

## Put yourself into the fault lines

By Ruth Ostrow

AT the Heart Politics conference I recently attended and wrote about, there was a lecture by journalist and child issues activist Kali Wendorf, exploring parenting and the problems we have raising children in the nuclear family.

When her lecture ended, Wendorf asked us to do a simple exercise: to visualise someone we know who is not -- in our opinion -- an adequate parent. Basically we were asked to judge them very harshly. To write down a list of things they should stop doing concerning their children. Then we had to write down all the things they should start doing in order to make their relationships with their children better.

We were then asked to cross out the name of the person we were judging, and put the word I there instead. In other words: I should stop going out five nights a week, and I should start putting into practice some disciplinary codes around television viewing. Then examine whether the statements rang true.

The exercise was really challenging because a lot of us did identify with the criticisms we were levelling at others. For instance, I talked to one man who had complained that a friend's drug and alcohol intake was preventing her from being more present for her child. He emphatically claimed that this did not relate to his own behaviour in any way. However, with guidance, he could see that substituting the word addiction for the word drug started to bring a reality home.

Many of us find ourselves addicted to a variety of drugs that distract us from our parenting -- excessive television, obsessive hobbies, or any activity that makes us zone out. On further discussion this man admitted that he had been feeling guilty for a long time about not being totally present for his family, and that his pattern of workaholicism provided a perfect escape from his home obligations.

I was fascinated by the exercise because it related to something I've wanted to write about for a while. I have recently been reading up on the psychological concept of projection, which is often about the space we occupy when we won't own something in our own behaviour that makes us feel guilty or bad, and instead dump our disdain on someone else who is acting no worse than we are.

In Jungian terms, projection is about the shadow side of ourselves that we refuse to accept, the darker side of our persona, our hidden desires and impulses that are relegated to unconscious behaviour. Thus we don't consciously realise that we may be feeling guilty about our flawed parenting, which is exactly the reason we come down so harshly on another parent, as Wendorf had exposed.

Projections of any kind can be hugely amusing. For instance, I once knew a man who was obese. I remember him stunning a room full of friends by announcing that a curvaceous woman we had set him up with on a blind date was a real dog because she was overweight.

"I don't want to date any fat women," he declared as we watched him wolf down a dinner of ice cream and cake. "And no uglies!"

I've known many men and women who are less than perfect, putting impossible judgments and expectations on others, furious at a partner's imperfections because they can't accept their own.

Similarly, I've heard many sexually active people refer to others as "slutty". As the saying goes: promiscuous is anyone who's having more sex than you are. In a situation such as this, projection may also be an expression of jealousy.

Promiscuous is how we might secretly want to be, if we felt safe expressing our shadow side. Hence our disdain for anyone who feels free enough to be "bad" or "naughty".

It's obvious when someone else is projecting: a loud friend prattling on about how she can't bear "Jenny" who doesn't stop talking; a friend who watches every cent grizzling that "Sam" is mean. It's fantastic to note the absolute disgust and amount of intense emotion criticsers have about behaviour they dislike or can't accept in themselves, or behaviour that triggers hidden longings that they can't give voice to.

The giveaways are the emphatic words: "Disgusting", "Terrible", "It's awful", "How can they?", "I hate being around them". The fact is, we're all more generous with other people's flaws if they don't trigger our own issues.

I have now taken to doing a little exercise just to enlighten myself. As Wendorf suggested, whenever I find strong emotions coming up about the way someone is behaving, I take a moment to put my own name in there, and ponder the possibility that it is me who is too loud, aggressive, mean, addictive, neglectful or who secretly wants to be more promiscuous.

It isn't pleasant to come against the shadow parts of ourselves that we deny, or repress, but it's hugely liberating to stand in responsibility and take the truth on the chin. And the truth is, the things we most dislike or want to change in others, are usually things we most likely need to own, or change, in ourselves.

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