

**Council for Relationships  
Tip of the Week  
Submitted 3/6/05  
Bea Hollander-Goldfein Ph.D., LMFT**

**KNOWING YOURSELF THROUGH THE TRANSFORMATIVE NARRATIVES OF  
YOUR CHILDHOOD**

“To thine own self be true” is a Shakespearean quote that has always stuck with me. Makes sense since I am a psychologist and a marriage and family therapist. It is a common ethic in our modern world, whether or not we actually fulfill the imperative to know ourselves, we often pay lip service to the sentiment. I have read a reference to the past few decades as the “Age of Intimacy” referring to the ever increasing trend of personal sharing in all forms of culture and media. Some utilize therapy as a vehicle to achieve self understanding. Others rely on friendships or other supportive connections. Some try to accomplish this goal on their own. Knowing oneself has various therapeutic benefits. It is easier to change if we know who we are and why. Leslie Greenberg, a founder of

Emotionally Focused Therapy, says that “you can’t leave until you arrive”. By this he means that you can’t truly change yourself until you fully know yourself.

Well, this is a tall order. How does one accomplish knowing oneself? Even in therapy this could be an elusive goal. It is certainly not my intention to answer this broad question in this short essay. It would take a tome to explain and a lifetime to achieve. This essay is focused on one path to achieve an aspect of self knowledge, which, in fact, is a very deep level of knowing once it becomes conscious. The path I am referring to is the exploration of the significant stories of childhood. This, in fact, is not a very common path of self inquiry, but it can be a very informative and profound source of personal awareness.

My advocacy for this aspect of self investigation comes from my work on the Transcending Trauma Project which is an investigation of coping and adaptation after extreme trauma. The goal of the project is the development of an integrated model of survivorship and resilience. It is not important to know a lot about the project, it is only important for me to share with you that the interviewing of survivors of the Holocaust and their children has revealed a very interesting process that underlies child development. All of us tell personal and family stories to our children, about self, parents, background, specific experiences, etc. Individuals who have experienced difficult lives convey these experiences to their children in some way, so that they are known to their children. Most survivors of trauma, tell their children about their traumatic experiences because these are part of them and part of their life story. So far, none of this is a surprise. What is surprising

is what is learned from an examination of these stories and their intergenerational impact . In our interviews of survivors and their children we were able to explore the impact of trauma based stories shared with children. It was fascinating to observe that the children not only heard the pain and sadness that were part of their parents' experience, but they also heard the descriptions of their parents' values, personalities and moral choices. The survivors themselves rarely perceived these hidden messages, for them it was the telling of a tragic story so that there would be connection with their children about their lives. For the children, the communication of these pivotal memories, were heard on multiple levels. One level was clearly experienced as lessons for how to live life, not only learning how to face death.

A significant process in child development is called "identification" which is the process by which a child identifies

with a parent that is does not necessarily take place on a conscious level. The psychological concept is most often applied to how we learn gender based behavior, which is to identify with the parent that we label as the same and then emulate their behaviors. The Transcending Trauma Project revealed through its analysis of survivor parent's interviews and their adult children's interviews that the process of identification was very powerful in the way that children incorporated the war memories of their parents. Children perceived the inner value system and personality of their parents through these stories of trauma, which inspired them to want to be like the parent in the powerful ways conveyed by the story. Therefore, the deepened histories conducted by the TTP team, revealed how deeply these stories reflected pivotal experiences for the parents and how deeply these stories fostered a process of identification in the children. This finding prompted us to

introduce an exercise for exploring the impact of stories heard in childhood into presentations about the Transcending Trauma Project to various audiences over the past 10 years. We engaged audiences in the discovery of their pivotal stories from childhood and in the exploration of how these stories impacted their development as children and how they are reflected in their adult personalities. Well, this was incredibly meaningful and successful for most participants. One could see the light bulbs coming on around the room.

The discovery of transformative narratives and how they are imbedded in our value systems and adult personalities is very enlightening and satisfying. Once brought into awareness, it is impossible to believe that such insight about oneself was ever unavailable to our consciousness. But, this is not surprising, since identification is not a conscious process, and we are not aware of saying to ourselves as children that we want

to be as brave as Dad, or wise as grandma, or strong as uncle Joe, or as intuitive as Mom. It is the power of the pivotal memories for the survivors that make the stories so impactful on the children. But this is a hidden process, even from ourselves. In our workshops, we discovered that it was possible to elicit these transformative narratives with a series of focused questions. If answered from a position of openness and self investigation, the process inevitably lead the participants to cathartic insights about the messages they incorporated from the pivotal stories told to them as children.

Below you will find the questions that will help you explore the transformative narratives of your life. You need a partner, so try it with a friend or loved one. In fact, you should do the exercise by taking turns, each one of you in turn digging back to report the stories of your childhood, only to find out how these stories have impacted who you are as an adult. You won't regret

what you will learn. In fact, this discovery will affirm the importance of the person whose story so impacted your life. It's a reconnection in a profound sense that just feels right. The exercise helps you to look in the mirror and see something you never saw before.

What does this have to do with the Transcending Trauma Project. **Nothing and everything. Nothing** in the sense that the stories you will discover, as profoundly impacting your life, will not have anything to do with the Holocaust, and hopefully will not have anything to do with extreme trauma. **Everything**, because the only way to understand the impact of stories of parental trauma on their children is to deeply understand the impact of family stories on oneself. As a trauma specialist I have often been asked what I thought the impact of 9/11 would be on the children of the rescuers. Since I am not personally interviewing these families, I cannot answer

surety nor specificity, but I would speculate that apart from the short lived impact of vicarious traumatization that the rescuers inevitably bring home to their families after experiencing such an overwhelming horrific experience, the children will learn from 9/11 what their rescuer parent tells them. Yes, they will learn the facts and be confronted with the painful reality of evil in the world, but even more importantly, they will learn

about their parents, their values, their beliefs, their personalities and how they coped. This is what the children will make a part of themselves as they move forward in their own lives.

Every family faces challenges and hardships. It is the nature of life. These realities become the stories upon which we are reared. Explore these stories and “to thine own self be true”.

### EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF A STORY

1. Focus on a story that was told to you by a family member, which was important to the person telling you the story and had an impact on you as you listened to the story. What is the story?
2. What impact did this story have on you when you heard it as a child? What do you remember thinking about the story? What do you remember feeling about the story?
3. Who told you the story? Why do you think it was so important to this person? Describe your relationships with this person.
4. What was the message of the story? What was the family member trying to tell you through this story?
5. What makes this story important to you? In what ways has the story affected you throughout your life? How did it affect your thoughts, your feelings, your beliefs and your values?
6. What role does the message of the story play in your life? How do you identify with the message? Have you made the message a part of you?
7. Overall, has the story been a positive or negative influence in your life? In what ways?