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CHAPTER I

A PENCIL SKETCH OF THE THEORY OF POSITIVE DISINTEGRATION

Questions we often ask ourselves as parents and educators are "What effect do I have on this child? Do I bring out the best in him? The worst? Was he born this way? Is his good (or bad) behavior a result of his early years?" And, whether we have read any philosophy or not, our answers are much the same as the answers of those who have spent years studying the issue and thinking it through. Sometimes we feel that it was all there in the beginning, good and bad, and, sooner or later, "it will out". Sometimes we recognize that something we said did sink in, and we fly to the other extreme, regretting the opportunities we have let slip by, and optimistically thinking of the ideas we can still pass on. Sometimes we think neither answer is correct, other times, both.

Is there an answer? Is it possible that the solution lies in the possibility that both his heredity and his environment exercise an influence over the child, the result of which is peculiar to that particular child, and no other. Certainly, this would explain how three or more children all raised in the same home can be so very different.

A way of viewing these questions and arriving at satisfactory solutions has been offered by Dr. K. Dabrowski, who with his rich background as a child psychiatrist for 35 years, paints a delightful picture of child growth and development. The picture he

presents is so well-elaborated that it can seldom be appreciated in its totality. For that reason, an attempt will be made to do a brief pencil sketch of what is actually a rich portrait of life.

The Theory of Positive Disintegration offers us a view of life as a series of developmental levels, or expanding circles of awareness, whichever is the most comfortable way for you, the reader, to think about it. Three factors operate in the story of development--the biological factor, the environmental factor, and, most exciting of all, a factor arising from these two, but unlike either. The last one is called simply "the third factor" by Dabrowski; it appears during the third "level" of development and it arises from the mental determinism of the individual to rise above both his hereditary and his environmental background. A person at this stage of development would never say "I'm only human", as an excuse for his behavior, or "I can't help it, I had a rotten home situation". He would accept full responsibility for his actions, recognizing full well that we often become what we are "in spite of", rather than "because of" our environment. Anyone who doubts this statement is advised to read Dick Gregory's book "Nigger".

What sort of behavior can we expect to see when a person (regardless of age) is at the level of development which is under the influence of the biological factor? This first stage is called the primitive or psychopathic integration. The individual here is integrated, functions smoothly and without much awareness

of himself. He acts on impulse, satisfying his needs as they arise without considering the needs of others around him. In fact, he is not really aware of others except in the way that they can serve his needs. We all recognize this behavior, to a greater or lesser degree, in infants and young children. When this behavior continues it becomes more subtle, but the underlying dynamics remain the same. We all know teenagers and adults who are efficient, quick to make decisions (even those involving many people), impulsive, thoughtless and self-centered. As a matter of fact, from our own position of occasional doubt and insecurity, we tend to admire these very people, and envy them their ease. Is it any wonder they are often in influential administrative positions?

What breaks down this primitive integration, this too-solid structure which doesn't allow in too much awareness? Dr. Dabrowski feels that this structure is broken down by collision with his environment, his social world. The young child comes up against partial or total "no", time and time again. This "no" to his primitive impulses, his self-centeredness, his "me-first" attitude creates "dis-ease" in the individual. (I will come back to this term later.) The rigid primitive structure begins to "dis-integrate". There is much disharmony, much of it with those in his environment, some of it with himself. This is much different from his behavior at the first level, where the person thought that all troubles were caused by others. Here now we see the influence of the social, or environmental factor. The individual becomes increasingly more moody, likeing something,

or somebody one moment, and disliking it the next. He has a strong desire to be rid of his environment and an equally strong need of it. He hates those whom he loves because he needs them, and he may, as yet, view these needs as weaknesses. This makes sense, because if you don't need anyone, no one needs you, and you won't have to bother putting any energy out in anybody else's direction. This behavior is often seen in adolescents, but not only in adolescents. Many adults continue to be very ambiguous, swinging first one way, and then the other in almost everything they do. As you would expect, growth at this stage is marked by considerable tension, tension resulting from the pendulum-like emotional "swings". Toward the end of this stage of development, either tension becomes so unbearable that suicide begins to look attractive, or re-integration at the first level takes place, or the individual enters a period of despair, emotionally exhausted. The latter is, according to Dr. Dabrowski, the most optimistic, though it feels far from it to the person who is suffering the agonizing growing pains. This period of exhausted retreat often allows the individual time to assess his position and gather up his energy for the next growth spurt.

The second level of development, during which the social environment brings about the disintegration of the primitive first level structure is called unilevel disintegration. This means "one" level disharmony, brought about by "either-or" conflicts, and resolved (but only temporarily) by "either-or" answers.

The next stage, the stage during which the third factor, mental determinism arises, sees the beginning of a much deeper disintegration. No longer is there only one level to the personality, but several levels. The person in this conflictual stage no longer experiences conflicts as just "either-or", but begins to feel a strong sense of "better" or "worse" when he reflects on his behavior, and that of those around him. The pendulum now swings up and down as well as from side to side. Confusion reigns. In trying to make sense of this chaos, the person experiencing this growth stage becomes closely attuned to those around him, constantly observing them, and himself. In reflecting on his past deeds, he may become ashamed of himself, disappointed, or even angry with himself.

He also becomes angry with others, and, in certain situations in which he sees clearly that individuals around him are acting in "worse" rather than "better" ways, he takes a strong stand. This stand Dr. Dabrowski refers to as positive maladjustment. It is seldom viewed as positive by his environment, unless his environment consists of unusually perceptive and aware persons who themselves are quite highly developed and desire this for others.

The third stage is the stage of spontaneous multilevel disintegration, multilevel because of the up and down motion of the emotional pendulum, and spontaneous because, along with his increased awareness of incoming stimuli, the pendulum is set in motion spontaneously by many incidents of which the individual was formerly unaware. Add to this his astonishment with himself for not having perceived this before, his discontent with his

previous ambiguous stands and the emotional disquietude resulting from his awareness of his inferior actions and you have a person who is thoroughly disintegrated. This stage is often viewed with alarm by persons around him, for the individual experiencing this growth stage is often physically incapacitated by the emotional drain. Often there is not much sign of what we commonly call productivity. When one considers that all this energy is going into internal growth, it is no wonder.

If the individual succeeds in selecting the values that, for him, are better, or "higher", then he starts on a new path, a path along which he meets and handles many tensions. With continued exposure to anxiety arousing situations, his actions become more and more automatic, and he frees more and more energy for further growth. It is important to him at this time to bring his actions in line with his thoughts. This results in a certain amount of internal harmony, although it often results in considerable external disharmony. The external disharmony bothers him less and less, for his security lies in his center of his own developing being. This center Dr. Dabrowski calls the "inner psychic milieu". It consists of the totality of mental dynamisms. They may or may not be arranged hierarchically. It is upon this center that continued personality development depends.

If there is a further increase in consciousness of self, organizational forces enter the developmental framework, and the individual moves on to the very enriched stage of personality

development, organized multilevel disintegration and secondary integration. Since so few persons get to these stages, most concentration has been placed on the first three stages of development, and the factors influencing them.

Before going on to discuss the organized stage of disintegration and the reintegration of personality at a highly aware level, let us briefly review the first three stages of growth.

The first two developmental factors parallel the first two developmental stages. Biological factors influence the stage of primitive integration, and environmental factors influence the stage of unilevel disintegration. The third factor, mental determinism, appears during the third stage of development, the stage during which man begins to reflect on both his heredity and his environment. If this reflection is accompanied by positive maladjustment to both influences, resulting in alienation from his social situation, and also in alienation from himself, we see evidence of a person with strong developmental potential.

In some cases, but only a very few, biological or constitutional factors are so strong that, regardless of how helpful the people in his environment are, the individual will not grow. Dr. Dabrowski emphasizes that this happens very seldom. Only a small portion of persons are constitutionally psychopathic. More likely, developmental forces are weak, or, at least, very vulnerable to an insensitive environment, one which, in fact, encourages the growing individual to re-integrate at the first

stage of development to insure his success in the world. And again, in rare cases, no matter how poor environmental conditions are, developmental forces are so strong that the individual surmounts seemingly impossible obstacles, obstacles which would drain another of emotional energy to the point of personal defeat, and he grows--in spite of, not because of his parents and teachers.

What about the last two stages, for I mentioned in the beginning of this chapter that Dr. Dabrowski outlines five levels of development. Very few individuals survive the rocky road of disintegration and emerge intact. If they do, developmental forces which are organizational in nature make their appearance. The fourth stage of development is called "directed, organized multilevel disintegration". What's the difference between this and the third stage, you may ask. At this level, individuals who have experienced the increasing awareness and sensitivity that accompany the painful, but worthwhile disintegrative periods of spontaneous multilevel disintegration choose to remain somewhat in this stage. They realize, for instance, that through suffering, their eyes are opened to the suffering of others, and never again do they want to become so involved in their own lives that they fail to notice what is happening around them. Never again do they want to forget that others are suffering, either through circumstances beyond their control, or in painful depressive states from which they are having difficulty emerging.



So this stage is marked by increasing self and other awareness. The individual constantly takes time to examine himself as if he were someone else, and tries to view others problems as they were his own. This attitude is called "subject-object" by Dr. Dabrowski, and it is this attitude which accounts for the individual's increasing ability to identify with and sympathize with others. In his ability to identify, he no longer makes the mistake of identifying only emotionally, thus losing sight of the overall picture, or only intellectually, thus actually being detached, but "empathizes", rather than "sympathizes". The difference is that, in some cases, he feels he must make a stand which may even add pain to the person who is already suffering. However, as in major surgery of a cancerous tumor, the immediate pain alleviates the long-term suffering.

During this stage, the person gains more self-control because his emotional and intellectual energy is no longer flowing aimlessly here and there, but is becoming more directed. He desires to educate himself further, with the recognition that education is not necessarily linked to formal learning processes. If he has consulted the assistance of a therapist during the painful disintegrative stages of the third level, he shows signs of wanting to replace help with self-help. He knows himself well enough to know that, in the long run, he is his own best therapist. Whether or not he is set free at this time depends also on the attitude of his therapist, for many are loathe to let go.

As the person at this stage is transforming himself, biologically and psychologically, the noticeable thing about his development is that so much of it is conscious. No longer does he give way to energy-draining behaviors that, until recently, have been part of the pattern of his life. If you compare his life to a tapestry, he has become the weaver as well as the cloth. The pattern of the tapestry is no longer so chaotic, but showing signs of a harmony which he himself is creating.

What's left, you ask? The stage that is longed for by all who have left the first stage, the level of primitive integration. For Dr. Dabrowski assures us that, once we have moved into the second stage of development, that of unilevel disintegration, we periodically experience flashes of "secondary integration", the fifth level of development. These flashes are experienced as utterly harmonious, almost exquisite--stages in which we feel as if we have risen above ourselves. He would say that what we are doing is "transcending time", and upon reflection, most will agree that during these moments, (or hours), we are not aware of time, nor can we think back and fit the experience into our usual time measures.

The experience is an exquisite combination of awareness and unawareness. We are aware of all around us and unaware of ourselves, our bodies. Some say that the experience is one of blending with nature, an inability to determine where their own being begins and ends. Persons who have reached the stage of secondary integration have reduced psychic tension, and, states

Dr. Dabrowski, give the appearance of great power and great peace at the same time. Their attitude is authentic and autonomous and this exhibits itself in behavior which is highly responsible and problem solving which is intuitive. What does all this mean?

They are autonomous in that they are free of both biological and environmental influences. No longer do they succumb to primitive impulses, or societal demands with which they do not agree. Nor do they spend a great deal of time feeling guilty about being maladjusted to society. The anxiety which accompanies maladjusted stands is recognized as one which cannot be resolved. This recognition and acceptance brings a certain amount of peace. Their ability to live so harmoniously with the remaining anxiety, (some call this existential anxiety,) is a result of practice. Their utter calm is admired and envied by many who would wish to be peaceful, provided the stage could be reached without the agony it entails. This is unrealistic, and indicative of a lower level of reality on the part of the admirer. (Some slight, not fully conscious recognition of this fact no doubt triggers off the envy some feel toward pacifists.)

Authenticity here does not refer to simple sincerity, for Dr. Dabrowski does not include "honest thieves" or "sincere psychopaths" in this definition. Authenticity is an attitude of sincerity and openness to all situations in life, the bad as well as the good. The person at this stage realizes that to be aware is to be aware of that which is painful as well as that which is pleasurable. Persons at lower levels would seek to avoid the pain.

Responsibility refers to a sense of the freedom of the consequences. Many who demand freedom fail to take this into consideration, and begin to whistle another tune when it comes time to face the consequences of their behavior. A secondarily integrated person may act, empathetically, in a way which is misinterpreted by those in his environment. He chooses to be true to himself, regardless of the pain that his act may cause. Those who are not yet so highly developed often give way in the middle of a serious confrontation and meet societal expectations.

In summary, Dr. Dabrowski bases his theory on the assumption that very real and testable differences exist between levels of all mental functions. Mental development is assumed to consist of a movement from lower to higher levels. This process is accompanied by "growing pains", consisting of a great deal of inner conflict, anxiety, and despair on the part of the individual. Long-lasting harmony and inner peace are possible only at the two extremes--the lowest level, where the individual is consistently primitive and acts thoughtlessly with no resulting inner conflicts, or at the highest level, where, having attained a degree of refinement and unification of personality structure, the individual is no longer in danger of slipping down to more primitive levels of behavior.

The individuals at the in-between stage, those who are capable of higher level actions, but not consistently or enduringly, are subject to continual climbing-up and slipping-down which results, not in inner peace, but in inner warfare.

If you are at peace with yourself, you may stop and consider whether you have reached the highest level or not yet left the lowest.