

## **When Caring Parents Break their Children's Hearts**

### **Hermann Hesse: Search for the Self**

(Adapted from my manuscript, *Failed Parental Love and the Lost Self*)

Who we are is very much a product of our life experiences. We are not born as killers or prophets. We do not have within us genes of a gifted artist, or politician, or philosopher, or tyrant. What we have are dispositions and temperaments, propensities to move toward or away from stimulation, potential strengths and weaknesses in our developing neural circuits to process information and create. How these neurophysiological idiosyncrasies become expressed in our unique personalities is dependent on the particular environment in which our brains and bodies develop, and the most important involves the attachment experiences of our childhood. Our early experiences shape our emotional relationship to the world.

When parents, however caring and well-intended, fail to value the inner self of the child, fail to be attuned to his or her uniqueness and individuality, when they fail to nourish the child's emotional self, lasting damage can result.

In what follows, I will examine the life of the German novelist, Hermann Hesse, showing the close parallel between his experiences in childhood and the themes and concerns that came to occupy and trouble him throughout his adult life. While one can of course never know what direction a person's life would have taken, had his or her circumstances been different, what I hope will become evident is that our personalities and emotional ways of connecting with the world depend a great deal on our attachment experiences. We are all much more than the product of our genes. Even identical twins are not identical. What

happens to us in our early life plays a crucial role in shaping who we become. For those of us who are the casualties of failed or inadequate parental love, what was lacking in our early attachment experiences will have a lasting influence on our sense of worth, our comfort with intimacy, and our way of relating to the world. While psychotherapy can help individuals to reconnect with the disowned inner emotional parts of themselves, so that they can feel happier and experience more fulfilling relationships, their childhoods cannot be reclaimed.

Hermann Hesse was a restless wanderer through much of his life. He was unhappy and at times despondent to the point of wanting to end his life. On the one hand he was attracted to the life of a hermit, on the other, he felt a need for security and a desire to be part of a community. At some deep unresolved emotional level he was searching for his place in the world. Throughout his life Hesse vacillated between the desire for connection and the need to escape.

His writings have a strong autobiographical element. The dominant theme that repeatedly runs through his works is that of the outsider, the seeker in search of the way to the Self, in search of a connection with the world. In many of Hesse's books, the protagonist is a pilgrim, a wanderer, questioning life, in search of meaning, in search of an authentic existence. In *Demian*, the pilgrimage—the inner search—concerns a boy, Emil, who is awakening emotionally. This boy, torn between security and a need for freedom, seeks to overcome the guilt and shame of his childhood, and discover the way to an integrated self. An older boy, Demian, befriends him and becomes his mentor, helping him to find his own inner truth. In another of his novels, *Steppenwolf*, the protagonist, Harry, is an

outsider—a reclusive, despairing writer—on a quest to discover and embrace the split off parts of himself, the complexities of his inner self that make him human.

While men are depicted as seekers of inner truth in Hesse's novels, the women are often portrayed in a somewhat two dimensional way, either as idealized, priestess-mother figures, or as prostitutes. How Hesse portrays his characters is intimately tied to who he is. What, then, lies behind Hesse's preoccupation with finding the path to the Self and his characterization of men and women? If we look closely at Hesse's upbringing, the answer becomes clearer. His creative works are an expression of his desire to reconnect with his impaired inner self, the origin of which can be found in his childhood.

Hesse was born to parents who were devout Pietists. His mother named Hermann after the name she had given her son from a previous marriage, a son who died at five months of age. She had idealized his memory.<sup>1</sup> She would come to relate to her son as an image rather than as a unique person.

Both of Hesse's parents came from a long tradition in which one's life is governed by the strict, puritanical teachings of Pietism.<sup>2</sup> As missionaries, their lives were in service of a higher calling. In her youth, Hesse's mother experienced emotional hardship. She was nervous and discontent, and felt torn between the dictates of her strict upbringing and her highly emotional temperament. When she was not yet four years old, her parents went to India as missionaries, leaving her behind. She showed a degree of defiance in school, and in her teens she developed a brief emotional intimacy with a man she met. Her parents did not approve of this relationship. When Hesse's mother reunited with her parents, she

submitted with bitterness to her father's rule. Out of that personal inner conflict between obedience and emotional liberation, she found her solution. At the age of seventeen, his mother had a conversion experience and dedicated herself to God. It was as if from that moment on all her emotions became channeled toward service to God, renouncing the human side of her emotional life.

In his youth Hesse had violent temper tantrums that were unsettling to his Pietist parents, and he was often punished for his transgressions. His parents found him rather difficult to manage. His mother felt she lacked the strength to deal with his high level of energy, his stubbornness and defiance. She recorded, "My inner struggle against his tyrannical spirit, his passionate storm and stress, is quite all-consuming."<sup>3</sup> Likely, her son's unbridled emotional spirit was threatening to her, for it was that part of her own emotional life that she had relinquished in her youth. Hesse, as a child, felt tossed back and forth between the "impulse for love, and his need for acceptance, and anxious withdrawal or anger."<sup>4</sup> Hesse's self-assertive behavior ran counter to the "Pietists' firm belief that a child's will must be broken in order to guide it down the path of righteousness."<sup>5</sup>

When he was six, Hesse was sent away to live in the mission school in Basel because his parents found him unmanageable. After a number of months he was brought home again. He looked pale, thin and dejected.<sup>6</sup> His mother considered this a wholesome change. She now found him much easier to handle. His will had been subdued. But then the fits of anger and withdrawal began again. At thirteen, Hesse was again sent away from home to a school where he was to prepare for examinations to qualify him for entrance into the

Theological Seminary. It was expected that he would follow in his parents' footsteps, pursuing the life of a devout Pietist.

Hesse revolted against his parents. He ran away from school, became infatuated with a girl, and made a suicide gesture. His parents sent him to an institution for treatment of melancholia. He improved and was brought again, but his tantrums increased and so he was sent back to the institution. He felt angry and betrayed by his father. He felt that no one understood him. Hesse then enrolled in a Gymnasium, a type of secondary school. He had renewed thoughts of suicide. He indulged in drinking and smoking.

It was Hesse's passion for writing that perhaps saved him from disaster. It was the one vocation that inspired him, and with dogged determination he eventually succeeded in making this his career. When he was twenty-one he published his first poems. His mother strongly disapproved of these poems, finding them "self-indulgent and secular."<sup>7</sup> She wrote to her son, "Turn yourself to God and don't be so indecent!"<sup>8</sup> He tried to placate her concerns, but her strong negative reaction created an emotional divide between them that remained until her death a few years later. He felt isolated and unloved. In his writings of that period, Hesse felt "a sense of unworthiness, of degradation, of a gloomy awareness of the passage of life."<sup>9</sup> He kept distant and aloof of his mother during her final struggle with life and avoided attending her funeral. Hesse's reason for his absence was to avoid sinking into that sense of loss "from which he tried to protect himself all his life."<sup>10</sup> He felt numbed and fatigued and depressed.

Throughout his life Hesse had repeated bouts of depression and episodes of suicidal thoughts. Despite his successes as an author, he had periods when he was disgusted with his life, feeling it was a waste and a failure.<sup>11</sup> He felt alone and misunderstood—aspects which he also saw in his father. Hesse was married three times, entering each with misgivings. He found no joy in his first two marriages, describing them as a kind of hell. He thought that perhaps he would be better suited to living the life of a hermit, and regarded his failings in marriage as a failure in himself. In a note to a friend, at the time of his second marriage, he wrote, “I remain always alone and can never penetrate the great void that separates me from other people.”<sup>12</sup>

Hesse felt a restlessness that he satisfied through periodic wanderings, leaving his wife and children behind. He alternated between seeking isolation and social solace, longing for escape and yet also wanting stability. He plunged into a depression when his father died. He entered psychoanalysis, although this did little to improve his emotional dissatisfaction.

In his later years Hesse wrote that when he and his brother were young, “great pains were taken to ‘break our wills,’ as pious pedagogues called it in those days.”<sup>13</sup> Hesse felt that art had not been valued in his home, and that these teachings had ruined his life.<sup>14</sup> He felt that he had been permanently damaged by his father in this regard. At the age of forty-eight he decided that if his life was not any better at fifty, he would consider hanging himself.

Religion was the center of his mother's life. It came before everything, absorbing her to the degree where she was insensitive to her children's emotional needs. Her entire life was an effort to emulate her father who was a model of the great pious missionaries. Although she cared for her children, her emotions had a cold warmth when it came to human relationships. "Her marriage serves the purpose of the Mission and the spreading of the gospel. Her love is from God and for him; not from human beings or for human beings. She loves her children, but as creatures of God, and she would have scruples and would recriminate herself if she put her own children ahead of a poor orphan."<sup>15</sup> Her love was an ideal, abstract notion.

With his mother's emotional life invested in devotion to God, and with his father remote and preoccupied, it is not surprising that Hesse spent his life in search of that part of himself that was never nurtured and acknowledged by his parents. The idealized image his mother had of her dead child, also called Hermann---an image which she likely projected on Hesse---likely contributed to Hesse's feelings of rejection and not being valued for who he was. Breaking of his will was more important than nurturing his individuality.

As a child, he felt unloved, misunderstood and alone. Those feelings stayed with him through his life. What Hesse learned from his unhappy upbringing was that his inner self was "bad," that self-expression was wrong and deserving of punishment. Love was contingent on submission, obedience, and giving up one's will. With his inner self having been rejected by his parents, it is not surprising he defended against an inner sense of loss throughout his life, and that at a deep level he could not free himself from an abiding

view of himself as a failure. His sense of detachment from his inner self underlay his feeling of being disconnected from others. Hesse's unresolved struggle with his self, his sense of disconnection, his yearning for an idealized lost past, found expression in his writings. It was in these writings that at some level he was attempting to find his own way back to his lost self.

In a letter to his sister later in life he wrote of his mother: "Her lovely image is still the best thing I ever had in life."<sup>16</sup> What Hesse found in his mother was only an image, an idealized wish that never materialized. His decision to absent himself from his mother's funeral speaks to the pain, resentment and sense of abandonment he experienced in his childhood and that pervaded his adult life and impelled him to seek what he had never received: parental love that validated who he was.

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<sup>1</sup> Farrell, *The Forgotten Childhood of Hermann Hesse*. (1987)

<sup>2</sup> Freedman, *Hermann Hesse: Pilgrim of Crisis: A Biography* (1979)

<sup>3</sup> Farrell, *The Forgotten Childhood of Hermann Hesse*. (1987, p. 255) Citation from Marie Hesse's journal.

<sup>4</sup> Freedman, *Hermann Hesse: Pilgrim of Crisis: A Biography* (1979, p. 29)

<sup>5</sup> Farrell, *The Forgotten Childhood of Hermann Hesse*. (1987, p. 257)

<sup>6</sup> Ball, *Hermann Hesse: Sein Leben und sein Werk* (1978, p. 37)

<sup>7</sup> Freedman, *Hermann Hesse: Pilgrim of Crisis: A Biography* (1979, p. 79)

<sup>8</sup> Minkus, *Traces of Motherhood in Hesse's Works*. Trans. Hajo Smit. (1997)

<sup>9</sup> Freedman, *Hermann Hesse: Pilgrim of Crisis: A Biography* (1979, p. 15)

<sup>10</sup> Freedman, *Hermann Hesse: Pilgrim of Crisis: A Biography* (1979, p. 100)

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- <sup>11</sup> Freedman, *Hermann Hesse: Pilgrim of Crisis: A Biography* (1979, p. 265)
- <sup>12</sup> Freedman, *Hermann Hesse: Pilgrim of Crisis: A Biography* (1979, p. 259) Citation from a note to Emmy Ball.
- <sup>13</sup> Freedman, *Hermann Hesse: Pilgrim of Crisis: A Biography* (1979, pp. 194-5) Citation from “Remembrance of Hans.”
- <sup>14</sup> Freedman, *Hermann Hesse: Pilgrim of Crisis: A Biography* (1979, p. 297)
- <sup>15</sup> Ball, *Hermann Hesse: Sein Leben und sein Werk* (1978, p. 56) Translation by H. Beihl.
- <sup>16</sup> Minkus, *Traces of Motherhood in Hesse’s Works*. Trans. Hajo Smit. (1997)