

Becoming Themselves: Infants and Toddlers*

JANE G. GOLDBERG

The author uses her experience as a mother of a young child to understand the preoedipal needs of children. Paramount among what children need is the mother's sensitivity to creating an emotional environment which balances the conflicting needs for union and separation. Recent research is presented delineating findings on the importance of touch, aspects of the development of language, the impact of the communication of emotions as well as the use of emotions in the development of cognition, and, finally, the role and importance of the father in the development of the ego.

My young daughter, Molly, asks about every living and nonliving creature: does it lick or does it bite? She knows that it's got to be one or the other. She knows, in her childish way, that every living being wants to either love or kill. This dilemma pretty much sums up the basic issue Freud struggled with as he was formulating his theory of psychoanalysis. He developed his theory of two drives and called the notion of licking (and loving) Eros, and the notion of biting (and killing) Thanatos; frankly I think Molly's terminology is a bit more evocative.

What Molly seems to grasp instinctively, as do all children, is that we all want to be close to each other and, simultaneously yet conversely, we all want to be apart from each other. We want to fuse and we want to separate; we want to be united and we want to be alone. It was a developmental milestone for Molly, a feat of cognitive

* Parts of this paper are excerpted from my forthcoming memoir, *Searching for Separation*.

maturation representing millions of years of evolutionary progress of the human mind, when Molly came to understand that a biter can also lick and that a licker can also bite. We want to love and to kill; sometimes we want to kill the one we love; often we want to kill the one we love the most. We want to fuse and we want to separate; sometimes we want to separate from those with whom we want most to fuse. It is in all the complex permutations of these conflicting desires and needs that our living together, living in relationships as the social animals that we are, is made interesting as well as confusing. Recently, I was taking a nature walk with Molly. The area around our country home was buzzing with the song of the cicadas—alas, this has been the year of the cicadas. These singing insects apparently come only every seventeen years to live long enough to make their strange ethereal music before they drop their eggs from a tree. The eggs then hatch into larvae and the larvae burrow deep into the ground and live off the roots of the trees for the next seventeen years. Anyway, as we were walking through the woods, we came across a cicada in the last, waning period of his life. He allowed us to pick him up by his wings, to place him on a tree and then take him off. He sat in our hands, walked on our arms. We spent twenty minutes with this cicada. We even named him, and Molly decided she wanted to take him home with her. We set him in Molly's carriage, perched in the empty seat like he was a king, and started to walk home. Suddenly Molly reached for him, took him out of the carriage, put him on the ground, and proceeded to stomp on him. For just a little while, Molly seemed to love this little cicada. For that moment, Molly embraced love and life and togetherness. Then Molly had had enough of that little cicada; she was ready to be done with him. In that moment of stomping, she embraced hate and death and separation. In her acts of love and then of murder, she embodied some basic principles about love and union—Eros—and aggression and separation—Thanatos: you don't have one without the other. They go together as surely as do the proverbial horse and carriage. And they're usually directed to the same object. You don't love one person and hate another; you hate most of all the ones you love most of all. You don't want to leave someone unless you also want to be close; the people you most ardently want distance from are the same people you want to possess.

When I am imagining being alone, being away from those I love the most, my unconscious is on the subject of murder. There are times, for instance, when Molly's demands have pushed me beyond my tolerable limit and there is no babysitter in sight. Rather than

screaming at her until she submits to leaving me alone, I throw her into her car seat with hopes that the rolling motion of the car will mercifully lull her to sleep. These are murderous thoughts toward my child that I commit daily. They are wishes and desires about her temporary obliteration. They arise out of a need to be away, to be separate and separated from her. Of course, I do not say to myself (or G-d forbid, to anyone else) that I want my child dead at these moments. I say to myself that I just want her to be a little different from the way she is. Or, I want her to go away, if only for a little while. I want Molly to be less childish narcissistic: "Come on Mol. Have a heart. Be good to your overaged Mom. Be a good girl who can put my needs in front of your immediate, ever-changing entirely-appropriate-for-a-child impulses. Be a good girl and take care of yourself for a while and leave me to my own pleasures."

But here is the ghastly truth about the unconscious: wanting someone to be different is the same as wanting them to not be there; and they're both equivalent to wanting the person dead, if only for that moment. It's saying: "You'd be just fine, *if only* . . ." Well, that's the first step into that infinite list of *if only's*. *If only* Molly were acting like a ten-year-old instead of the three-year-old that she is. Passing thoughts of: *if only* Molly went to school five days a week instead of two; *if only* a thousand contingencies that aren't true so that the time we have together could be easier or so that I could have more time to myself. All of the *if only's* are just ways of not being with what is. They're ways of killing what is. They're ways of killing, without the actual act. Metaphorical murders.

When Molly decided that she had had enough of that little cicada, she could have engaged in a metaphorical murder. She didn't have to kill the unfortunate creature. She could have just separated—gone on home, leaving him to die a natural death which he was on the verge of doing anyhow. But she is only a child and she is still close to her murderousness in an unfiltered, unadulterated way.

In fact, infants and children are the most murderous creatures around. They are prevented from being destructive with their murderous impulses only by the fact that they are small, relatively uncoordinated and ineffective in carrying out most behaviors.

Every mother knows the murderousness of her child. And every mother knows her own murderousness, a legacy from her own infancy, a fact of her basic nature. Mothers know that they themselves are the most fierce targets of their child's murderousness; they know that their beloved child is often, more than anyone else, a target for their own murderous rage. There is no particular order to which

comes first—child wanting to kill mother, or mother wanting to kill child—since it is in the nature of both.

Not long ago, I was up all night with food poisoning. When Molly woke up in the morning, I told her that I had been sick all night. She then asked me if I knew where her doll was. What was Molly being? A narcissist. Children, as well as embodying the most intense murderous impulses on the earth, are also the world's greatest narcissists. Of course, narcissism is all about murder—the obliteration of awareness of the other person as a separate person with separate needs. Nora Ephron has a great quote which goes something like this: if you give a child a choice of having her mother in Hawaii, 3000 miles away, having the time of her life, relaxing, eating gourmet food and engaging in a great romance versus having her mother in the next room, utterly suicidal, one step away from putting her head in the oven, the child will choose to have her mother in the next room. This is the normal narcissism of a child.

This narcissism lasts a very long time when it's in relation to the mother. I remember an experience I had as a teenager when I was taking the bus home from school one day. I had to change buses, and at the intersection where I stood waiting for the second bus, I suddenly saw my mother driving through the intersection. I called out to her; I even began to run furiously after her car. But she didn't hear or see me, and kept right on driving her sure path toward home. I was much too experienced of a bus-taker and I was much too old to logically have this reaction; nevertheless, I found myself weeping with the pain of abandonment. It was somehow strangely not possible to me that my mother could not know of my existence—that I could have remained invisible to her. I could not believe, or accept without pain, that she actually had an existence separate from me, a life that did not include me.

This feeling of separation from my mother was not my primary emotional experience as a child. To the contrary, my mother and I had an uncommonly close relationship. I grew up with the certain knowledge that my mother adored me, that I was a precious gift to her, that, in a sense, I completed her. I never doubted her love, nor her commitment to being the best mother she could. And, ours was a mutual love affair. To me, in my childhood years, she was the best, the most beautiful mom in all the world. Yet, even with all that love, for that one moment, as I watched her car vanish away from me, pulled into the anonymity of traffic, the pain of recognition of our separateness was searing.

It is the job of every mother to make the commitment to take her

child's raw energy of wanting to kill her—the murder behind normal developmental narcissism—and to turn this into something wonderful, into a splendid act of metaphorical murder. And every mother must make the commitment to take her own raw energy of wanting to kill her child and to turn this into something wonderful, into another splendid act of metaphorical murder. In short, it is the mother's job to help her child to break the most unbreakable of bonds, to separate with as little pain as possible and with as much joy as possible.

I see how difficult this struggle is for both Molly and me. Daily, we are disappointed and frustrated by our wish for our symbiosis and our need to separate. Daily, our mutual needs for togetherness and separation conflict. When she wants to lie in my lap, I need to see a patient. When I am ready to play with her, she is happily ensconced in drawing and doesn't want to be disturbed. Molly grapples mightily with the stunning realization that she and I are separate and that, in fact, I am not always at her beck and call. She is destined, as we all are, to experience over and over again the painful feeling that there are times when her desires for another person will not be met, that there is not always an instant route to the person she needs, wants, and loves most of all. This is Molly's destiny as my child and it is, as well, my destiny as her mother: her sometime inaccessibility to me is just as painful to me as my unavailability is to her. I worry that the day may come, as it did for my mother, when our needs for each other may become badly skewed and my need for her will become much stronger than her need for me.

Children need to know that when they want to move away from their mothers and when their mothers want to move away from them that this is not a forevermore kind of disappearing act. Molly needs to know that if she moves away from me, I will be there when she wants to come back to me. Such knowledge is, most of all, what children need to be reassured of—that they can want to kill off the other person, but that they will not succeed. Mothers need to be like those bouncing figures that keep popping up no matter how many times you punch them down. When Molly tells me to go away, or when she herself goes away, she is verbalizing and enacting her momentary wish to kill me off. She wants to kill me, but she wants me to remain alive for future reference. Children are our planet's most ardent believers in resurrection.

What else do our children need? They need to be touched. The Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II conducted his own little 13th century experiment. He removed babies from their families and gave

them over to nurses who were instructed to take care of only their basic needs: feeding them without holding them, bathing them without hugging them. He wanted to learn what language the babies would speak if they never heard speech, never heard a song or a lullaby. What he learned, however, had nothing to do with language. All his babies died.

Centuries later Freud understood that maternal love is essential for both life and mental health. In 1909, he proposed to the mental health community that an Academy of Love be created to scientifically study the phenomenon of love. Freud felt that if we understood more about love, we would be able to take steps to alleviate some of the human misery and suffering that comes from the absence of love.

It took forty years and a world war for scientists to finally come to see Freud's wisdom in his idea of studying love. In 1950, the newly formed United Nations commissioned a group of psychoanalysts to study the importance of maternal love. John Bowlby and René Spitz took hold of Freud's vision, and as a result of their research we have precise information on the positive power of early love and the disastrous effects of its absence.

Spitz's research informed us of the same disease that Frederick had observed seven hundred years earlier. The disease, now called *marasmus*, seemed to be a withering away of the spirit and then the body from a deprivation of maternal love. As a result of this research, we have filmed documentation of the effects of inadequate mothering. Spitz observed and filmed thirty-four infants in an orphanage. These children, like Frederick's children, were rarely fondled, caressed, played with, or exposed to any of the other kinds of nourishing attention that loving mothers bestow on their children. Within three months, the babies had difficulty sleeping, had shrunk, and were whimpering and trembling. Two months later, most of them had taken on the appearance of idiocy. Within a year, twenty-seven of the thirty-four infants had died.

Children need to be talked to. The journey toward language begins in the womb where the fetus is bathed in the sounds of its mother's voice. We know that a four-day-old baby can already distinguish one language from another. French babies will suck more vigorously when they hear French spoken than when they hear Russian; similarly, Russian babies are activated more by Russian than by French. The size of a child's vocabulary is correlated with how much the mother talks to the child. The complexity of sentence structure that children use is correlated with the complexity of sen-

tence structure that the mother uses in talking to her child. Remember the mermaid played by Daryl Hannah in the movie *Splash*? She taught herself English by watching television. Nobody knows better than I how television can serve as an occasional baby-sitter. But watching television won't enhance your child's linguistic ability. Only "live" language, live interaction teaches language. As analysts, we understand the importance of language, the essentialness of being able to translate one's experience into words. It is, we feel, the *sine qua non* of psychic integration.

Children need exposure to a wide range of feelings. Information that is embedded in an emotional context will stimulate neural activity more than information alone will. Someone once told me—I have to admit, I've never found the reference—that Freud said that any adult who can remember before the age of four is a genius and that it is not possible to remember before the age of two. I've often wondered about this. If it's accurate, I've wondered if the key to explaining the phenomenon would be the learning of language. Perhaps the structure of the brain changes after language, so that preverbal experiences (what we modern analysts call preoedipal) are not susceptible to memory after this alteration of the brain, after language development. With that theory in mind, I had an interesting experience with Molly that apparently disproved my little theory, but, instead, illustrates how important the emotional context is. At the point of Molly's development when she knew about five words—thankfully two of the five were "tooth" and "hurt"—she was able to tell me that her tooth hurt. The dentist said he needed to pull two of her baby teeth. I did research and found all the ways that teeth can be pulled in a young child. They can put the child in the hospital and give anesthesia; they can do it in the office with less powerful drugs; they can put the child in what's called a "papoose," which is essentially a straight-jacket that holds the child down. I went for the office drugs. But for Molly the drugs didn't really work, and for a half-hour, she sat in the dentist's chair screaming and crying. After twenty minutes, I was utterly traumatized. I couldn't watch. I spent the next ten minutes hiding in the bathroom. It took me days to conceptualize that perhaps Molly wouldn't be permanently traumatized by this event because she had clearly had all her aggression during the painful episode, and, hopefully, had been able to discharge enough energy through her aggression.

A few months ago—this is now two and a half years later—Molly asked me if I remembered the time when she went to the dentist and I hid in the bathroom. I had never referred to this event, never spoken

about it in those two and a half years. Yet, there was that memory of that time, just sitting there waiting for Molly to develop the language to enable her to talk about it. I was astounded. But, as I thought about it, I realized that that event was the most emotionally evocative event in Molly's short life.

Another example of the strength of emotion and cognition: I bet no one in the room remembers what they were doing on May 31, 1976. But I bet everyone remembers what they were doing on November 22, 1963 when they first heard that JFK had been shot. Similarly, a child will learn the concept of "later" when it is attached to a trip to Toys R Us as opposed to a dictionary definition of the concept. Causality, a key concept in logic, is best learned through emotion: If I eat, Mommy smiles. Mommy wants me to eat. This cognitive connection builds synapses in the brain.

A mere fifteen years ago, researchers thought that by birth, the structure of the infant's brain was genetically determined. We now know this is wrong. Early childhood experiences are powerful determinants in how the intricate neural circuits of the brain are wired. The genes determine only the basic wiring, the heartbeat, the lungs respiring. Everything else, fully half of the 80,000 different genes in a human being, is given over to the formation and running of the nervous system: the building of synaptic connections. There are simply not enough genes to do the job necessary; that leaves experience. Experience provides the organizing framework for the child. The experience of an infant is in large part the emotional tonality of his world. Building synaptic connections, or what researchers call stimulation, is best done, like language, in an emotional context. Peek-a-boo, in which everybody is laughing, will stimulate a child's emotional and intellectual development far better and faster than flash-cards.

Of course, the down-side of how influenced the brain is by experience is that it is acutely susceptible to trauma. If the child's primary emotional experience is fear, then the neurochemical responses to fear become the building blocks of the organization of that child's brain. We know enough now to have a precise neurochemical explanation of Freud's concept of the repetition compulsion. In trauma, there is an elevation of stress hormones, such as cortisol. High cortisol levels during the first three years of life will increase activity in the brain structure, the locus ceruleus, involved in vigilance and arousal. The brain, then, is primed to be on hair-trigger alert. Later, whenever there is an experience, a memory, even a fantasy that remotely reminds the person of the trauma, this region of the brain is activated

and a new surge of stress hormones is unleashed. As well, when this hormone is being produced over and over again, regions in the brain responsible for other emotions are not being stimulated. The region of the brain responsible for attachment, for instance, will not be stimulated. Abused children have twenty to thirty percent smaller areas in the cortex and limbic systems responsible for attachment. Adults who were abused as children have a smaller hippocampus than non-abused adults. The hippocampus is responsible for memory.

Children need to play. The 19th century philosopher Rudolf Steiner believed that childhood was a time for fantasy and imagination. The Waldorf schools, which have developed in order to offer Steiner's program of childhood education, dim the lights in their pre-school classes in order to facilitate the child's access to her internal world. This is, of course, much as we, as psychoanalysts, do. Steiner also recommended delaying teaching reading for the child, as reading organizes the brain in a structured way. This belief, of course, flies in the face of how most ambitious mothers think. Often mothers stimulate, and stimulate their children in their quest for the ever-more perfect, ever-smarter child. I read recently of the plight of one woman who was denied her childhood. Yeou-Cheng Ma started violin at two-and-a-half and was tutored by her father. She won competitions galore until her younger brother, Yo-Yo, started cello at four-and-a-half and eclipsed her. Yeou-Cheng had a breakdown at the age of fifteen. She says: "The job of a child is to play. I traded my childhood for my left hand."

Children need fathers. I was reluctant to admit this one. I like to think of the mother as being the only one that counts, but it's not true. Research shows that children whose fathers help care for them are less likely to become violent, have higher IQ's, better impulse control and better social adaptations. Interactions between fathers and infants, like those between mothers and infants, follow a pattern that transcends class and culture. Each mother has a distinctive way of holding her child. She will do it nine out of ten times. Each father, in contrast, picks up his baby in ten different ways. Mothers play with their children in distinctive ways; mothers use toys. Fathers, in contrast, use themselves. They will use their bodies as rocking horses, monkey bars. In short, fathers do not mother. They father. Fathering is different than mothering. But it seems that the mixture of the two is better than either one alone.

Jerome Kagan tells us that shyness has a genetic component. Yet he also shows that it can be modified so that it disappears. There need

be no question about the nature/nurture controversy anymore. Nature affects nurture and back and forth. Each influences the other.

My first psychoanalytic teacher said that after fifteen years of analysis, the main difference in her functioning was that she learned to knit. This sounds like a little thing. Yet, think about when you have a splinter in your hand. It's a little thing that feels like a big thing. It affects your whole being, in a sense. Learning to knit can mean a sea-change in a person's psychic makeup. Psychoanalysis can make tiny changes in a person—it can give the person a new emotional experience, and this tiny change spreads to the whole person.

41 East 20th Street
New York, NY 10003

Modern Psychoanalysis
Vol. XXII, No. 2, 1997