

Kafka's Metamorphosis

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My first extended solo venture into the world came at about age 10 years when I was signed up for a two-week stay at Camp Lakeland, a sleep-over camp run by the Jewish Center of Buffalo. Lakeland was very popular with the parents and children of middle-class Jewish families like my own in Western New York. When I arrived, I knew a few of the other kids from previous summers at the Center's day camp, but the vast majority of the other children and adults were strangers to me. I was assigned to a cabin of 10 boys with a counselor and assistant counselor, and soon discovered that the counselor, Sandy, was an adult unlike any person I had ever met. He was an intense but kind man, quietly intelligent, who nevertheless commanded and received respect. He ran a tight ship. We were expected to make our beds daily, keep the area around our bunks neat and clean, and follow the cabin rules without fail. For the most part we all did. It was a very functional little community, as was the rest of the camp that year. Sandy believed that it was helpful in getting 10-11 year-old boys to settle down for the night to read a story for 20 minutes as dark descended on our cabin.

The first story he chose was the *Metamorphosis* by Kafka, and as you might imagine, it was unlike any story that anyone had ever read to me in my brief 10 years of existence. In addition, several times a week after breakfast we would have a discussion of what we thought about the reading of the previous few nights. The discussions were also unlike any I had ever participated in at home or school. I didn't know quite what to make of them. Sandy would ask us to imagine how we would feel if we woke up one

morning in the body of cockroach, or what we thought the point of writing such a story might be? “Was it about the meaning of life?” he asked one morning. I didn’t know life was supposed to have a meaning, I thought only words had meanings. Despite the theme of the story and the unsettling nature of the discussions, I surprised myself by not being frightened either by the stories or bedtime. (I was frightened of the dark as a child, and truth be told I still don’t like the pitch-black darkness very much.) Something in the story and the subsequent discussions got my mind going in directions it had never traveled before, and each road I went down seemed to open up into two or three more. I remember some of the other boys thought the whole bedtime story and discussions “stupid,” and rumor had it that the reason Sandy was reading this to us was that he was in training to be a psychiatrist at Stanford University Medical School in California. Of course, I didn’t really know what a psychiatrist was or did, nor had I ever heard of Stanford back then, but it sounded like a big deal and I was duly impressed.

Lying in the dark hearing the story of Gregor and his attempt to adapt to life within the body of a cockroach was strangely fascinating. One problem, though, was that I had grown up in a pleasant suburban area of Buffalo that was free of cockroaches, and my interest in bugs had been exhausted by studying spiders in third grade. I decided the first night of the story that a cockroach must be like the centipedes we did have in our house, and which always made me mildly nauseous when I saw them crawling near me. I would try to imagine myself coordinating one hundred legs, or trying to turn over in the bunk bed without arms or hands for leverage and stability. That part was eerie, but once I got past that to the challenge of how he might overcome his predicament, re-connect with

his family, and ultimately find a way back to his human form, I was captivated. It never occurred to me that a story might not have a happy ending.

I was also intrigued by Gregor's observations of the people in his life, the disparity between how they thought and acted, and their complex relationships with each other. Knowing what I do now about the trajectory of my own life, I can see what I couldn't see then. This was the experience that sent me in the direction that ended in choosing a career as a clinical psychologist, specifically a psychologist interested in the impact of family relationships on personality development. It has been a very rewarding career studying what Kafka seemed to love most, the complex connections between our most important familial relationships and our deepest conscious and unconscious emotions.

Throughout these years, though I never read Kafka, the story of the *Metamorphosis* has crossed my mind innumerable times, and always with a kind of inexplicable joyfulness and sense of satisfaction, the way one remembers the words from a favorite childhood song one hasn't heard in years. I don't think I could have articulated before writing this essay why memories of such a gruesome story would have such positive associations. Those two weeks were the beginning of becoming an independent person, discovering the benefit of close relationships with adults and peers outside of the family, and developing ways of using my mind that had never been encouraged at home.

I have spent the last 40 years immersed in the theory and practice of clinical psychology and the philosophical questions imbedded in the study of psychology. Are the mind and the brain identical? If not, can we study the mind scientifically, or must we accept its inherent subjectivity and individuality? Can people with serious psychological problems like suicidal depression or psychotic delusions really be helped? If so, do we

help such people more by offering human compassion and support or by medical interventions such as electroconvulsive shock (ECT) or powerful mind altering drugs? As I read the *Metamorphosis* after a hiatus of 50 years, I cannot help but now approach it as a psychological case study of a man crushed by a seething resentment of the emptiness of both his work and family life—crushed the way a bug is crushed under the heel of a boot.

Dissociation

Yet, there is something quite incongruous about Gregor's psychological predicament. Looking back, I think that his almost quizzical and detached response to what one could only imagine as a most terrifying experience (the transformation from human to sub-human species) is probably what kept me from being too overwhelmed by the story as a ten-year old. How was it that he both recognized that he was now a cockroach and still thought he needed to get to work on time or notify the manager that he wouldn't be coming into work? Gregor seems to have the presence of mind to begin to discern how to control his new bodily form, but not the presence of mind to consider how horrified the family will be when they encounter his new appearance. Later, when he does realize how repulsive he is to the rest of the family, he still nurtures the belief that his beloved sister will care for him in a kindly manner. He can't understand how after months of trying to do so, she gives up and joins the parents in resenting his presence in the house as though that was all he was—just another a cockroach.

Kafka has captured the psychological process of dissociation that eluded Sigmund Freud who at the same point in history (the early 1900s) was developing psychoanalysis. Freud emphasized how when confronted with very painful experiences we repress them, pushing them out of awareness entirely, pretending to ourselves that the feelings and thoughts do not exist, and never have existed. It took psychoanalysts another fifty years to recognize the critical importance of the defense mechanism of *dissociation* that Kafka is illustrating in this story. In dissociation we don't repress thoughts and feelings entirely, but we switch back and forth between contradictory emotional states or beliefs (e.g., intense fear and complacency) without recognizing that we are doing so. When in one state of mind we act as if the other doesn't exist at all. There is a lack of what is called integration of the self. We all do this on occasion as we try to cope with unexpected or traumatic events. Children who have been seriously abused often become adults who dissociate quite often.

Kafka also anticipates in this fictional "clinical case study" the embryonic ideas that 75 years later would become the core of structural family therapy. Kafka offers remarkable detailed insights into the pattern of relationship within and between the different dyads and triads in the family: father-son, mother-son, father-mother-son, brother-sister, father-daughter, mother-daughter, father-mother-daughter, and eldest child-youngest child. We easily forget in psychology that the experience of being in a family can be radically different for each of the children or parents in the "same" family. It is these sub-systems of dyads and triads that partially explain those radically different experiences.

The Psychology of the Middle-Class Worker

Kafka also goes beyond Freud and the other early psychoanalysts by bringing to the analysis of an individual human mind the social, political and existential concerns that were being explored by writers in other fields. Gregor was struggling to get out of bed and go to work long before his metamorphosis into a cockroach. He already felt like a shell of a man, trapped in a mundane traveling salesman's job that he hated but could not leave because he had come to believe that he owed it to his parents and sister to support them. He had to be the strong man of the household because they were all so seemingly helpless. He couldn't quit, because his sister didn't wish to just have a job the way he did, but an artistic career as a musician. His parents arranged for him to commit himself to providing for that, too. He is the work-horse of the family and she is the pampered thoroughbred. Rather than expressing the resentment that he must have felt unconsciously, Gregor laments that his sudden inability to work may jeopardize her future. Like the African-American slaves who were enslaved as much by the master's indoctrination as by the boot or whip, Gregor cannot imagine a life lived any other way.

Then there are the reactions of the "helpless" family members to their suddenly incapacitated work horse. They are fearful and worried—not so much for his well-being but for their own. What will happen to them if he can't support them? Rather than care for this son who has sacrificed his life to their wishes, his parents are reduced to resentment, despair, and ultimately shame that they have such a defective son. They are ashamed of him in much the same way parents today may be ashamed when their children become unable to function in the community, exhibit the signs of psychological dis-

tress, and receive the stigma of a diagnosis of “mental illness.” His parents respond the way many today do when their children are labeled “schizophrenic,” a problem that often emerges in late adolescence as the child realizes he/she is unable to cope with the complex relationships of the work-a-day world. Even the mother, who seemed at first genuinely concerned for Gregor’s well-being, gradually distances herself to the point of just wishing him dead and gone from the house.

Perhaps this is the point that Kafka had in mind for us to ponder during a time when the industrialization and urbanization of Europe in the 19th century had rendered work for all but those at the very pinnacle of the pyramid a backbreaking, mind numbing, or soul-murdering experience. Even white-collar jobs like a traveling salesman, though not quite so physically taxing, were often meaningless and empty. Basic human relationships were disrupted by the constant travel, for only superficial relationships are possible with those one meets on the road, and those who remain back at the home office one rarely sees. In such an economic and social environment, even family relationships are reduced to a kind of utilitarian attitude of, “What have you done for me lately.”

A cockroach is a much despised pest against which many precautions are taken in order to avoid infestation. Gregor is treated little better than such a pest even before his metamorphosis, and in literally becoming a pest in this story he exposes the true quality of his relationships with those in his family, workplace, and even the strangers rooming in his own home. Being a cockroach-person among people who are somebody—who matter—is very dangerous. Once one reveals or unmasks the true nature of the exploitive relationships to those who would wish to preserve the status quo, one becomes as vile as a real cockroach, and target for extermination. Ironically, a person trapped in the web of

such a relationship to both the family and the world of work, one also becomes vile to oneself. Having created an allegory of the plight of the middle class white-collar worker in the early 20th century, Kafka then reverses the Freudian theme of the Oedipus complex where the son secretly wishes to kill the father, and has the father deliver a mortal wound to the son in order to prevent him from further upsetting the mother.

Finding Social and Political Meaning in Symptoms

There is a theory in psychoanalysis that all of our psychological symptoms no matter how severe or seemingly bizarre serve a psychological purpose. (This is contrasted with the medical view that such symptoms are just random mis-firings of neurons in the brain.) For psychoanalysis, even psychotic symptoms are an adaptation to the terrifying belief that one is about to be murdered. Symptoms are an attempt to survive, even in a diminished state, rather than be destroyed. Another way of looking at this is to assume that all symptoms communicate or express something meaningful about the state of affairs in a person's life. For example, physical pains like a pain in the neck may be the result of not being able to express directly to someone close that she/he is being "a-pain-in-the-neck."

Now if we take this theory and apply it to Gregor, we see that he has become an invalid, unable to function in the world, but requiring someone else to feed him and clean up after him. This is very much the status of people in our society who become severely disabled, either physically or mentally. Often times the initial period of disability allows

a relief from the stresses of trying to keep going in the face of insurmountable odds, and having no responsibility is a welcome change. Over time however, the disability intensifies the experience of being in danger, the feeling that others may wish one harm. Modern urban, industrial, and corporate life has little room for those who aren't self-sufficient and productive, unlike the agrarian and small town culture that had been the norm in Europe for over a thousand years before the industrial revolution. The psychiatrist Thomas Szasz, himself a Hungarian refugee writing 50 years after Kafka, has argued that modern mental patients are those people who rebel against the impossible social and economic circumstances of their impoverished or powerless station in life, but register their protest surreptitiously through their symptoms rather than through the more dangerous route of direct political protest. Choosing to be seen as "mad" rather than bad, such people trade their role of virtual serf for that of invalid or patient. This Gregor does by becoming the cockroach. In witnessing the family's reactions to him, we are forced to consider the serious flaws in both the family system, and a socio-economic system where members of a family are reduced to competing with one another for the meager status and benefits accorded to the one who is most incapacitated or dependent.

If one slips up and calls attention to the deplorable conditions of one's life as Gregor did, then that life, dreary as it is, becomes untenable. Those who call attention to such features of our social, economic and psychological landscape are often viewed as either visionary or deranged. Kafka joined Marx and Freud in taking that risk in stories like the *Metamorphosis* and *The Trial* (which Sandy also read to us that summer). These writers shared a belief that the modern era had produced a civilization that had reduced human existence for the vast majority of the population to a state of being where mind-

less, self-defeating, and irrational patterns of behavior were the norm. Only the person who could free him or herself from the shackles of institutionalized economic, political, religious and social conformity had a chance to survive at a level of existence higher than that of the cockroach. Those who simply followed the crowd, followed orders, believed everything they were told by their parents, took whatever job was available no matter how demeaning, and treated those with less power exactly as badly as they themselves had been treated, could eke out an existence. To openly reject such a fate leaves one essentially on one's own in the universe, flying solo, responsible for one's own fate, and for finding one's own meaning. That too is terrifying, but for some not nearly so deadening as being a cockroach just waiting for the exterminators to arrive—and arrive they did a generation later when the Nazis invaded Eastern Europe.