



Understanding Boundaries

A SNIPPET FROM
ULTIMATE YOU BOOK
BY SHARON PEARSON

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Your Tribal Cycle Your “tribe” is your family of origin, and the patterns of thought and behavior that your family engaged in represents your Tribal Cycle. The tribe is the epicenter of what impacted you, shaped you, and carried you into adulthood. Your tribe had impactful individuals within it who shaped and influenced your thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and beliefs about the world. These are the “Big People”. They may have been both of your parents or a particular parent, a foster parent, a sibling, a teacher, a priest, a friend. It could be anyone who touched, impacted, and substantially shaped your thoughts and feelings. The events and experiences you had with them, either positive or negative,

Interacted with, collided with, shaped, and informed who you were coming to believe you were, and from this genesis, who you are today. How your parents were raised is influenced by how their parents raised them, which is influenced by how their parents raised them, and so on. So your Tribal Cycle is the perpetual repetition of patterns of perception, beliefs, expectations, choices, behaviors, and communication styles – good or bad – down through the generations. All this becomes messy when the members of your family haven’t been able to cope with intense feelings or conflicts, or if they don’t know how to encourage or respect your boundaries.

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"You may have been forced to 'take sides' during conflicts between your Big People"

THE TRIBAL CYCLE BY
SHARON PEARSON

When stressed, your "Big People" were likely to have fallen back into learned ways of dealing with situations that were more about them managing their anxiety or insecurities rather than with what you, as a child, needed. Wherever your family sat on this spectrum between "shut down" and "rocky-verging-on-insane", the members sought, unconsciously, to achieve their version of balance. Regardless of whether you were raised within a family that could best be described as "barely functional" or highly functional, the goal was balance and stability and the reduction of tension. For one person not to fulfill their part within your tribe to achieve this balance was to rock the entire tribe because the stability of the family was the primary concern. The more adaptable, in tune, and present to you and your needs your tribe was capable of being, the less you felt the need to help maintain this balance. The more insecure your tribe was, the harder you felt you needed to work for this balance.

And if you and I can just unpack this a little more... The relationships the most influential Big People in your life had with one another determined the character of this balance – and the more pain they were in, the harder you had to work to help achieve the balance overall.

If your Big People were close and intimate and knew how to meet their individual needs on their own, you had less of a need to step in and "help". If your Big People were distant, angry, accusatory, despairing, distressed, in pain, shaming, or displayed any other form of not being vulnerable, the greater you felt the need to step in and "help" protect your tribal system. And the more your Big People attempted to get their needs met through you and/or your siblings, the more entrenched within your tribe you became. No matter who you are, how you were raised, or what you believe to be true about how you were raised, you grew up in a family whose entire field of energy impacted every single member of your family. Attitudes become encoded within family members and then acted out in the family and society as a whole. Your family, or the group that was considered your tribe, was greater than the sum of its parts. All this, and you were a child. Try that on. You were a child. Trying to figure out which way was up. Shoelaces and making your bed were monumental hurdles for you to conquer. One of the Big People in your life communicated, either implicitly or explicitly, their lack of adaptability, through shut down emotions, perhaps through inconsistent love and affection, through making unrealistic demands on you, through pouring love, focus and attention onto you when what you needed was space to be your own person, or maybe by refusing to give you comfort when you needed it. Or they refused to discuss topics that made them uncomfortable, or they demonstrated a fundamental lack of respect towards their partner or perhaps made inappropriate demands on you or your siblings... When it's good, it's great. When it's not, it's a sad and bewildering, sandshifting-under-your-feet kind of experience, especially when you're a child.

You may have been forced to "take sides" during conflicts between your Big People. • Perhaps you, your thoughts, your feelings, your perceptions, and/or your views were ignored, criticized, mocked, minimized, disregarded, or shamed. • Your Big People may have been intrusive and overly involved and protective of you when you were ready to explore your world solo.

THEY MAY HAVE- gone the other way, being distant and uninvolved. • You may have experienced the crazy-making situation where your Big People contradicted your version of recent family events, invalidating what you knew to be true. • You may have experienced violence or witnessed it. • You may have been a "favorite," or not been a "favorite," or perhaps you were compared unjustly to someone else. • Or perhaps you learned to be watchful and hyper-vigilant to the moods and expectations of your Big People, so you could anticipate and prepare yourself for what happened next. You were a child who, through an innate and entirely normal and appropriate desire to survive, not be rejected, not be alienated, and not be shamed, tried your best to help this tribe and these Big People achieve some form of equilibrium. Can you possibly imagine the strain this placed on your capacity for reasoning? For making sense of it all? You, like all children, would have adapted as best you could to what conditions you found yourself in, in a way that provided balance and symmetry to the relationships. But, I have to ask, at what cost? None of this was planned. It wasn't intended by the Big People in your life. It wasn't intended by previous generations. It wasn't intended by you. Perhaps you "acted out" – rebelled; or "acted in" – you harmed yourself or you were compliant. You did what you needed to do to survive and remain accepted within your tribe.

"A healthy cycle is where there is a free expression of you, and for each member of the family as well."

By Sharon Pearson

This isn't about blame. It's not about how "they" have to change before you will. That would be self-defeating. This is the family system at play. And your Big People were as caught up in it as you were. I believe that the number one block to our own well-being is the extent to which we don't recognize or acknowledge that we're caught in our Tribal Cycle. You may have wonderful habits that you learned from your tribe, and these are a significant part of your Tribal Cycle. You may have pretty awful patterns of behavior, too, and these are also part of your Tribal Cycle. If you've ever felt inexplicable anxiety about making a step forward in your life, it's because your proposed growth will take you out of the Tribal Cycle of your own family. Sometimes the line between your Tribal Cycle and a behavior isn't always clear. I tend to make it simple for myself. If I'm doing something that keeps tripping me up, despite my knowing "better", then I'm probably caught up in some aspect of my Tribal Cycle. Instead of dealing head-on with whatever messed up pattern of behavior I've got going on, I check in with my Inner World. Am I living my values, or am I trying to please someone else? Am I acting based on what I want to create, or am I acting out against an aspect of my Tribal Cycle? Am I choosing the path for My Awesome Life, or am I playing out the next generation of my Tribal Cycle? It's time to make the invisible visible. To pull from the darkness the hidden pressures upon you to be and to act a certain way.

The Dynamics of a Healthy, Functional Family When things are humming along in a functional family, each member recognizes that everyone else has different thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and preferences. They are comfortable with the fact that each person can make independent decisions and they recognize that those decisions may impact each other. In these relationships, one person can see how someone else is upset but doesn't get caught up in that person's emotions, thus avoiding escalating the situation through "taking on" the emotion. One person can make a decision to do something that sits outside what is considered "the norm", and it's registered as being "different and okay". The need to make the family look good isn't there. You make decisions because you believe they move you and your life forward, rather than wave the family flag in distress. You can be heroic when you believe it's needed, or lighthearted, or objective, or emotional. Then, in the next experience, you can be contrary to any of these responses, depending on what you believe is appropriate for you and the situation. You, and how you show up, is not limited to a fixed, expected role whose purpose is to maintain the family's balance. Each member of this family can move between different roles without consequence. There is a free expression of you, and for each member of the family as well. You grew up free to express yourself as you are. The balance between individuality and being a part of this family was achieved without judgment and without anyone trying to get you to "conform" or fit in when you stepped outside of the group. You didn't and don't have to give up being you for the sake of the family's expectations. Conflict can be handled without passive-aggressive tactics, manipulation, silent treatment, or the "punishment" of those who rebel. It's handled with direct communication of each person's needs and emotions.

A desire to understand the other is the norm. The leaders – the Big People – in this family don't see their children as existing to reassure them, or remind them that they're "good parents". If you were a child in this family, you weren't there to make them look good through compliance or rebellion. You could feel what you felt, and label it without feeling isolated, rejected, or judged. And you could express how you felt without shame because all emotions were treated with respect. In this scenario, there is reciprocity of care, respect, and love. This doesn't have to be demanded. You give care, respect, and love. You receive care, respect, and love. You don't have to "earn" it through performance. There are no conditions. And it's not withdrawn by you or anyone else when someone makes a mistake or hurts someone else's feelings. Your Big People didn't think they had all the answers but still gave you the guidance you needed to flourish into your version of You. When they made a mistake, they apologized. When they made their stuff about you, they owned it. And each of you have a sense of self that's grounded in self-worth. You know you're enough. You know you can handle it. You don't expect life to become easier. You simply improve on the You that you were the day before.

Enmeshment is when any number of people interact with a lack of awareness of or consideration for each other's personal boundaries. Boundaries are permeable, unclear, and often ignored; or are rigid, unyielding, and impervious to emotional intimacy. Enmeshed families are rigid systems that become locked in over time, and it can be a tough gig to break out of these established patterns and roles. In this environment, it's challenging to develop emotional and psychological maturity. Whatever challenges you have, either from your childhood or in your adulthood, they are an "SOS" about your Big People's pain.

"My relationship with my parents has matured since then. Healthy boundaries are becoming more normal for us."

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Your symptoms of pain are a message – a message that you are distorting your own growth in an attempt to try to alleviate and absorb your Big People's pain. And as you, an adult, attempt to "find your own way" and "forge your own life" you are, in effect, trying to change the whole tribal system's way of operating. Your attempts at expanding your life and choices – your moves toward your own well-being – are a threat to the contracted and inflexible ethos of your tribe. If you feel that life seems to get harder and relationships seem to fail to live up to their promise, you are apt to become frustrated, lost, alone, and in pain. This is you stumbling upon the discovery, perhaps years after leaving the tribal home, that you're still entrenched in the "job" you had as a child. You learned your job as a child: maintain the status quo regardless of its lack of health, at all costs. And this you did, but you didn't do it consciously, or with conscious thought about its consequences to you. Again, how could you? The greater the entanglement, or "enmeshment" you have with your tribe, the harder it is to have your own life. And the easier it is to repeat patterns of distress, such as procrastination, self-sabotage, addiction, repetition of the same mistakes, lack of intimacy, feelings of loneliness, anxiety, perfectionism, anger, sadness, not trusting others, constant disappointment...

Specifically, you may notice that you experience some or all of these challenges: 1. You may have an exaggerated sense of responsibility for others; or you are often in conflict and rebellious. 2. You feel guilty when you take care of yourself; or you can't function unless being cared for. 3. You have few self-determined goals and often wonder what your "purpose" is. 4. You have difficulty knowing or expressing your needs. 5. You have trouble knowing what appropriate boundaries are. 6. You struggle to distinguish between feeling and thinking. 7. You function in reaction to others. 8. You lack beliefs or convictions of your own about who you are, and how you want to shape your life. 9. You're unclear what a close, emotionally intimate relationship looks like or what it takes to achieve one. 10. You repeat patterns of behavior which cause you pain, or you keep experiencing the same relationship mistakes. The lower the self-esteem and sense of self-worth your Big People had, the greater the enmeshment, as they attempted – unknowingly – to become lovable, worthy, and enough through how they engaged with you and what they demanded of you. I was raised with love, and my parents did the best they could for our family. We were what you would call a "normal" family. My parents conceived me before their marriage. This was a big deal in the sixties (yes, that long ago!). They were too young, confused, and had little support. Years later, at my birthday parties and special events that were supposed to be in my honor, all the guests were told with humor about how I was a "mistake". A poem was written about this hilarious "mistake" for my eighteenth birthday party and read to all of my friends. It wasn't funny to me. I didn't mind that I'd been conceived before my parents were married. I did mind that occasions that were supposed to celebrate me turned into occasions to make fun of me.

To mock me. I protested a little bit, and was told it was all in good fun, and that I should "lighten up". (God, how I came to resent that "advice!") It didn't occur to me to just say no. This is probably because I felt that I had no power in the relationship to voice my hurt and have it be taken seriously. I questioned my own sense of self as I worried about my hurt. Yes, I worried about what was wrong with me for feeling hurt. How crazy is that?! At some level, I guess I sensed that treating the situation with humor mattered to my Big People. I put their needs ahead of my own. I played the role of the well-behaved daughter and smiled through the poem as it was being read. My relationship with my parents has matured since then. Healthy boundaries are becoming more normal for us. Expressing our needs is possible. It's new territory for us and we're closer than we ever were when I was growing up. But "Back Then," we were enmeshed. You become enmeshed when your feelings, thoughts, perceptions, and ideas are treated as secondary by your tribe. You – the You you're becoming – is set aside for the you that the other family members want to continue to see. The traits of Your Centered Self – lovable, worthy, fierce, determined, passionate, compassionate, sensitive, emotional, expressive, creative, opinionated, loving, warm, curious, adventurous – are discouraged, or worse, are shamed. You set aside your Centered Self and learned to "play the game" of being who your Big People needed you to be. And the extent that you felt you needed to do this is the extent to which you remain enmeshed today. Your claim to freedom begins when you are free of the enmeshment. It's to embrace the You that you were meant to be, before the conditioning set in to tell you otherwise.

The rules of Enmeshment

HOW TO RECOGNISE YOU ARE LIVING OUT A PATTERN

A snippet from Ultimate you book by Sharon Pearson

1. You get to feel what the Big People are comfortable with you feeling.
2. You get to think what the Big People are comfortable with you thinking.
3. You are here for the Big People, to fulfill their need for security and reassurance.
4. You will be praised for achievement, not for effort or improvement, or just for the You that is uniquely You.
5. You learn not to talk about a topic unless the Big People want you to.
6. The Big People can criticize you, and get impatient and angry, and you can't.
7. Don't ever make the Big People look bad.
8. Mistakes are shameful and to be avoided.
9. If the Big People are uncomfortable by your behavior, you have to stop. You aren't here to make them feel uncomfortable or challenged.
10. There's a right way and a wrong way, and you have to get it right.
11. When you're wrong, or you fail, the Big People can reject you.
12. The Big People don't have to change, you do.

TO FIND OUT MORE ABOUT HOW YOU CAN SET
HEALTHY BOUNDRIES IN YOUR LIFE BOOK IN A FREE
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