

Rejecting Family-Imposed Roles

Marilyn T. Wussler, S.S.N.D., M.S.

Recently, in conversation with a social-worker colleague, I explored how “don’t feel, don’t trust, don’t talk”—the un verbalized rules in a dysfunctional family—continue to affect my living of community life. She remarked, “Yeah, *don’t* is the big four-letter word, and *should* is the companion six-letter word; with the greater number of letters, it carries even more weight in my life.” This comment created the spark that inspired me to continue my jottings about how dysfunctions in my family of origin provide a script for my life today.

A major task of individuation, of reclaiming the “real self,” is articulating, recognizing, confronting, and shedding the *shoulds* that govern behavior. Each of us has them; learned early in life, they are reinforced over and over (even rewarded when lived out), and covertly, subconsciously active in our adult responses. Depending on the role(s) each of us played in our family of origin, the idiosyncratic *shoulds* will have various nuances—but constriction of the self, loss of the true “me,” and warping of the personality are universal characteristics.

I propose to articulate a few of the *shoulds* that hold each of us in a bondage more total than solitary confinement. Escape from the prison of our personal *shoulds* is impossible until those *shoulds* are recognized and named and confronted; even then, in an insidious, devious, hidden way, they reappear and keep reminding us of the prison

within which the self is detained, kept from growth and expression.

ALL FAMILIES AFFECTED

One wants to believe that one’s family of origin is “perfect for me” because it is the forum that produces the dynamics that allow one to move toward individuation as one confronts the dis-ease in that family. A reality often not recognized is that no family of origin is perfect; correlative to that, every family is to some degree dysfunctional. So long as I deny that reality, I can’t begin to confront my own unhealthy attitudes and behaviors; I keep myself imprisoned.

So much has been written about alcoholism and other substance addictions. Ann Wilson Schaef and others also write about “process addictions”—addictions to work, to power, to making money. (I grew up in the post-Depression era; in my family I heard messages such as: “If you knew how much this cost, you’d appreciate it more.” “Be careful to check the cost and don’t spend more than. . . .” “No, you can’t go to the show. That squanders money your daddy works so hard for.”) A process addiction can become a riveting dynamic in the family system—a source of control, negativism, and a host of other influences.

It is so easy to deny any dysfunction in a family of origin that is unaffected by substance addiction.

But the definition of a source of dysfunction within a family system is any person, event, or situation that rivets the family's attention, precludes freedom of movement beyond set roles or rules, and requires the commitment (often unconscious but sometimes conscious and explicit) of members of the system to maintain it. A handicapped child, an elderly grandparent, an emotionally ill relative, a parental marriage marred by infidelity, a runaway sibling, a child who does poorly in school—any of these factors and a variety of others, as well as a parent or other family member who abuses substances, can create dysfunction in the family system.

Commitment follows from the unspoken expectation that everyone in the family will do his or her part to keep the system intact and functional. Take the case of a handicapped child. Because the parents' energies (on many levels, including physical and emotional) center on more care for this child, others in the family find themselves covering certain bases, assuming more responsibility, denying their own needs, negating their truth so as not to make things harder. The mother says to the handicapped child's healthy sibling, "Your little sister is so sick and needs so much attention." The translation the healthy child makes is, "I'm healthy, so my needs must not be as important. I don't deserve to take any of mommy's time, because she's so busy and worn out already." Part of the self is disregarded, feelings are suppressed, and the commitment to maintain the system gets more locked into place.

The six-letter word, *should*, plays itself out through the roles in the family system. Roles in a dysfunctional system are many and varied; often participants play more than one, as the need or commitment requires. All participants enable the system to continue and the addiction or dysfunction to stay paramount. Four major roles have been identified as those played by children in a dysfunctional system: hero, clown-mascot, scapegoat, and invisible (or lost) child. (Various authors discuss other roles in family systems. John Bradshaw, for example, in *Healing the Shame That Binds You*, lists over twenty roles that have been noticed operating in dysfunctional relationships.)

HERO

In looking at how *should* operates in the life of the hero, it is important to note that the role is often played by the eldest child but shared by others. The hero is the child who is trying to please, to make things easier, to live up to expectations (verbal and nonverbal); he or she learns self-control and ways of controlling the environment as well. The hero in the dysfunctional family generates a set of scripts out of his or her experiences. If written or spoken, these scripts would sound something like:

1. I should always do my best so I don't worry mommy or daddy.
2. I should carry my load of responsibility, and if someone is slacking off, I should do his or her part too.
3. I should think, feel, and act like an adult.
4. I should keep all the pieces in place and everything running smoothly.
5. I should never get out of line and cause embarrassment.
6. I must not fail, even in small things.

Notice how airtight the *shoulds* are: words like *always* and *never* are part of the script. Variations on the theme might include such words and phrases as *must*, *ought to*, *have to*, and *obliged*, or related negatives (e.g., *must not*, *should not*.) The effect is the same—emotional constriction and minimal freedom to move beyond a set pattern. In community this scripting might be expressed as follows:

1. I'm responsible for the smooth functioning of this local house.
2. If things aren't going well, I need to work harder to build community.
3. It is my responsibility to alleviate any tension or anxiety about sharing.
4. I need to earn more money to take care of our elderly sisters, etc.

CLOWN-MASCOT

We observe other *shoulds* in place in the role of clown-mascot. The clown-mascot is the child who wears the happy, smiley face in spite of tears or fears, the child who carries the burden of keeping joy in the family system, of being sunlight in the darkness, of drying tears and glossing over pain with his or her brightness. The clown-mascot learns to delight and to make light of events that could bruise, and in so doing, often makes light of his or her own needs. *Shoulds* in the life of the clown-mascot sound like:

1. I should never worry about the future; I should always be happy.
2. I shouldn't let anyone know I'm hurting.
3. I should keep the family smiling so everyone thinks we're fine.
4. I'm responsible for parties and good times, and no one will have fun if I don't make them laugh.
5. If anyone is sad in the family, it's my fault.
6. Nothing is so bad that we can't see the bright side.

The role of the clown is to brighten and liven things up. Anything that is ordinary, boring, or dull is an invitation for the clown to enter and turn it into "party time." The clown is the great mask wearer

and role player in the sense that he or she orchestrates the family system's denial of feelings of pain. The clown can become the show-off, the buffoon, the one who compels attention through antics or fun—but he or she loses the truth of self in the process and cannot afford the luxury of feelings of sadness, fear, grief, loss, defeat, despair, need. Clown-mascots in community are folks people love to be around, because there is a lightness, a brightness wherever they are. Operating under the surface of such individuals, though, are obsessive thoughts:

1. If things get too heavy, they'll never lighten up.
2. Don't worry; be happy.
3. I can lift and lighten the burden others bear by smiling in spite of my tears.
4. A party solves all things; if this community isn't talking together, we can at least play together. That way, we'll look like a community.

SCAPEGOAT

The scapegoat role is perhaps the most difficult to fulfill in terms of the consistent pain to the self. For the child in this role, who is taking on the burden of negatives for the family and sacrificing the truth and beauty of self in the process, the *shoulds* are:

1. I should be willing to carry the burdens of others.
2. I should get what's coming to me, because I'm such a bad boy or girl.
3. I shouldn't complain if things don't go right, because I'm not doing what mommy and daddy ask.
4. I must suffer a little more and take on a greater load to keep others safe.
5. I deserve to be punished, because mommy and daddy know what's best.
6. I'm the worst in this family, and I don't deserve attention. I'll take punishment and not let anyone know I'm hurting.

The child caught in this bind somehow has to justify to himself or herself the wisdom of the parents and does so at the radical expense of self-esteem and self-awareness.

INVISIBLE CHILD

The invisible (or lost) child is the one who is the quiet peacekeeper, the one who fades far enough into the background so as not to make waves or upset the balance of power in the family system. *Shoulds* operative in this child's life are:

1. I should be so quiet that no one notices I'm here.
2. I should not be any kind of bother.
3. I should stay quiet so I don't disturb anyone.

Parents do not recognize the roles played by children in the formative stages of those roles

4. I'm not worth paying attention to, so I shouldn't be noticed.
5. I must not take the spotlight from anyone else.
6. I'm afraid of attention, so I should stay in the background; maybe that way I won't get hurt.

The invisible child is the one who surrenders his or her self to the system, becoming a virtual nonentity in his or her own perception—the lowest, last, and least, unworthy of notice. As an adult, continuing to be “lost” or “invisible” in community, with a self fading more and more into oblivion, this person continues with such inner messages as:

1. I don't want to cause any trouble, so I won't speak up.
2. If I'm quiet, maybe no one will notice me.
3. I have a right not to share or connect; people around me know better what serves all of us.
4. I'm ashamed of my thoughts and feelings; they prove that I'm the odd one.

ROLES MUST BE CONFRONTED

Parents do not recognize the roles played by children in the formative stages of those roles. It is often necessary to make them explicit or to exaggerate them to demonstrate how devastatingly they affect the lives of children. And these roles continue to operate in the lives of adults. For instance, the community scapegoat is the one who tells himself or herself:

1. I'm not OK and never have been OK; I'm not valuable in this community.
2. I can take anything people dish out; it's what I've learned to do best.
3. I've never succeeded at ministry and never will. I'm a burden to this community.

4. Go ahead; hit me while I'm down. I deserve what I get.

In specifying the internal messages inherent in each role, I have deliberately caricatured, exaggerated, or expanded them. It is easy to avoid recognizing my own dysfunctional roles and scripts until I express them in an exaggerated fashion to bypass the denial defense. Unless deliberately confronted, roles that begin in childhood can continue into adulthood. Each of the role players described learns not to trust the self, learns to keep the family secret(s) or preserve the family system (dysfunctional as it may be), learns not to validate or express his or her feelings. The self gradually diminishes as the person lives out the role he or she has adopted in the family of origin. Until that role is named, owned, and confronted, the self can bring to community only the prescribed role.

Test the reality of lived community experience. The lists of *shoulds* are not comprehensive, only representative. What is the role or combination of roles you live in community (whether in formation, in professed life, or even in retirement)? What roles do others in your community "family system" play? How do the roles interact, and at what expense to your true self?

The language of dysfunctional family systems is the language of sin and grace revisited. Sin darkens the intellect, weakens the will. What so darkens my

perception of myself as the role I am scripted to play? What so weakens my will to claim, stand up for, advocate for my precious self as the *shoulds* that tyrannize my life?

Hope lies in naming and confronting roles. The self can be refound and refounded on the more healthy ground of "I choose," "I need," "I want," "I feel."

RECOMMENDED READING

- Black, C. *Repeat After Me*. Denver, Colorado: Medical Administration Company, 1985.
- Bradshaw, J. *Healing the Shame That Binds You*. Deerfield Beach, Florida: Health Community, 1988.
- Presnall, L. *The Search for Serenity: And How to Achieve It*. Salt Lake City: Utah Alcoholism Foundation, 1959.
- Schaef, A. *When Society Becomes an Addict*. New York, New York: Harper & Row, 1987.



Sister Marilyn T. Wussler, S.S.N.D., M.S., is a psychological therapist at Personal Growth Center, providing residential treatment for women religious in Spokane, Washington.

Parents Can Improve Television for Children

School psychologist Dr. Bennett Z. Hirsch, who has been doing research for three years at the Yale Family Television Research and Counseling Center, recently reported the results of his findings regarding children's television viewing habits. He and his colleagues studied the effects of television on 66 kindergarteners and first-graders by going into their homes and observing them directly. There were two major findings, according to Dr. Hirsch. The first was that the amount of time parents spent talking with their children about what they were viewing made a significant difference in the children's learning. As a result, he recommends to parents, "Talk to your child about what they're watching. Watch with the child and discuss it as you're watching it, before and after. Talk about what they see, raise questions, get it so they're really processing the information."

The second major finding, says Dr. Hirsch, is that "putting limits on the amount of TV watching made a major difference in what the kids get out of television, and it almost didn't matter. . . whether [it was] a 30-minute-a-day or 2-hour-a-day limit." He explains, "Just

having that limit in place sends a message to the child that it's not just a passive, nonstop activity. It's something you think about and plan."

Dr. Hirsch found that children who watch a large amount of television programming are inclined to view the world as frightening, since violence occurs on TV far more frequently than it does in real life. The study also showed that children who watch television less than three hours a day are less aggressive than those who spend more hours in front of the screen. It is not yet clear whether television attracts children who are more aggressive or whether the viewing of so much violence contributes to the development of aggression among young watchers.

Lamenting television's lack of good educational programs for children, Dr. Hirsch concludes, "I think until parents stand up and say we need something *done*, until we're willing to take a stand and join organizations, until we're willing to write our legislators and really get on top of this, as long as we remain tacit about what's on the air for our kids, we'll continue to see the most minimal programming."