

Becoming a Secure Base and Safe Haven to Others (ii) by taking personal responsibility



Unknown to his wife and even to himself, *Mr Tan's rage was more deep-seated than he had thought. The meltdown came three months into their marriage.

The wife had cooked dinner and had expected him to stop his mahjong game with neighbours to join her at home. When he insisted on playing another round, she nagged at him in annoyance. In a fit of rage, he threw a piece of mahjong tile at her. That meltdown spiralled into an unsalvageable breakdown leading to their divorce three years later.

A probe into Mr Tan's past would help to connect the dots. It would explain the above incident and how it possibly sparked off a series of unfortunate events, leading to his marital breakdown.

Mr Tan was the eldest child. His three younger siblings were born one year after another. As a child, he was a real handful. He always got into trouble with the neighbourhood kids. His mother constantly complained about him to his father. Before he was old enough for school, his father would often tie his legs to a table until he returned from work. In Primary School, he was the only student who did not have his parents' consent to go on excursion trips. Mr Tan recounted his past with the same resentment and grievance as if he was reliving it. What he felt was rage and frustration, borne out of a deep sense of powerlessness against perceived injustice, undeserved shame and unreasonable control.

Mr Tan had no awareness nor understanding that he had carried issues of his childhood into his marriage. He did not recognize that the childhood pain he had experienced had not been processed and so became unresolved issues which affected the way he would relate with others in later life. That cost him his marriage and many other relationships.

His wife's behaviour had triggered the rage lurking in him. Like having stepped on a landmine, she had unknowingly reopened the wound. When an unhealed latent wound is reopened, the other person's response often takes the form of strong emotional reaction and impulsive behaviour which are usually disproportionate to the situation. This was in Mr Tan's case. This is a result of being led by irrational and distorted perceptions, activated by latent toxic beliefs, the existence of which he had no awareness of. They are also usually accompanied by strong physical sensations in the person. Subconsciously, he would have felt the same undeserved shame and unreasonable control as he had experienced with his father. The here-and-now conflict has become reenactments of incidents in his earlier life.

Like Mr Tan, the wife was probably triggered too by Mr Tan's behaviour due to her own unresolved issues. Neither of them could experience the other as a safe haven in the marriage. The breakdown was almost inevitable.

Does it mean therefore that our difficult childhood would spell doom in our marriage and in our other relationships? No, not always. It is true that hurt people hurt others because we tend to recreate the damage to our loved ones what was done to us in the past. If we are however cognizant of this syndrome and begin to make sense of them, make peace with our past, with ourselves, with those involved, the damage can be stopped in its tracks. Unfortunately, this is easier said than done. Before one can come to that place of deciding to make sense of their past, they have to recognise their need to take appropriate personal responsibility. It is in this area of taking personal responsibility that most fall short of.

**fictitious name*

Connect-Point

The past is not dead, it is not even past. The past lives on in everything we think, feel, say and do. It is an active participant in our lives. (William Faulkner)

We may not have been able to control the hurtful events that happened in the past. But we have to recognize that we *now have the power* over how we want to continue to experience those events and change their hold over us. Unfortunately, we often deny ourselves of this power. Instead, we succumb to playing the blame game, the waiting game and the complaining game.

Why is this our default mode? It's our fallen nature. Blaming, waiting and complaining provide us subconsciously with an excuse for not taking action. We would say, "The other person is at fault. She has to change, not me." The truth is, we have no control over others' behaviour or actions. The only control we have is over ours. We do the changing that is needed. The other person may do theirs when they see our change. That is taking personal responsibility. It often creates a chain effect in the relationship, resulting, we hope, in more changes.

Although a full-grown adult, Mr Tan was still stuck in his blame (of his parents), his shame (feeling looked down upon) and helplessness (feeling constantly victimized) as he was as a child. It didn't help that he made an inner vow to block out memories of that chapter of his life. He continued to be held hostage by self-pity, bitterness, resentment, unforgiveness, shame, victimization, self-rejection and fear of rejection. All of which triggered his rage. He blamed his wife for triggering his rage and complained about her harshness, impatience and lack of understanding towards him.

Being self-absorbed in his own pain, Mr Tan could not discharge his responsibility over his wife and children, to ensure that they feel safe with him, that they could enjoy stability harmony and love. A true adult would consider these as desirable values to be upheld for his/her family. And if things were not working out as they should or as he/she desires, a responsible adult would check if his/her own actions and behaviours have affected the lives of his/her loved ones. Instead of pointing fingers at others, he would take personal responsibility to look within himself to see what needs to be changed.

He must recognize that he has the power within himself to self-reflect, examine and change course for the betterment of his family. That, Mr Tan was not able to do. He had no one to journey with who could ask him difficult questions to help him confront himself. He needed courage, honesty and humility to start taking personal responsibility, to rise up and take actions. He needed help to get out of the rut of self-centeredness, selfishness and self-pity.

It is only when Mr Tan is willing to take ownership for the relationship breakdown, when he admits that he had contributed to the bad state of affairs, that things will look up. It is when Mr Tan acknowledges that he has not been the parent/spouse he had wanted to be because he had been overtaken by something within him, and that this pattern was not desirable, that the work of helping him to make sense of and make peace with his past can begin. (Next article)

When we are able to rise up to take personal responsibility whether in relationships or in other areas of our lives, it will not only be the best gift we can offer ourselves, it is also the most loving thing we can do for those who depend on us to be their secure base and safe haven.

