

Repetitive Patterns

Julian Nangle

As a child we learn to survive in our environment by instinct. Once we have discovered the correct instinctual responses to secure survival these become a repetitive pattern. Such patterns are inhibiting to the sufferer, though they vary in degree and nature. What follows is an example from my own clinical work.

Gordon is a 45-year-old hard-working married man with four children. Five years ago he started having an affair which is ongoing. At ten or eleven Gordon was happy enough, although his parents were exceptionally exclusive and didn't give either him or his sister much chance of a look-in with them emotionally. Nonetheless he was doing very well at school. One day it was announced that the family were moving. Gordon was removed from his school and placed in another one on the other side of his home town where he was far less happy. He didn't know it at the time, but this was to be a half-way house. Three months after moving to his new school he was moved again, this time away from his home town altogether, to a school in the country where his parents began running a pub. The consequence of this was that Gordon saw even less of his parents. It was at this time that he also lost the once close link with his mother which he had enjoyed throughout his early life. He used to sit in a rocking chair beside her while she sat at

the piano which she played 'like an angel'. When the family moved to the pub, inexplicably to the eleven-year-old Gordon the piano did not move with them and he never saw or heard his mother play again.

As you may imagine, Gordon was severely traumatised by these events but was powerless to stop them. His way of coping, possibly inspired by his parents' own emotional aloofness, was to shut down. He began to deny reality. He skived off school and went and did his own thing. His school reports, very encouraging from his first school, became increasingly bad and at times his father would formally beat him for poor school performance.

At forty-five Gordon has been continuing the pattern set when he was affected by these emotional traumas. His marriage and family life went awry and this upset him so much that he 'skived off' and started having an affair. For five years he managed to keep the denial that anything was amiss under some sort of control. Finally, when the letters from the solicitors suing for divorce became too numerous and too evident to ignore he sought help in the form of counselling. It was the biggest and bravest step he had ever taken in his life because it was the first step towards breaking the repetitive, compulsive pattern of shutdown, albeit probably too late to save his marriage.

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Such patterns are the running sores of our lives and their habitat is the unconscious. It follows that the more we can relate to the unconscious and its contents — the more we can develop a dialogue with it — the more power we will give ourselves over our lives. It is only when that which is unconscious is made conscious that we give ourselves choice.

The reason why it was so courageous for Gordon to enter counselling, as always for everyone who takes this step, was that he was entering the great unknown. He was offering up his child into the hands of someone unknown to him. Incidentally, at the end of the first session with Gordon I referred to a point we had touched on when he originally rang up to make that appointment — that the following week we would be meeting somewhere else (his first session was in the week I was moving house!). It transpired that he had quite missed the point on the phone. He was totally unaware of the fact that he would be 'having to move' — he had no recollection of our having discussed it — in other words he had shut down on the phone while in the very act of seeking help to counter this repetitive, compulsive pattern.

There are many patterns within all of us. I myself have suffered from waves of insecurity about being acknowledged, worrying whether what I'm doing is going to be valued, derided or simply overlooked. This pattern, over which I have now got

some control, originated in a childhood where my little eight-year-old self was booted out from the warmth and security of a very loving mother's lap into the cold corridors and bleak dormitories of a boarding school. I have a vivid memory of my first night at my first boarding school: I am beside myself with grief and wailing and crying like many in the dormitory but I seem to be going on longer than the others and someone yells out to me to 'belt up'. Not having a belt I stretch out to my bedside table and steal my socks into the bed and shove them into my mouth while staying firmly under the bedclothes. I know now that I was not alone, far from it, but then, at eight, I felt I was the only little boy in the world who was crying.

The reason this experience set up the pattern of insecurity is that my very foundations — my belief system — had been shaken to the core by being sent away at that age. My own way of coping was to be adaptable (I 'belted up' as best I could) and to try and please everybody, just as Gordon's way of coping was to shut down. The cause of the need for a coping mechanism, however, was the original trauma and this is what has to be faced.

Such compulsive patterns exist. What we need look at are the ways we can break them by bringing them into full consciousness and give ourselves back that innate individual power and autonomy we were blessed with upon our conception.

