

proposing simple-minded things," because the total group has already committed itself to that kind of declaration. Everyone has internalized the message in his own way. It is inescapable.

Chapter 8

Polarities and Conflicts

It seems to me that the sine qua non of man's knowledge, happiness, and existence is to be found in the idea of the reconciliation of differences. It matters little whether we talk about mental health and personality structure or whether we talk in the context of society. It matters little what the size of the society is. It makes little difference whether the society is a marriage, a small group, a large industrial organization, a community, a nation, or many nations; the basic issue is that of the reconciliation of the individual with the group, the organization, the integration of parts into a unified whole. These issues are all matters of totality, wholeness, completeness, unity, order, structure.*

Conflict may be healthy and creative or it may be confluent and non-productive. The latter form of conflict occurs when I don't understand myself and accuse you of something of which I am guilty, and involves at least two forms of defense—repression and projection. Healthy conflict occurs when

*Jones, Ronald C. (Untitled). In Brockman, J. & Rosenfeld, E. (eds.), *Real Time I*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1973.

each of us is an integrated person with some self-awareness and a clear sense of differentiation. Conflict arises when there is a clear sense of disagreement about something which is a real issue between us; it is not a result of projecting stuff on each other which we are unable to confront within ourselves. Healthy conflict, if handled skillfully, results in good feelings between people; it is a "win-win" rather than a "win-lose" proposition.

I am fond of telling my friends that I like making trouble. For one thing, people who disagree rarely bore each other. For another, conflict provides the potential to differentiate ourselves from the boundaries of other personalities. Too often, people who have deep ties also tend to drown in each other's psychological boundaries; they even look alike. When two clearly differentiated boundaries rub against each other, the individuals experience an exhilarating sense of contact.

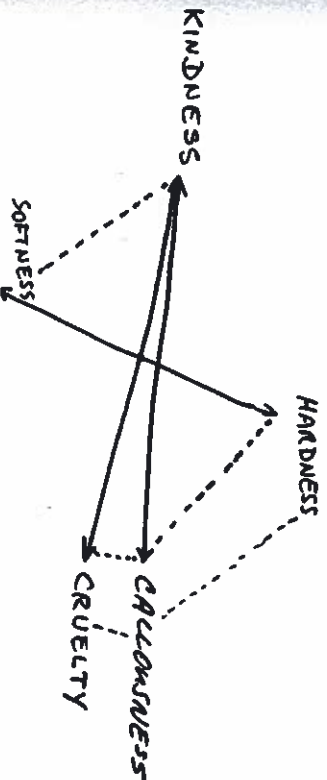
The same phenomenon holds true of intrapsychic or internal conflicts. When brought into awareness with clarity, conflicts tend to allow the person the sense of his internal differentiation, and at the level of creativity, hold the possibility for integrated behavior—behavior which is highly adaptive because it spans the full range of responses between formerly experienced polar extremes. The person is able to respond flexibly to a variety of situations out of that sort of range. In contrast, polar responses are generally restricted, unimaginative, and brittle in relation to daily life stresses.

Conflict which repeats itself stereotypically, without unique solutions or learnings, leads to confluence rather than contact between people. Thus, it is the potential for learning which holds creative promise for conflict.

POLARITIES: GROUNDWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING CONFLICT

A good theory of conflict covers both intrapersonal and interpersonal conflict. It begins with the individual as a conglomerate of polar forces, all of which intersect, but not necessarily at the center. In an oversimplified example, we might

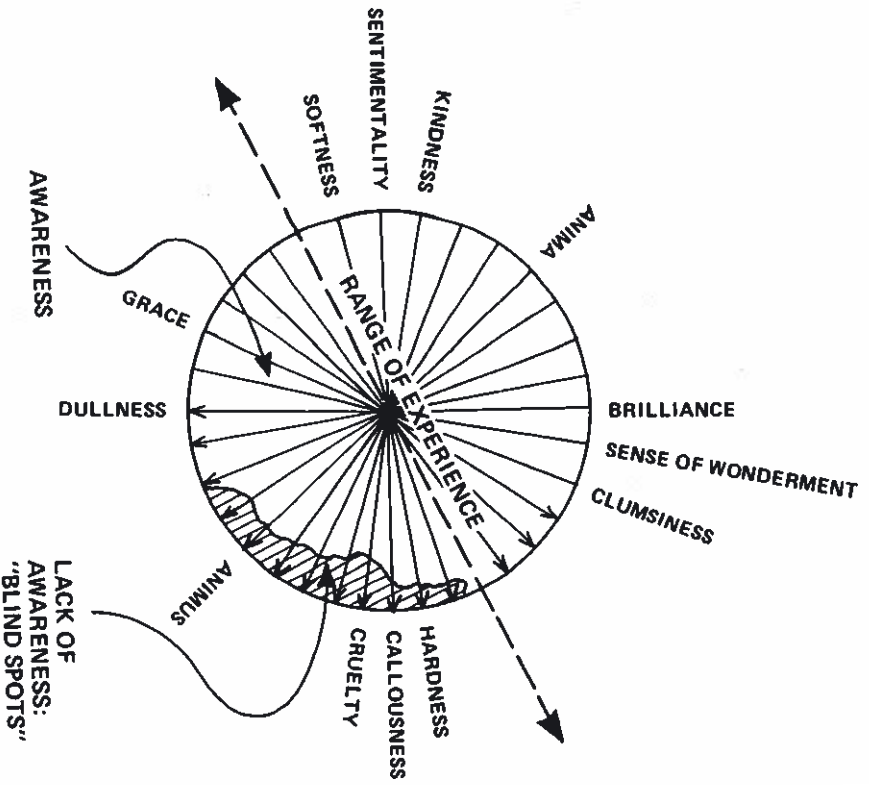
say that a person has within him the characteristic of kindness and also its polarity of cruelty, the characteristic of hardness and its polarity, softness. Furthermore, a person possesses not just one opposite, but several related opposites, creating "multilarities."⁶ For example, cruelty may not be the only polarity of kindness; another may be insensitivity or callousness toward another person's feelings. Diagrammatically, such a simple multilarity looks like this:



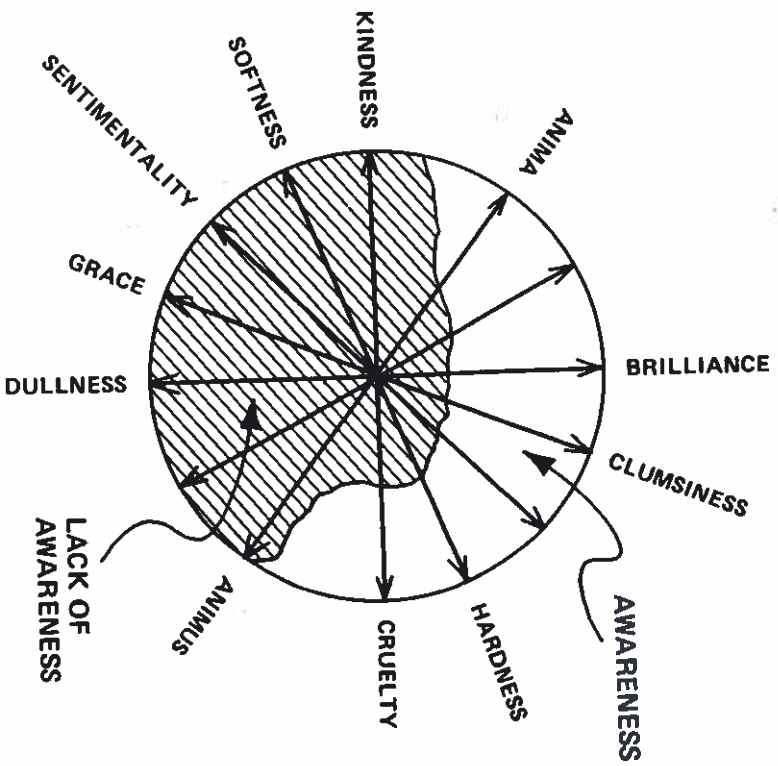
Polarized conceptualizations and feelings are complex and interlaced. They are, obviously, related to the individual's particular background and perception of his inner reality. One's inner reality consists of those polarities and characteristics which are ego-syntonic, or acceptable to one's conscious self, and those which are ego-alien, or unacceptable to the self. Often, the self-concept excludes painful awareness of the polar forces inside of us. I would rather think of myself as bright than dull, as graceful than clumsy, as soft rather than hard, as kind rather than cruel.

Theoretically, the healthy person is a complete circle, possessing thousands of integrated and interlaced polarities, all

⁶Multilarities is a term created by Erv Polster.



Healthy self-concept. Here the person is aware of many opposing forces within himself. He is willing to see himself in a multitude of "contradictory" ways. He experiences relationships between a variety of inner parts.



Pathological self-concept. The "disturbed" person sees himself in a unilateral stereotypic manner. He is always this and never that. His awareness of a multitude of inner forces and feelings is quite limited. He lacks fluidity and broadness of self perception. He is vulnerable to attack.

melted together. The healthy person is aware of most of the polarities within him, including those feelings and thoughts which society disallows, and is able to accept himself that way. He can say to himself: "Sometimes I am soft, but in situations where I am threatened, I really like my hardness. When I am in line and someone deliberately pushes in front of me, I don't feel soft, and it's okay not to be." A person may be generally graceful, yet clumsy in some situations. A healthy person can bump into a waiter in a restaurant and not have to say to himself, "What a clutz I am."

There still may be "blind spots" in the awareness of the healthy person. He may acknowledge his softness but not be aware of the hardness in himself. When his hardness is brought to his attention, he may experience pain, but he is willing to incorporate this new notion of himself into his self-concept. The healthy person may not always approve of all his polarities, but the fact that he is willing to suffer their awareness is a significant aspect of his inner strength.

There are massive holes in the awareness of a disturbed person. He has a rigid, stereotyped view of himself and is not able to accept many parts of himself: his stinginess, homosexuality, insensitivity, hardness. He denies his so-called negative polarities—those aspects of himself which he has been conditioned to think of as unacceptable or repulsive—and tends to project these characteristics on to others. Becoming aware of these unacceptable polarities makes him anxious. The result is the emergence of neurotic symptoms, with neurosis being the failure to control the emergence of anxiety.

INTRAPERSONAL CONFLICT

I view the self-concept as analogous to the dark and light sides of the moon. Intrapersonal conflict involves clashes between one's dark and light polarities. For example, when a woman says, "No," to her child, the light side of her moon says to her, "You're being reasonable; this is an unreasonable

request, so it's okay to say no." At the same time, the dark side of her polarities (maybe something she has learned from her mother) says, "You're being cruel and unkind; you're not a good person to do that." So she starts torturing herself when she should have forgotten the whole thing. Although such situations usually involve other people, the conflict is brought on by what the person does to himself.

One aspect of the dark side of the moon is the conscience, or the superego. This dark aspect of the conscience is often a Hitler, an unreasonable, rigid, uncompromising conscience: "What do you mean you're going to bed at ten o'clock when you didn't answer those letters and you didn't return those phone calls?" Another way to define these two parts of the moon is to say that the nagging part of the moon is the sadist and the light part—that which takes all the crap and is unable to deal with it—is the masochist. It is almost as if there are two people in one.

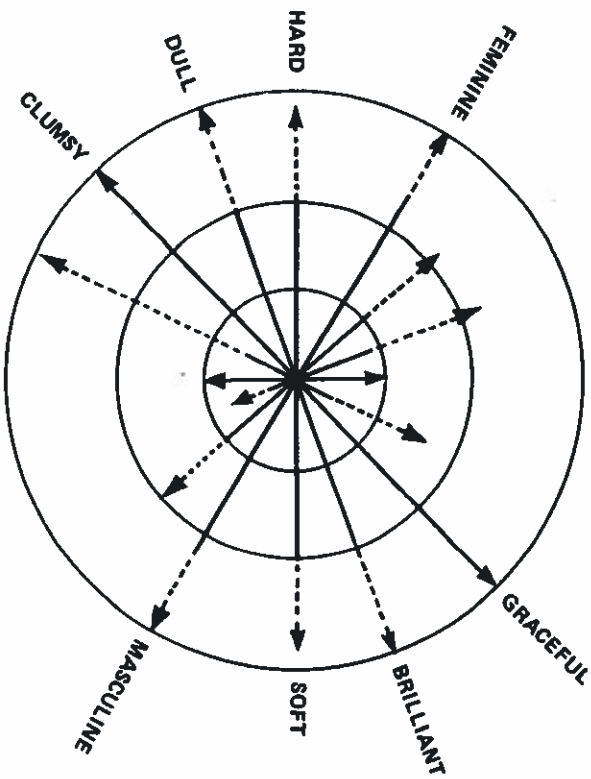
One way to deal with a conflict like this is to clearly separate the "two" people. For instance, I might say to a client: "Put your sadist on this couch and your suffering victim on this chair, and let them talk to each other. Maybe they can work it out." In this process, the more "they" work it out, the more awareness the client develops about the dynamics and intercourse between his two parts. And the more he learns about the mysterious parts of himself, the healthier he becomes.

Essentially, that is what therapy intends to do—to remove that which is mysterious. When we are in the dark, we imagine devils and evil forces lurking "out there." When we turn on the light, we feel safe. This is what psychoanalytic theory is mainly about: the mechanics of pushing the painful polarities inside of us into our consciousness, and then dealing with what happens when they begin to bubble up and create anxiety. Freud made a successful effort to turn the lights on inside our psychological lives. Much of Gestalt therapy concretizes and operationalizes his ideas into more effective therapeutic interventions.

STRETCHING THE SELF-CONCEPT

My theory of polarities dictates that if I do not allow myself to be unkind, I will never be genuinely kind. If I am in touch with my own unkindness and stretch that part of myself, when my kindness emerges it will be richer, fuller, more complete. If I do not allow myself to be in touch with my femininity, then my masculinity will be exaggerated, even perverse—I will be a hard, tough guy. Many of my clients have said to me, "You're a man, but you're different; you're soft and that's nice." When one side of the polarity gets stretched, it is almost automatic that at some point the other side also stretches. I call this the "around the world" phenomenon: If you keep flying north long enough, you'll eventually be heading south.

In order to grow as a person and have more productive conflict experiences with others, I have to stretch my self-



"Stretching" the self-concept. Movement in one direction inevitably stretches the opposite polarity.

POLARITIES AND CONFLICTS

concept. I have to teach myself to invade that part of me which I do not approve of. There are various techniques involved in this process. First, I must uncover that part of myself which is disowned. Second, I need to come into contact with the disowned part of myself. This is the preliminary step—getting in touch with how I keep secrets from myself. I might put a part of me on the couch, representing my secretive self, and that part might say: "I am mysterious and I am interesting. You should appreciate me because I keep you from exposing your tenderness and I protect you." And the other part, sitting in a chair, might say: "Yes, but don't we pay a price for that?" Then I go back to the couch and say, "Yes, a lot of the time I find myself alone when I don't want to be alone, and I stew in my secretiveness."

Once I feel kinder toward and more fully understanding of my secret self, I can relate to another person who tries to penetrate that inner territory or threatens that part of me. I call this whole process stretching the self-concept, creating more room in one's picture of the self. The more broadly I know myself, the more comfortable I am with myself.

One of my clients experiences severe anxiety, falling victim to a part of himself that says: "You are not worth living. You are a bad person; your life is bad. There isn't anything good about you." He cannot take ownership of this mean, sarcastic attitude as part of his own character. He always experiences "it" as suddenly accosting him, as if "it" came from outer space. As he is working with me, he realizes that the "bad" part of him developed very early in his life. As a child, every time he left his house the other kids kicked, beat and teased him. Slowly, he began to identify with these children, and after a while they taught him to be his own critic, his own enemy. Now, as an adult, he doesn't need his angry friends. He does the job himself, kicking himself in the ass every day.

Once he was able to come in contact with this introjected critic-sadist, he could feel more sympathetic toward this unacceptable part of himself. Now when he feels self-critical, he can address himself to the critic: "Hey, you have really suffered. You are the part of me that was beaten. I am sorry you



The curious result of the stretching process is that the polarities of the characteristic will become more evident, more solidified.

took this job on for yourself. Isn't it time you stopped being so hard on me? After all, you know I am a decent human being."

One may think that if this man accepts the reality of his criticism and sadism, he will become a sadist. This is a fallacy. The more this man accepts his punitive, sadistic self, the less the possibility that he will act on his sadism in the future. The curious result of the stretching process is that the polarities of the critic will become more evident, more solidified. Thus, if for him the polarity of critic and sadist is acceptor and healer, then his acceptance and healing qualities will become more genuine and real with others, as well as with himself.

On the other hand, the less aware he is of these negative aspects of himself, the more he will find himself acting out these parts. I remember a young man who came to see me because he was horrified by his behavior. When I inquired further, he said, "I don't know what got into me, but I hit my baby boy so hard I broke his leg. And yesterday I threw the cat against the wall." This young father had no contact whatsoever with his own sadism. It was totally disowned. "It" popped out of him like a foreign object, beyond his control.

A person who is always considerate and kind may not be in touch with his resentment or anger, or with his sorrow about the pain which was inflicted on him. It is very difficult for such a person to accept his rage. Sometimes the only way he can handle rage is to be a better human being to others than anyone has ever been to him. He does not handle the consequences of being a victim, and it is inconceivable to him to identify with the victimizer.

Let me give you another example. We cannot agree to do something fully unless we have a choice to say, "No." A woman complains because she's agreed to give her time to solicit for a worthy cause when she doesn't have the extra time, or when she feels that she's done it so many times before that someone else should do it this time. She can't say "No" because she knows someone should do it, or maybe because she won't look good if she refuses. So she says "Yes" and feels resentful or makes a martyr of herself. She's not doing the job

because she really wants to. It would be better for the woman to say, "Look, I know this is a worthy cause and I understand your problem in getting volunteers, but I've done this many times before, and I'm tired and busy, and I will not do it this time." If she could learn how to say "I won't" genuinely, she would have much more pleasure saying "I will" when she does accept the job another time. The "I won't" stretches the fullness of the "I will."

INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT

Interpersonal conflict often arises out of intrapersonal conflict. This occurs when an individual represses his awareness of some part of himself and then projects it onto someone else: It is easier to see the evil in another than in oneself. The devil is a grand projection of our inner evil and God of our inner goodness. It is easier to fight with someone else than to fight with oneself, to "resist the devil" than to cope with one's own evil intentions. Fighting with oneself is a lonely business and anxiety-provoking. It is less painful to attack a part of oneself by blaming the other person for being that way, especially if the blame is not open and above board.

Sometimes we attack parts of others which are lovely but too frightening to ourselves. Let us say that I have a part of me that really likes to cuddle, to hold someone and rock or sing to them, but I learned along the way that a "mature" man doesn't do that, or that it's aesthetically ugly, or that if I do I am going to get in trouble. So here is a lovely thing to do, but if I wanted to do it, I would be uncomfortable. Then I see a mother holding her 12-year-old son and rocking him, and I say, "Look at her, she's making a piece of jelly out of that boy; she's weak; she doesn't know how to handle her son. She should put her foot down and stop giving him all that sympathy." I would be disapproving: "What's the matter with you? Why are you so soft?" The result may be an argument.

Out of my own expertise as an "exhibitionist," I tend to be particularly sensitive to another person's exhibitionism. When

I am not aware of showing off, I tend to be attracted to that behavior in another person: One showoff knows another. If I want to have a constructive conflict, a creative conflict, I had better get in touch with that part of myself first; for by being in touch with that aspect of my inner life, I take the venom out of my potential anger.

If someone I dislike exhibits behavior that is so repugnant to me that I disown it in myself, then I cannot be objective about that behavior. I can't be clear about it; I just feel pissed off. For example, some students report to me that a colleague of mine didn't show up for a teaching session. I should be the last person in the world to hear such criticism, because I disapprove of my own tardiness. I feel guilty if I am just a little late. When my colleague arrives, I tell her, with all my righteousness, that I don't like what she did, it is shitty behavior, and it is incompetent. The result is that everybody in the room gets angry with me. If I were a little kinder to myself about my own tardiness, I might be more reasonable with my colleague and take time to get more information before passing judgment on another.

I think that recognizing one's own polarities affects one when falling in love. We often fall in love with the person who represents the dark polarities in ourselves. Let us say that I am a woman who does not experience certain parts of myself. I don't have self-confidence. I feel I am not inspired. I experience myself as a rather dull person. I am sure I am not creative. Then I meet a man. He takes me out; he is lively and exciting. He says, "I'm going to turn this world upside down." He seems creative; shows me some of the things he has done, and I fall head-over-heels in love with him. He is a delight. He perks me up. He makes me feel good. It is as if a lost piece of myself has suddenly come back to me—there it is! And often the language of love is exactly like that: "He's a piece of me. I'm not complete without him. He makes me a whole person."

It is a beautiful feeling, but there is always a problem with that kind of situation. Maybe the man isn't everything she thinks he is. He might have other characteristics which she