have never found any reason to change this view of the world, which was reinforced as a teenager first by the force used against me, backed up by state power, as described in Chapter 8, and later by studying Machiavelli, and the hard-nosed political science taught at Columbia, and the electrifying experience of the Columbia Strike of 1968.³

I surmise that most children do not think of their situation in terms like these. Christopher points out that most children accept their parents' authority, even though they may quarrel with particular exercises of it. This suggests to me that my situation was out of the ordinary, and resulted from the explosive combination of a child of unusually independent spirit and a mother unusually threatened by his independence.

Why did she feel so threatened? Why did she feel the need to enforce a domestic ideology in a ruthlessly domineering way? I have no way to *know*, for sure, but I have a theory. Readers of Chapter 2 will recall that her father, David Lazarus Rubinstein, committed suicide early in 1929, when his daughter was at the impressionable age of 11½. Head in the oven, and it happened when she was away from home. I think (perhaps her brother Roy, five years older, told me this) that she felt responsible for this event, not an uncommon reaction for the child of a suicide. This led her (I speculate) to feel that, having been a failure as a daughter, she would have to be perfect in her later roles of wife and mother, or dreadful consequences might again follow.

- “My mother had a very difficult childhood, having seen her own mother kill herself. So she didn't always know how to be the nurturing mother that we all expect we should have.” Amy Tan.⁴

Perfection is a dangerous goal for anyone, especially for a person not well balanced emotionally. It can lead to excesses of rigidity and ruthlessness, and even, if the need is strong enough, to the delusion that perfection has been achieved and must be defended. It can lead to seeing anything that challenges the ideal of perfection attained as a mortal threat. And I certainly posed such a challenge.

Here's an example. I was somewhat older than 11 when this happened, because we were living on 70th Street. It was a chilly day in the late fall. I had to go to Meyrowitz the

³ See Chapters 4.C (Machiavelli), 11 (Columbia), and 12.D (the Strike).

⁴ In an interview, dated June 28, 1996, with the Academy of Achievement website, <http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/tan0int-1>.

optician at 86th Street and Madison Avenue. I took it into my head to walk there from 70th and Park, a distance of about a mile, wearing no coat, only slacks and a polo shirt. I was cold – that was OK, I was experimenting with being cold. Children are supposed to experiment – it’s how they learn about the world. I enjoyed the experience despite its discomfort.

But when I got home my mother erupted with rage. *How dare I* do a thing like that? I discerned, through the volcano of anger and reproach, that the reason she objected was that I might catch a cold. Well, I suppose there was that risk. Why was this enough to unleash so pyrotechnic a response? The answer was, I think, that in her mind it was her job to protect me against harm. A perfect mother would never allow her child to be at risk. By even theoretically exposing myself to risk, I was undermining the perfection of her motherhood and threatening her arrangement with (and propitiation of) the world. No goddamn child was going to get sick on *her* goddamn watch, goddamn it! Therefore my deviant conduct had to be suppressed, at whatever cost.

As usual, as always, it was all about *her*. A less obsessed mother would have said well, it was cold out there, wasn’t it? You know you could catch a cold that way – better wear a coat next time. Meanwhile how about some hot chocolate to warm you up? But my being cold was not the issue for her – it was *how dare I do such a thing?* The phrase was telling – in her mind, exposing myself to the cold was *something I had done to her*.

There were plenty of other examples of this kind of thinking, and not always about me. Bedtimes were strictly enforced, on the theory that children need their rest. Well, OK – that wouldn’t be my style of child rearing, but by itself it is not a wholly unreasonable position. But how about this: there is a gathering of people, my parents’ friends, my girlfriend and others, at our house on 70th Street. Christopher, a teenager, is entertaining us by playing the piano. The moment of his bedtime comes. My mother stops his performance in mid-bar and orders him upstairs to bed that very instant! Do children need their sleep? Probably. Was the threat to Christopher’s health from staying out of bed an additional five or even fifteen minutes, to finish the piece he was playing and perhaps receive some applause, worth the humiliation she inflicted on him? Not in a million years. It disgusted people who were present, who still remember it decades later. It disgusts me now to remember it. But a perfect mother puts her children to bed *on time* – any variance is a risk, and no risk can be tolerated, no matter who gets hurt.

I could go on telling stories like this, but my purpose is not to rehash specific outrages but to show that my mother was nuts on the subject of discipline for children. And I use the word *nuts* deliberately. She had an ideology and *no one* was allowed to threaten or even question it. She would flatten her children if they got in the way of her *Mutterheit* – it was far more important to her than the people she was supposed to be mothering. She was very fond, after one of her children crossed her, of saying “There’s going to be a New Order around here!” It is inconceivable that my mother, who was 22 when Hitler

entered Poland, and who went through World War II as an adult and a Jew, did not know that a “New Order” was the specifically named aspiration of fascism. It can only be that this phrase reflected, whether consciously or not, her affinity with the totalitarian mindset of fascism and the fascist determination to extirpate all resistance. *Il Duce ha sempre ragione*.⁵

Most people liked my mother, except her own children. She was very intelligent and energetic and resourceful, and capable in her own way at getting things done. She *wanted* to be a good mother, but she wanted it too obsessively for anyone’s good. She was notably successful as a director of volunteers – during the war at the Aircraft Warning Service, later at the School Volunteers, and finally at Channel 13.⁶ The trouble was that her children were not volunteers – we were conscripts.

- From an e-mail in 2003: *If I had had a more reasonable mother, so that resistance was not the key to survival, I might have had a more pliable disposition. My pliability was weeded out, leaving scar tissue instead. On the other hand, I was probably not all that pliable to begin with, or I would have been more easily plied, and I would have become a mama’s boy instead of a prickly resister.*

My siblings reacted in their own ways. I defined the situation politically and resisted. Christopher’s response was more measured. I don’t wish to characterize his feelings or actions – he speaks for himself in his papers lodged at Yale. By the time Adam was growing up I think my mother’s need to dominate her children had slackened somewhat – Adam says he was left more or less alone. If this is true, I cannot say just why – it could be that she detected in Adam a similar spirit of resistance, and didn’t want to go through that again, or it could be that her failure as a mother was so thoroughly demonstrated with me that perfection as a goal now seemed out of reach. Or it could be that she got more self-understanding and stopped being quite as nuts. I don’t know – as soon as I myself was out from under her thumb I ceased to care about what she was feeling.

And where was my father in all this? Completely passive, as I recall. He always backed her on everything – that was the ideology of solidarity. And because of his own investment in submissiveness, he would not have been inclined to challenge her anyway. I loved my father, and for years I excluded him from the bitterness I felt toward my mother. But now I have come to see that he was complicit in her mistreatment of me, and that he should have protected me. The fact that he didn’t, whether from weakness, apathy or fear, was close to unforgivable. He was certainly complicit in the monstrous betrayal that was the climax of this conflict, discussed in Chapter 8.

⁵ Mussolini’s slogan. It means *The Leader is always right*.

⁶ See Chapter 2 for slightly more about this; still more is in the files on her in the Phillips Family Papers at Yale.

- “I cannot think of any need in childhood as strong as the need for a father’s protection.” Sigmund Freud.⁷

My father’s passivity left me alone to defend myself against my mother. I had almost no resources for doing this except a keen understanding of the political situation and an unbreakable will. Both my parents were both quite willing to beat me, which happened with some frequency – I will never forget sitting on the stairs at the 70th Street house, while my mother was hysterically lashing me with a dog’s leash, and I was screaming with pain and hatred. The pain passed more than 50 years ago, but can I still feel the hatred, undiminished to this day. It isn’t good for me, but there it still is.

But what could I do? I was too small to resist physically, and moreover if I did hit back I knew they would not hesitate to call the law on me and ship me off to a reform school. As it turned out I was right to believe they would move against me with outside force – see Chapter 8. I thought of going to the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, which was just a block away, and asking their protection. They were whipping me, after all. But I knew that someone from my privileged background would not get a fair hearing there – or indeed anywhere.

The only thing I could do is what a resister can always do when dominated by overwhelming force – *not recognize the legitimacy of the oppressor and not lose faith in himself*. I did not recognize the legitimacy of my mother’s attempted domination over me, not then, not now, not ever. And I did not waver or begin to think maybe they were right and that I was bad. This was not normal parental authority – it was something very different and very sinister. I believed I had a moral right to a reasonable level of autonomy, and to have my views considered with at least some regard. And they (that is, she) in turn did not consider my resistance legitimate, or that I had any right to control of any part of my life. They did not always *exercise* control over every part of my life, but they (that is, she) never accepted any limitation on their *right to do so*. I don’t think it is exaggerated to draw a parallel to Chief Justice Taney’s notorious statement that blacks “had no rights which the white man was bound to respect.” *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, 60 U.S. 393, 407 (1856). I was not a slave, but the people who had legal control of me and my life did not believe I had any rights they were bound to respect.

Indeed, a good part of the problem was that I was not respected as an individual. My opinion carried no weight at all. Decisions were made – for example to take me out of one school and put me into another – without even consulting me. I was treated in things that mattered as a kind of possession. I was the *object* of my mother’s motherhood, and

⁷ From *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930). Or, as Marlon Brando put it in the movie of Budd Schulberg’s *On the Waterfront* (1954): “You was my brother, Charlie, you should have looked out for me a little bit. You should have taken care of me just a little bit so I wouldn’t have to take them dives for the short-end money.”

failure to conform to her idea of how a son relates to a perfect mother (obediently and gratefully, of course) was considered an existential threat and dealt with accordingly. It is interesting in retrospect to see that the school they chose for me (Collegiate School) had the same approach – submit and do what we demand, and if you don't you're rotten, and we'll force you. See Chapter 3C.10. I didn't know it could be any different until I got to Walden and saw what a respectful school environment could be like. See Chapter 9.

This pervasive disrespect was an important element of my discontent. I remember at a very young age fantasizing: I'll become a child actor, because those are the only children people take seriously. Of course nothing came of this – I didn't really want to be an actor, and anyway real child actors are not taken seriously, but are notoriously subject to abuse and manipulation. All I wanted was to be treated like a person. I remember how amazed I was to visit the home of my friend Lee Oestreicher, whose mother and stepfather *did* in fact treat him like a person, and did not try to dominate him as far as I could see. The political economy of that house seemed to be based on civility and cooperation and affection rather than on domination and the threat of force. No doubt there were clashes of will there too, although I didn't see them – but the important thing was the attitude. I certainly wished Lee's mother were my mother too. I still wish she had been – my life would have been very different, then and probably now.

I recognize, as I said, that my mother *wanted* to be a good mother, and did the best she could given the severe distortion of her personality. But I have been too badly damaged by her cruelty and betrayal to be inclined toward forgiveness. I forgive her in theory, because I know I should – unforgiveness is corrosive, and forgiveness reinforces essential skills of Dharma practice such as compassion, non-attachment, and awareness of impermanence. But you really have to *mean* forgiveness, and in my heart I don't.

And I realize also that I must have been a handful. But I was fighting for my life. If I had been in a supportive environment rather than a hostile one, I would probably not have been such a handful.

- “The monsters of our childhood do not fade away, neither are they ever wholly monstrous. But neither, in my experience, do we ever reach a plane of detachment regarding our parents, however wise and old we may become. To pretend otherwise is to cheat.” John le Carré.

All children were and are subject to their parents, especially in those days, and this subjection does not usually become so highly inflamed an issue. Why did it in my case? We had equally strong wills but diametrically opposed interests. I would not accept subjection and she would not accept anything else. Both saw the other as threatening a vital interest. Under those conditions conflict was inevitable.

The conflict between us culminated in the *coup de main* described in Chapter 8, to which the reader is now referred (I suggest reading it *immediately* after this chapter, as the two form a unit). I was made a political prisoner in an *explicitly admitted* attempt to break my will, effected with deceit, maintained with pitiless force, and accomplished (at heavy financial cost) with utter and ruthless disregard for the damage to me. It was proof that she would stop at nothing to overpower me, and proof that I could not look to my father or anyone else for help. But as will be seen, my own internal strength defeated her in the end. I was not the first political prisoner to survive such treatment with an unbroken (and indeed fortified) spirit.

As a result of this early training I learned to see clearly through the surface to the underlying power relationships in most situations. It made political science easy for me – I had learned it at my mother’s knee. I learned to base analysis on *interests* rather than on ideology or on what people say, and not to expect people to act against their interests. They may, sometimes, but don’t count on it. I still see the world very much this way. No doubt I miss a lot of nuance, but I also see a lot that other people do not see.

I note in passing that none of my mother’s four children, despite marked differences in their personalities, has ever been able to form a satisfactory or enduring pair bond. It seems likely that this circumstance has an environmental basis.



Tailpiece: *The Virgin in Glory*, by Albrecht Dürer (1511)

Document 7-1: Poem by Philip Larkin

“This Be The Verse”

They fuck you up, your mum and dad.
They may not mean to, but they do.
They fill you with the faults they had
And add some extra, just for you.

But they were fucked up in their turn
By fools in old-style hats and coats,
Who half the time were sippy-stern
And half at one another’s throats.

Man hands on misery to man.
It deepens like a coastal shelf.
Get out as early as you can,
And don’t have any kids yourself.

[This poem, first published in 1971, later appeared in Larkin’s 1974 collection *High Windows*.]