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Hidden in Plain Sight: Getting to the Bottom of Puzzling Emotions

Barry Grosskopf
VanderWyk and Burnham (January 2007)
Softcover $16.95 (336pp)
978-1-889242-29-3

Imagining one's parents as children is an exercise too rarely done. It's much easier for parents to empathize with children than the other way around. The author, a psychiatrist who teaches at the University of Washington (Seattle), makes this point effectively, and bases his approach to healing on getting people to discover emotional depths with their own parents. It takes maturity to accomplish this. Although even young children can appreciate how another person feels, they lack the perspective and the vocabulary needed to grasp what their parents were like as children, much less what traumas they endured. The pain and confusion that haunt a parent stem from experiences hidden but still present, often closeted by unresolved issues and taboos.

"So much of our family's history is hidden in plain sight," says Grosskopf. It is possible to hide a story by exaggerating part of it, or by focusing on a moral to justify some behavior or attitude while keeping the listener away from the emotional truth. Adults who come to therapy often describe their parents narrowly, knowing important facts without ever having grasped how it really was when their parents were young.

The book's fourteen chapter titles reflect its approach and scope: "Life Stories," "Blind Spots," "Unanswered Cries," "Sexual Abuse," "Grief," "Choosing to Grow," "Honesty." Grosskopf includes poignant case examples: forty-two-year-old Mark was taking an acting class when the exercise was to imagine the worst day in a parent's life. His father, as a boy of eight, had to leave home and live with his aunts for two years because Mark's grandmother had become ill. His dad talked about his own father with great anger, but Mark felt more sympathy for grandpa than for dad. In acting class, Mark imagined himself as his father at eight: "they were forcing me to leave home. I had to say goodbye to my brothers and sisters and my mother and father. I started sobbing so hard I couldn't breathe. I never knew. I mean, I knew, but I never felt it before."

Widely read, well organized, and passionate, Grosskopf brings a perspective based in years of work as a therapist with a diverse clientele, including underprivileged, poorly served, and very difficult patients. A thoughtful student of history, he fills in a blank in the family annals of Sigmund Freud, who himself paid too little heed to the impact on his parents of the death of his younger brother (as have his many biographers). Hidden trauma is characteristically vented on the younger generation. Grosskopf holds that those who traumatize children must have been victims themselves—not to absolve them of responsibility but to find a path to resolution that stops the reverberations.

Grosskopf writes well toward a goal that is simple but elusive: to see parents as "ordinary struggling human beings. When we are hostile toward our parents we should take it as a sign that something went wrong in their lives, or something is wrong in our understanding." There is a nice paradox here: to honor one's mothers and fathers by imagining them as children.
(August 18, 2009)

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