

Intimate Worlds

Chapter 22

An Important Part of Loving: Acknowledging Human Separateness

We were sitting in the Walkers' small, thickly carpeted family room. At the far end of the wood-paneled room was a small bookcase that held an impressive display of family trophies. "Quite an awards cabinet," I'd commented, noting that the family had automatically seated themselves in what structural theorists such as Salvador Minuchin would view as a visibly "healthy" arrangement.

The parental couple, side by side on the piano bench, sat so near to each other that their upper arms touched. Frances and James Walker thus constituted a discrete and separate subsystem (the "executive subgroup"), and no member of the younger generation had hurried to sit himself or herself down between them.

Their three children (that is, the "sibling subgroup"), who ranged in age from seven years to almost fifteen, had placed themselves close together on the small love seat. The resulting clear differentiation between these two important subsystems within the family was like a tableau of good government in action. It was as if the Walkers, in the very act of sitting down together, had recognized a certain inherent orderliness in their relatedness.

With my open sketch pad upon my lap, I was in the process of constructing the Walkers' family genogram. There was Frances, age forty two, director of the marketing and advertising department at a major life insurance company in Hartford, and her husband, James, forty-four, who was an accountant and the proprietor of his own small but prosperous accounting firm. The children, who had ranged themselves in order of ascending age, were James Michael Oamie), age seven; Debra, age thirteen, and Lyla, who would be fifteen at the end of December.

The Walkers had been married for sixteen years. I looked around at each member of this African-American family in turn. Frances Walker's complexion is the golden color of honey. The couple's daughters and their son are neither as light as their mother, nor do they have their father's milky-chocolate hue. It is as if a most precise genetic alchemist, working with the pair's hereditary palette, has mixed their pigments together and produced their children's soft, matte-brown skin tones.

"Is this a first marriage for both of you?" I inquired, turning to gaze directly at the parents. This is a question I ask routinely, but the pair of them looked startled. It was as if I'd asked them if they'd committed a bank robbery recently, and if so, whether or not the robbery had been successful. "Oh ..." It was the father who responded, after a pause. "The first marriage, yes." One of the teenage girls began pushing against the other's shoulder, and the pair of them started to giggle.

The rest of us began laughing too. "Don't mind us, we get silly," Frances Walker apologized, trying to look appropriately serious. I hadn't been with the family for more than a very brief time, but I was enjoying their sense of playfulness and already feeling relaxed. This in itself told me a great deal about the Walkers, because one cannot feel at ease and relaxed in an emotional minefield.

A Matter of Mood Tone

My interviews with the Walkers began in late November 1992, and over the next several months, I met with the family as a whole unit and in varying types of subgroups (for example, "parental," "sibling," "sisters") and talked to each of them individually as well. It was well past St. Valentine's Day when our regular conversations began to taper off; and although, in the course of our sessions together, I had come to know each member of the family separately (and all of them together) extremely well, my initial gut assessment of the Walkers never did change much. This family would, as I realized fairly quickly, fall into either a "high adequate," Level 2, or outright "optimal," Level 1, placement on the Beavers family health and functioning continuum. (The ways in which the adequate family and optimal family differ from each other will be explained further along. But for now, suffice it to say that these two groupings are far more similar than they are different, which is why the Walkers can ably represent both family categories here.)

What specific factors most distinguish healthy, high-functioning families from those below them on the Beavers Scale? One very reliable indicator is the family's emotional climate, its mood tone—in the simplest terms, what it feels like to be with them. According to family expert Leonora Stephens, M.D., "The affect in the optimal family is one of affirmation, even joyousness. These people take a real delight in one another—not only in their samenesses but in their differences as well."

For instance, most of the individuals in a particular family may be athletes and sports lovers, while one son is the bookworm and "our family philosopher"; in a competent, well-functioning emotional system, this child's differentness is, as Stephens explains, "not only accepted, but actively enjoyed." It is as if, within that small culture, the members of the social group are infused with the belief that one can be who one is, and that good things will happen in human encounters. One does not have to be just like everyone else to achieve a sense of belonging.

This kind of acceptance seems to be part of the very air that the members of the healthy family breathe in and out. It is evidenced not only by the things that people in the system say to one another, but in a multiplicity of nonverbal cues and gestures as well. It was, most certainly, readily observable in the Walker family's facial expressions, in their body postures, and in their way of meeting one another's gaze in a very clear, focused, and directed manner. These are wordless ways of communicating, of saying "I see you, I care about you, you matter, I appreciate the ways in which you are different, and enjoy the fact that you are the person you are."

Explaining Healthy Functioning

It was at the end of our first interview, as I was putting away my taping equipment, that I found myself alone with James Walker for a brief time. Frances and fifteen-year-old Lyla had rushed off to get their coats; they were running late for Lyla's piano lesson. Seven-year-old Jamie was getting his coat too-he was going down the street to play-and the thirteen-year-old, Debra, was upstairs returning a phone call.

"You asked if this was a first marriage, and it is," the father said reflectively, as if he'd not yet stopped thinking about this particular question among the many that I'd posed to them. "But this isn't just the first marriage, it's really the only marriage-the only marriage that either of us is planning to have."

"That's quite an endorsement," I responded with a smile, zipping up my quilted parka. He smiled, too. "It is," he agreed, as he saw me courteously to the door.

I went down the frozen, slightly slippery front pathway in front of the Walkers' yellow frame house in the gathering dusk. I was reflecting that although I still knew relatively little about these parents' families of origin, making some educated guesses would be easy. James Charles Walker and Frances Townsend Walker had come from fairly loving and stable backgrounds- of that I could be fairly certain; in fact, I would bet my hat on it.

But in the course of our subsequent discussions, I was to discover how very wrong I was. James Walker's early life narrative could, in fact, have been the prologue to a disaster-and yet it had proven to be anything but one. This caused me, in turn, to reflect upon how much trickier it is to explain health and competent functioning, in the face of early adversity, than it is to explain the existence of difficulties, symptoms, and pathology. (See Chapter 23, "Why Some Children Thrive Despite Early Family Trauma.")

The Model of a Dad

It was not until the Walker family interviews were well under way that the father's own history began, somewhat haltingly, to emerge. I recall how, at the outset of that meeting, I'd flipped through my thick drawing pad until I came to the Walkers' genogram, and noticed that (given the amount of time we'd already spent together) there was surprisingly little information there.

Our conversations had, thus far, been very oriented toward the family's present-day life. As for the parents' own families of origin, all that I'd jotted down on the page were the names of James's father and grandfather, and the fact that both members of the marital pair had come from a family in which he or she was one of six siblings. This evening, I was meeting with the parents alone, and it was high time to find out more about the families that each of them had come from.

I decided to start out with James's side of the family diagram, for though I'd always found him quite forthcoming, I find it best to make sure that any males in the company are drawn into an active role in the conversation as soon as possible. "I want to find out more about all of these siblings-six on your side, six on Frances's," I said, with a smile, my pencil aloft over the sketch pad.

I laughed, "Of course I do know that your father's name is the same as your name-" The Walkers laughed too, for during our first interview I'd gotten momentarily fuddled by the fact that James himself was named after his father-he was James Charles Junior-but his own son James was not the Third. "Right, he's James Michael," put in Frances, in her lively, accommodating manner.

"And your mother's name?" I met James's eye and waited. "Elinor," he said softly, and then spelled it.

I drew a circle, wrote "Elinor" beside it, at the opposite end of the long line designating her marriage to James Senior, leaving plenty of room to include the five younger siblings that I knew were to appear. "Right now, I'd like to know about these other guys," I said, tapping the page lightly with my pencil. "Your age is forty-four, so who's next?"

"Of the siblings?"

I nodded, and James responded clearly, almost in the stentorian voice of an expert giving testimony, "I have a sister, Eliza, and a brother, Stephen. He's the one who's now deceased."

"Oh. Yes," I said quietly. Toward the closing moments of our last interview, in response to a question about "worst times" that the family had experienced, James had talked about his younger brother's untimely death of a heart ailment three years earlier. Stephen had been awaiting a heart transplant at the time and had died before a donor organ became available.

"Did you know this brother-in-law pretty well?" I asked Frances now, and she nodded quickly. "Yes. Oh, yes," she replied fervently; she had, she added, felt extremely close to him. During our last discussion it had seemed to me that the children knew this uncle somewhat less well, I remarked, for they'd appeared somewhat taken aback and shaken by their dad's obvious pain when the subject of his brother's death had arisen.

"Our kids had only spent short periods of time with their uncle Steve, because he had moved to Georgia with his family. Atlanta, Georgia," James explained. "So it wasn't that often that we got together as families, and it was mostly at large gatherings in various people's homes."

Also, put in Frances, the children hadn't been very much aware of what was happening at the time of their uncle's sudden death. "It all happened so quickly, more or less in a very rapid series of phone calls in the night. Then the two of us went up by ourselves for the funeral, and the children stayed with friends while we were there." Frances stopped speaking, turned to look at her husband solicitously.

Then she turned back to me. "They didn't feel all of what was happening," she murmured, then sighed. I turned to James, asked him gently, "How old was your brother at the time of his death?"

He answered swiftly, "He was thirty-six." There was an elongated silence, and after a while I realized that the Walkers were expecting me to be the one to break it.

I looked down at the open sketch pad on my lap, then asked James awkwardly, "And your sister, Eliza-how old is she?"

The question sounded inane in my own ears, and I regretted the words as soon as they were spoken. But the husband, seeming relieved and almost grateful, said, "Eliza's two years younger than I am, so she would be forty-two."

I jotted in the information and asked immediately, "And who's next in line?"

"That's it, for my mother's first marriage. Then I have two stepbrothers and a stepsister," James replied. I looked up quickly. "Oh, I see," I said, although I felt myself stiffen in surprise.

This piece of news did not, I realized, fit in with my own preformed notions. It was as though I'd run smack into an inner wall, solidly constructed of my own theoretical beliefs and convictions. I felt rattled momentarily by the impact, for this was not turning out to be the solid, secure home base that I'd been so confidently expecting James Walker to have come from.

"So then.... Who was your mother's first husband?" I asked him, trying not to look as taken aback as I felt. The answer to this question was, of course, one that was already written down on my sketch pad; his father had been James Charles Walker Senior, as James told me patiently.

"I see," I said. "So your parents were divorced," I murmured.

"Yes, they divorced," he responded. His folks had, as he went on to explain, been married for some nine years; the marriage had ended when he himself was about six or seven years old.

I hesitated, finding it difficult to integrate this news of early and profound disruption with the unusually capable, energetic, emotionally connected husband and father whom I saw before me. "Did you see much of your dad after that?" I inquired. '

"No, I did not. There was a long period of time-" James halted, seemed to ponder what he would or would not reveal to me next. But then he did go on. "As a matter of fact, after my parents divorced I probably didn't see my father between the ages of six and"-he sighed-"oh, about twenty-six years old."

"Twenty-five or twenty-six." Frances Walker, nodding, echoed her husband's words.

They were both staring at me, waiting for me to say something, but I found myself feeling confused and at sea. Given this history of stark abandonment, how could James Walker have possibly become the kind of a parent he'd become? Without even

quite realizing that I meant to ask this question aloud, I exhaled deeply and heard myself say, "Wow, so how in the world did you ever learn how to be a dad yourself?"

He laughed lightly; the question seemed to please him. "Well, I had a stepfather," he reminded me. "And I had plenty of other men around who were examples of how to be a good dad. I think, too, some part of it comes naturally," he added, as if gratified to think of the real hurdles which he'd been capable of overcoming. Frances was nodding her head rhythmically as he spoke.

Mysteries of the Last Generation

When I asked him how long his mother had been alone before remarrying, James Walker was not completely certain. He believed that it had been about a year and a half. The first child born to Elinor's subsequent marriage was his brother Mark, now thirty-five years old; then came Donald, two years younger. Last and youngest in the family was Margaretta, two years younger than Donald. I realized, at that moment, that their surname must be different from his own. "And what is your stepfather's name?" I asked, my pencil poised above the sheet of paper.

James answered, "Bailey-Dwight Bailey was his name," just as the gong of the half-hour sounded in the background. Perhaps it was the confluence of the chime and his use of the past tense that made me ask whether or not James's stepfather was still alive.

"Yes, he is," James replied, but added nothing further. Another silence followed, and I felt as if I'd been traveling along a road that had come to an abrupt and unexpected ending.

"So then, you didn't see your own father for this remarkably long, twenty-year period." I returned directly to the topic that had paralyzed us, for no other topic of conversation seemed possible at this moment.

"My father's whereabouts were unknown," James said evenly.

"Did he just vanish, disappear-or how, exactly, did things happen?"

He paused momentarily, then chose to sidestep the question. "My mother did establish a new relationship, a whole new life, with someone else. We were living in Tuskegee then-Tuskegee, Alabama. We lived there at the time of their divorce and her remarriage, and we lived there a short time afterward."

Did he think that this new relationship of his mother's might have had anything to do with the breakup of his parents' marriage? I inquired. But the very notion seemed to strike James as ludicrous, and he dismissed it with a smile and a shake of his head. "My stepfather came along later on. As to why my parents divorced, though, I don't really know.... I think they just grew apart." He shrugged briefly as if to say that this was sufficient explanation, and all the explanation that he himself required.

The mysteries of the last generation, and most particularly of that long ago divorce, were matters about which he seemed content not to know and was perhaps even

unwilling to speculate. "Anyway, to round out this story," he continued, "we all moved north in the 1950s, and we had no idea where my father was as we were growing up."

The family's decision to migrate to upstate New York had been prompted by the fact that Dwight Bailey, who was working at a gas station and earning thirty-eight dollars a week, had learned from a relative that an auto mechanic could earn as much as eighty dollars a week for the same kind of labor in the North. "For my parents, the difference between thirty-eight dollars and eighty dollars a week was a very, very tempting one," recounted James, with a smile, crossing one leg over the other, and folding his arms across his chest easily. "So we loaded up the car and came north. Of course my father went first, and found a job-my stepfather, I mean."

"You said 'my father,' "I interrupted to observe, "and so he really did feel like a father to you, I think?"

James nodded his agreement, said appreciatively, "I spent all of my young life with him knowing him as my father, and he treated us like a father. There was no distinction made between my stepbrothers and sisters and any of us as being only half-brothers and half-sisters. Even now, we don't even consider that-" "-and that's a term I haven't even heard." Frances leaned forward to underscore his comments eagerly. "We just don't make those distinctions at all. Between stepfather or stepsister-" "-or half-brother." Her husband nodded.

"Yes, half-brother or half-sister." She nodded back at him, but went on explaining matters to me. "Which is why even hearing the terms now, as we're speaking, is somehow striking.... It's strange." What she was saying, I believed, was that there was nobody in this family who was only halfway inside; if you were in the system, you were naturally considered a fully accredited part of it.

Still, glancing downward at the brief note I'd jotted on her husband's side of the family genogram-"Moved north in 1956, with stepfather"-I couldn't help but reflect that when he'd left the South as an eight-year-old boy, James Walker had been leaving his deepest, earliest memories of a completely different father somewhere behind him. And while it seemed evident that he had been fortunate enough to have a reparative experience with a truly nurturing, caring stepfather, being raised as if he were the son of his mother's new husband was not exactly the same as being the man's own son in reality.

And as they grew older, James told me, he, Eliza, and Stephen (that is, the three children of his mother's first marriage) had begun writing to various relatives on the paternal side of the family. They were attempting to make contact and perhaps reconnect with their real father, or at least discover his whereabouts. But no one in the entire family had heard from him, and nobody seemed to have any idea where he might be.

James Walker's son, Jamie, was now around the same age as he himself had been when his own father (at least, from the seven-year-old child's point of view) had vanished from the face of the planet. Gazing, now, at the adult man I wondered how, as a young boy, he had construed what was happening in his world and how he had explained his father's disappearance to himself.

In his groundbreaking book *The Analysis of the Self*, theorist Heinz Kohut describes the natural evolution of infantile narcissism and grandiosity ("I am at the center of the universe, and all that happens within it revolves around me and is under my command") to the more modulated and mature, healthy narcissism of adult life.

"Healthy narcissism" is, of course, a synonym for "self-esteem," which is to say that relatively stable sense of one's own self-worth and essential lovability. The self-esteem of maturity is neither grandiose nor omnipotent, but accompanied by an awareness of one's own realistic human shortcomings and limitations.

Early in our lives, Kohut says, we learn to esteem ourselves by basking in the luminous aura of our enchanted parents' admiration. That is, the rudimentary seeds of our good feelings about ourselves germinate and slowly grow within the rich soil of these first, crucially important love relationships. It is the caretakers' spontaneous delight in our unfolding skills and capacities that provides us with a mighty sense of our own wondrousness and excellence. We feel tremendously important in the human world as a function of our importance to them.

The naturally exhibitionistic young baby's self-delight and self-aggrandizing tendencies are thus nourished (or as Kohut would say, "mirrored") by the admiring parent's empathic responding to his or her small personage and slowly accruing accomplishments. The parents' evident joy in the feats and successes of their offspring provides the child with the needed narcissistic supplies. For the child needs to feel, first, that he or she is perfect, and second, that this perfection is recognized by those who matter most in his or her own circumscribed universe.

According to psychoanalyst Kohut, the nascent self of the developing baby is at best poorly differentiated from the self of the nurturing caregiver. In other words, the very small human being does not initially have a distinct, well-bounded sense of "me, myself" but instead experiences the self as amorphously merged and fused with the self of the beloved parent. The parent's praise and affirmation are, therefore, perceived as emanating not only from the outside environment but from within the self as well.

Although in actuality the young child is exceedingly weak, vulnerable, and needful, the normal grandiosity of early life (what Kohut called the "grandiose self"), supported by the confirming, validating responses of the nurturer, makes the baby feel crucially important to the ongoing function of a cosmos whose very center he or she occupies. But over time, and most inevitably, the narcissistic supplies flowing in from the admiring, comforting attachment figure will be interrupted, not reliably there when

required. Things happen, such as Mom being unavailable when desperately needed- perhaps simply out for a social evening, when baby awakens feeling anxious and frightened to find only a baby-sitter (the wrong person) there to console and care for him or her.

These small existential jolts, which Kohut termed "tolerable failures" in empathic responding, serve to provide the offspring with a succession of small opportunities to learn how to care for and empathize with his or her own self. For in the (temporary) absence of the vitally necessary narcissistic feedback, the reassurance and affirmation that came from the parent must now be provided from within the psyche itself.

Such brief, manageable lessons in self-soothing eventually teach us, suggests Kohut, how to give to ourselves the loving support and calming that had initially come in to us from the outer environment (in human terms, always the social environment). And if all has gone well during the course of development-which is to say, if the parents have been able to "respond to and confirm the child's innate sense of vigour, greatness and perfection"-then what was initially our caretakers' high estimation of our goodness and innate worth undergoes transformation and is internalized. Thus it is that parental mirroring, which Kohut equated with the "gleam in the mother's eye," ultimately becomes the steady gleam of confidence and self-regard that emanate from within the individual human being.

The Child's Need to Exalt and Venerate the Parent

Parental mirroring is not, in Kohut's schema, the sole form of narcissistic relatedness that the growing child requires. Equally essential to psychological development is the child's need to exalt and venerate the parent in what is called the idealizing relationship. Here, instead of being a perfect person who is being admired by a loving other, the offspring admires the beloved other extravagantly. This "idealized parent imago" is, write Kohut and co-author Ernest S. Wolf, an attachment figure "to whom the child can look up and with whom he can merge as an image of calmness, infallibility and omnipotence."

The youngster's own fantasies about the caretaker's amazing qualities ("My dad is the strongest person in the world") are, in fact, being projected into the wildly admired other and are perceived as existing there. In this form of narcissistic relatedness, the developing child's self-image is enhanced by his wonderful illusions about the parent's magnificent powers. The child experiences himself as partaking of the strength and mightiness of the father with whom he feels so deeply linked and identified. Such fantasies about the caretaker as invulnerable and flawless flood the child with feelings of safety, pride, and well-being.

Because the establishment of an idealizing relationship will ultimately have a profound impact upon the offspring's own capacity to set goals and form inner ideals, the child's need to admire the parent in this endearingly extreme, often highly unrealistic fashion is a developmental imperative. That is why the attachment figure will usually be

idealized, even in what appear to be highly inappropriate circumstances—for example, when Dad is in fact a petty tyrant, an alcohol addict, or even serving a sentence in jail.

What is in fact being attributed to the parent is the dependent child's own internal vision of imagined flawlessness and superiority. Over time, however, just as the youngster's early grandiosity and omnipotence will be cut down to size by life's unavoidable disappointments and blows, so his or her sense of the adult caretaker's exalted worthiness and perfection will slowly but inexorably deflate down to an understanding more consistent with reality.

Still, as Kohut and Wolf write, "however great our disappointment as we discover the weaknesses and limitations of the idealized ... [parent imagos] of our early life, their self-confidence as they carried us when we were babies, their security when they allowed us to merge our anxious selves with their tranquillity-via their calm voices or via our closeness with their relaxed bodies as they held us-will be retained by us as the nucleus of the strength of our leading ideals and of the calmness we experience as we live our lives under the guidance of our inner goals."

What were once overblown good feelings about the other are, in short, eventually internalized in the form of good feelings about the self—that is, self-esteem. Thus, over the slow course of development, the idealized relationship with the caretaker leaves the offspring with a wonderful residue, a kind of magic dust.

For when the initial glorification of the parent eventually gives way (as it inevitably does) the maturing child is left with a deep feeling of inner worth that has derived from the original identification with the adored and passionately adulated caretaker. As psychoanalyst John Zinner has observed, however, success in this normal developmental process does require that the parents be "emotionally available, and willing to tolerate both the child's idealization and de-idealization of them. Parental loss or behavior that betrays the trust their child has placed in them may lead to an abrupt and massive de-idealization."

The parent must slide from his or her high pedestal slowly, not tumble from it so abruptly that the youngster's capacity to reinternalize the idealized image of the parent is overwhelmed. For should the "Emperor" parent lose all his new clothes too shockingly and suddenly, the child's own sense of inner worth and his ability to form ideals and goals will usually be profoundly affected.

While disillusionment with the exalted caretaker is surely in the human cards, it must occur bit by bit, in a series of tolerable, manageable small frustrations and setbacks. I could not therefore fail to regard very seriously the fact that in James Walker's early life this normal developmental process had been sharply and radically interrupted.

Given that a natural object of any seven-year-old boy's wish to relate in an idealizing fashion is certainly going to be his own father, how had this man managed to survive his parent's loss in so seemingly intact and capable a fashion? I was curious, even

awed. We have such a multiplicity of explanations and theories about pathology and the development of "problems in living," but so little understanding of what underlies healthy adaptation and human resilience.

Had the stepfather who had stepped into James's daddy's shoes very soon afterward parented the little boy so well and so caringly that this early trauma had been rendered somehow manageable? A famous comment of Nietzsche's-"That which does not destroy me strengthens me" came into my mind at that moment.

"How did you find your dad again?" I asked James. "Or did he find you? Or what eventually happened?" To my surprise, an expression of pleasure crossed his face, and he smiled.

The Prodigal Parent

James Walker didn't reply for several moments; his thoughts seemed to have drifted elsewhere. I waited, absently reading the logo on his aqua and navy sweatshirt ("Denver, Colorado") over and over again, wondering idly if he'd actually been there. He cupped his hand under his face, stroked his jawline with his fingers several times, then leaned forward and said in a lively voice, "Well, it was a long, long time. We'd made many, many efforts to try and find him by writing to relatives on his side of the family, but that never got us anywhere. And we'd tried at various times to go through the Veterans Administration, because he did serve in the military-

I interrupted to ask whether the word "we" referred to himself and his siblings, or to himself and his mother. Who, exactly, had been involved in these efforts? "Principally me, my brother Stephen and my sister Eliza," he responded easily, then continued as if relishing the telling of the story.

The three siblings had written to the V.A. and to the Army in an effort to track their father down, hoping that one or another of these huge organizations would have some knowledge of his whereabouts. By that time, recounted James, the three of them were all moving into their late teens; it was not until he himself had reached college that they'd finally received a favorable response from the Veterans Administration.

Here James paused and laughed a deep bass laugh, the sound of pure satisfaction and enjoyment. "One day, then, I received a letter from my brother Stephen, saying that he'd heard from the V.A. They wouldn't tell my brother where my father was, but they would tell my father how to get in touch with him. So they did. Then my father contacted Stephen, and we all found out where he was." He was gazing at me with so triumphant an expression that I almost expected him to say, "And then we lived happily ever after."

But he merely inhaled, let a deep breath out very slowly. "I was living in New York State at the time; Albany, New York. And it turned out that he was right in New York City. Right in New York City," he repeated with emphasis, "and he'd lived there for

a number of years. So nearby, and we didn't know it!" He shook his head back and forth slowly several times, as if to underscore the oddness of this circumstance.

Then James resumed, "I was out of school by then, working for the New York State Department of Social Services, and I traveled a lot. So on one trip I had to go to New York City, and while there I made a call to St. Luke's Hospital, which was where he was working at the time. And it was really strange, because I had no idea what my father would even look like! Nor did he have any idea of what I would look like." His eyes had grown wide, perhaps with remembered apprehension, but he laughed again in the same pleased, gratified fashion. "It was a very, very emotionally wrenching moment when we met," he said, meeting my eyes fully and directly as he spoke.

"I can imagine that it was," I responded, not averting my gaze although I was finding the intensity of the moment almost painful. This story of a son's meeting with his father after a twenty-year separation seemed to have a mythic resonance, an echo of the story of the Greek hero Ulysses who, on meeting his grown son, Telemachus, after a twenty-year absence, suddenly throws off his beggarly disguise and reveals his true identity as the missing parent, saying, "I am that father whom your boyhood lacked and suffered pain for lack of. I am he." James grew quiet, and the three of us sat there stiffly for a while, not saying a word.

Then he went on, his voice sounding more composed, under control. "It was also kind of awkward, because I didn't know how to respond to him; he didn't know how to respond to me, either. But I just saw this big smile. And he looked at me, and it grew across his whole face, and then he looked down at my feet and said, "Yeah, you're my son, all right."

James slapped the side of his knee, laughing. Frances and I began laughing too, although I wasn't completely sure what the joke was. "Big feet, is that it?" I asked him, and he beamed his approval at me.

"That's right, that's right." I felt commended, like a student who has just made an intelligent comment in the midst of an intricate, somewhat convoluted lecture. "We-my dad and I-had only a short period of time in which to talk," he continued, "because I was there on business and there were other people traveling with me; they were sitting outside, waiting for me in the state's car. So we spoke only briefly, exchanged addresses, and said good-bye, and I left." James shrugged briefly as if to say "End of story," but a moment later his face was alive with excitement again.

"But then-I'd already gotten into the backseat, and the car was pulling away, when I turned around," he recounted. "And there, running behind the car and down the street and chasing the car was my father! And he signaled me to roll the window down, then pressed a fifty-dollar bill into my hand," he concluded jubilantly.

"So that was it," he added, by way of epilogue. "After that first meeting, we wrote to each other often and we saw each other, too, from time to time. Later on, much later,

when I graduated from business school, he did attend and there he met my mother again.... After all those years." His voice had dropped, grown soft and thoughtful, and the look on his face was dreamy.

I myself was lost in thought, wondering what his long-absent father's chasing him down the street and pressing a fifty-dollar bill into his hand had actually meant to James Walker, as a newly adult young African American professional. It was a question that I was aching to ask him, but I felt hesitant to do so at this particular moment; and I decided that I would ask it later on.

A Boy and His Dad

One year after this "wrenching" reunion with his long-absent father, James told me, he'd decided to leave his job at the New York State Department of Social Services and go back to graduate school to study accounting. He was accepted at the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth, and began his studies there the subsequent fall.

A year later, in 1976, he and Frances had gotten married. Their older children, Lyla, now fifteen, and Debra, now thirteen, were born two and four years later, respectively. But there was a six-year age difference between Debra and the couple's youngest child, Jamie. The Walkers' son wasn't born until 1985 and was therefore the only one of the children who never got to meet James Charles Walker, Sr. For in 1982 James's dad suffered a stroke and a heart attack, and he died of heart complications within the following year.

"If you were to give me a couple of adjectives that might best describe your father," I asked James now, "what do you think they would they be?" He gave me a slightly perplexed look. "I mean, of course, your biological father, not your stepfather," I clarified my question, but he shook his head as if he had nothing whatsoever to say.

"I realize that you didn't have a big experience of him, growing up," I murmured, as if to soften the question as the silence continued to stretch itself out. Then I added diffidently, "Would you say, for example, that he was 'calm,' a 'cool' and very 'collected' sort of person?"

As far as I was concerned these particular adjectives were no more than randomly chosen examples, but they seemed to hit a bull's-eye of immediate response. "Oh, yes . . . " He let out a long sigh of air with the words, as though his agreement came from somewhere very deep inside him. "I would say that he was very, very controlled, yes. He was very calm, very intelligent, very well organized."

"Me-tic-u-Ious," put in Frances, with a comfortable laugh, putting stress on each and every syllable of the word.

"Meticulous, yes." James exchanged a friendly look with his wife and placed his arm across the sofa behind her. Then he turned back to me expectantly, and the two of us exchanged a smile. "Are those adjectives that you would use to describe yourself as well?" I inquired lightly.

It was no more than a fishing trip on my part, but he jumped slightly, said, "Yes," emphatically, and then chuckled at his own response.

"Absolutely, he is so much like his father! It's amazing," Frances, with a laugh, put in warmly, her voice a rich tremolo with a captivating little break in the middle of a word here and there. "An amazingly striking resemblance, if you think-" She didn't finish what she was saying, but turned to her husband instead.

I turned to James also. "What was your dad doing for a living, by then? Not working as a shoemaker at St. Luke's Hospital, I suppose," I added lightly, for I knew James Senior had been a shoemaker back in Alabama. Was it my imagination, or did this innocuous-seeming question make James Walker tense up ever so slightly? His father had been working as an orderly at St. Luke's at the time that they'd gotten together again, he said shortly.

I had the odd suspicion that James might be defending his dad from me. Was his concern that I might think less of this "meticulous, controlled, calm," and self-contained parent because his father had not been an educated man with a job of recognizably good (white-collar) status? I felt like saying to him outright that I myself had come from an immigrant, blue-collar background, and that there had been father-problems in my own early life as well. But although it might have eased this moment of social disquietude, it would have been highly inappropriate in the context of these interviews.

I fell silent, a silence that I was afraid both he and Frances might be misinterpreting. The telephone began ringing in the kitchen; after several rings, I heard Debra answer it and launch into a high-pitched, laughing conversation. A frown crossed her mother's face briefly, and I recalled that Frances had expressed some concern about how much homework time this adolescent daughter was squandering on lengthy phone conversations with her friends.

James's gaze was, however, locked upon mine. He didn't seem to be at all distracted by what was occurring slightly offstage, in the wings of this intense conversation. His expression at this moment was, it seemed to me, somewhat downcast, as if a momentary cloud were passing over his usually animated, expressive face. I found myself thinking about this adult son's ardent protectiveness and loyalty toward a father who had by no means been a loyal, caring protector during the years of dependence when it had mattered most vitally.

I asked, my voice sounding hesitant in my own ears, "When you did see your dad again, after all that time, you must have had some feelings about this guy who'd just-just dropped out of sight for all those years. Or were you just so happy to see him that you didn't have any bad feelings at all?"

James shook his head. "I didn't have any bad feelings, because I didn't have any reason to have bad feelings-to the best of my knowledge, he hadn't done anything terribly wrong. True, he wasn't in my life for a large

part of my life-

I was staring at him in amazement. "But doesn't that in itself seem kind of wrong, for a kid?" I heard myself saying-or should I say blurting out? His lack of resentment seemed almost unfathomable to me; had he no empathy for the little boy he had been, the seven-year-old child whose father had vanished from his world so totally and so completely?

"It was something that I missed.... It was a void," he acknowledged quietly. I could hear the note of sadness in James's voice, but there was no spirit of blame or anger whatsoever. "Yes, that's what I mean," I said, retreating gently; I wondered if he was in denial about his painful feelings or if, on the contrary, he had been able to come to terms with some very distressing early experiences in ways that I didn't completely understand.

Tumbling Tumbleweed

I glanced at Frances, noticed that she was leaning backward in her seat like a passenger in a car that is accelerating at an alarming rate and is already well over the speed limit. I decided to take my cue from her and back away from this hazardous topic, or at least to do so for the meanwhile. Dropping my gaze, I sat staring down at the genogram on my lap-most particularly at the small square representing their son, under which I'd written "Jamie, age seven." I said nothing for the next several moments, but James was unwilling to allow the discussion of his father to rest in the place where we'd left it.

"There was no dislike for him, because there wasn't-because I did have a father," he stated, in an even, strong, reasonable tone of voice. "And I had a very good father. Very supportive, a hard worker and a good provider. For a long time, my father worked three jobs-two full-time jobs and a part-time job also." Dwight Bailey had not only driven a maintenance truck for the city of Niagara Falls, but he'd also been a bus driver and worked as a contractor at the same time. "He poured concrete, installed patios, driveways, and sidewalks. He'd tear them up and put in new ones. My father-my stepfather, that is-was a very strong, powerful man, and people used to admire his physique."

A look of boyish admiration came into James's eyes at this moment, and I glimpsed the young child in the mature adult man. "He was not a tall person, but he was a very forceful, strong sort of guy. In fact, he would just scratch his head and his biceps would simply swell up, and people were amazed. He never lifted weights or anything; it just came from hardwork."

But then James added, "He and my mother did have their problems, but he was always very, very good to us."

The problems in his mother's second marriage had, he believed, resulted from the fact that she was a deeply religious woman-"not a fanatic, but a very religious person"-and had become ever more so over the years. "My father, on the other hand, always loved the good life." Here James made a rueful, ironic face, but laughed aloud at the same time.

"He loved to party, drink, have fun, and he had an excellent sense of humor; he made everybody laugh." He himself laughed again, as if visualizing some remembered scene, but then added, in a sharper, more critical tone of voice, "It did seem to me that he could be somewhat-well, irrational at times."

How so, I asked, but James looked stumped, as if this weren't the easiest question to answer. After a long pause, during which he seemed to be scanning backward through his recollections, he said slowly, "I just can't bring to mind right now a particular subject that we argued about. But if we were arguing, he would make his point by saying something like 'Grass is green, isn't it?' And of course you'd have to agree. So then my father would say, 'All right, then .. .' " James grinned, and Frances laughed.

"That's my point!" she mimicked her father-in-law jokingly.

"In other words, 'I rest my case,' " I, added, and the three of us giggled together, releasing tension.

"My father was just not the kind of person you could argue with in a rational, logical way." James sounded highly, entertained and yet really annoyed with the man simultaneously. Still, I hadn't failed to take note, throughout this conversation, of how comfortably his two different fathers seemed to coexist in his own mind and in his thinking. James Walker never did refer to Dwight Bailey as anything but his father in ordinary conversation; I heard him use the word "stepfather" only when he was distinguishing between the two men for my benefit.

"If I were to ask you, What was the most important thing you ever learned from your father?, what do you think your answer would be?" My voice was reflective and musing and I cocked my head to one side, smiled, met his steady gaze directly.

"Is this Dwight Bailey or James-Dwight?" asked Frances immediately. My eyes still fixed upon her husband's, I shrugged lightly as if to say to him, "Your choice." "She's talking about my father-about James," he turned to tell Frances decisively, then turned back to me.

"I don't know what I learned from him. I think I inherited some things from him ... some traits,"

I shook my head, smiling slightly, as if to say he wasn't quite responding to the question that I'd posed. "Can you think of something that you actually learned from him? It doesn't have to be something positive; it can be positive, negative, whatever."

He nodded, said in halting phrases, "Well-I think-I may have learned-that it's important to keep in touch with your family."

I nodded and said: "By his not doing it." I was amplifying upon his answer, but my own voice, as I heard it, was far less convinced than it was questioning.

"By his not doing it, "James repeated, nodding in agreement simultaneously. "Not only with us but with his own brothers and sisters, because he didn't keep in touch with them, either. They had no idea where he was, and they'd been close when they were

younger. Very, very close. My brother Stephen was named after his brother, and my sister Eliza was named after his sister. But when he disappeared, he just disappeared; no one had any idea for years and years where he was. Whether he was dead or alive, sick or well ..." His voice trailed off on this mystified and somewhat plaintive note.

"Did your aunt and your uncle have any idea why he disappeared from sight in that way?" I asked. James shook his head, said, "No, none."

"And you still don't know?"

He shook his head again. "We still do not know; that's right; he just did it. We did discover, later on, that he was ill-he had the heart ailment that he eventually died from-but it wasn't the kind of illness that would have prevented him from keeping in touch." He was speaking in a neutral tone of voice now, and I asked him in a similarly even, level tone whether he thought that the ending of his parents' marriage had caused his father to vanish from an entire former lifetime in that manner.

"I can't say that because I don't know," James replied, almost formally. But after a moment he added slowly, "I think he probably spent time in the South, and like most people eventually just migrated north looking for opportunity and excitement, a different way of being ..."

"But it does sound as if he was very disconnected," I said, my eyes staring straight into his sympathetically. "It sounds as if he'd gotten into what you might call a 'tumbling tumbleweed' kind of life-" I stopped in mid sentence, for his startled expression told me that he had heard this last remark in a spirit in which it hadn't been meant. His wife shifted in her seat uncomfortably, cleared her throat.

"No, I don't think so; that's not the impression I got," James stated tersely and almost coldly.

I was in no doubt about the fact that I'd made a misstep, but it was one that I couldn't quite fathom at that moment. It wasn't until much later, in the course of interviews with other black families (both single-parent and intact), that I came to understand the sensitivity that exists in the African American community in regard to the widespread stereotype of the absent, disconnected, nonproductive black male. When I had said "tumbling tumbleweed," they had heard me saying (or so I later came to believe) "shiftless, good-for-nothing drifter."

But at that juncture, although I didn't understand exactly what it was that was being heard amiss, I did have the presence of mind to turn to his wife and ask, "Frances, what are your own thoughts about this long disappearance? I mean, what's your own understanding of what might have happened, or how do you describe or explain this in your own mind?"

"I'm not sure, I'm not sure, but I did know-I could see-the loving and caring that were there," she said fervently and supportively. Then her expression became somewhat doubtful. "I'm not sure," she repeated, her voice low, "and I think one of the reasons why I insisted that James reconnect with his father was that' there were so many unanswered

questions....It's just unfortunate that we ran out of time, because we didn't realize his dad was as ill as he was.

"They were just getting together, and I think beginning to catch up, when his father went into the hospital. Then we'd go back and forth to visit, but not really to stir him up. Not to get him upset; just really to spend time with him. We did think he was going to get better, and that later on we'd really get a chance to delve into where he'd been, what had happened to him during-" Frances halted in mid-speech, looked swiftly at her husband, then looked back at me.

She met my gaze fully and directly. "To me, his dad was not the kind of person you would think of as having been adrift or just blowing around in the wind during those years. He was very neat, very organized; he looked great; he looked wonderful. We just had no idea he was as sick as he was; I was shocked when I got the phone call, and in fact we brought his body here for the funeral. He's buried here in West Hartford, in the graveyard of our own church, which is just a few miles away. But it did take us by surprise, because at that time everything was just sort of opening up. We were about to really get to know him, after all those years."

She had been speaking swiftly, in a voice charged with affection and regret. In the brief silence that ensued I turned to look at James, saw that his momentary ire had vanished completely. An expression of satisfaction and good nature had now returned to his features, and I wondered if he were merely feeling gratified by this almost automatic outpouring of his wife's support. Or was the sense of contentment and emotional closure that I could see reflected in his features due to his not only having found and reconnected with his father, but with his having been able to bring him home again permanently? James's dad was buried in his adult son's churchyard, not more than a few miles from where we sat.

A Lot of Love, a Lot of Sharing, a Lot of Caring

The next time I met with the Walkers, the entire family was present. "So, tell me," I began by saying, "what is it like, living in this family?" This broad question, not surprisingly, met with total silence.

The Walkers looked at me, then at one another, then back at me with smiles of bewilderment and embarrassment. "Anyone at all can answer," I added, and then waited expectantly for something to happen. Nothing did.

I looked from one member of the assemblage to the other. "What is it like, living here?" I repeated. "Anybody who feels like answering, please speak up."

James Walker laughed, surveyed the other people in his family teasingly. "No one wants to go first, huh?" the father inquired. They laughed too, but nobody spoke. I dropped my gaze, stared at the six-sibling lineup on each parent's side of the genogram. Then I looked up to find that Frances's open-eyed gaze had locked, radarlike, upon mine.

She gave me the impression that she wanted to speak, but that so many potential answers were coming into her mind that she couldn't settle upon anyone of them in particular. "Somebody ought to go second, then"-I smiled at the mother-"and then the next person can be the first one."

Frances returned my smile, but still made no reply. When it came right down to it, I realized, she was having trouble admitting me across the family threshold.

I reflected that she, as a high-powered executive with a considerable staff under her charge, might well have conflicted feelings about surrendering control and making herself vulnerable. I said nothing, and it was the father who spoke up at that moment.

"I think it's pretty easy to live in this family," James commenced slowly.

"There's a lot of humor ..."

"Yes, I can see that," I agreed quickly, and everyone smiled. I glanced quickly at Frances, who seemed relieved that her husband had begun speaking. ..

"There's a lot of cooperation," James added then. "A lot of love, a lot of sharing, a lot of caring," he went on, and his wife nodded.

The father looked at his children, said reflectively, "There isn't a need for strong discipline, because the values are laid down and everybody seems to understand them, and abide by them. So there isn't a need to impose discipline"-he sat up suddenly, ramrod straight on the piano bench, as if taking command militarily-"or at least, not very often," he amended jokingly. "So-" The rest of his remark was lost in a babble of the girls' high-pitched laughter and comments. Then everyone was talking at once, making it impossible for me to hear what anyone person was saying. When the hubbub quieted down, however, Frances began to chime in. "I think that there are areas of-of intensity as well," she said, in that gentle yet authoritative tone of voice. "Because we are all involved in a lot of things, and we all stay on the move."

"We all have our own separate lives," she explained, "and we're all doing lots of different things. We bring it together in this family, and so there's a lot going on." What she was saying was that in this family, people invested themselves in their own interests as distinct and different individuals and yet remained profoundly connected.

It was almost as though she had read a book on healthy family functioning and were giving me all of the correct answers before I got to ask the questions. For it is in fact this very expectation-that each person within the group will naturally pursue his or her own separate interests and then bring back into the home some of that outside energy and intensity- that perpetually reinvigorates the healthy family and gives it its special sense of aliveness and vitality.

Frances drew in a long breath, then exhaled deeply. "This all adds to the general intensity, and I think from time to time we've just got to stay still . . . "

I was aware of the way in which the mother, as she spoke about everyone's separate activities adding to the "general intensity," was leaning forward in the direction

of her children as if to bridge any potential distance that might suddenly loom between them. "You mean you've got to slow down, cool your jets," I murmured, and she nodded in agreement.

"I think from time to time we've just got to stay still," she repeated, "to-oh-reflect on ourselves and what we're doing. We miss some things, and we have to play catch-up from time to time." Her gaze swept the circle of faces that were turned toward her, then turned back to meet mine.

"What do you think you miss?" I inquired quietly.

She looked uncertain, and made no reply.

"Are you saying that in the rush you just don't hear each other from time to time?" I proposed, after a few moments had passed.

Frances nodded immediately. "I think that's it. I think that-well, James and I work full-time, and they're in school, plus they have their extracurricular activities." She was telling me that in her view the search for some balance between each person's individual world and the intimate world they all shared as a family had to be continually active-that equilibrium wasn't something that one could count on to just happen naturally.

While everyone had, by all means, to be encouraged to follow his or her own individual pathway, they all had to remain aware of one another and in good affective contact. Otherwise, there was the ever-present danger of someone straying too far from the family pack and suffering the pain and potential hazards of isolation.

I turned next to her seven-year-old son, and asked him, "What about it, Jamie? Can you add anything to what your mom and dad are saying?"

The boy's attention had wandered, and he jumped when I addressed him directly; everyone laughed. Debra put her arm around her little brother's shoulder. "Are you in shock?" His mother leaned toward Jamie, asked coaxingly, "What's it like, being in this family? Do you like being in this family?"

The Youngster shook his head up and down enthusiastically. "Yeahhh," he said.

"Why?" Frances prompted him.

"I don't know; I just do," Jamie replied, and the family's easy laughter sounded again. Then the father, eyes fixed upon his son, added, "I think everybody has to be somewhat self-reliant, and somewhat independent, too. Because they all have to do for themselves at various points in time. They have to be able to prepare their own meals from time to time."

"Even Jamie?" I smiled at the boy. "Do you have to do that from time to time?" He nodded his head up and down proudly.

"He'll have to fix himself a sandwich, grab himself a snack," said the father.

"Some cereal in the morning," added Frances, and her husband continued.

"We encourage that; we want our kids to be self-reliant, to be able to do things for themselves and not be completely dependent on someone else. For instance, everybody

needs to know how to wash dishes, iron clothes, do their own washing, too. I think those things are important-

He was stopped in mid-sentence by a burst of laughter from the sofa. The girls were engaged in an exchange that I couldn't quite grasp, and I asked Lyla to explain to us what was happening. "Oh, I was just telling Debra that she needs a little more experience, on that front," stated the older of the two sisters dryly.

I asked this eldest sibling if she would like to add to what others had already said about living in this family. "How do you find it?" I asked her. Fifteen-year-old Lyla answered, without hesitation, that it was "secure" and that she knew always that she'd be taken good care of. "You know you can depend on rides, and money if you need it," she explained. "It's just like-security," she reiterated.

"So it's a pretty safe place to be?" I asked, and she nodded. Then I turned to the middle sibling, Debra, and asked her what she would have to say about living here. "Nothing," she replied.

"Nothing? Just-nothing?" I repeated, with a smile. Her parents looked at their middle child in amazement.

"Nothing," Debra repeated firmly, clearly reveling in the drama of this moment. She straightened her wide-rimmed glasses over the bridge of her nose, then stole a glance at her mother, who merely rolled her eyes. This pubescent girl was letting all present know that the perfect family was not a family that she wanted to be any part of, but nobody seemed overly concerned. Evidently, it was safe here to feel differently and to be contrary.

Family Roles

It was in the course of that same, all-family interview that I asked the Walkers a playful question, one that I knew they would enjoy. This was the question of whether there were certain roles or character parts that people in this family tended to fit into.

"In lots of families," I explained, "there is someone who is the clown and someone who's always in trouble; somebody may be the angel here, and somebody may be the one who ..." I paused and looked around at the amused faces of the parents, the slightly perplexed Jamie, the giggling teenage daughters. "I'm hearing a little laughter around here," I said.

When I asked Debra if she had such a role, and if so, what it might be, she was ready with her reply. "I'm the one who's always in trouble," she said drolly, and without a moment's hesitation. This brought forth a rush of laughter and comment from the other people in the family.

I smiled and asked her what sorts of trouble she was most likely to get into. She paused, her expression growing serious and thoughtful, then murmured that it usually had to do with talking on the phone too long, and sometimes it had to do with getting a bad grade. As she spoke, her voice pitch was dropping. I had the impression that this middle child liked to seek the family spotlight but then felt shy and diffident when it actually landed upon her.

I asked her then what other things she might do that would reliably land her in the family doghouse, but Debra could think of nothing else. So I let the matter rest there, and turned to the eldest sibling, Lyla.

Lyla couldn't think of a role that she had, and asked me to suggest more of the possible categories. I smiled, "Oh, the complainer, the devil, the one who's always sane and logical, the one who's always emotional-" I began reciting.

But at this point she held up her hand, halted me right there: "I'm emotional," she said, definitively. "I'm probably the one who likes to argue the most, also," added the teenager, looking around at the other people in the family as if for confirmation. Everyone except her little brother laughed and nodded; he appeared to be lost in his own thoughts, at the moment.

I interrupted this conversation to lean toward Jamie and ask if he was perhaps thinking about which of the roles was his role. He nodded in a weighty, significant manner, which brought forth universal smiles and some suppressed laughter. Thirteen-year-old Debra put her arm around her little brother's shoulders again, giving him a hug and a squeeze.

I told Jamie to go on thinking, and that I would get back to him in a very short while. Then, turning back to Lyla, I asked her which topics in particular she tended to get into arguments about.

"Anything, really," she admitted. "If I disagree, then I'll start arguing about it." The most recent such incident that she could describe had occurred just yesterday, in her Sunday school Bible class, when someone had made what she considered to be a sexist comment; she had chewed him out.

How, I asked, had her fellow student responded? "He didn't say anything." Lyla grinned; her dad, laughing, put in, "That fella said to himself, 'Whoa, better leave this woman alone!' "

Now it was young Jamie's turn. I asked him what role he thought he had in the family, but he remained uncertain. When I asked him if he was, perhaps, "the angel," he shook his head dubiously. He said he couldn't say for sure; he didn't think so.

But when I asked him if he might be "the complainer," he nodded his head in agreement and said solemnly, "Yes." This evoked hoots daughter from his sisters and

much negative head-shaking on everyone's part. Clearly, no one in the family agreed with him, and I found myself laughing with them.

At the same time I was reflecting upon the fact that there was something basically life-affirming about the quality of this family's humor. The Walkers could surely share a joke, and did so readily, but the jokes they made were not attacking ones and were not being made at any family member's expense.

In distressed, dysfunctional emotional systems, this is very rarely the case. In troubled families, nothing tends to be funny at all--or if humor is present, it is of the assaultive, denigrating variety. The pathological family script is a deadly serious melodrama, one in which there is neither character development nor resolution of any difficulty, and in which the selfsame plot repeats itself ad infinitum. Everyone is stuck inside the system, in set roles and complementary relationships that are rigidly fixed and unchanging. What is lacking is the healthier family's capacity to step outside the drama--and even the stage frame--and to regard itself with amusement. In order to do so, a sense of humor is a basic necessity.

And what was significant about the Walkers' interchange was not only its humorous quality, but the fact that the discussion did not seem to be generating any hostility whatsoever. This meant that the individuals inside the system were capable of stepping outside the system and reflecting playfully about the role that each of them was enacting within it.

The Sheriff

I noticed that thirteen-year-old Debra's expression was pensive, and asked what she believed her brother's role in the family to be. She said, without a trace of sarcasm, that he was the angel. But older sister Lyla wasn't sure that she agreed. "Probably, he is the angel, but he's not completely perfect," she said forthrightly. "Still, he's probably the best out of all of us," she added, a somewhat enigmatic afterthought.

I would have asked her what she meant had I not noticed the boy's gaze fixed attentively upon his' dad. I asked James Walker what he thought his son's role in the family to be; he turned and looked at his child pensively for several moments. Then he said softly, "Oh, I think he's a sweet little kid. He likes to joke and clown around, to jump me when I'm not paying attention to him. And he likes to be very affectionate--receive and give affection."

This father was not so much responding to me as he was reflecting aloud, in a voice that was vibrant with tenderness and emotionality. The sense of loving connection in this family was extraordinary; in fact, it was downright enviable.

James Walker's own role in his family was, as he saw it, "that of an enforcer." His wife, on hearing this, reared back in her seat, then turned to stare at her husband, her expression a parody of horror and incredulity. She giggled.

"You think of yourself as a kind of sheriff, then?" I inquired, and he nodded. "Yes, the one who maintains stability, discipline, that kind of thing," James said calmly. Frances's expression was becoming ever more extreme, a caricature of perfect disbelief and amazement. "You're the sheriff?" she demanded. "How so?" She giggled again, and the children began giggling along with her.

"I think that when things need to be attended to, and they haven't been attended to, it's my job to see that they finally get done," he maintained seriously; but his wife, with an incredulous smile on her face, said, "This is sounding like Gunsmoke to me."

My own thought was that if this dad was indeed the family sheriff, he seemed to wear his badge very lightly. I was thinking, too, that the members of this family were having to do some serious searching in order to sort out what their own individual roles might actually be. In distressed, dysfunctional families, these "parts" are usually far easier to discern, for very often the people in the system have had certain preformed, predesignated roles imposed upon them. In many instances there is a pathological script, which seems to demand that someone be an "angel" or a "devil" or a "slut" or a "savior"; the appointed individual's role is set an~ waiting to be played out. In healthier family organizations, on the other hand, people are freer to create their own roles, and the emotional system is flexible enough to accommodate them.

Frances was now humming the theme music from Gunsmoke, and I said to her, with a nod in her husband's direction, "What do you think of that self-characterization?"

"I don't view him that way at all," she said decisively. In her opinion, James's role in the family was more accurately that of "the serious one." "That's just what I was thinking," burst out fifteen-year-old Lyla, as soon as her mother had spoken. "He's definitely the most serious person in the family!" I turned at once and looked at Debra questioningly; she nodded and said only, "Yes." But young Jamie, when he was asked in turn, said he thought that his dad was very serious-the most serious person in the family-but that he was a little bit like a sheriff also.

Interpersonal Curiosity

In a way, the youngster was making an important point, for in healthy emotional systems an individual is always far more than his designated role in the collective script. Thus, while James Walker might be the most "serious" person in his family, he could clearly be playful (when Jamie jumped on him unexpectedly, for example) and while the father was perhaps exaggerating his position as "law enforcer," he was obviously playing that role to some degree as well. In well-functioning systems, a person may be "the most serious one," but that is not all he or she is seen to be.

In distressed families, on the other hand, the members of the cast tend to occupy roles that have been preformed rigidly and seem to be set in cement. Dave Anderson's family role as "bad, betraying male" in relation to his "rightfully angry" mother had this air of having been created for him in advance. And he was, as is usual in this kind

of emotional system, viewed as being his role; it was as if there were no other parts or aspects of his self than those that the Andersons' pathological script appeared to require.

As psychoanalyst Edward R. Shapiro and Episcopal clergyman A. Wesley Carr observe in their joint work, *Lost in Familiar Places*, "In many families where individuals manifest severe personal problems, the members have a striking lack of curiosity about one another. Instead, they are often remarkably certain that they know [my italics], understand, and can speak for other family members without further discussion. If individual members attempt to challenge assertions about who they are, they encounter bland denial, unshakable conviction, or platitudinous reassurance. Even though such assertions are usually incorrect and frequently lead to escalating disagreements within the family, this cycle is difficult to interrupt."

In less competent, poorly functioning families, the emotional system shapes the individual's role, and the individual is that role and can be nothing otherwise. In better-functioning, healthier families, on the other hand, people tend to create their own roles, which are not unidimensional and which can change over time as both individual and family development proceed and continue.

Loving the Distance

When I asked the Walkers if they could tell me what some of the family's most memorable happy times had been, they merely looked at one another, nonplussed. Frances shook her head as if to say that no such event was coming into her mind at this moment. I was surprised, and had to fight the urge to propose suggestions—a large family reunion? A vacation they'd taken? What I was looking for; I explained, was an occasion that they could remember as having been a wonderful experience for all of them.

But they seemed to be unable to focus upon a particular occurrence, and Frances shook her head again. "I think the answer's probably different for each of us," she said, in a doubtful, musing tone of voice. "We've certainly shared good times, when there are weddings and other kinds of special occasions—and that's great," she appended enthusiastically. "But then we share in other kinds of things"—she sounded graver and more serious again—"when one of us is being honored or highlighted: Debra making state and then going on to regional in the cheerleading competition; James being named man of the year by the local chapter of the National Council of Negro Women, as he was last week; Lyla being accepted for a trip to Australia ..." The mother's gaze lingered on each member of her family as she or he was being singled out.

I looked at Lyla, who had sat bolt upright at the mention of her forthcoming journey to Australia. "Wow, you're going to Australia," I said.

"When?"

"This summer," she responded, in a voice charged with excitement.

Frances was now looking fondly at her son. "Jamie was just selected as student of the week, two weeks ago," she added gently.

There was a brief silence. "Debra got pretty far in that cheerleading competition," put in the father, thoughtfully.

"And she was just named mother of the year," burst out Lyla, gesturing in Frances's direction. Then she pointed out the trophy that her mother had just received, which stood between one that Jamie had gotten for field hockey and one that Debra had won at softball. There was such a sense of mutual pride, affection, and belonging here that I said impulsively, "Hey, can I join this family? You sound like a great bunch of people," and we laughed at the oddity of the comment.

So many factors (not the least of which were age and race) made this the silliest of notions, and yet I was thinking, not without a sense of wistfulness, what growing up in a family such as this one would have been like.

Frances Walker, her expression becoming pensive again, said, "The way I see it, we all rejoice in those good things, and we don't feel threatened. But it's a big deal for anyone of us to get involved in something, and to win. Or to lose, for that matter, because losses—those are important also. And we've lost, too." Her voice had that crack of emotionality. "There are things that we haven't really gotten."

She was looking at her daughter Debra, and said quietly, "We lost at the regional cheerleading competition, and we all felt that, I believe. But we all wanted to be there, and to be part of it ..." Frances turned to look at her husband and said feelingly, "And to me, it was interesting that in losing, Debra handed something to you? I'm not sure what it was, but I saw something. And she gave me the flower ..."

Her voice trailed off softly, and I said to Debra, touched, "What did you hand your dad? Do you remember?"

"No," said the thirteen-year-old flatly and dismissively, a reply that was met with peals of laughter. "It was a ribbon," her father said at once.

Each of the contestants in the cheerleading competition had been given a ribbon and then a flower at the outset, he explained.

"And afterward, her dad asked her if she was upset," Frances interrupted to tell me, "because the other girls were crying, and she wasn't crying. To me, it was just interesting," she repeated, "because even though she didn't articulate it, in giving him the ribbon and me the flower, Debra seemed to be saying 'I'm glad you're here.' " I turned to the adolescent girl and said, "When your father asked if you were upset, what did you say?"

"No," she answered shortly, but she had a sardonic twinkle in her eye. At that moment, the half-hour gong of a clock sounded. I looked at my watch, and so did Frances. It was three-thirty in the afternoon, and I was aware of the fact that Lyla had to be driven to a schoolmate's house at four o'clock.

"You weren't upset?" I turned back to Debra dubiously. "Even after having made it through the state competition, and gotten that far?" She shrugged, shook her head assuredly. "Whynot?" I asked, tempering my air of wry disbelief with a friendly smile. But Debra, unfazed, only shrugged lightly and said, "I don't know for sure.... I guess I was happy to get that far, to get where I was." In reaching the regional level of the cheerleading contest, she explained, she had gotten further than she'd ever expected to go.

I realized that she meant what she said. For while Debra Walker had not emerged as a finalist in the last stage of the competition, she had come away from the experience bearing clearly in her mind the positive aspects of the situation, which represented the full half of the cup rather than the empty one.

A long pause followed, during which I looked at each family member in turn. "What I hear you all saying," I said at last, my voice tentative, "is that in terms of good times in this family, every one of you has had certain special things happen which everyone else has been able to enjoy ... Is that what you're saying?"

The question was directed to Frances, who nodded and said, "Sure, sure. But we've lost as well," she reminded me immediately, as if she feared I might perceive the situation in an unrealistically rosy fashion.

"We've also had some good times on trips," observed the father at that moment. "We went to Disneyland, and we had a fantastic time, though we were all doing different things in different groups."

There was something really delightful about the Walkers, I thought, and I said aloud, "I get the impression that there's a certain respect, in this family, for the fact that people will probably want to do their own and perhaps very different things. And I have the idea, too, that there's a real acceptance of differences-and yet you're all pretty close." I turned to the second daughter, Debra, confident that she would puncture any balloon of unjustified idealization. "Am I getting a correct impression? Would you agree or disagree?" I asked her.

The teenager nodded, and said briefly, "Yes," as if at some level she hated to admit it. "You have your space here," put in her mother levelly, at that moment. "And you're allowed to have that space."

This was, in my own opinion, an important part of what made this family as well functioning and competent as they obviously were; an important part of loving is acknowledging human separateness. As the poet Rainer Maria Rilke has so beautifully phrased it, "Once the realization is accepted that even between the closest human beings infinite distances continue to exist, a wonderful living side by side can grow up, if they succeed in loving the distance between them which makes it possible for each to see the other whole against the sky."