

CONSCIOUS RELATIONSHIPS AND SOCIAL CHANGE

by **Tony Humphreys**



No matter where you are or what you are doing, whether you are alone or with others, you are always in relationship. Typically, we think of relationship in terms of intimate relationship between, for example, parent and child, lovers or husband and wife. However, different kinds of relationships occur in all the places that individuals live, work, play and pray, and these need just as much attention as the relationships between intimates. Furthermore, each relationship is always a couple relationship, whether it is between a parent and a child, two lovers, a manager and an employee, a teacher and a student, a parishioner and a priest, a citizen and a politician or between neighbours. Any parent, teacher, politician, leader, manager, employer, doctor or member of the clergy who sees a group as a single entity rather than a collection of individuals misses a fundamental and critical issue – each individual in that group will respond to him in a unique way. In fact, he is dealing with as many couple relationships as there are individuals in the group. If we treat all family members, employees, patients, clients, students and audiences in the same way, we overlook the creative dynamic of the

uniqueness and individuality of each human being. In reality, each child in a particular family has a different mother and a different father, each employee has a different employer, each student in a particular class has a different teacher, each patient in a particular surgery has a different doctor and each client in a particular psychotherapy practice has a different psychotherapist.

There is the further reality that each individual has a story and that his or her story is a unique autobiography and only that person fully knows their story. However, some aspects of a person's story may be known only at an *unconscious* level and this hidden world will only become available to *consciousness* when the person finds adequate emotional and social safety, initially with another and, subsequently, within self.

The story of a person's life is not the events he or she encounters – for example, difficult birth, loving mother, emotionless home, conditional loving, violent father, possessive mother, kind grandparent or affirming teacher. The story consists in the person's *inner* unique and individual responses to these events. What is amazing in a family or classroom

or workplace is that each person responds in a unique way to situations that arise. This makes total sense because when two individuals interact, inevitably their interaction will be of a unique nature. Parents are powerful witnesses to how each child is completely different from the other and this happens whether children are reared in benign or difficult circumstances.

However, when children are reared in violating circumstances, their individuality is expressed through the unique unconscious formation of very powerful defensive behaviours that are designed, on the one hand, to reduce the frequently encountered threats to their wellbeing, and, on the other hand, to bring to the attention of any mature adult in their lives their deeply troubled interiority. Children who experience a stable and loving family also express their individuality and develop a repertoire of open and creative responses that are different to those of the other siblings. Another way of putting it is that children whose wellbeing is jeopardised daily are ingenious in the ways that they *repress* (hide away) or *dissociate* (not connect with) those aspects of their true nature that they dare not exhibit,

whilst children whose wellbeing is unconditionally held are ingenious in the ways that they express and manifest their individuality, ensuring that they are not confused with anybody else within the family.

As an adult, each of us has a responsibility to occupy our own individuality. However, to do that, we need to become aware of our unconscious and conscious responses. You may well ask: are we not always conscious of what we feel, think, say and do? Certainly, you may notice that you can be aggressive, violent, shy, timid or manipulative but you may not be conscious of the sources and intentions of those defensive responses. The common response is to employ other unconscious defences: *rationalisation* (creating what appear to be 'reasonable' explanations for unreasonable behaviours), *denial* ("I have no problems"), *projection* ("everybody else is wrong") or *introjection* ("I'm just 'bad' and I have no control over what I say or do"). Unless these sources are uncovered your defensive responses towards yourself or towards others will continue. Consciousness requires that we own, understand and are accountable for our inner and outer behaviours and that, when the responses are defensive (as opposed to mature) in nature, we make new mature choices and take new mature actions.

In examining the literature on training for managers and leaders I have discovered an emphasis on prescription, proscription, coaching, employee engagement, talent mentoring and e-learning. What was glaringly absent in my search was the fact that we have an *unconscious* and also that leaders and managers, like the rest of us, carry considerable emotional baggage into their roles, which, inevitably, interrupts their

effectiveness. Another missing link was a focus on *affectiveness* and the reality that mature governorship is both a head and heart phenomenon. We have seen in all the economic, political, educational, social and health service crises besetting us here in Ireland and some other westernised countries, that it was predominantly men who occupied positions of power, and, sadly, with devastating results. Notoriously, men generally operate from a 'head' space and ignore, dismiss or ridicule a 'heart' space. But good leadership and management need to *affect* (influence) employees and service users in order to *effect* (*bring about*) progressive results. Indeed, being affective and effective are inseparable partners when it comes to mature management of any family, work, social, political, educational and health organisation. If the men on top had been operating from heart places then the greed, narcissism, avarice, depersonalisation of employees and customers, bullying, arrogance, superiority, corruption and cover-ups that are now so evident would not have happened. However, even though accountability, responsibility and authenticity need to be forthcoming from those leaders and managers, compassion is also required! Witch-hunts and blaming only serve to push them further into hiding. I do believe that those in power operated *unconsciously* – were driven by hidden fears, vulnerabilities, addiction to success, power, wealth and 'being right.' There was present within them their true essence which had become eclipsed and their hunger and thirst for love and recognition had propelled them into seeking out substitute ways of being seen in the world. This process would have begun in their childhood years in their homes, classrooms and community.

When any individual is mistaken by his parent or teacher or significant person for academic achievements, for success, for 'being the best', for 'being a star', for 'being good' or ridiculed for 'being bold', 'for failure', for 'making a mess', then a darkness descends on the person and the drive to maintain the token recognition becomes overwhelming. These children ingeniously conform to the unrealistic expectations or to the put-down labels, to the mistaking of their precious worth and presence for what they do. They creatively devise powerful ways of staying on the pedestal or of keeping their heads below the parapet. All their intelligence and creativity go into sanctifying the mistake and, repeatedly, this sanctification is reinforced by teachers, lecturers and employers. What is even sadder is that when these individuals marry they will unwittingly repeat the mistake with their own children, and when they are in positions of power they repeat it with employees and customers, and woe betide those who rebel. Incidentally, it was the 'highly engaged' managers and leaders who collected the huge monetary bonuses and misspent public monies. What is emerging now is that these rewards were a redundant exercise and only added to the mess we are experiencing. In any case, work is intrinsic to our nature; to over-extrinsically reward work destroys the true nature of work – this is true of learning as well.

The absence of any reference to the unconscious in the management training literature makes defensive sense, because who in a work (or other) organisation is in a consciously mature and solid place to challenge immature management? One of the most common phenomena at staff meetings is


silence – passivity, often of a passive-aggressive nature – where what needs to be challenged goes unchallenged, where what needs to be brought to consciousness, stays in the unconscious. Whether you occupy the lower, middle or higher echelons of power and you turn a blind eye to what is threatening to people’s emotional, social, spiritual and economic wellbeing, and, ultimately, an organisation’s progress, you require as much raising of consciousness as those who are perpetrating the neglect.

Take the example of a workplace manager who bullies and intimidates employees. When confronted he is likely to justify and rationalise his threatening responses with, for example: ‘nobody would do anything around here without being shouted and ranted at’ or ‘being bullied did me no harm as a child.’ However, when that manager compassionately understands the bullying behaviour as an unconscious creation arising from unresolved fears within himself – for instance, fear of failure, fear of what others think, fear of letting down his parents – it is likely that a consciousness will emerge of the real threat that he is posing to the wellbeing of employees. Once that consciousness is present, new choices and new actions are now possible towards himself and the employees. Getting to the story of what led to the bullying is not an attempt to dilute the serious emotional threat that bullying poses – sadly, over sixty suicides occur annually as a result of bullying. On the contrary, it is my belief and my experience that unless the person who bullies becomes conscious of his hidden unresolved emotional conflicts, his defensive behaviour will continue and is likely to escalate when outside pressures increase. Change is only possible when

what lies hidden is brought to the surface and what it was in his story that led to the creative development of bullying as a means of withstanding hurt. Individuals who bully need the support to stand with themselves, so that they are no longer dependent on others standing with them. The overt intention of bullying is to ensure control, but the covert intention is to draw attention to the urgent need to be in control of self and to support others to do likewise.

How then can organisations create the emotional and social safety for ‘highly engaged’ leaders and managers to allow to come to consciousness what has lain hidden for decades? No change is possible without such consciousness – consciousness of fears, insecurities and confused identities – the mistakes. A determined effort is required to

create the relationship environment that will lead to an increase in managers’ consciousness, so that the genius they have employed unconsciously in developing and reinforcing their defensive strategies can be unleashed into their consciousness for the good of all, mostly themselves. Some of these individuals who occupy top political, religious, corporate and educational positions and who are deeply defensively entrenched require one-to-one psychodynamic help or, at least, face-to-face group training to effect a raising of consciousness.

The conscious manager operates from the fullness and goodness of his awesome nature and creates a work environment where it is a joy to come to work; neither will he stand idly by when dark and defensive practices are present – oh, if it were only so! 



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He is regularly sought for his expertise and views on radio and television shows and writes a weekly column for one of Ireland’s primary newspapers, the Irish Examiner. He is the author of many best-selling books. His best known books are *The Power of ‘Negative’ Thinking*; *Self-Esteem, the Key to Your Child’s Future*; *Work and Worth*, *Take Back Your Life*; *Myself, My Partner*; *Leaving The Nest*; *Whose Life Are You Living*; *All About Children*; *The Mature Manager*. *The Compassionate Intentions of Illness and Relationship*, *Relationship, Relationship, Relationship*, *The Heart of a Mature Society* have recently been published. His books are currently available in 15 languages and are available in 28 countries. He has recorded CD’s on *Adult Self-Esteem*, *Raising Children’s Self-Esteem* and *Self and Work*.

His varied earlier careers encompassing theology, education and business add breadth and depth to his unique understanding of human behaviour. His ideas are challenging, sometimes controversial, yet they are always presented in the safety of understanding and compassion. It is indicative of the ethos he creates that he is in constant demand for lectures, workshops, seminars, conferences from a very wide range of audiences that cross different social strata, different age groups and different social sectors.

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