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Excerpts from THE ENCHANTED SELF, A Positive Therapy

By Dr. Barbara Becker Holstein

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In my years as a psychologist, I have come to believe that most people seeking psychotherapy are unhappy not only because of earlier hurts and traumas, as well as present frustrations and problems, but because they cannot access earlier happy moments often enough. Resulting in not being able to experience enough positive states of well-being. It is these unique states of well being that I have come to label THE ENCHANTED SELF.

Many scientists of human behavior recognize that we do not yet, and perhaps never can, fully understand human nature. I have become more and more convinced that we do not. For example, what interests me is that we do not fully understand some people, who have apparently fortunate lives but experience little joy, while others, apparently less fortunate, experience great joy. Perhaps we have tried too hard to understand pathology in our science of psychology while we have not tried hard enough to recognize and understand what I call ego-states, or happiness.

When I first began to analyze data from the women I interviewed, I kept trying to understand how their enchanted adult lives evolved from the childhoods they talked about. I found that although there seemed to be some clear connections, many others were not clear at all.

The capacities of these women to reclaim positive aspects of their childhood, while discarding the dysfunction that was often also present, was astounding to me. It seemed as if a magic wand had been tapped on the women's heads in their adult lives.

For example, when Edith talked about her childhood, she at first remembered only its dysfunctional aspects: the fighting between her parents and their constant criticality. I suggested that we go back and look again at her childhood to identify times when in spite of the pain of family life, she felt excited about her own life and about herself. With the encouragement, she could separate out positive memories of herself from dysfunctional family experiences and she remembered some wonderful times: delightful family picnics, fishing with her grandfather, etc.

An activity you can do to start on the positive road of Enchantment:

What are some golden moments in your childhood when you felt particularly happy? These moments can be from any age, from your earliest memories through early adulthood. When you find a golden memory, enjoy it. See yourself at that age and experiment with letting different senses reconnect to that happy time. Can you remember the way your body felt? Can you remember what activity you were engaged in? Were there any smells? What was the weather like? How did things look around you? What did your mood feel like? Take time to really enjoy this happy memory of yourself.

I wish you a joyful journey. I hope that your life feels whole and that you find your past, whether beautiful or painful, a repertoire of talents and capabilities is that are uniquely yours. I hope that your talents, capacities and potential will give you a sense of well being as they thrust you into the world in meaningful ways.

Barbara Becker Holstein, Ed.D., is a psychologist in private practice. Her book, THE ENCHANTED SELF, A Positive Therapy, published by Harwood Academic Press, is now available at your local bookstore. (The Sources, February 1999)

Dr. Holstein is the originator of The Enchanted Self and a psychologist since 1981. She is the author of two books: The Enchanted Self, A Positive Therapy and Recipes for Enchantment, The Secret Ingredient is YOU! Dr. Holstein speaks on radio, and appears on television in NY and NJ. She gives lectures, seminars, retreats and audio interviews on LadybugLive.com and is in private practice in Long Branch, NJ with her husband, Dr. Russell Holstein.

Beginning to Reclaim My ENCHANTED SELF – Part 1

By Dr. Barbara Becker Holstein

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Please stay with me as I share this excerpt from The Enchanted Self, A Positive Therapy over two weeks with you. This section reveals the way that I initially began to reclaim my own Enchanted Self.

My enchanted self was beginning to emerge, unpeeling as an onion is unpeeled, layer by layer. This is important because I think so many of us shy away from our innermost positive feelings perhaps as much as we do from the dark shadows around us. The search for The Enchanted Self is intimate in revealing and it's scary — and maybe people really won't understand or appreciate it. Maybe we have to fight through shame or humiliation before we find it. Maybe we won't understand or give credit to our own enchanted selves when we do! That would be the most violating thing of all, if I were to find my own enchanted self and then discard it. If I can't have it anymore, because I thrown it out.

One of my first self-discoveries was recognizing my lost capacities for engaging with people without being paid. As I interviewed the women I realized how much fun I was having, how I felt on equal footing and yet privileged to be hearing their stories, how "female" I felt and how connected. I loved this wonderful opportunity to have time with women that was not social time and yet not work time, either. I began to realize how hungry I had been for this kind of "at ease time" with women. My childhood had

pushed me away from such time with women. After all, I had to get out, to get going, to be competent and, often, competitive, not connected.

The second layer was feeling profoundly more connected to women, all women, than I had ever felt before. I found myself suddenly able to ally myself with and have compassion for many women, an ability which had eluded me prior to these interviews. Family members, friends, my mother, all took a softer hue.

As therapists, we can certainly wonder why this hadn't happened as a result of my training and my time in therapy. After all, I had been exposed to hundreds and hundreds of intimate stories over 15 years. My hunch is that while in the treatment room, I, like any paid healing professional, saw myself, to some extent, as being in the authority position. This may have reinforced some natural biases that I carried with me from my childhood. I think I continue to withhold some deep level of empathy, still seem myself as being apart. When interviewing the women, however, I was automatically their equal, and that placed me differently. Having the privilege of listening to the 18 women, began to listen to other women's voices with less bias and value judgments. For example, I had always valued certain capacities, such as pragmatic decision-making and the capacity to carry through once a decision had been made. This is a capacity which can be restricted for women. After this glimpse into the girlhood dreams and shattered hopes of many of the women interviewed — the compromises made with life and the painful, yet successful ways of salvaging one's soul after many lost opportunities — I was able to cross a barrier and join them at some level of womanhood — removing my old iron bars, my negativity and judgments.

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