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ABSTRACT

Exploring family influences is particularly helpful for career counseling clients who are stuck pursuing goals they know they want; clients who feel torn between practical or realistic paths and their individual passions; clients who express guilt or fear about defying their family's or society's expectations; clients who perceive the barriers blocking them from forward movement as stemming exclusively from outside sources; and clients who fear feeling like a failure if they make the wrong choice. Family perspectives can be introduced to clients by discussing their current goals and what they believe to have prevented them from reaching these goals. The counselor can then help the client see the "familiar" lenses through which they have become accustomed to viewing--and limiting--their choices. Four primary interventions that can be used with these clients are: become peers with parents by assuming authority over your own life; change yourself--don't wait for family approval or permission to change; know the patterns and habits that block you and break them deliberately and persistently; and reframe "defects, failures, and inadequacies" as purposive and evolutionary. In career counseling, exploring family perspectives can help clients uncover the deepest barriers to their progress. (MKA)

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by

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Since writing *Hand-me-down Dreams: How Families Influence Our Career Paths* (NY: Three Rivers Press, 2000), I have steadily expanded the range of career coaching clients with whom I utilize family perspectives. Exploring family influences is particularly helpful for: clients who are *stuck* pursuing goals they know they want; clients who feel *torn* between "practical" or "realistic" paths and their individual "passions"; clients who express *guilt or fear* about defying their family's or society's expectations; clients who perceive the *barriers* blocking them from forward movement as stemming exclusively from *"outside"* sources; and clients who fear feeling like a *"failure"* if they make the *"wrong"* choice.

What links such clients together? Usually, they are defining the values and choices confronting them in limited or outmoded ways which originate in the experience of past generations, most significantly, parents and grandparents. These clients are trying to outgrow the restrictions, or they wouldn't be seeking your help. But they may not have accurately named the source of their conflict as stemming from family lessons. Nor may they understand fully that they are not only free to, they **must** clarify and swear allegiance to their *own* authority on goals, values, possibilities, and priorities. They must, that is, if they're ever to develop attitudes and behaviors that align with their individual passion, purpose, and happiness.

Introducing Family Perspectives

When interviewing clients, I keep family perspectives closely tied to current goals by asking people first to tell me what they want, and then to tell me what they believe has prevented them from attaining that goal so far. The stories people tell implicitly include within them **alternate narratives** in which they could have clarified or attained their goals without consulting you — except that these other paths didn't *occur to them,* or *didn't feel possible, advisable, or pragmatic.* Then, like a detective, I work with clients to try to understand the literally "familiar" lenses through which they've grown accustomed to viewing — and limiting — their choices.

In most cases, these lenses: *constrict* their creativity; *create confusion* about what is possible or worthy to pursue; and/or engender *conflicts* between loyalty to the person they're *discovering they really are,* and their loyalty to *appearing to be* the person their family or other loved ones need and expect them to remain. Under these circumstances, clients need to find other lenses that reveal new life stories in which they attain their goals while maintaining respect from and connection with their families.

Four Primary Interventions

In my work with "stuck" clients, I've found that one of four primary interventions usually helps people to overcome conflicts of guilt and loyalty, and thereby mobilizing energy to pursue goals.

I. Become peers with parents by assuming authority over your own life.

Sometimes, people express the fear that if they leave a steady job, go back to graduate school, or enter a field with greater risk or less social status, that someone important to them will criticize or judge them. Usually it's a parent or someone with the authority and status of a parent in the client's mind. The anticipated disapproval acts to inhibit freedom of movement, leading to a stalemate and continued unhappiness as clients not only remain in a career or job that no longer suits them, they steadily lose respect for themselves because they can't "make it happen."

The criticisms that bother most people are those of *disloyalty, impracticality, irresponsibility, or immaturity.* These judgments differ from criticisms which the client knows are unfair, exaggerated, or manipulative (*e.g.,* you're insane; you're bad; you'll give Dad a heart attack, *etc.).* With these latter criticisms, clients may need coaching to protect or defend themselves against verbal attack, but they're sure they are right in the goal they've chosen, and sure that they have the *right* to choose. But with the former criticisms, people aren't entirely sure they have the right to follow their own conscience or desires. They feel enough doubt about the validity of their course of action to refrain from wholeheartedly pursuing change. They haven't assumed the right to make their own judgments about, for example, what constitutes "disloyalty" to an employer; whether sticking with a path that makes you unhappy is truly "responsible" or "practical"; or whether "maturity" consists in facing the truth about your interests and goals rather than pretending to be someone else.

In these situations, people need help learning to view themselves as equal to, as *peers* with, their parents; and as having *greater authority* than their parents over their own lives and over issues and decisions their parents don't and can't know as much about as they themselves do. These areas of expertise range from careers that didn't exist when their parents were younger, the economic realities of current times, and the different, highly variable shapes of equally "successful" career tracks in today's marketplace.

Let me clarify what I don't mean by adults becoming peers with parents: I don't mean diminishing respect for parents, loving them any less, or not taking their concerns and suggestions into consideration. But I do mean: taking the burden off parents for defining values and making decisions, distinguishing love and respect from control or obedience, and insisting upon self-respect and self-reliance. People are much freer to love their parents when they don't have to fend them off or run away from them in order to feel free and adult.

James Hollis, a Jungian analyst, observed that "we cannot grow up until we can see our parents as other adults, special to our biography certainly, wounded perhaps, but most of all simply other people who did or did not take on the largeness of their own journey." Family therapist Donald Williamson refers to this transition to equal status as the end of the "hierarchical boundary" between generations, so that all adults in the family are "peers" and "equals." This launches a "new stage" in the family life cycle — because families exist in a dynamic state. When you change, everyone else must change too.

This **new complexity** — in which you can love and respect your parents but not *obey* them — and in which they can be befuddled by or even disapprove of your decisions but also

take pleasure in your happiness — is a helpful solvent for clients' fear and guilt. It can eliminate the anger and distance caused by perceiving someone else's disapproval or lack of understanding as a barrier to your own happiness.

Ironically, parents' criticism is often delivered in the spirit of trying to help and guide adult children whose hesitation or doubt suggests they're still in need of parental guidance — even when the parents can only apply outmoded advice that worked for them but can't and stubbornly won't work for their children. When clients take on complete responsibility for making their own decisions, they remove the burden of dependence and power from their relationship with prior generations, leaving them free to pursue happiness, and their parents free to take pleasure in that happiness — not to advise, guide, or harass their adult children toward it.

II. Change yourself. Don't wait for family approval or permission to change.

Many people get stuck "waiting" for parents, spouses or other important family members to "get it" before they pursue a new goal. They believe they have the right to do what they want. They know their parents or others don't understand them or their goals. But they stubbornly persist in trying to persuade, "get through to," or alter their parents' point of view before they move on. They then perceive the barrier preventing them from forward motion as originating outside themselves, "in" the other person's *stubbornness* or *cluelessness*. The hazard in trying to change others before you change yourself is that the other person may never alter their point of view! The client's happiness and freedom may remain forever dependent on someone else's attitudes and opinions.

Hurt, anger, and loneliness usually drive this "waiting game." People who feel they've never received validation, empathy, or support from family members may angrily and righteously continue to pursue it. They believe that they deserve it, that it's long overdue, and that other family members — especially siblings — may have gotten more than their fair share. So why shouldn't they persist in trying to get their fair share too?

The problem is that parents and other family members may never change their attitudes. They may not be capable of changing. They may not want to. They may not care about the qualities and abilities in the client that the client wants them to care about. For example, clients' ability to have grandchildren or to carry on the family business may always matter more to their parents than their ability to build rockets, create social justice, or conduct open heart surgery. It doesn't mean that these clients aren't excellent in their chosen endeavor, nor that they won't make an important contribution to themselves and society by pursuing it. It simply means that their parents may not *care* about this chosen form of excellence as much as they do other aspects of their children's abilities or potential achievements; these are **important distinctions**. Clients need to seek approval and validation for their intelligence and achievements from people who care about, understand, and value them. Such people *can* include family members but they by no means *always or necessarily* include them. Ever.

It helps clients who are caught in this "waiting game" to recognize the difference between actually *being* smart, capable, accomplished, etc., and their parents' ability to *value* those qualities. This recognition saves them from choosing careers or striving for glory to "prove" a point that won't accomplish their goal. They can *prove* they're smart, but they can't make others — even parents — *care*. They can, however, change themselves. They can pursue goals that express and strengthen their intelligence and abilities, and can rely upon their own approval, validation, and the support of people who care about the same things in themselves and in life that they do. That ends the "waiting game" —for good.

Williamson, Donald S., "Personal Authority Via Termination of the Intergenerational Hierarchical Boundary: Part II-The Consultation Process and the Therapeutic Method." *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*. April 1982.

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