

CHAPTER 4

UNIVERSITY AND WORK

A Sugar-Coated Pill

We never went on holiday without an entire suitcase filled with pills and potions. In our undifferentiated family we communicated via physical symptoms, and my parents were therefore the proud owners of numerous bottles of prescription medicines (cf. Bowen, 1988). Some of these, such as their antihypertensive medication, were essential, but the rest were kept on standby to manage a variety of aches, pains and worries. Their preoccupation with illness and medication notwithstanding, my parents seemed blissfully unconcerned about my physical wellbeing. I was a fairly healthy, active child and regularly came home with scrapes and bruises. Treating these minor injuries always seemed like such a big imposition upon them that eventually I learnt to attend to them myself. Even when the problems were more serious – a ruptured eardrum and a broken wrist – I had to tell them that I needed medical attention. This lack of concern and care about my physical and emotional wellbeing are characteristic of their uninvolved parenting style (Louw et al., 1995). It is then also not surprising that my choice of a future career leaned towards medicine. Healing in our family would have to start on the physical level.

I completed matric with university exemption and passed my teacher's diploma in modern piano. By my calculations I had accomplished what my parents expected of me. I had become the blue-eyed, blond-haired, piano-playing academic. I now wanted to become a medical doctor, but my parents tried to convince me that it was a difficult career choice for a woman in terms of the impact of marriage and a family. They thought that a pharmaceutical career would provide me with more flexible employment options. Unfortunately they did not do their homework well and knew too little about the career opportunities in medicine to venture an informed opinion. Choosing a career in modern society is a difficult task and parents should explore a number of factors, such as the interests and abilities of the adolescent, academic qualifications required, diverse career opportunities, current salary structures and the future viability of a career before final decisions are made (Thom, 1995). However, as pharmacy was, at least, a profession in the medical field, I finally

conceded. I was accepted at Potchefstroom University for the BPharm degree and my path to learning more about my parents' vast array of little pills commenced.

My parents had impressed upon me that they had saved for my studies since my birth and I felt obliged to ensure that I passed each year, even though the senior students tried to convince me that nobody completed the degree in the allocated four years. I therefore refrained from taking part in most of the student activities that would keep me away from my books, and I buckled down to my studies. This early isolation from the social activities of student life in favour of academic success would have a far-reaching effect on my later ability to develop intimate relationships and find a suitable marriage partner (Erikson, cited in Meyer & van Ede, 1995).

Most of my fellow students did not have wealthy parents and had been uprooted from their families, who were living far away, with the result that we formed our own little family. My need for a "substitute" family to fulfil my emotional needs arose from my lack of differentiation and cut-off from my family of origin (Bowen, 1988). The social support of a close-knit group provided healing when tragedy threatened relationships and budding careers. My two best friends were involved in a serious car accident on the first day of our second-year exams. One of them sustained extensive facial injuries that left scars on her pretty, young face. This was my first experience of helping someone else through a period of bitterness and regret, and I was impressed by her courage and the resilience of human nature in overcoming adversity. My relationships with fellow students were characterised by an autonomous interdependence, which functioned as a reciprocal support system offering companionship, security, support, acceptance and a sense of belonging stemming from a group identity (Thom, 1995).

The pharmacy students at Potchefstroom University were an elite group and had a reputation for working hard and playing hard. We had more classes than everyone else, were always hauling huge books to the campus and wore white coats, covered with an array of colourful spots and strange holes. On occasion we were seen dashing out of laboratories when something caught fire, and on Friday evenings nobody wanted to sit next to us in the dining-hall after our shark dissections at Zoology practicals. I even came back from class one day with a frog in my briefcase, which made its escape in the residence and caused chaos. This sense of

“differentness” from the rest of the student group gave me a sense of “uniqueness”, but it remained a pseudo-differentiation as it was based on only one aspect of the self, namely academic performance. For recreation we indulged in “slap chips” and a milkshake at the local cafe, followed by a film at our only movie theatre, affectionately known as the “20th”. The audience was always a lively crowd, consisting of university and college students and lecturers, naughty kids from the local boarding schools, deprived army guys and inmates from our local mental institution. I have fond memories of long, leisurely walks down oak-lined streets after fresh spring rains and students waving cheerfully as they pedalled past on their bicycles. However, sugar-coated pills tend to hide a bitter core. At this stage I had been assimilated into a student system that had settled down to a comfortable equilibrium, but the dysfunctionality of my underlying schism of self would not remain hidden forever (Bowen, 1988).

Separation Anxiety

I had always thought women went to university to obtain a degree, but I discovered in my final year that you are supposed to find a husband and the degree is just “something to fall back on”. However, by then it was too late for a romantic endeavour. Four years of drunken male students returning to their residences behind ours had also shattered my naive ideas of serenades at midnight and long-stemmed red roses. A few years earlier I had been promptly discarded after my first romantic kiss under an oak tree and by now I had given up on the proverbial prince on a white horse. My compartmentalisation of self for the purpose of academic development, in the absence of intimate relationships, prevented the synthesis of the intimacy versus isolation developmental crisis that Erikson (cited in Meyer & van Ede, 1995) maintains is needed in order to establish a loving relationship.

Another startling realisation also came my way. I had somehow thought that when I returned home with the cherished family degree, the doors of heaven would open and I would be welcomed into the loving arms of my parents. However, their behaviour towards me during the preceding four years had grown colder and more distant and I was disturbed when it dawned on me that nothing would change: I would be going home to the same emptiness at the end of the year. My whole life

had been focused on this goal, to the exclusion of everything else, and suddenly I knew that I had been tricked. It was as if I had led a pious life of abstinence, only to discover that God does not exist and there is no heaven. Post-formal operational thinking permitted a critical re-evaluation of the paradoxical communication in my family of origin (Bateson, 1980; Gerdes & van Ede, 1995). I could use logical argumentation to review interactional patterns within the family system, factors which contributed to dysfunction in individual members, processes of change and the possibility of a different outcome (Gerdes & van Ede, 1995).

I somehow got it into my head that if I stopped eating I would be thinner and more acceptable to people. A retrospective analysis indicates regression to a lower level of development and a child-like plea for assistance via physical symptoms in order to differentiate and consolidate my identity (Andolfi, 1980; Bowen, 1988; Erikson, cited in Thom, 1995). Eventually I felt so tired that I had trouble walking to the campus and my concerned friends came around with coffee and rusks. My marks started dropping and I did not know where to turn for assistance. My lack of emotional differentiation and the unresolved identity crisis of adolescence resurfaced and I did not have the necessary internal resources to deal adequately with this new reality (Bowen, 1988; Erikson, cited in Thom, 1995). However, I could fall back on my post-formal operational thinking (Gerdes & van Ede, 1995) to mobilise external resources to provide a more innovative solution to this complex interpersonal problem. I had a pharmacology lecturer whom I trusted and respected and I went to see her at the Campus Medical Services, on the pretext of a medical problem, to test the waters. She was kind and considerate and eventually I entrusted her with the details of my home situation. She listened with compassion and it was a huge relief to finally have someone who validated my feelings without judgment or rejection. Then she did something that changed my life: She referred me to the psychology department for counselling and a whole new world of possibilities opened up for me. This was a world of warmth where I was allowed to express my emotions and my dignity was respected. The psychologist made one point very clear: I had to get out of my parents' house as soon as possible. I developed a great appreciation for the extraordinary kindness shown to me at a time of crisis, and it is still the human quality that I value most. I had revisited Erikson's trust versus mistrust

developmental crisis (Meyer & van Ede, 1995) and acquired a certain level of hope that I would complete my studies successfully and could initiate some important life changes upon graduation.

The oral pharmacology exam was our last paper and by then most of the students had already left the campus. I said my sad good-byes and returned to the residence to pack the last of my belongings into my car. It was a hot summer's day and small clouds of dust and leaves were swirling around in the hot afternoon breeze between the deserted buildings. The sound of eager young voices had gone from the place I had called home for four years, and the desolation spelt the death of an era. The family mascot was coming home. This kind of departure highlights the tragedy of substitute families: They offer a temporary oasis of belonging in the desolation of the desert, but ultimately everybody packs up their tents to continue their life's journey and all that is left are dust and memories (Bowen, 1988). I had formed an attachment to my fellow students and the loss of this social support system once more led to a sense of abandonment and isolation. Gerdes and van Ede (1995) confirm that attachment is a core element in adult relationships and termination of these attachments can be very traumatic, even for an adult.

Out on a Limb

My pharmacy internship at the Hillbrow Hospital gave me an excellent clinical background, a very high regard for nursing staff and a strong stomach. I was the ward pharmacist for the surgical intensive care unit and the septic ward. Both provided me with good learning experiences and rewarding challenges. When the new Johannesburg Hospital opened, we moved over and I stayed on for another year at the end of my internship to gain additional experience. I still harboured a frustrated medical doctor within and the clinical environment provided me with opportunities to ease my yearning. The work environment replaced academic life to give a framework to my life and occupational success enhanced my self-esteem and self-confidence (Gerdes & van Ede, 1995).

I lived with my parents during my internship year as I was earning the vast sum of R300,00 per month and still had to pay off a student loan. As predicted, the atmosphere at home was as chilly as ever and I remembered the wise words of my

counsellor in Potchefstroom. The following year I moved into a flat in Hillbrow, which was close to the hospital and more convenient when I was on standby at night. I became good friends with some of the pharmacists and nursing staff, and my social life expanded. The hospital system became my new substitute family, which offered essential socialisation opportunities to experiment with new roles and fulfilled some of my emotional and psychosocial needs (Bowen, 1988; Gerdes & van Ede, 1995). It proved to be a good decision to move out of my parents' home. The only problem was that my parents' home had not left me (Bowen, 1988).

Whilst living with my parents I resorted to emotional isolation to deal with the unresolved emotional attachment described by Bowen (1988) to my family of origin. As Bowen predicts, moving out activated more extreme methods of emotional cut-off from the family system by creating a physical as well as an emotional distance while I was trying to convince myself that I could escape its tentacles; but the emotional attachment remained in the form of a continuous search for replacement families that would offer sufficient closeness and acceptance for healing and differentiation. Yet, as Bowen further predicts, as soon as I came into contact with emotional systems that had a family structure I would run away. The "caring" in these imitation families seemed superficial and made me feel dependent, vulnerable and pathetic. I also repeated the relationship patterns and the role definition of my family of origin in these "substitute" families, with the result that I often ended up feeling disrespected, disconfirmed and rejected, and eventually became the outsider. The result was that I started leading a nomadic existence and did not make a home for myself anywhere (Bowen, 1988). I viewed all systems as temporary stopovers and my mottoes in life became "I travel light" and "the only person you can rely on is yourself". Later, however, during my psychology training, when the temperature would rise in emotional contexts, I was caught between a rock and a hard place. I could not run because I was committed to the course and I could not hide because I had to face my supervisors on a daily basis. It was an entirely new and frightful experience to stay emotionally connected and take the pain involved when the scabs were scratched from old wounds.

Final Offer

I had learnt my first lesson in paradoxical communication at my parents' hands (Bateson, 1980). I had achieved all they asked of me and yet I had the distinct feeling that they ended up hating me for achieving the very things they had been denied. My father had always tried to compete with me, and insisted on trying to study further and take music lessons while I was a child. Not much came of these endeavours and his long working hours probably contributed to the demise of his lofty plans. In a moment of anger he told me once that he would make sure that I would not get anything that he was not allowed to have. This provides a window of shocking clarity into his mind. Unwittingly, he had expressed a well-known truth that my chances of reaching a higher level of differentiation than his own were very slim indeed (Bowen, 1988). This should be a warning to all parents who try to live their lives through their children and to the children who oblige. The way to hell really is paved with good intentions. The outcome is that, as Bowen points out, "spreading" the undifferentiation amongst family members only helps to maintain a precarious ambience of peace and quiet, and creates a "lose-lose" situation in terms of the differentiation of individual members.

I was as poor as a church mouse, but my parents seemed to feel that they had helped me to a professional qualification and had paid their dues. My flat contained only the barest essentials, acquired second-hand, and it would have made an interior decorator weep into her muesli. According to Levinson (cited in Gerdes & van Ede, 1995), this period is typical of young adulthood, when a person has to become self-sufficient, build new occupational and social life structures and assume responsibility for an autonomous life.

Furniture had to wait, however, because I was hatching a different plan of action. I was motivated by the hospital environment to further my clinical knowledge and decided to do an Honours degree in pharmacology at Potchefstroom University. It was also a way of reconnecting with an academic environment that had been "home" for me, and a last ditch attempt to gain acceptance from my parents. The "return visit" to the home of my "student family" was an attempt at differentiation from my parental as well as my academic families of origin in order to explore other facets of the self (Bowen, 1988). This time, I did not tell my parents that I would be studying further and decided that I would pay for it myself. My parents had the nasty

habit of playing the role of long-suffering parents who made tremendous sacrifices to enable me to study. Family and friends regarded me as the “spoilt only child” who got everything on a plate. I was tired of feeling guilty and defending myself against these accusations. For this degree I would be able to claim ownership, because they did not have to fork out a cent. I convinced myself that I had finally departed from my family of origin, but living in secrecy only represented a more extreme level of emotional cut-off (Bowen, 1988).

Enrolling for this degree meant that I had to drive through to Potchefstroom every second week, and only returned home after midnight. It made for a long day and a dangerous trip home for a woman on her own. We were only twelve people in the class and as postgraduate students we had a higher status in the department, which meant closer and more meaningful interaction with our lecturers. Once more I had found a temporary replacement family to provide a sense of belonging and it satisfied some of my emotional needs (Bowen, 1988). I also discovered my skill as a surgeon during our practical classes. If I had studied medicine, it would have given me great satisfaction to do reconstructive surgery after accidents or fixing birth defects. There is something artistic and healing about giving somebody a new face and a new life that would have given me great joy. I had to deal with my sense of loss at the realisation that my adolescent identity foreclosure had permanently sealed the door to exploring my original career choice of practicing medicine, which had remained a latent possibility until this time (Erikson, cited in Thom, 1995). However, healing through reconstruction takes on many different forms.

Pygmalion

The second time around at Potchefstroom I did not just get a degree, I also found romance. Unfortunately he was already taken, but he was an impressive man and the first time he held my hand I fell in love. For once in my life I was the chosen and the beloved, and it was an offer I could not refuse. In terms of Bowen’s (1988) conceptualisation, committing to this relationship against my better judgement was indicative of my level of relative undifferentiation, characterised by my search for a relationship that would satisfy my hunger for love and approval. However, always waiting for the crumbs to fall off the rich man’s table can prove to be very frustrating

and sometimes hunger would seem preferable. Our times together were bittersweet and the parting was a wrenching experience. He was considerate and loving and gave me an insight into the psychological world of men. I came to realise that they are not all such cold fish as my father, and I was surprised at his depth of feeling and sensitivity. He was supportive of my studies, but also valued me as a woman. This was an important step in differentiating an emotional self. I learnt to be more comfortable with emotional and physical closeness. I also rediscovered a respect and appreciation for men of quality, as interaction with him proved to be an enriching experience. However, all good things must come to an end and he finally ended the relationship. This relationship was a “pressure cooker” of development in which the dialectic opposites described by Erikson (cited in Meyer & van Ede, 1995) had to be reprocessed. I had to deal with trust versus mistrust towards this person, weigh up personal autonomy against the shame of emotional dependence, take initiative to establish closeness whilst coping with the guilt of a forbidden relationship, display industry in my work and studies versus feelings of inferiority due to his higher occupational status, contrast my identity as an intellectual person versus the role confusion of emotional irrationality and the intimacy versus isolation that characterised our relationship. Even though these Eriksonian crises (Meyer & van Ede, 1995) were only partially resolved, I was hopeful that I would eventually meet someone else and had the willpower to purposefully search for a suitable partner, I felt more competent to handle close emotional relationships, I had expanded my female role identity and had gained some experience of a “love” relationship.

Corporate Animals

The end of a romantic liaison just after starting a new job is bad karma. I had decided to make a career move to the pharmaceutical industry and was just finding my feet when my lover dropped the bomb. I tried to be sensible about being dumped, because I had known it would come at some stage, and I tried to keep my composure at work. As I was not used to the severity of the emotional impact of such a significant loss, I coped by shutting down my feelings. However, this proved to be as futile as trying to hold a ball under the water. What my mind would not acknowledge, my body recognised. My health deteriorated rapidly and stress played a major part in turning my physical weak spots into clinical illness. As Bowen (1988)

suggests, developing physical symptoms in response to emotional stress coincided with the communicational patterns acquired from my family of origin. Once Pandora's box had been opened, it was not that easy to shove the demons back inside. With time I learnt to overcome the loss and move on, but the symptoms had made a home for themselves. This confirms Bowen's view that people with lower levels of differentiation tend to develop symptoms when faced with a major life stressor and that the dysfunction may become chronic. Gerdes and van Ede (1995) also state that the termination of close personal relationships during adulthood is traumatic and can result in physical symptoms. Through all the turmoil I managed to complete my Honours degree and decided to inform my parents about my closet qualification. At my graduation ceremony they revelled in being in the limelight again, but they remained cold and distant towards me. They tarnished an otherwise pleasant day, and I decided that I would never again invite them to a ceremony such as this. For a long time I had thought that there was something inherently missing within me that made me unlovable, but I now started wondering whether their attitude was not rather a reflection of their own inability to love.

I started doing competitive ballroom dancing, and as I had wanted to dance since childhood this was the fulfilment of a dream for me. It forced me to give up the invisibility of a wallflower for a spot in the limelight. This was a step towards individuation of self, and dancing represented an expansion of self-definition (Andolfi et al., 1983; Gould, cited in Gerdes & van Ede, 1995). When I was recruited by a large multinational pharmaceutical company in 1984, I thought I had it made, but that was when the trouble started. Within the first week I had an odd feeling of discomfort that increased as time went by. I started to realise that this company portrayed the image of being "people orientated" and a "large happy family" on the surface, but underneath all was not well. I saw how people gradually lost all traces of individuality and started dressing, behaving and even thinking the same way. The company would zero in on people's vulnerabilities and start exploiting them to their advantage. Aggressive behaviour and power games were viewed as the hallmarks of successful and ambitious employees, whilst any traces of softness and kindness were ridiculed as signs of weakness. These people seemed to lack a basic sense of common decency in their behaviour towards others. Instead of trusting my instincts

and getting out, I thought there must be something wrong with me, as I was the only one that seemed to feel this way. I ended up staying for eight years. According to Bowen (1988), due to the unresolved emotional attachments to my parental family, I initially bought into the fallacy of the benevolent corporate family system. Decision-making and advancement in this company were done on the basis of alliances, emotional blackmail and abuse of power that Bowen maintains are similar to what one might find in dysfunctional families. The corporate “parents” based their assessment of corporate health and employee happiness on profit and fringe benefits, whilst remaining oblivious to the dangerous undercurrents of abuse, arrogance, paranoia and distrust. I could sense the danger, but unfortunately, as Bowen would have pointed out, I did not take responsibility for the role I was playing in maintaining the system and as a result felt helpless to effect change.

After my hurt and disappointment over the ending of my love relationship had diminished somewhat, I met someone else with whom I could establish a close, long-term relationship. My partner and I bought a house together and although we were very close, we both eventually realised that a marriage would never work. I had chosen someone with the same level of undifferentiation as myself, and his family system was also characterised by disconnection and emotional cut-off (Bowen, 1988). However, we were both functioning at the level of post-formal operational thinking and had a sufficient level of solid self to propel us in the direction of personal goals rather than emotional fusion (Bowen, 1988; Gerdes & van Ede, 1995).

So, here I was working for a very prestigious company, with a dashing young lover and a cupboard full of beautiful ballroom dresses – and I was still desperately unhappy, so much so that I started developing panic attacks. I knew that this situation was eroding my life like a cancer and that I had to do something, but I felt paralysed. I had a tendency to disconnect from emotionally charged relationships, but I had always been committed to academic and vocational systems. Because my pride and self-concept as a stable employee prevented me from leaving the corporation, I achieved emotional distance from an untenable situation by developing physical symptoms in accordance with the patterns learnt during childhood (Bateson, 1980; Bowen, 1988). At the end of 1992 the situation came to a head during a confrontation at work, and I decided that it was time to abandon ship. I felt

humiliated and ashamed that I had failed so miserably in my private as well as my professional life. So I did the one thing I knew best; I ran away from my corporate home and added to the burden of unresolved emotional attachments I was dragging around with me (Bowen, 1988). It was clear that I had still not successfully negotiated Erikson's developmental tasks (cited in Meyer & van Ede, 1995), such as trust versus mistrust, autonomy versus shame, initiative versus guilt, industry versus inferiority, identity versus role confusion and intimacy versus isolation. My vaguely defined self-concept and identity foreclosure led to disappointment with my career choice and uncertainty about my ability to establish meaningful vocational goals (Thom, 1995).

A New Dawn

I believe that in the face of obliteration of the self, the self will emerge. People's individuality and unique personalities were so suppressed at this company that I became rebellious and started fighting to be my own person (Andolfi, 1980, Bowen, 1988). The problem was that the "authentic" person had been in hiding for so long that she had become a stranger to me (Gergen, 1991). I also came to detest falseness and treating people with disrespect. I had advanced to Kohlberg's post-conventional level of morality (cited in Thom, 1995), which meant my internal compass was based on universal ethical principals that would protect individual rights as well as personal dignity and promote the wellbeing of larger social systems. My moral values kicked in with a vengeance, and I would not tolerate humiliation in the name of corporate discipline. I also learnt to trust my instincts and realised that when something seemed wrong, it probably was. I had come of age in the corporate world and had developed a healthy cynicism about that environment. I realised that corporations are mere simulations of caring families and that if a crisis looms, your beloved colleagues will sell you out at the drop of a hat. Bowen (1988) rightly warns against companies whose power structure is similar to that of dysfunctional families, pointing out that their interactional patterns pose a threat to the long-term survival of these organisations. I reframed my view of employment from family membership and loyalty to renting out my services and time to the company for a fee. I owed them a high standard of ethical and professional work and they owed me a salary at the end of the month – that was all. I became intrigued by the price we pay for

system membership and how we are shaped by it. This brought up renewed doubts about the wisdom of committing to a marriage, especially when I considered the destructive patterns in my family of origin. As Bowen (1988) would put it, I had achieved a higher level of differentiation in the sense that I could utilise both my emotional and intellectual systems to evaluate a situation and had developed well-defined principles and convictions, even though I was still hesitant to express them openly. I had also reached the stage of individualising reflective belief in my religious development and I became very critical of the perceived rigidity, superficiality and dogmatism of organised religion (Fowler, cited in Gerdes & van Ede, 1995). In the meantime, my relationship with my long-term partner had deteriorated to the point where we decided to sell our house and live separately. My life was in a shambles, and I felt very alone and frightened. I put on a brave face and went for interviews to try and find alternative employment. As luck would have it, I managed to land myself a position in clinical drug research with a family-owned corporation.

This step heralded a new phase of my life. My confidence slowly returned and even though the ten-year relationship with my partner had finally ended, I felt that things had taken a turn for the better. Something else happened to me. I had faced humiliation, rejection, a loss of self-esteem, illness, financial loss and the demise of a close relationship and I had nevertheless prevailed. I had fought so hard against losing my sense of identity and becoming just another clone, that I now had a clearer picture of who I was. Perhaps we sometimes need to get lost before we can find ourselves. I was angry with myself for wasting eight precious years of my life without having the courage to do anything about it. However, life is a strange place. Hardship tends to make you tougher and more streetwise, but it also makes you wiser and kinder to yourself and others.

With this realisation, the path I had travelled up to this point started to make sense to me. I knew that I wanted to be a clinical psychologist and this time I would not settle for second best. This was a calling that I had to answer, otherwise I would be diminished as a person. Even though I was still settling into a new job and a new home, I enrolled at Unisa for my undergraduate courses in psychology. This sequence of events was the catalyst that awakened my latent ability to individuate

and differentiate (Andolfi et al., 1983). I no longer viewed my “difference” as a dysfunction, but rather as something to celebrate and elaborate upon.

I had a long way to go: two years part-time to do Psychology I, II and III, and then another three years for the Honours course. Clinical drug research involves long hours and a great deal of air travel to different cities, and I probably did the bulk of my studying sitting at airports and on airplanes. I got used to feeling somewhat tired all the time and I became a confirmed coffee addict. At least now I was out of the starting blocks, but it was tough working and studying at the same time. People told me it could not be done, but I had heard that one before. Two years later I was admitted to the Honours psychology programme on the basis of my pharmacy degree and undergraduate psychology results. After another three years of studying and many late nights, D-day had finally arrived.