

hers. That's why I go to analysis, so that my stuff does not spill over and give anxiety to my children. I do not read her journal, and she does not read mine. Some things are private, and should be so, I feel.

My parents are Ruby's grandparents, and my child-in-relation-to-my-parents is not someone Ruby needs to know, in all its greed, need, terror of change, fear of loss and abandonment. Just because I went through all of that, I don't see that Ruby has to. That inner child is the crea-

ture that becoming a mother resurrected in me, brought me slap-bang up against, the one who never was recognised or allowed to just be. Therapy is healing this lost little soul, and my real children are showing me another child, who can play and be a proper child, even though she was never let be one the first time around.

I've used far too many words here to try and be clear about this with you. It comes down, I think, to a clear boundary between the child and the adult, and to the responsibilities of being a parent.

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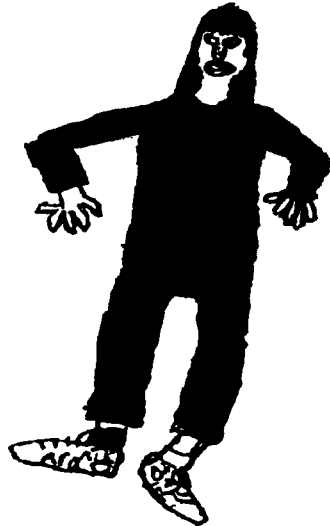
## ***A Case of Mistaken Identity***

*Eric Whitton*

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**M**ost people have a strong desire to be close to another person. For some it forms the central point of their lives. Others are scared of it or have given up hope of finding it. Although it is the most natural impulse, the pathway to intimacy has for many been overlaid with false trails. I believe it is possible for any two people to be intimate and open with each other, given certain conditions. But there are a number of obstacles which keep us from closeness, and we need skill and awareness to overcome them and recover our ability to be close.

Many of the difficulties in relationships arise from what I call a case of 'mistaken identity'. When we look to another person for closeness based on fulfilling a role



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which keeps us unequal, we are doomed to failure. Intimacy can only be between equals. The most common mistake is to confuse intimacy with nurture. Eric Berne described intimacy as a Child-Child relationship, whereas nurture is a Parent-Child relationship. It is not possible for two people to be close when one of them is 'on guard'. An intimate relationship must be mutually nurturing, but the sort of transactions involved in nurture are by their very nature one-sided. Intimacy is not primarily about taking care of each other. It is an active unself-conscious way in which you and I enjoy each other as equals. At that level I don't have to comfort you, protect you or instruct you.

This confusion comes from our earliest experiences of closeness with mother. Although this was at best pleasurable for both mother and baby, it was naturally for the most part unequal.

In adult relationships, however, the idea that one person is responsible for another gets in the way of being close. What many people are looking for in close relationship is being looked after, which is fine, but when that dominates, you either get into a one-sided affair or into a struggle about 'Who's looking after who around here?'

The main purpose of this piece is to show how our expectations of our friends, partners or lovers often fall short because we are mistaking closeness with the search for *mother*: the mother we had or the mother we didn't have. The confusion is understandable.

The natural desire for intimacy is very close to that of nurture. Wanting another person is likely to provoke that early need

for dependency on someone stronger. This is particularly true in close physical relationships because that early primitive need for mother is powerfully stimulated. Without realising it, we are longing for that completely and utterly loving mother — which was and is always out of reach — and then our Adult awareness of reality can easily fly out of the window and we try to get from someone something they can't give. It's too late for that total nurture and protection. That's not to say that we can't get some good 'mothering' from another adult, but not as a matter of course. It's not your job to look after me, though sometimes I may wish it was. It's my job to look after me. If I can get cared for — fine; and if I care for you, that's fine too. But though it may help, that will not of itself bring us closer. You're not my mother and I'm not yours and she, in that sense, does not exist.

I remember one my clients who was going through a rough time, and whose partner was very supportive. After a while she was surprised that he didn't want sex. He told her, 'How can I, I'm on duty'. Depressed people are hard to get close to because they are still grieving *mother*.

Of course the reverse is also true. When one person takes on the role of *mother* in a relationship, they suffer from the delusion that rescuing their partner will bring them closer, but this sort of indispensability is all about control which spells goodbye to intimacy.

Transactions which are 'mothering' may be a prelude to intimacy but until we *both* move out of parenting into Child-Child activity we cannot be intimate — sharing our inmost thoughts and feel-

ings. In that experience there is no need to 'help' — just to be ourselves, to see the other clearly and to talk and act straight.

Games are played when people are unable to be straight about what they want. Quite often I hear of people saying 'I want to be close' when really they mean 'Take care of me' or 'I'll take care of you'. It can happen the other way round: playing needy or rescuing when we mean 'Lets get close'. In doing so, we project our needs, or our need to be needed, onto our partner or friend, thus making them into our mother or baby. Either way we sabotage the possibility of Child-Child intimacy.

Sexual games are a re-enactment of our unfinished business with *mother* in which we are bound to end up with the same bad feelings as before and avoid intimacy, because we couldn't be mother's lover as a child (although in adult life we can be close friends). 'Mistaken identity' is a pastime for both men and women. It

easier for men to play it with women for obvious reasons, but I often hear women talking about men as though they were looking for *mother* in a man. And men can often be so nurturing that they attract the Child in a women. In either case, if they succeed in finding *mother*, they lose out on intimacy. If they don't, they just lose out.

Looking for *mother* is a hopeless task. It's too late. But we can sure mess up our relationships when we get into that time warp which takes us back to our early unmet needs. Getting out of that is the task of growing up — a nuisance if you want to stay little. We can learn to grow in therapy and through our experience of life, so avoiding playing 'mistaken identity'. We can find an open and spontaneous way of being with people without being overdependent. Although it is similar to that of being close to mother, being intimate with another person as an adult is quite distinct and unique.

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*Mother* is used in this article to describe that part of parenting which gives primary nurture, which in later life becomes the sought after myth that we can regain it. Parent, Adult and Child are used in Transactional Analysis to describe the three parts of personality (ego states) that are involved in transactions.

### **Further Reading**

Eric Berne, *Sex in Human Loving*, Penguin Books, 1973

