

CHARLYNE GELT, PH.D.

Encouraging Self-Discovery and Empowerment



Unfinished Family Business



“Feelings of worth can flourish only in an atmosphere where individual differences are appreciated, mistakes are tolerated, communication is open, and rules are flexible – the kind of atmosphere that is found in a nurturing family.”

— Virginia Satir

Fear in the Workplace

For Janice, the upcoming Monday marked both the first day of spring and her first day on a promising new job. She had everything to look forward to. She felt her position was the perfect fit she had been searching for, responsible and intellectually demanding. This was a challenge she relished.

“I know I can depend on you,” her new boss had told her during her job interview. It felt good to Janice to have him believe in her strengths. She wanted to live up to his expectations. Perhaps she would even move up the ladder!

Just Like Home

What Janice was not conscious of at the time was that her new boss’s statement mirrored her role in her family of origin where she was the “capable and responsible one,” the “dependable” one who didn’t complain even when she never got the respect or the authority she deserved. Her perfectionism and work ethic demanded top quality performance despite her hurt inside. No wonder, she realized later, why she’d felt so comfortable during the job interview – the atmosphere had seemed so familiar, “just like home.”

On her first day on her new job, Janice had a shock. Instead of feeling capable and strong, as she’d anticipated, she felt as though she was walking on egg shells whenever she was in the presence of her boss, a controlling man who seemed to vacillate between obsessive micromanagement and a total lack of structure and direction. Just as her father, she never knew what to expect or where she stood because his reactions were so unpredictable.

All that Janice knew was that from that very first day, she was a nervous wreck. “I didn’t know from moment to moment what to expect from my boss, so I was constantly off-balance instead of in control, which is what I wanted to feel. I’d get angry at him, at myself, but I didn’t dare show it most of the time – then I’d have humiliating outbursts.

The “Aha!”

Janice’s big “Aha!” came after an unexpected scolding from her superior during which he’d yelled at her, “*If you ever, ever, have a reason for somebody to come and talk to me about you again, don’t come back to work!*” She was devastated. “He didn’t even give me a chance to discuss it or to explain,” she said.

Such emotionally demanding and painful situations on the job often provoke a lot of soul searching to understand why such scenes occur. “It started with a tremendous anxiety, an intense pressure, like I’ve been here before.” She began to recognize that she had been there before, that her job environment was ancient history. “Once again, just as when I was a child, I was scared, jittery, and on the defensive. This was just like home! My boss had a way of making me feel wrong, bad, and guilty about nothing.” After six months on the job, the strain finally got to Janice. She was tired of the whole experience, tired of bouncing about in a sea of uncertainty and pain. She quit. She went into therapy where she became consciously aware of how for years she’d been carrying her unfinished and unresolved family issues into work, resulting in conflicts – not just with bosses but with co-workers (“siblings”) – many of whom had ironically done the same thing: Brought their own unresolved family issues to work!

Fear in the Workplace

As Janice was to learn, fear in the workplace is common and often replicates dysfunctional family of origin dynamics. Once Janice understood, it seemed obvious – but it takes a while to really “get it”. Some people never do. She discovered that, like a moth to flame, she’d been drawn to bosses like her father whose goal was control over others rather than cooperation, team work, or empowerment.

Dominance and submission is a multi-generational relationship dynamic that perpetuates at home and at work, leaving the targets feeling they have no emotional skin, are out of alignment, trapped, detached, reactively cut off, and they often give up and succumb to the lure of fusing with the “enemy.”

This concept of “stuck togetherness” and enmeshment was first noted by American psychoanalyst Murray Bowen whose focus was on family *systems*, especially the unconscious emotional patterns that emerge within the nuclear family and infiltrate into multi-generations of unsuspecting family members, pushing them to abandon their sense of “self” in order to be accepted into the family (or workplace) system.



Unfinished family business lingers in our psyche like a thief in the night waiting to steal a fragile sense of identity. Controlling, neglectful, or abusive parenting patterns linger behind emotional walls only to be re-experienced throughout life in a variety of settings, from home, to work, to community, to love relationships.

Healing the Symptoms of Unfinished Family Business

“Knowledge is power, knowledge is safety and knowledge is happiness.”

— Thomas Jefferson.

Janice was one of the lucky ones. Her work crisis presented the perfect opportunity to work on unfinished family-of-origin issues. It was her opportunity to transform “fate” into a deep-life change. She sought not just another new job (where the same thing could happen again), but internal change. “I wanted to learn to speak up and ask questions.” She also wanted to shift away from her family’s “my way or the highway thinking,” to having “a right” to her own thinking identity. There was no turning

back. It led her out of her comfort zone (i.e., familiar family dysfunctional patterns) and into assessment of her inner unknowns. She set her intention to learn from this so as to walk through life without fear, breaking away from submissiveness and old family emotional functioning, and finding a new path.

Stopping at the Edge of the Precipice

Many of us plunge headlong into bad work or love situations because we fail to recognize the unconscious story that is playing out through our actions. Having a sense of our early family of origin dynamics helps by offering valuable insights into how we might, unconsciously, be acting out self-destructive patterns in our current work or family environments. *We don't know what we don't know.* Then, we no longer need to succumb to the lures of old destructive patterns as if they were our fate. In the process of fusion, an individual anxiously focuses on relationships and gives up "self," resulting in somatic illness, emotional illness, or a problem in social functioning. The question that reflects this process is: Do I have to give up myself to belong to the family or group?

The process of self-differentiation consists of partially freeing oneself from the emotional entrapment of one's family of origin, while developing a unique, personal, authentic one-to-one relationship with each member of your family. It is then possible to be emotionally connected without fusing into emotional oneness. To give birth to the Self, one must be both connected, self-aware and make decisions in behalf of the self, regardless of the Invisible psychological contracts we make with our families: an "I" and a "We."

Charlyne Gelt, Ph.D.
PSY22909
16055 Ventura Blvd. #1129
Encino, CA 91436
www.drgelt.com
818.501.4123