

CHAPTER 3

EARLY CHILDHOOD YEARS AND ADOLESCENCE

Small Beginnings

I was born on 11 March 1957 on a very rainy day, which makes me a Pisces in the true sense of the word. My mother's domestic worker called me Pulani, which means "rain child" in Sesotho. I was christened Cecilia Sanet Small. My names became an integral part of my identity. I was called Cecilia after my maternal grandmother and Cecilia became my academic persona, because this was the name I was called at school, university and work. I share this name with a group of other women in our family, including my maternal aunt and a favourite cousin. It is uncanny that the name "Cecilia" also imparted to its bearers an identity of kindness, caring, gentleness, sensibility, adaptability and diligence. Cecilia is also a very versatile name and spontaneous adaptations by friends and colleagues in various contexts to Cecils, Cecily, Celia, Cilly and Cis reflect my vocational diversity. Gergen (1991) would argue that my name has become a reconstruction of the particular relationship.

Sanet is a combination of the first names of my parents. It represents my biological roots and I have always felt strangely uncomfortable with it. This composite name is also symbolic of their efforts to fuse my identity into their "common self" (Bowen, 1988). "Small" is the surname, and people usually find it amusing, even though many (especially Afrikaans speakers) spell it incorrectly. It connects me to a family system. According to the *Collins concise English Dictionary* (Makins et al., 1993, p. 1268), the word "small" means "limited in size, of little importance, humble, to be humiliated, unimportant and trivial". This was therefore a most unfortunate choice of family name selected by my Scottish ancestors. It would seem that the multigenerational transmission process (Bowen, 1988) in a family system can start as early as writing a name on a birth certificate.

However, life gracefully provides us with a broader social context to assist with the healing of very old wounds and to fill in the gaps where the family cannot provide. I have always cherished my given name of Pulani, because it was chosen for me with great care as a welcome gift and it signifies my distinctiveness. This name represents the creative, intuitive and spiritual parts of my personality. These are highly valued qualities, carefully hidden for most of my childhood until much later when the spring rains finally came.

Two's Company

I was born six years after my parents were married. My father was the eldest of three children and the next sibling was born nine years after his birth (see Figure 3.1). My mother was the middle child in a family of five. Her parents died when she was in her late teens and she moved from a farm in Ficksburg to Johannesburg in search of employment. My father worked for the Post Office in the Cape and was transferred to Johannesburg, where he met and married my mother. Neither of their parents had had the financial means to give their children a tertiary education, and my father and mother had to save for a long time before they could afford a house. As in the creation of the universe, my parents first had to “sculpt” a home before they could start a family. Financial reasons were also offered to explain why they decided to have only one child. As was the case with our planet, my life was “chosen” to be the slate on which my parents could write their evolving selves.

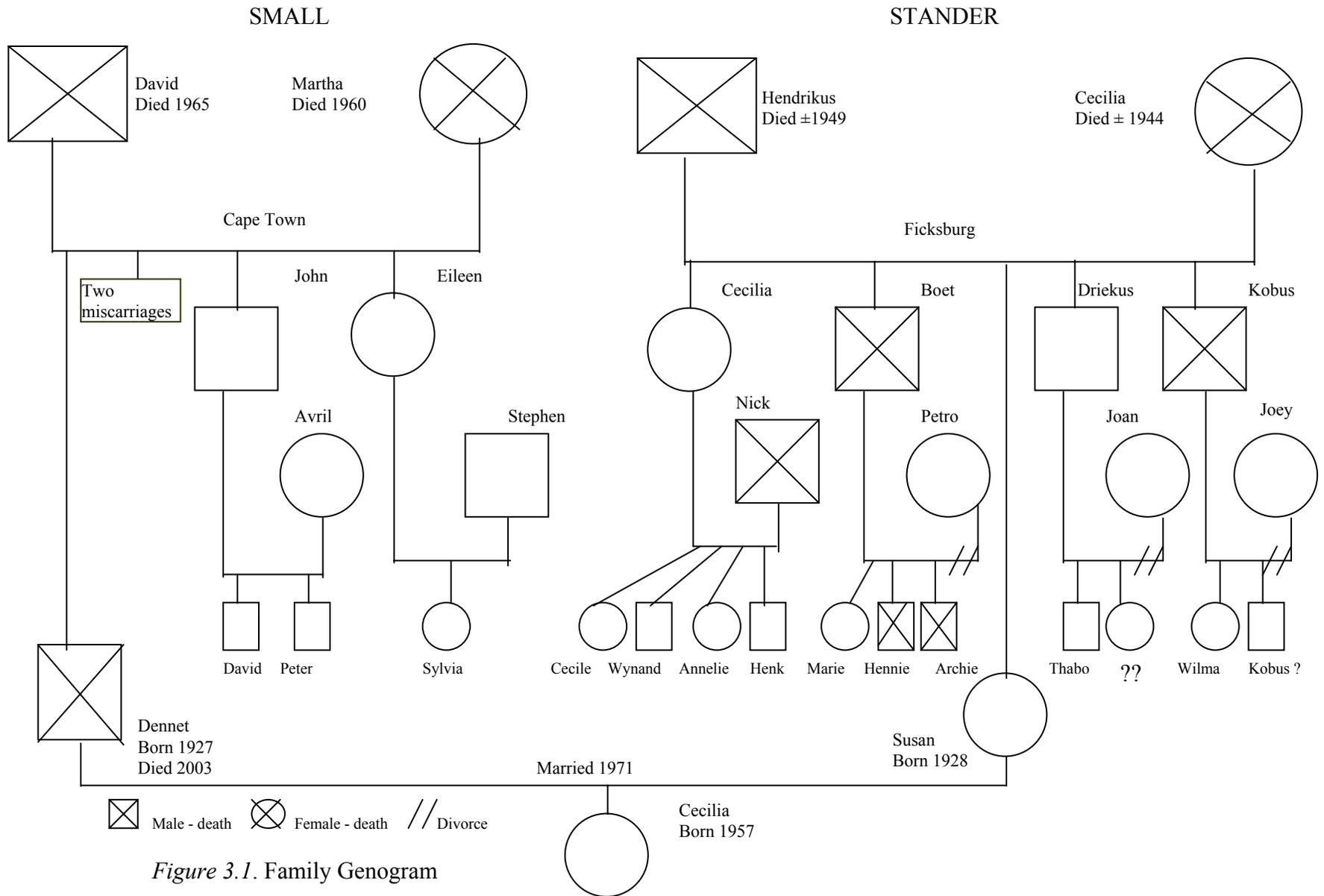


Figure 3.1. Family Genogram

These early life choices of my parents would have several implications for me. Characteristic of the baby boomer generation, they had high expectations for their child. An only child becomes the family mascot, the one who must achieve all the goals and satisfy all the ideals of the parents. This was a tall order, especially as my parents failed to realise that I might have dreams of my own. They also seemed to have an expectation that I would fulfil the roles of both son and daughter in our family. I developed a kind of androgynous identity where I would push my dolls around in the toy cars they bought me. They saw me as a combination of themselves and their aim was to shape my identity in the image of their own. Just as humans were created to link the work of the heavens with that on earth (Zohar & Marshall, 2001), I was to serve as the bridge between my parents' hopes and dreams, and the fears and limitations on their part that stood in the way of achieving these goals. My mother defined herself in terms of the precision of her bookkeeping career, cooking and baking for friends and a lifelong yearning to play the piano. She was the dominant member of the family (Bowen, 1988) and inherited her father's rage. However, she was also more sociable and caring than my father. Underneath her harsh exterior she hid her mother's vulnerable and sensitive side. My father sacrificed job satisfaction for stability, was a frustrated scientist throughout his life and dabbled in photography in his spare time. He considered himself a "*sagmoedige Neelsie*" and adored my mother. However, his interpersonal style was cold, intellectual and disconnected. He lacked interpersonal warmth and the social skills to form close relationships with anyone but my mother. I identified more with my mother than with my father, but my definition of self became a mixture of their identities. I have inherited my father's passion for science as well as some of his creativity, and I learnt interpersonal warmth and assertiveness from my mother. The one thing I seem to have inherited from both of them is their wacky sense of humour. Thus the dualistic nature of the universe (Bateson, 1980; Zohar & Marshall, 2001) is reflected in my parents and also within myself. The selves of both my parents contain the double description of rigour and imagination as described by Bateson (1980), and in both of them the potential for self-differentiation remained dormant in order to preserve emotional harmony (Bowen, 1988). It saddens me to think that they chose to differentiate vicariously through their child, instead of having the courage to

search within and initiate the unfolding of their innate selves (Bateson, 1980). My struggle with this duality became a lifelong attempt to integrate my strong, assertive side with my kinder, gentler qualities; I needed to establish interpersonal boundaries to protect the integrity of self, but I also wanted to be liked, accepted and respected by other people.

In my interpretation, my parents' ideal daughter had blue eyes and long, blond hair, played the piano and obtained a university degree. I had to be helpful in the house, obedient, never argue with them, always say "thank you" and not make too much noise. At first glance this does not seem too difficult an assignment and I tried to comply in order to gain their love and affection (in the manner described by Botha et al., 1995). A child evaluates her traits according to the value system of the parents, as explained by Botha et al. (1995), and therefore always having to be a polite and undemanding child robs one of the natural unfolding of the self and the opportunity of having a sounding board to test one's evolving qualities. The result is a skewed development with the emphasis on intellectual differentiation at the cost of emotional, psychosocial and spiritual differentiation. I would become Cecilia, the scholar, and Pulani would be my closet self, carefully shielded from danger. I also developed very vaguely defined interpersonal boundaries, as my family environment was too unsafe to test the limits of these boundaries. The severe consequences of violating family rules were an additional deterrent. The "togetherness forces" (Bowen, 1988) of our family required obedience and dedication akin to nunhood, with the result that the fires of individuality were systematically extinguished in me. If a child cannot push the envelope in a caring environment, it becomes difficult to build up enough courage to take life risks when there are no safety nets. You grow up to be a very small person indeed.

Like most adults, I have very few memories of my baby and toddler years apart from isolated fragments, photographs and family stories. I used to love my mother's anecdotes about my baby days because they conjured up an ambience of nurturing and caring. However, my parents' stiff body postures and physical distance from me in family photos belied these fables. I seem to have achieved the cognitive developmental goals of this period, such as the basic sensori-motor and language skills referred to by Erikson (cited in Botha et al., 1995; Louw & Louw, 1995),

without too much difficulty. I used my parents as role models for imitated behaviour and my family system to form basic concepts of myself and the world. At this stage my cognitive and emotional functioning was egocentric, which, according to Botha et al. (1995), means my understanding of the thoughts and emotions of my parents was at a simplistic, intuitive level and that I would have reflected the cause of their behaviour back upon myself. In terms of Lewis and Brooks-Gunn's description of this developmental stage, as cited in Botha et al. (1995), I would have had a sense of an existential self, in other words, that I existed as a separate entity with physical boundaries. If I search the folds of my mind, I can access the early encoded, non-linguistic perceptions (Bateson, 1980) of discomfort, rejection, fear and isolation, and surprise at isolated incidents of gentleness. From these early-memory engrams, I can conclude that I did not successfully resolve the first of Erikson's developmental crises, of trust versus mistrust to obtain hope. My perception of rejecting parents and my lack of trust in them probably played an important role in my rejection of formalised religious institutions and my inability to believe in a loving God, as Fowler (cited in Gerdes and van Ede, 1995) contends that a child's feelings of rejection may influence her religious development.

A close bond between my parents and I was never established and my current cognitive reasoning would conclude that this was due to a combination of my parents' lack of differentiation, their disconnection from their families of origin and my innate temperament (Bowen, 1988; Louw & Louw, 1995). Logically, the "goodness-of-fit" (Thomas and Chess, cited in Louw & Louw, 1995) between the emotional fusion of my parents (Bowen, 1988), their lack of nurturing parenting skills (Maccoby & Martin in Louw et al., 1995), my early independence (Erikson, cited in Meyer & van Ede, 1995) and my efforts to gain acceptance by exhibiting the desired behaviour (Kohlberg, cited in Louw et al., 1995) optimised the survival of the family system. However, on an emotional level, the early seed of doubt that there could be something inherently wrong with me that made me unlovable to other people would continue to sprout in the fertile ground of other close emotional systems. This confirms the notion, articulated by Botha et al. (1995), that a negative self-concept could give rise to poor social adjustment and plays an important role in the development of the child's personality.

Apparently I gave up on my parents at a very early age, and instead of clinging to them through insecurity due to inadequate emotional bonding, as Papalia and Olds (cited in Louw & Louw, 1995) would suggest, I explored the possibility of “greener grass” on the other side of the fence. My mother relates the story of how, as a very young toddler, I crossed the busy road in front of our house and took a long and leisurely stroll in the field across from our home. When my parents finally managed to track me down, I was a tiny figure amongst a herd of cows disappearing into the sunset. To say that they were not happy about my wanderlust would be superfluous and they made their displeasure at my undesired behaviour (Mussen et al., cited in Louw & Louw, 1995) clearly known and, as Bowen (1988) would predict, as soon as the symptoms were removed the warning bells regarding the underlying problem were silenced. On the surface it looked as if I had mastered Erikson’s second developmental crisis of synthesising autonomy versus shame and doubt to obtain willpower more successfully than I had negotiated the first crisis. However, my premature autonomy and willpower probably arose more from necessity than desire, while the shame of not being loved and doubts about my inherent qualities would eventually lead to a pseudo-differentiation (Bowen, 1988). My search for substitute parents had commenced, and I was lucky enough to acquire temporary “grandparents” in the neighbours who lived behind us. Whereas my parents were the strict disciplinarians, *Oupa* Dawid was a man of unlimited patience and unconditional acceptance. I used to spoil him with chocolates stolen from my mother’s cupboard, while he entertained me with his fisherman stories (I promised to take the secrets of how he made fishing rods to my grave). He gave me an appreciation for men of great quality that would allow me to recognise similar attributes in the men who would cross my path during adulthood, such as my psychology supervisor. These “grandparents” also symbolically modelled more appropriate interpersonal boundaries: *Oupa* Dawid erected a split-pole fence between our properties to ensure privacy, but at the bottom of the fence he constructed a little door that opened from both sides to allow access when desired.

My maternal aunt (also a Cecilia) and her husband were my godparents. My aunt took after my grandmother, and was kind, accepting and nurturing towards me. When I stayed over at their home she would coax me out of bed in the morning with

a song and invite me into the kitchen as if I was an honoured guest, rather than a sleepy child. She would sit me down at the table with coffee that had been brewing on her Aga coal stove for hours and was strong enough to wake the dead, with an ample supply of her homemade aniseed rusks. My uncle called me his palomino mare, because of my blond hair, and sneaked some pocket money into my hand whenever we departed for home. My four cousins welcomed me with open arms and I regarded them as my brothers and sisters. As Belsky (cited in Louw et al, 1995) suggests may happen, the support offered by my extended family helped to buffer some of the negative effects of my parental family. At their home I was called Pulani, the skinny, barefoot child who could usually be found up in a tree or who spent her time riding down the Outeniqua mountains on a freight train with her cousins (without tickets, but armed with a bag of oranges), sitting on the bow of a speedboat with the wind and spray rushing at her face or swimming naked with her (female) cousins in the local lagoon. I am convinced that my adopted grandparents and my godparents saved my life; even though I was indoctrinated from an early age not to make a nuisance of myself, these people provided me with a social awareness, positive role models (Botha et al., 1995) and a sense of solid self (Bowen, 1988) that would anchor me for the rest of my life. This is in line with the statement made by Botha et al. (1995) that other adults could have an important influence on the development of a child's self-concept. However, this is where the duality or double description of self (Bateson, 1980) started and it reflected the paradoxes of my family system. I adopted a non-intrusive, invisible self with my parents to meet their expectations and fit in with their rules and norms in an effort to be accepted (Kohlberg, cited in Louw et al., 1995). Within the family system of my godparents I could let the "wild child" out of the cage, but it had to be done secretly, behind my parents' back; and so I learnt that the jewels of the self had to be protected from the destructive forces of my family of origin.

Three's a Crowd

One and one do not make two; they make a triangle.

In my analysis (in this section) of my parents' marriage and of our family, I have applied Bowen's theoretical concepts as a means of discovering the constraints on differentiation that prevailed in our family system.

According to Bowen (1988), marriage partners select spouses with the same level of differentiation as themselves and reincarnate the attributes of the emotional systems of their families of origin. When my parents married, their individual ego boundaries were neutralised as their pseudo-selves fused into what Bowen refers to as a "common self" or a "united front" to achieve emotional unity and closeness. My mother was the executive officer of the common self and my father was the submissive employee who adapted to follow her lead. Even though my mother was the middle child, her exposure to an abusive home situation may have resulted in a resolve to reverse the power roles in her own marriage, and as a result she gained a higher level of functional self. In addition, my mother was favoured by her father as she was named after his beloved sister, and she probably expected the same level of devotion from my father. My father, on the other hand, probably had to contend with a severe case of sibling rivalry after being the "only child" of the marriage for six years. He could have experienced jealousy and a fear of losing his "mother's" love upon the arrival of a new baby. In doing my mother's bidding he probably hoped to retain her affection, but at the cost of losing self in the process. As time went by my father's solid self was eclipsed by the marital "common self" that served my mother's goals and needs. At times I felt sorry for him. He often seemed to be holding back a silent cry of desperation, particularly when, for example, even his hobby of photography was converted into an additional source of income. His assigned role of provider consisted of working and sleeping, which allowed very little breathing space for personal interests. Characteristic of people in the second quarter of the Differentiation of Self Scale, my father was aware of his intellectual capabilities, but his intellect and career became the common property of the relationship system. Eventually my father evaporated into a no-self and almost

regressed to an infantile state of dependence on my mother. It was frightening to watch his physical and psychosocial deterioration over the years and it instilled in me a fear of close emotional relationships, which apparently required a “death” of self. It was a price I was not prepared to pay. Much later in my parents’ marriage the dependency roles would be reversed when my mother became seriously ill.

As the discomfort of my parents’ emotional fusion increased, they had to find mechanisms to defuse the resultant suffocation anxiety, as Bowen (1988) terms it. My mother tended to avoid marital conflict because of unhappy childhood memories, and open conflict was incongruent with my father’s concept of himself as a meek and mild person. Dysfunction in my father, such as psychosomatic illnesses and alcohol abuse, as well as projection onto a child, seemed to be more viable options. The arrival of a baby six years after the start of the marriage brought some old fears to the surface for him. In our family system, where the open expression of emotions and opinions were forbidden, physical symptoms seemed to be the communication medium of choice. For my father, physical illness and asocial behaviour were a kind of passive aggression towards my mother and myself. These mechanisms also maintained enough emotional distance to allow each person a certain functional level of the pseudo-self. My mother retreated to her work and baking in the kitchen and my father to his scientific books and photographic dark room. I relied on the school system and my imagination to create contexts of differentiation. The rest of the marital emotional tension was contained by triangling me, as Bowen would put it, into a three-person system. The intensity of this projection process was heightened because of our family’s relative isolation from extended families and social systems. In addition, as the only child I had to take the full brunt of the projection of their undifferentiation.

There was constant competition for my mother’s attention. My father worked long hours and in his absence I was able to get closer to my mother, but as soon as he returned home they would pull up the drawbridge and I would be left out in the cold. I have vivid memories of them hugging each other, with me pressing my hands between their bodies, pleading: “Let me in, let me in!” As I got older my mother would often confide in me, and would ask me not to tell my father. These “little secrets” between us made me feel special and wanted. Triangling allowed tension to

be distributed across a three-person system as two members of our family would stay connected, while the third one would be frozen out. Thus I occupied one of two positions in my family: connectedness through triangulation by my mother or lack of connectedness as the outsider, with the result that I never developed a personal relationship with my father. My father's lack of social skills and eccentric behaviour often embarrassed my mother and I and we sometimes ganged up on him, which banished him to the role of outsider. It must have been humiliating and annoying for my father to have his child behaving so disrespectfully towards him. He would tolerate this kind of behaviour from my mother, because he was vying for her love, but I would eventually pay the price for my arrogance.

Due to my parents' low level of differentiation and high degree of "ego fusion", the equilibrium of our family system was tenuous. When stability was compromised due to life stressors during my adolescence, the functionality of the system crumbled and, as Bowen (1988) would have foreseen, this resulted in chronic emotional and psychological dysfunction. In our family system, emotional cut-off or disconnectedness alternated with emotional fusion or dysfunctional connectedness. However, my parents and I managed to retain a certain level of intellectual, goal-directed functioning. The lack of enduring cohesiveness and my quest for diversity and progressive differentiation posed a threat to the survival of the family system (Andolfi et al., 1983; Bowen, 1988). As I had never been welcomed into this family system I could not differentiate, and even when I left, I did not say goodbye.

Orphan Child

I was three years old when the angels came during the night to fetch grandma. We were spending the holiday with my paternal grandparents in Cape Town at the time, and my grandmother died suddenly and peacefully while we were all asleep. Her untimely death was a tremendous shock to everybody and with my immature understanding of events I tried to piece together how the angels got her through the burglar bars and why I was not allowed into her bedroom. I had an intuitive understanding of the finality of death, but I had a peaceful acceptance of its inevitability and was happy for her to be taken on such an exciting journey. We were not a very religious family and I did not have visions of a heaven, lined with streets

of gold. I cannot remember death ever being discussed in our family and it remains a mystery to me why I viewed it as a continuation of life rather than an end. My perceptions of a “God” and the implications of death at such an early age suggest reasoning on a concrete level characteristic of a child between four and seven years old (Fowler, cited in Gerdes & van Ede, 1995), as well as an intuitive understanding of events. Perhaps young children are more in tune with abstract concepts such as life after death, even though they may not yet have acquired the necessary cognitive capabilities to reason at this level.

Shortly after the funeral my mother decided to return to full-time employment, which meant I was abandoned by two important people in my life within a short period of time. Botha et al. (1995) say that separation from parents is traumatic for young children and that it may have an impact on their subsequent adjustment and functioning. My mother had to find someone to take care of me during the day, but at that time crèches, nursery schools and aftercare centres did not exist. The only option was to pay one of the housewives in the neighbourhood to take on the responsibility. I never knew how my parents managed to convince them, but these substitute families were usually reluctant to play the role of surrogate parents. My parents made it clear that they were working very hard and making sacrifices so that they could send me to university one day, and I was thus expected to be thankful that these people were prepared to look after me. Unfortunately, this message prevented me from telling them if there was anything amiss at the homes of these caretakers. While my parents were at work I stayed with six families over an eight-year period, and felt like an unwelcome burden for most of the time. I tried my utmost to be as invisible and undemanding as possible, but it never prevented the substitute families from rejecting me in the end. I became acutely aware of my “differentness” from other children. My parents both worked, I was an only child, I was left-handed, I had a funny English surname, I had thick, long hair that had to be managed by my mother and it made me feel like a baby. In addition, I had trouble with everyday skills such as making tea, telling the time or knowing the names of common objects such as cars or flowers, because nobody had bothered to teach me. I felt stupid and went to great lengths to hide my ignorance. This “differentness” gave me an early sense of differentiation from my peers, but unfortunately also a

separateness (Kirkpatrick, 1997) and awkwardness that would ultimately lead to isolation and loneliness.

This extended period of disconfirmation in various family contexts was the most pervasive and damaging in terms of my sense of self. I felt that I had no value as a person and the only way people would tolerate me was if I became invisible. As I was merely a visitor at these homes and felt no sense of belonging, I always had to be accommodating to the “legitimate” residents. The result was that I developed very pliable interpersonal boundaries and my “differentness” made me feel odd instead of special. However, the arrangement provided me with a unique insight into various family systems, as I was pushed and pulled by their internal rumblings without becoming enmeshed (Bowen, 1988). I also assimilated a variety of experiences during my stay with these families, which I put on ice for utilisation at a later stage of my life. Louw et al. (1995) state that these social learning experiences have an important influence on a child’s social development. Notwithstanding these positives, my personal growth and development were stunted by the continuous demands to fit in with new families and the embargo on expressing the qualities that defined me. I became progressively more disconnected from social systems by using my intellectual skills to develop a “don’t care” and “I’ll show them” attitude. I played a pseudo-self to the audience at hand, whilst the solid self was hiding in the wings (Bowen, 1988).

Teacher’s Pet

At the age of five I embarked on my predestined path to fulfil my parents’ dreams: I started grade one as well as piano lessons. I was a good student at school and my grade one teacher developed a fondness for me. My grade 1 teacher was caring and supportive, and in line with the research of Pederson, Faucher and Eaton (cited in Louw et al., 1995), she had an important influence on my overall development and academic progress. This was a fortunate break for me, because an older child in my substitute family, who was burdened with the task of walking me home in the afternoon, was a reluctant brother. I had by now achieved the higher level of emotional maturity referred to by Louw et al. (1995), and had the ability to understand the emotions of my surrogate brother. He regularly slipped out at the side

gate of the school, leaving me sitting on a bench with no idea of how to find my way home. My teacher, it seems, took pity on me and would take me home in her car. My parents were never informed about this situation, and eventually I came to the conclusion that it would be prudent to memorise the route home as I felt guilty that my teacher was being pressed into playing taxi driver for me. According to Piaget's theory (as cited in Louw et al., 1995), I had reached the concrete operational stage of cognitive development; logical thinking, considering various aspects of my predicament simultaneously and seeing things from the perspective of the other child, and my teacher permitted effective problem solving. Increased sensitivity to the emotions of other people and more advanced language skills also enabled me to communicate my problem clearly to my teacher (Louw et al., 1995), and I could make a realistic evaluation of possible long-term solutions. I had achieved greater emotional differentiation and was aware of the social rules regarding appropriate expression of emotion (Vander Zanden, cited in Louw et al., 1995); it would not have helped to make a big fuss or cry on my teacher's shoulder every day. I had to make deliberate use of memory strategies (Louw et al., 1995) to encode the various route markers along the road in order to find my way home. I faced Erikson's third developmental crisis and masked my feelings of guilt at being a nuisance by taking the initiative and striving purposefully to find a solution.

This was a pivotal point in my life. I came to the conclusion that I could not rely on the people who were supposed to take care of me, which indicates that Erikson's (cited in Meyer & van Ede, 1995) first developmental crisis had not been successfully resolved. I became fiercely independent (Andolfi et al., 1983; Erikson, cited in Meyer & van Ede, 1995) and decided that I would not impose on anybody. If I felt unwelcome in anybody's company, I would simply walk away. My personal pride and dignity would be protected at all costs, and I would never beg for anything. My mother was also a suitable role model in this quest. At a time when most women were homemakers and dependent on their husbands for money, my mother was earning a salary, had her own bank accounts and was managing independent financial investments. She was no pushover and took very little nonsense from anybody. I feared her, but I also respected her courage and determination. However, my experience of rejection and neglect became a looking glass into the emotional

world of other people and I developed a soft spot for the underdog. Louw et al. (1995) confirm that children become more sensitive towards the feelings of other people and exhibit more altruistic behaviour during middle childhood.

Louw et al. (1995) indicate that the school environment may be a source of support, and in my experience, the school context did, indeed, give me some of the recognition and validation I so desperately needed, and it played an important role in my development. The rules for acceptance by teachers were simple enough to follow. If you were an obedient, well-mannered and diligent student, you would gain their acceptance and recognition. Bowen (1988) would argue that at this level of differentiation my life goals would be relationship oriented, with the result that I had an almost adult relationship with my teachers and hardly ever tested my boundaries with them. In other words, satisfactory academic achievement became my meal ticket to acceptance and building a positive self-image, in line with Louw et al.'s (1995) observation that academic success facilitates the development of a positive self-image and feelings of self worth. At this stage I was at Kohlberg's preconventional level of moral development and I therefore followed the rules and regulations of the school system to obtain recognition and avoid rejection. My intellectual self became the tool of connectedness to other people, but my emotional and social selves remained hidden most of the time. This became a point of great irritation to my music teacher, because I played the piano like a robot, without a hint of emotion. I had not been very keen on music lessons in the first place and she ended up smoking an entire pack of cigarettes each lesson and writing long letters of complaint to my parents. You can only kick a dog so far, and I had learnt from my father that rebelliousness (Bowen, 1988,) in the form of passive aggression, allows you some measure of individuation without the dire consequences of open defiance.

My parents had an interesting parenting style, especially regarding my schoolwork. On the one hand they demanded conformity and obedience with threats of punishment, in typical authoritarian style (Baumrind, cited in Louw et al., 1995). This had a negative effect on my self-esteem, hampered the development of social skills and made me shy away from strangers, as Louw et al. (1995) predict. It was clear that they expected me to deliver good academic performance and to obtain a university degree, but they did not make the details of their expectations clear and

their involvement in my schoolwork was minimal, typical of the uninvolved parenting style described by Maccoby and Martin (cited in Louw et al., 1995). My experience of parents who oscillated between an expectation of unconditional obedience and complete disinterest made it difficult for me to believe in a caring God who had my best interests at heart. I could not accept a God, as described by Fowler (cited in Gerdes & van Ede, 1995) as a “parent” who was fair and in whom I could place my trust. I always had a “best friend” at school and the exclusivity of this bond provided a feeling of belonging (Louw et al., 1995). My peer group at school was particularly valuable to me as an only child, because it allowed interaction with equals and a context in which I could experiment with various roles without fear of punishment (Louw et al., 1995). I had twin friends at school and for some reason I tested my boundaries with them to the point of near destruction of the relationship. However, they remained gracious and never pushed me aside, even when we had to move to Kimberly for a year and they made new friends while I was away. My interaction with supportive social systems such as school, my friendships with peers, achieving academic success and striving towards the “ideal self” as sketched by my parents, influenced my developing self-concept and social functioning (Louw et al., 1995). Academic diligence helped me hide personal feelings of inferiority and a pseudo-differentiation was cloaked in a facade of achieving competence in the skills required for adult life (Erikson, cited in Meyer & van Ede, 1995).

Hunger

At age eleven I became independently dependent. When I got the boot from the last family I stayed with while my parents were at work, I decided that this was where I drew the line. I had had enough of reluctant caregivers and I told my mother that if she would give me a key to the house, I could take care of myself during the afternoon. She seemed happy to be relieved of the burden of looking yet again for another home for me and glad that I had reached a level of maturity that permitted more autonomy (Thom, 1995). What she did not know was that I swore an oath to make very sure that I would not impose on anybody ever again. At this stage I was entering adolescence and was becoming more self-sufficient in preparation for adult life (Thom, 1995). I was entering Piaget’s stage of formal operations. Scientific thinking allowed me to consider various factors with regard to the lack of aftercare

facilities, considering a number of possible solutions and constructing hypotheses regarding the pragmatic implementation of my plans. Formal thinking increased my awareness of the complexity of the personalities and family structure of my “surrogate” parents and I realised that simplistic solutions such as being the “good girl”, as described by Kohlberg (cited in Thom, 1995) would not solve this ongoing problem. My cognitive maturity, which had reached the level of formal operations (Piaget, cited in Thom, 1995) and social awareness allowed me to make a realistic evaluation of my situation and I realised that if members of my community were not willing to act as caretakers for me, there was not much point in trying to force the issue.

On the surface everything seemed under control, as my academic progress was good; but inside me a hunger for warmth, nurturing and attention was growing stronger every day. My peer group and teachers played an important role in my social development, as explained by Louw et al. (1995) and Thom (1995). Even though there was a definite socio-economic class distinction at the high school I attended, association was based on the “birds of a feather” rule rather than on rejection of non-members by a particular group. I had a best friend whom I had known since primary school, and this friendship provided acceptance, companionship and confirmation of my budding self. We shared most of our dreams, expectations and fears with each other (Thom, 1995). However, the core issues of rejection and loneliness remained hidden behind the facade of academic achievement. I was attempting to establish my own identity and was looking for suitable role models to emulate (Thom, 1995), and with whom I could test my own boundaries. I could not identify with my parents and had trouble consolidating my androgynous characteristics into a suitable female sex-role identity (Thom, 1995). I was re-evaluating the value system of my parental home (Kohlberg, cited in Thom, 1995) and developing an awareness of myself as an individual with independent views as described by Erikson (cited in Thom, 1995). On the surface I adhered to the conventional level of moral development; I obeyed the rules at home like a “good girl” and at school I followed safety rules, such as not leaving the grounds during school hours, because they made sense to me (Kohlberg, cited in Thom, 1995). However, formal operational thinking allowed me to view rules as a “gentleman’s

agreement” that should promote the interests of all the parties involved (Kohlberg, cited in Thom, 1995). I was also entering the phase of synthetically conventional religious belief and was starting to think more abstractly about broader religious concepts instead of adhering dogmatically to the rituals of organised religion (Fowler, cited in Gerdes & van Ede, 1995). However, my parents’ mixture of authoritarian and uninvolved parenting styles (Louw et al., 1995) did not permit open discussion and exploration of our differing moral and religious views. In an urban social environment, suitable role models and replacement parents are in short supply and nobody welcomes a clingy, needy teenager, so I kept my distance and tried to absorb as much nurturing as possible in an indirect manner, using my imagination to fill in the gaps. My parents stayed blissfully unaware of what was happening to me. They had enough on their plate, in any event, dealing with my mother’s alcoholic and very depressed brother who had moved in with us. It was the only time I can remember that I thought my parents’ marriage was under threat.

Sacrifices

According to Bowen (1988), the symptoms of childhood can escalate to major symptomatology at adolescence during stressful periods. This view is supported by Andolfi et al. (1983), whose views confirm that symptomatic behaviour in our family developed during a period of stress that required adaptation. The tension of our threesome became unmanageable and another family was triangled into the system (Bowen, 1988). My differentiating aspects of self could no longer be glued together into the restrictive self-concept of the obedient schoolgirl established during childhood, but my family of origin could not accommodate the changes of adolescence or assist me to integrate them into a stable identity (Erikson, cited in Thom, 1995). I had not yet acquired the skills of post-formal operational thinking (Gerdes & van Ede, 1995) and could not formulate or communicate my problem adequately; I felt that I was driven by a force beyond my comprehension or control.

At the age of 15 I ran away from home to a family I hardly knew, and informed them that I could not stay with my parents anymore. They were enormously shocked and promptly phoned my parents to fetch me. They told my parents everything I had shared with them in confidence and said they never wanted

to see me again. My mother projected her family and marriage-related anxiety onto me, and as my father was always very attuned to my mother's emotions, he supported her plan of action to reduce the level of stress. He took off his belt and proceeded to give me the hiding of my life while my mother watched. My parents showed no emotion at all and the episode had the macabre atmosphere of a public execution. It was a deeply humiliating experience and I had to beg my father to stop. My mother gave him the instruction to do so when she thought that I had learnt my lesson. I had, however, lost all respect for my father as he had seemed to follow my mother's orders blindly without having any will of his own. At last, he had had the chance to take his revenge on me for the years of disparaging remarks made by the mother-daughter dyad and, as an extra bonus, he had gained my mother's approval. I had been sacrificed to protect their marriage from crumbling.

The developmental changes that accompanied my adolescence required a transformation of the interactional patterns in our family to which Andolfi et al. (1983) refer. However, in an effort to re-establish equilibrium and to ensure family cohesiveness and continuity, my parents responded by rigidly adhering to the previously established family structure, individual roles and family rules (Andolfi, 1980). However, they had won the battle but lost the war. They threatened to send me away to boarding school, but I managed to convince them that I would repent for my sins. I quietly took all my diaries and personal notes into the back yard and burnt this "evidence". Then I salvaged what was left of myself by emotionally disconnecting from the triad. I divorced my parents, retreated to my bedroom and viewed them as nothing more than fellow lodgers in a boarding house. This decision saved my sanity, but nearly destroyed my life. As I became the obedient, subservient child once more and my uncle moved out, the focus of the symptom was removed and the family behaved as if the problem had been "cured" (Bowen, 1988). However, it was like trying to hold a ball under water. Despite all your efforts to keep it under the surface, it is bound to pop up somewhere else at a time when you least expect it.

Only much later did I understand that I was searching for appropriate role models and a sense of belonging in order to consolidate my identity, differentiate and become autonomous (Erikson, cited in Thom, 1995). Running away from home was a rebellious act to expose the inadequacies of my parental home in meeting my

adolescent developmental needs and was an extreme attempt to obtain assistance in the midst of an identity crisis. I had, however, betrayed my parents by confiding in someone outside the family system. This would be the “forbidden fruit” that would lead to an exile from my family of origin. Like Adam and Eve, I had learnt my first lesson about the double-edged sword of differentiation: If I remained undifferentiated I would become just like my parents, as predicted by Bowen (1988), but striving for differentiation would be a solitary exercise without their support. The behaviour of my parents during this adolescent crisis was characteristic of people in the second quarter of Bowen’s (1988) Differentiation of Self Scale. My mother intellectualised their actions as “concern” for my safety during my running away episode and the goal of their efforts was to ensure that I would not take such “risks” again. My father kept his logical reasoning regarding this episode to himself and acted in accordance with my mother’s wishes to re-establish emotional equilibrium at all costs. Even though he was capable of intellectual decision-making, he relied on dogmatic authoritativeness and unquestioning compliance without considering extenuating circumstances.

My father has always held the conviction that children are not capable of understanding what is best for them and should be forced into correct behaviour. He viewed my communication for help as “misbehaving” and “upsetting” my mother, and acted accordingly to correct the transgression. Neither he nor my mother seemed capable of giving consideration to my emotional world or viewing events from a meta-perspective in an effort to understand why I had behaved in such an uncharacteristic way. They did not realise that my behaviour was an indication of my need for differentiation and independence, and they were incapable of adjusting to the changes that accompanied the normal life cycle of the family and of its individual members (Andolfi, 1980). I had become the “identified patient” in the family triangle, and this little upheaval offered the opportunity to seek assistance, thus supporting Whitaker’s (cited in Andolfi, 1980) belief that once a family system becomes dysfunctional the family is not able to heal itself without professional help. As the saying goes, though, there are none as blind as those who will not see, and once the dust settled it was decided that we would not speak of this event again. However, the “ghosts” of these original relationship patterns became engraved in my

self and were resurrected upon exposure to emotional and vocational contexts during adulthood. Bateson (1980) warns that these early symbolic representations of our social world has an effect on our subsequent perceptions and responses. I resolved Erikson's identity versus role confusion developmental crisis via an apparent identity foreclosure as a result of parental pressure for conformation and family equilibrium. Below the surface, an identity confusion remained, which as Erikson predicts would make the integration of various roles during adulthood extremely difficult. It would give rise to anxiety, anger, insecurity, indecisiveness, procrastination and interpersonal conflict. I would also experience continuous difficulties applying my abilities to establish a meaningful career.