

Names are changed to honor client confidentiality.

Break Free

We are only truly free when we take the initiative to direct our own fate and move beyond an existence anchored to old patterns.

Branches on a young bonsai tree are wired down and shaped to conform to a fixed design. In time, the wires are no longer necessary. The bonsai will hold its forged shape. Like the bonsai, we were shaped at a young age. But unlike the bonsai, when the wires are removed—that is, when we grow up—we have the option to remain fixed, shaped permanently, or return to our original and natural form. We have choice.

In a counseling session, Donna, 46, talked at length about her dreams and aspirations. They remain stashed away on a shelf because she hasn't been able to unwedge herself from early shaping.

"Fear keeps me from pursuing them," she said, "but not pursuing them is making me miserable." Expressing her aching emptiness, she said, "I want to be more and do more with my life. My life is a dull and joyless pit."

Donna's response is understandable because a repressed self is a depressed self.

She was the youngest of four children.

"I was a mistake—my parents didn't plan for me," she said. Instead of being treasured as a nice surprise, she felt like a burden. "I always felt like I was in the way."

Donna's siblings were considerably older so she tended to be overlooked and excluded. "I was left out of family discussions," she said. "If I tried to get in my two cents, I was either ignored or interrupted."

The same scenario persists today. At family gatherings, Donna continues to be excluded—she continues to feel insignificant and dwarfed by her older siblings. She's also accustomed to being the target of ridicule, especially by her father and older sister.

"They're bullies," she said. "They have an insatiable appetite for stomping on people. So I protect myself by not being noticed. I've learned that being ignored has its pluses."

Donna spoke of how diminished she can feel just being near her older sister. “She likes to lord it over me,” she said. “I feel my power being sucked from me when I’m around her. She puts down everything that’s important to me.”

A common human trait we all possess is a tendency to over-generalize, and Donna is no exception. Every aspect of her life is affected by her belief that she’s unimportant and a magnet for criticism. Convinced that the entire world is like her family, she expects to be ignored, ridiculed, and perceived as someone of little or no value.

That belief has a paralyzing effect on her heartfelt ambitions. One of her most cherished dreams is a burning desire to write children’s books, but she’s held back by fears and her low self-opinion.

Anticipating her older sister’s reaction, she said, “I know she’ll think it’s a completely ludicrous idea. She’ll pick it apart.”

I asked: “So, what do you need to do when you’re met with that challenge?”

She was at a loss.

I advised: “You need to say, ‘Your opinion is your opinion.’ Then walk away. Nothing more need be said. Why does her opinion matter to you at all when she’s purposely looking at you through a bully’s lens?”

Nodding, she said: “I have to quit seeing myself as a six year old, don’t I? She doesn’t even know me.”

“Exactly!” I said.

Donna asked: “Well then, what can I do when I’m interrupted at family meals?”

“Don’t go ‘little,’” I said. “Override your tendency to self-diminish—assert yourself, instead.”

I explained how the young bonsai inside her was shaped to be passive and irrelevant.

I continued, “But that isn’t your true self. Depression and dissatisfaction with your life is direct feedback from your inner guidance system telling you that you’re not fulfilling your true nature. Get bigger than your sister’s opinion of you and shake off the self-image you adopted.”

I told Donna that her problem isn’t her older sister, or her father, or how she was ignored as a child. “Your problem is what you bought into,” I said. “You swallowed a lie.”

At an early age Donna decided she was a mistake, less important than her other family members and less powerful than her older sister. But the amazing thing about being human is

that decisions aren't fixed. She can make a new decision. She can redefine herself as something quite different from her family's limited and imperfect lens.

I suggested that she practice standing tall around her family. She can start by seeing them as a perfectly designed exercise-machine for straining against to build the emotional muscles she never had. Doing so will change her self-concept, giving her the confidence and the courage to chase after her dreams.

Her family situation has always been less than ideal, so this is her chance to change the bindings on her internal bonsai and grow in whatever direction she wants to. That's freedom.

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