THE MYTH OF WE*

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I don't know whether it's more accurate to say that we invent stories or that they invent us. Probably both are true. Call them myths, call them dreams, call them realities, we need stories to live our lives. For one thing, they remind us that we are subjects, by and large shaping our own characters in a plot at least partly of our own devising. This is especially important in an era when so many forces encourage us to treat ourselves like biological objects. Stories reflect how it feels, what it is like, to be fully human. And they inform us that being human subjects means that we live in a world in which we are deeply embedded. They show us that our world is always in front of us, with us and behind us. We have to live in what you might call the between. Whatever the self might be, there is always otherness, and we continually meet it at every turn. Like the stories themselves, it is a world that we

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make, but it also makes us. We need the stories to live our lives because as humans we seem to need meaning to be able to live coherently. The collapse or loss of meaning tends to make us crazy, drives us to disintegration and destruction.

The good stories, the most valuable ones, also tell us that we can never know as much as we want to know. Not only is there little certitude about what is, so to speak, “out there,” but we don’t know with anything approaching causal predictability who we are and what we will do next. That life deals us continual surprises is what Heraclitus, the pre-Socratic Greek philosopher, meant when he said you can’t bathe in the same river twice. You can’t step into the same world or even the same self twice. Granted that we frequently behave as if we can, but making this a habit leads to repression, illusions of control, and neurotic fixations. Such is the human condition as reflected in stories.

What we know, perhaps all we can know, is our actual experience. Not what underlies it or what causes it. The best stories begin with our profound longings, but leave us with wonder and mystery. They insist that we live in a difficult world, one that is fraught with obstacles to our desires and our wills. They make it clear that we live in time, that there are disappointments, mistakes, and failures along the way, that we decay and die. Yet they still point the direction to a fulfilling life despite the drawbacks. The less valuable stories, or, worst of all, the dangerous ones, begin with our profound longings and then end up lying to us in order to soothe us. They tempt us to believe that love is eternal; that we can be heroes of efficient action or glamorous style; that we can be the fastest gun in the west or the lover every man or woman dreams of without even having to work very hard at it. They promise that we can get to the bottom of human motives; that we can conquer evil; or that we will achieve salvation from all pain and limitation and, at some point, probably after we die, return to paradise.

From its beginnings psychotherapy has been about stories. Nowadays there are schools of so-called narrative therapy, but they are hardly the only ones that tell stories. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud said that our dreams reveal underlying processes and forces, which reflected the scientific attitude of his time. But the stories he made up to explain dreams were Greek tragedies and Gothic horror tales of incest and patricide and castration. Today they seem more satisfying to us as dramas than scientific explanations. Already in Freud's time, both Jung and Rank tended to let the science go and allowed their fascination with stories to permeate their theories.

That we invent stories and that they invent us, that we make the world and it makes us, and that all we can know is our experience, which we participate in creating — these ideas are close in spirit to the philosophy called phenomenology. I say close to it because I'm not concerned with trying to be precise about the term at the moment. I simply want to point out that it's a view of the human condition at the heart of the psychotherapy that I practice and teach, Gestalt therapy. It is from this point of view that I want to deal with a particular story or myth about love, a mixed blessing of a story that I call "The Myth of We."

This myth of intimate togetherness contains at once the best and the worst of our enduring stories. Though it exists in many variations, they all address the same fundamental human need for love. It captures one of our most elemental aspirations — the desire for union with another — but also fools us into expecting certitude in love. Why would we want certitude? Because love, among our most basic needs, has a special characteristic: we want it desperately and we fear it at the same time. When you are hungry, you go to the world to get food, when you are thirsty you search for something to drink. Obviously there are situations where the coming together of hunger or thirst and the source of meeting those needs fails because the need is blocked or the supplies are

scarce. But, as a rule, things go fairly smoothly. When we need love, however, we reach out to the world to get it—and everything all too often turns into a mess. Why? Why does it have to be so difficult?

Well, I think the reasons are inherent in an inescapable fact of human development. At the beginning of our lives, love and dependence are virtually indistinguishable from one another. For the infant or young child love, in a sense, is a matter of survival. This alone is surely enough to give love an uneasy edge. To make matters worse, we have the probably the longest dependence on adult caretakers of any animal. I once watched a documentary movie about sharks. Now, I don't know if I got it exactly right, but let me tell you what I thought I saw. There was a scene showing the birth of a baby shark. The baby shark was fighting its way out of a kind of egg or membrane. Some adult sharks, let's call them parent sharks, hovered nearby. When the baby shark got free of its egg, it sort of looked with a menacing grin (this is how I saw it) at the parent sharks, and it immediately shot out for the open sea. And I thought to myself, I bet there are no neurotic sharks.

For us the open sea is a long way off. We start out unable to distinguish love from dependence, and a great many people that I know are unable to distinguish love from dependence for the rest of their lives. I think the hardest thing in adult life is to separate love from dependence enough to find one's balance between them, since they are necessarily merged at the starting point. The striving for autonomy starts early, too, but how it goes depends on the family. Consider for instance, the stage of development that we call "the terrible twos" in the United States — I don't know what you call it in Austria, but I'm sure you go through it — first as children, then as parents. During the terrible twos a child begins to say no. Discovering the power of saying no (because up to this point the child pretty much says yes — although I have to admit that my son began protesting the

minute he was born), the child begins saying no to absolutely everything in kind of ecstasy of negativity. So why does it later become the hardest word to learn to use comfortably or convincingly?

Some parents are made very anxious by their child's refusals, so they overwhelm the child's no-saying. But the child's no is crucially important because it is the beginning of his or her more fully separating out an identity from the first dependencies. There is, of course, some earlier separating as well. The first appearance of the individual's sense of "I," the psychological separateness from the mother or from adult caretakers, is accompanied by anxiety. This is probably our first knowledge of anxiety, though not necessarily our first experience of it. You could say that the sense of self and the knowledge of anxiety are born at the same moment. Classical psychoanalytic theory called it "primary separation anxiety." In my book, *Intimate Terrorism,* I speak of it as abandonment anxiety. But there is another important developmental anxiety as well. If parents, during the terrible twos, don't allow the child's no to evolve freely, if, for example, they are too anxious themselves and prevent the child's no, they fortify this other kind of anxiety which I call engulfment anxiety. (To be sure, there are some things you can't allow the child to say no to, but parents ought to be sensitive to which battles are worth fighting.) Engulfment anxiety is the fear of being devoured, controlled, colonized by the large, powerful caretakers upon whom one depends. We all grow up contending to some degree with both these existential anxieties — abandonment anxiety and engulfment anxiety.

Human development proceeds as an exchange, a continuous give-and-take, between two basic, somewhat opposed impulses — the need to belong and join intimately, which includes a measure of dependence; and the need to know and express one's solitary, idiosyncratic, willful identity. When you reach adolescence, the main developmental task is to reconcile and integrate these two sets of needs. Let me call

them the claims of the “I” and the claims of the “we.” The problems with this difficult integration come when there has already been an overdose of either abandonment anxiety or engulfment anxiety in the course of growing up. The work of integration requires the freedom to say no as well as yes. Woe is the child whose ability to freely say no has been tabooed or choked off. Then he or she goes into adult life doing battle with or clinging to an internalized parental “we,” anchored in place by anxiety. And from then on intimate surrender to another feels either like a desperate necessity or a threatening loss of oneself.

During puberty and adolescence — a time of struggle with such delicate balances — western culture tends to hit us hardest with the Myth of We. In its most highly idealized and sought-after form it’s known as romantic love. We learn that we are going to fall in love on some enchanted evening. Two strangers happen to look up from talking or eating or whatever activity at a social gathering and their eyes meet. The meaning of their lives up to this point suddenly falls into place. It’s as if a bolt is released, and a door in the soul swings open. In a trance of destiny, this new budding “we” walks out of the party or dinner into the evening. There is a full moon, and the willow trees dangle their branches along the riverbank as “we” walk along it. Even the birds sing a different song that night just for “us.” Romantic love is a marvelous experience, and I certainly wouldn’t want to deprive anyone of experiencing it. I couldn’t anyway.

The trouble in paradise comes when people cling to this beautiful, transient dream of love as an ideal or ideology on which to base everyday ordinary intimacy, by which I mean making a life together over the course of years and maybe decades. Like benevolent parents who might block the child from saying no for the sake of family harmony (an early form of the Myth of We), the romantic ideal sweetly discourages disagreement, honest conflict, two people’s capacities to openly say no to one another. Thus it leaves couples beached

on the shoals of adolescence with the task of reconciling the claims of being oneself and being with another still unfinished.

What happens finally is that this dream of a perfect we, of two as one, like Adam and Eve in the garden before the apple, ends in a betrayal. It has to, because though it is wonderful for adolescent first love — and I hope that all of us, even at my age, can now and then experience renewals of adolescent first love — it provides no firm footing on which to build a life of intimacy. And with so little to support the formidable discipline of constructing an intimate relationship, people tend to fall into a profound disappointment. Whether its an hour after making love the first time or whether it's the next morning or whether its after the honeymoon or a year later in the marriage, whenever it happens, there comes a fall into disappointment. The disappointment may an inevitable stage of love — I tend to think it is — but heaven knows it is made worse, often fatal, when two people discover that they are not one unit but two solitudes struggling to choreograph differences that can generate innumerable possibilities of friction.

As a Gestalt therapist with a great deal of experience working with couples, I've spent a lot of time recently thinking about Adam and Eve because I think they are an endlessly intriguing couple. Where else in history do you get a creation myth that is based not on magic animals, not on demigods, but on an ordinary middle-class couple who launch human history by doing what every married couple ever since has done? They set each other off on a contagious sequence of bad judgments; they blame each other when things go wrong. You notice, by the way, that Eve is the one who gives in to temptation. Throughout the ages Genesis has been used like a legal brief to suggest that women can't control their animal impulses, so men have to keep them in their place. That is the male myth of the fall. As a matter of fact, however, Eve is the member of the first pair who at least had a little initiative.

Adam invented passive-aggressive masculinity. He believes in still another myth — that of the good boy. You can hold onto the Garden of Eden, which offers the best real estate on the planet and everything else you could want as long as you obey God the Father. In this version, Eve is a bad girl, but is she in fact governed by her wilder impulses? No, she is tempted by intellectual curiosity — she wants to know more. And why shouldn't she be interested in knowing more? But, to be sure, you are not supposed to be too curious — we are all punished for being too curious.

All Eve has to say to Adam is "try this, it's good," and he goes along with her and takes a bite of the apple. Whereupon God shows up. Adam and Eve go into hiding in the bushes because now they know they are naked, and they are embarrassed. God says, "Adam, where art thou?" You notice He doesn't even mention Eve. And Adam replies, "I'm here in the bushes, God. I'm naked." "Who told you that?" asks God. "It was the woman," Adam replies, "the woman made me eat the apple." And that's the beginning of marital scapegoating and power struggle that continues to this very day. It's still a usable parable, this story of Adam and Eve. In the Garden of Eden they could have maintained a perfect union, a perfect we. Of course, they were naked there, too, and it didn't bother them in the least. Then they ate this apple, and what did they discover? The knowledge of good and evil, and the knowledge that they would die. This was the forbidden knowledge that would make them like God. Now Adam and Eve look at one another, and they "know" that they are naked. So they don the first fig leaves.

It has always been said that what they feel is shame. Their new self-consciousness about their nakedness is the beginning of sexual shame, and it is followed up by the Judeo-Christian war on sexual pleasure. Maybe so, but I'd like add something to this notion. I think it may have also been the first experience of intimate disappointment. Perhaps Adam and Eve looked at each other now with awareness of change

and death and saw for the first time in each other's nakedness the signs of aging and decay. And they said to the each other, "Oh, you are not really who I thought you were! Already your breasts are beginning to sag a little.... Already you are getting a bit of a pot-belly." There's still shame in this, but also disappointment. It's what happens in every relationship when two people leave the weeping willow-birdsong-moonlight stage—in other words, pass from the extraordinary state we call romantic love into ordinary love. This is a very difficult transition, and I believe that our culture needs rather desperately to support it by creating new stories that help us learn to live an ordinary love in the context of everyday life. This would be what it means to love in the here-and-now. One can see difficulties, of course: It's one thing to say to your partner, I love you passionately, I love you madly, but how do you tell someone, I love you ordinarily? Getting this across, after infatuation dies down, may be the more heroic work of art.

I am a Gestalt therapist who tends to avoid the specialized language of Gestalt therapy when I write, though I obviously have to refer to it when I teach. And I'm a psychologist who tends to stay away, whenever possible, from the technical language of psychology. I began my intellectual life writing poetry and studying literature, and I taught those subjects at two American universities. I have a strong distaste for the reified and abstract jargon with which psychology and the social sciences approach the human situation. Just as I would like to supplement the myth of extraordinary romantic love with a romance of the ordinary, I would like to restore ordinary language to the pursuit of psychology and psychotherapy. This gives me a kinship with a famous citizen of Vienna, Ludwig Wittgenstein, who insisted that philosophers use the language of our everyday conversation in order to bring philosophy home from its abstract flight into the metaphysical stratosphere.

But let me resort to a little Gestalt therapy jargon anyway for those of you who are familiar with its terms. Per-

haps it is obvious that when I talk about the dream of a merged "we," created for the sake of certitude in love, I am talking about an important instance of what Gestalt therapy calls confluence. Gestalt therapy defines confluence as a mode of togetherness that lacks awareness of the boundary that separates beings or entities and enables them to preserve the differences that distinguish them in the act of meeting. And the idea of life in Eden, our most famous myth of the original "we," involves the absence of such a boundary. That Eden is a state of fixed confluence is made clear by the fact that it is utterly static and without conflict, a condition where all needs are met without effort. You could say that this archetypal garden represents the essential, perfectly healthy confluence between parent and infant that supports the first stage of human development. But after that, not much else goes on there. Thank God for the apple.

Given the fall into the unpleasant discovery that we are alone and that we live in time, such that nothing stays the same, perhaps we always need to remind ourselves that we also live our lives against a backdrop of confluence. This background is made up of our embeddedness in nature and our dependence on connection to others. If we are ultimately alone, we are also at home in the world by virtue of this confluent background. In moments of passionate or mystical absorption in otherness, the sense of connection becomes the foreground. Both aloneness and time seem to disappear. A nice place to visit, but you can't live there.

The problem with our traditional myth of romantic love is that it implies fixation of foreground confluence. The rest of life tends to be relegated to the background. You go to a party and see a couple you know holding hands. They go on holding hands for the remainder of the evening, and you may think to yourself, "Isn't it wonderful? They still love each other enough after twenty years of marriage to hold hands all night." But when you walk up and say to one of them, "How have you been?" the other answers, "She's fine." And from this

new perspective you take a closer look at their hand-holding and notice that their knuckles are turning white. It's a death-grip, an immobile state that we call a fixed Gestalt. Such fixations are always the basis of pathology in Gestalt therapy. This couple's holding hands is like staring at a sunset. When you first look at it, it can be a stunning vision of vital beauty, but if you keep staring, the optic nerves and muscles grow fatigued, and the excitement drains out of your looking. What gives a sunset its vivid, particular grandeur vanishes from your looking, and you no longer really see it. The party turns into a funeral.

The occupational hazard of romantic love is that it is so exciting, like a gorgeous sunset between two people, that couples are tempted to make a fixed Gestalt out of it. The result is a frozen "we," two people staring at one another until they no longer see each other. And then their life together feels boring and monotonous and deadly. At this point the anxiety-ridden power struggles between them may begin — if for no other reason, at least so they can prove that they are still alive. We could certainly use a myth of love based on a different set of images and possibilities. In Gestalt therapy we like to insist that contact between people needs to include respect for their differences, which emphasizes the separateness as well as the union in every meeting. Insisting on separateness in addition to the background and moments of confluent togetherness gives love breathing room, allows both the yes and the no that must always exist between two people, and thus resurrects the sense that love can be a continuing act of free choice.

But love based on the freedom to choose — the freedom to allow things to change, the freedom to be alone or together as one desires — feels risky and anxious-making, especially for those who rely heavily on the bond between love and dependence. The breaking of romantic confluence can even open the doors to violence. In my country, you read in the newspapers much too frequently that still another wife or

girlfriend said, "I'm leaving you. I've had enough. I'm fed up, that's it." Subsequently she is found beaten to death or shot. Her husband or boyfriend has replied, in effect, "If I can't have you, nobody can." Maybe this tells us, among other things, that the traditional claim that women are the dependent sex is a convenient cultural lie, propagated by men and, until recent times, subscribed to by most women. It seems to me that only dependence on a relationship could lead a man to resort to such desperate, violent measures. These are hardly acts of love.

What is involved when a man demands that a woman stay no matter what is only too obvious. It suggests that men might be the more dependent sex after all, dependent on women to serve as mothers. Just as women need to continue coming more fully into their own power, which they have been doing as an organized movement over the past twenty-five years, men need a movement of their own to help them learn to separate psychologically from their desperate love-hate hunger for mothers. Then we might at last be able as a culture to imagine stories of love based on a better balance between surrender to the collective spirit and deciding not to go along, between self-expression and team-work, between honoring one's own needs and honoring those of the other. I ask you, what is love worth if does not include these freedoms?