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# The Role of Loss in Personality

Development in Terms of the  
Theory of Positive Disintegration

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Abstract

To my knowledge Dabrowski never produced a systematic study focusing exclusively on the consequences of personal loss (e.g., of a parent or of a spouse). However throughout his published works there are numerous references to the phenomenon. In this presentation I will make use of these scattered references to articulate a Dabrowskian theory of the developmental function of loss. Briefly the theory is as follows. Those who possess psychic overexcitability (especially of the emotional and imaginal kinds) develop intense attachments to the significant persons in their lives, with the consequence that when they sustain a loss of one of these significant persons, their mourning is correspondingly intense. This intense mourning can result in one or another form of dysfunctional behaviour, the production of creative works, or personality development. In some cases, e.g., Michelangelo, all three are found in the same person.

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Although I wish to focus on Dabrowski's treatment of the role of personal loss in the development of the personality, this phenomenon needs to be understood as a specific instance of a much broader principle. It is Dabrowski's contention that some measure of frustration of basic needs is necessary for personal growth. In an

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For the development of higher needs and higher emotions, it is necessary to have partial frustrations, some inner conflicts, some deficits in basic needs, some difficulties in the realization of the needs arising from the biological life cycle....

It is also a necessity to have some sadness and grief, depressions, hesitations, loneliness, awareness of death and various other painful experiences which lead us to replace our bonds to what is common, sensual, easy to replace...to that which is individual, exclusive, lasting, etc.

This means that in the process of fulfilling basic needs, there should remain some dissatisfaction to make room for introducing conditions that would permit the realization of human authenticity, and under which appears and matures awareness of and sensitivity to the meaning of life, to existential, and even transcendental concerns, hierarchies of values, intuition, even contemplation.

Unpleasant experiences, and particularly existential shock and anxiety assist the growth of sensitivity to other people and to one's own development. This does not mean that we can discount the possibility of a positive developmental impact of joyful moments, intense experiences of happiness, either past, present or anticipated.

[But] We lay special stress upon the creative role of "negative" experiences, because their developmental role is often overlooked and misunderstood. (Dabrowski, 1970:35-36)

By frustrating basic, or lower level, physiological needs, a space is made, so to speak, for the emergence of higher level motivations. But negative experiences are not sufficient in themselves. These may provide the space, but the dynamic force has to come from psychic overexcitability. In addition, a certain level of personality development has to have been attained.

Dabrowski maintains that it is only those who are emotionally sensitive and who are in a state of "developmental readiness" (i.e., experience life in multilevel terms) that can make use of suffering and failure in their growth towards secondary integration. This view is expressed in a passage from Personality-shaping through positive disintegration:

In its global form, the process of secondary integration...takes place [only] with persons who are "prepared" for it, [who are] universally sensitive, and who possess a distinct developmental readiness. This process is already shaped by poignant experiences, suffering, and failures in life. (Dabrowski, 1967:137-138)

Thus to profit developmentally from experiences of frustration or failure an individual should possess psychic overexcitability and be at a sufficiently advanced stage of personality (i.e., spontaneous multilevel disintegration). According to the above remarks, negative experiences simply shape the developmental process and/or create the spaces for the developmental process to emerge into full awareness, presumably by diminishing interest in pleasurable distractions in the external environment.

The point that emotional overexcitability and developmental readiness are necessary if negative experiences are to be catalysts for growth is also made by Dabrowski in his discussions of reactions to grave experiences. The manner in which one reacts to negative experience including personal loss, varies according to the level of

personality. Reactions at level II (or unilevel disintegration) are characterized by regression and escapism.

At times of grave experiences the action of affective memory can be overpowering and manifested as intense longing for maternal care, or as recourse to magic, animism, dreams. An escape from depressing reality to the carefree world of emotional warmth and fantasy is a means of self-protection and also a means of looking for a way out of actual difficulties. (Dabrowski, 1974:178; and Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977:167)

On the other hand, reactions on the third level of personality (or spontaneous multilevel disintegration) reflect developmental concerns. In his account of sadness at level III (or spontaneous multilevel disintegration) Dabrowski emphasizes personal loss as a cause of sadness.

One of the most intense experiences of pain and sadness is separation from loved ones, the experience of breaking or separation of an exclusive relationship, the realization that death may come and separate forever. Sadness, grief and despair are often evoked by the realization that those we love do not return to us after death. (Dabrowski, 1974:141; and Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977:130)

But in the paragraph preceding the one just cited, the focus is on sadness resulting from the contemplation of one's shortcomings. In this paragraph, Dabrowski says that at level III,

Sadness achieves a higher level...This is directly related to transformations involved in the hierarchization of values. Such a new and different way of valuation leads to sadness over one's own imperfection, over distance from the ideal, and over lack of sufficiently active creativity. Sadness here is very clearly provoked by the dynamisms of astonishment with oneself, dissatisfaction with oneself, feelings of shame and guilt, and also positive maladjustment to lower levels and lower types of reality. (Dabrowski, 1974:141; and Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977:130)

Here sadness is not said to be caused by an external situation, but by a realization that one falls short of one's ideals. And no explicit connection is made between the sadness that results from loss and the sadness that is experienced as a result of self-evaluation. Nevertheless it follows logically that when a person at level III sustains the loss of someone close to them, the consequent sadness would result in an increase of self-recrimination and self-criticism.

And Dabrowski implies as much in a passage in which he contrasts reactions to personal loss of "normal" persons with the reactions of neurasthenics.

A normal person on the death of even an intimate friend or relative, usually suffers a slight shock which does not leave deeper impressions. Not so with psychasthenics or neurasthenics, who are inclined to exaggerated self-analysis, phobias, and depression, "striving for ideals and homesick for eternity." (Dabrowski, 1937:29-30)

Those who are neurasthenic (i.e., who possesses emotional overexcitability) will be deeply affected by the experience of loss, and affected in a way that encourages the growth of their personality. As a result of the loss they will very likely strive for some transcendent ideal and engage in self-analysis, in addition to experiencing phobias and depression.

In his analysis of depression in *The dynamics of concepts*, Dabrowski states that depression is a common consequence of misfortune, failure and other kinds of loss, including personal loss.

It is characteristic that states of sadness, and frequently states of depression, are encountered whenever we find...misfortune, failure, loss and breakdown taking place; whenever former interests and ways, of experiencing the world and oneself are inadequate and new ones have not yet been formed. This process happens during puberty when there is excessive sadness in comparison to previous periods, in mourning and following disappointments... (Dabrowski, Kawczak & Sochanska, 1973:156-157)

In the same section of *The dynamics of concepts*, Dabrowski describes the developmental potential of "creative depression."

In addition to pathological elements, there are positive elements in the structure and development of the majority of depressive states. The emotions associated with depression--feeling of inferiority, dissatisfaction with oneself, disquietude with oneself, feelings of shame and guilt--play a fundamental role in the development of an individual. They are the essential characteristics of the first, spontaneous phase of building a multilevel inner psychic milieu--that is to say, a phase of preparation for the activity of the third factor and autonomous dynamisms... (Dabrowski, Kawczak & Sochanska, 1973:156)

Here the depression that follows loss does not just help in withdrawing attention to external distractions, but is given a more critical role in the developmental process. Depression is nothing less than the source of many of the developmental dynamisms of multilevel disintegration. Although it should be recalled that the kind of creative depression being described occurs only in cases where psychic overexcitability is present and where a certain measure of personality development has already taken place.

In articulating a general theory of loss from the perspective of the theory of positive disintegration mention should be made of one more aspect and that is the role of emotional support, encouragement and guidance. A supportive environment is not always equally important in the view of Dabrowski. As he explains in an essay in *Mental growth through positive disintegration*,

We can distinguish three main forms of interaction between innate potentials [including psychic overexcitability] and environmental influences:

- (1) If the developmental potential is distinctly positive or negative, the influence of the environment is less important.
- (2) If the developmental potential does not exhibit any distinct quality, the influence of the environment is important and it may go in either direction.
- (3) If the developmental potential is weak or difficult to specify, the influence of the environment may prove decisive, positively or negatively. (Dabrowski, 1970:34)

When the genetically determined developmental potential is strong, personality development is almost inevitable. When developmental potential is weak, then personality development is all but impossible. In other

cases environmental factors (favourable or unfavourable) will be more influential.

An example of someone for whom Dabrowski considered the environment would be important is the case of a 34-year old woman, whose boyfriend had died and whose mother was terminally ill, presented by Dabrowski in *Psychoneurosis* is not an illness. In his clinical diagnosis, Dabrowski states,

This patient represents a clear instance of multilevel disintegration, even if limited in scope. We are dealing in this case with such strong forms of emotional and imaginal overexcitability and with such distinct introversion that under the impact of grave experiences and also pressure of complex experiential contents, there appears to take place a not totally conscious uncovering of the basic dynamisms of positive breakdown. (Dabrowski, 1972:29)

Since the process of personality disintegration was not fully conscious, and since she may have been at risk for schizophrenia or suicide, Dabrowski felt that a supportive environment would be important for the realization of her potential and thus in his therapeutic indications he says,

The therapy should concentrate upon developmental and creative forces both in the patient's inner psychic milieu and in her external environment. These forces should be used to increase her interest in life and to promote further mental growth. Despite her depressions and suicidal tendencies she had a high level of enthusiasm which could be awakened by strong authentic agents (e.g., getting involved in [a] valid and important social movement, [a] great love or [a] friendship). Such development...needs to include...a search for new friendships to be developed with a deeply empathetic attitude. It would be absolutely necessary to help her find such friends. (Dabrowski, 1972:29-30)

A second case in which Dabrowski sees a supportive environment as critical is that of a 20-year old woman referred to as Irene. Irene, whose case is reported in *Mental growth through positive disintegration*, was deeply affected by the death of her mother to the point of attempting suicide. Part of Dabrowski's analysis of her is as follows:

It appears that she had not adequate mental transformational abilities. Due to this limitation, high mental tension led to a split into two personalities which...was a safety valve against suicide or schizophrenia... her emotional tension, empathy, and sense of duty were of a high level, but the dynamism of inner psychic transformation was comparatively weak.

From the standpoint of the theory of positive disintegration...The patient [shows signs of]...the beginning of spontaneous multilevel disintegration. (Dabrowski, 1972:47)

Again we have an instance of someone who while possessing developmental potential, her actual development was limited and she was at risk for mental illness.

Dabrowski's therapeutic recommendations in this case included emotional support, education, especially in the area of personality development, artistic expression, and someone to take an interest in her.

The patient needs the support of a warm human environment, assistance in working out a program of further education and in the sublimation of her emotional life. The development of artistic abilities might help the patient find a sense of life. (Dabrowski, 1972:47)

...she should be given assistance in her education, above all self-development, which should aim at positive, perhaps accelerated growth...Of fundamental value, also, would be the formation of deeper intellectual capacities which would bring discrimination into the emotional and moral aspects of her life. Of great importance would be a friendly...interest taken in her total development such that she might find some compensation for her abruptly ended attachment to her mother. In this connection, it might be essential to discover and develop some of her more important interests and abilities. (Dabrowski, 1972:49)

In spite of the presence of psychic overexcitability and a degree of multilevelness, Dabrowski's prognosis is not very encouraging if Irene were to be left without external support.

In conditions wherein she would be left without proper therapeutic and educational help, we could presuppose development of suicidal tendencies, mental illness, or resignation from so-called normal life. (Dabrowski, 1972:48)

In both of the above cases, loss led to personality disintegration, but the process was not entirely positive--it was deficient--and there was a risk of suicide and/or mental illness. As a result Dabrowski considered that environmental support, encouragement and guidance were essential.

Thus far we have seen that under the right circumstances loss can be at least the occasion of further personality growth. The circumstances include the presence of psychic overexcitability and of a multilevel personality structure. In some cases however a supportive environment is also necessary. We have also seen that the reaction to loss under favourable circumstances leads to the development of an ideal and of self-criticism. An examination of Dabrowski's analysis of some eminent persons who lost either their mother or their spouse will provide more detail on the emergence of an ideal of personality and of multilevel self-criticism in reaction to such a loss.

### **The transformation of grieving into enhanced multilevel disintegration**

One model of the grieving process is that described by John Bowlby and Colin Parkes (Bowlby, 1979/1994:83-89). The first stage is numbness (or denial) which lasts for a few hours to a week. The second stage, which can last for months and sometimes even years is yearning and searching--this stage also includes feelings of anger and blame. The third stage is disorganization and despair. And the final or fourth stage is some degree of reorganization. Yearning and searching is characterized by thoughts of the deceased, going to the grave or favourite haunts of the deceased and in some cases having dreams or visions or auditions of the deceased. This stage is also characterized by anger directed toward those felt to be in some way responsible for the death of the beloved person--including anger turned in on the bereaved in the form of self-blame or guilt. At some point the yearning and searching diminish and despair sets in either permanently or else until such time as the bereaved becomes reintegrated into a social network and develops a routine in which the deceased is not a necessary component.

I would like to suggest that for some very few persons, i.e., those in, or close to, the stage of spontaneous multilevel disintegration, the search for the deceased becomes (through displacement or sublimation) a search for an ideal--thus strengthening the bereaved's hierarchy of values. I would further suggest that in such persons the anger and guilt that accompanies yearning and searching, has as its goal no longer the physical return of the deceased, but rather the attainment of the deceased in the form of the newly acquired ideal. The reactive anger and guilt thus provides additional energy for whatever feelings there already are of dissatisfaction with oneself, astonishment with oneself, disquietude with oneself, multilevel shame and multilevel guilt--in short all the self-critical dynamisms of multilevel disintegration. And I base these speculations on Dabrowski's interpretations of the experience of loss in three eminent persons--Gérard de Nerval, Michelangelo, and Jan Wadisaw Dawid.

It is Dabrowski's view that in the case of the nineteenth-century French poet, Gérard de Nerval, the death of his mother deepened his emotional and imaginal overexcitability and created in him a sense of emotional insecurity such that he was always in need of affection.

Gérard de Nerval was a prominent French poet of the romantic period. His poetic abilities were displayed early in his life as well as his enhanced emotional and imaginal overexcitability. These traits were deepened by [the]...early death of his mother, feelings of abandonment, emotional disappointments later in life. He grew defenceless and in need of affection to feel protected and secure. (Dabrowski, 1972:186)

It may be suspected that of the of negative experiences indicated in the passage just quoted, the most influential was the death of de Nerval's mother. Feelings of abandonment defencelessness and a need for affection are natural consequences for a child who has lost a primary caregiver. This is especially true of those who possess emotional overexcitability.

Normally yearning and searching for a deceased caregiver comes to an end after a given period of time, especially if there is an adequate replacement figure. But as we have seen above, Dabrowski stated that for psychasthenics, yearning continues. This view is shared by Bowlby who, in a description of those prone to disordered mourning, says the following:

Evidence at present available strongly suggests that adults whose mourning takes a pathological course are likely before their bereavement to have been prone to make affectional relationships of certain...kinds... described as nervous, overdependent, clinging or temperamental, or else as neurotic. Some of them report having had a previous breakdown in which symptoms of anxiety or depression were prominent. (Bowlby, 1981:202)

Many of the characteristics noted here by Bowlby can be seen as expressions of emotional overexcitability. However in personalities that are at risk, or in possession of emotional overexcitability, mental illness is not inevitable. Another possibility is the transformation of the yearning and searching for the lost person into a search for some transcendent ideal. According to Dabrowski, such was the case for Gérard de Nerval. At first de Nerval sought for this ideal in a romantic relationship.

His whole life Gérard de Nerval carried in his heart a mourning after his mother who died when he was very

young. As a result he was always looking for an exclusive love relationship which would combine the ideal of a mother with the ideal of a lover. (Dabrowski, 1972:188)

But de Nerval's search for his mother also led him to withdraw into the world of his imagination. That he had the kind of temperament prone to react to loss by compensatory fantasy is made clear in Dabrowski's discussion of psychoneurotic infantilism.

Psychoneurotic infantilism is characterized by childish vulnerability, maladjustment, naivete, a realism, openness, excessive sincerity. In consequence there is great susceptibility to being hurt, general fragility, as in the case of Gérard de Nerval. The highest form of compensation is here a life in the world of imagination, fantasy, sometimes daydreaming. We observe positive regression as a need for rest in the world of carefree and sunny childhood far removed from everyday reality. (Dabrowski, 1972:201)

However this positive regression into a fantasy world was more than a mere escape. It was a search for an ideal of love that supplied de Nerval with the inspiration for much of his poetry.

Like in Kafka's case his enhanced excitability was mainly emotional and imaginal. His exclusive, ecstatic, all encompassing love for his mother was one of the strongest factors in the shaping of his development and his creativity. His enhanced excitability and the trauma of his mother's death were the basis of his maladjustment and his creative impulses. He isolated himself from reality and dwelled in the world of fantasy, esotericism, [and the] idealization of love... (Dabrowski, 1972:189)

Yearning and searching for a lost mother was also a factor in inspiring Michelangelo to search for an ideal. His love for people, for the arts and humanities, and even for God was, in Dabrowski's view, a result of the fact that he was an orphan.

One of the most important traits of Michelangelo was his immense and never satiated capacity for love. "The whole life of Michelangelo, whether that spent for writing, carving or painting, reveals to us that he was a lover of love...was in love sensually and spiritually."...Buonarroti was continually in love with everything. Primarily he loved his mother with a melancholy orphan's love. This love finds expression in the Madonna and Child and the Roman Pietà. He loved his family, his servants, pupils, paupers, unfortunates...He loved beauty in all its aspects: freedom and truth, nobleness and strength, poetry and song, wit...He loved art, which for many years was the only meaning of life for him. Finally, he loved God, with a love that, with the passage of years, became the only love. He searched for God in his life as an artist...Toward the end of his life God became the supreme value for him. (Dabrowski, 1967:209-210)

Michelangelo's loss of his mother resulted in a yearning and searching for her that became transformed into a search for an ideal of beauty, truth and God. But as a result of not achieving this ideal there arose in Michelangelo a multilevel disintegrative process. Or in Dabrowski's words,

In the deepened love of God there increased a strongly peculiar attitude of worship, of humbleness, of guilt, of inferiority, of sin, which grows from yearning and the awareness that one's ideals have not been attained. (Dabrowski, 1967:209-210)

Yet another example of someone for whom loss led to the acceleration of multilevel processes is that of the late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Polish psychologist, Jan Wadisaw Dawid. As a result of the death of his wife, to whom he was deeply attached, Dawid's approach to life underwent a transformation from one in which he interpreted human behaviour in physiological and chemical terms to one in which he sought answers to the mysteries and meaning of life in mysticism. Prior to his wife's death Dawid's personality was marked by introversion and little emotional expression. Nevertheless Dabrowski finds evidence of emotional overexcitability.

...Dawid in his "realistic period" paid little attention to the emotions. He was strongly introverted. Yet under the cover of self-control and rationalism one could perceive emotional tensions, excessively sharp criticism and occasional explosiveness. This indicates that he was endowed with emotional overexcitability but subjugated it to precise and detached thinking. (Dabrowski, 1972:190-192)

As result of the death of his wife, Dawid's personality underwent a trasformation.

Under the impact of his wife's suicide his psychic structure, his psychological type and his methodological approach underwent a basic change. From a cool logical empiricist he became an individual sensitive and alert to the feelings and thoughts of others. He recognized in himself a need for parapsychological experiences and began to work on inner feelings, mystical experiences, and especially contemplation and ecstasy. In this work he did not lose any of his previous clarity of mind, precision of observation and formulating conclusions, nor [did he give]...up logical reasoning. He was then over forty. One can say that with this fresh start he transcended his psychological type and his biological life cycle.

His creative output grew out of his gravest psychical traumas which changed, accelerated and gave direction to his developmental potential that until then appeared to be largely hidden. (Dabrowski, 1972:190-191)

Dawid's ideal of penetrating supersensual realities was a critical one, that is to say he integrated into his concern for mystical states and personal transformation the critical thinking that characterized his earlier approach to psychology.

Dawid's creative process was in general conscious, although some contents had an unconscious, or even superconscious character embracing mystical phenomena. such were his high intuition, empathy and the feeling of the presence of his deceased wife near him; also the feeling that his wife spoke to him although he was aware that he was uttering the words himself. He became convinced that the way to mysticism broadened, deepened and elevated his awareness and was the cause of his greater understanding of others and empathy. Nevertheless both during his experiences and afterwards he elaborated them critically and systematically. He studied with discrimination available sources on mysticism, parapsychology, methods of self-perfection and meditation. Dawid began to practice meditation as an empirical approach to the study of mystical phenomena. In consequence his attitude toward people became more deeply empathic. (Dabrowski, 1972:191-192)

Although motivated by a desire to be reunited with his wife, Dawid's ideal was not simply escapism. Instead the urge for reunion with the lost person was transformed into an evolving concern for some transcendent

reality, and any apparent experiences of this reality were subject to critical analysis. Dawid was even able to entertain doubts about his own motivation for his spiritual quest, as the following citation from one of his letters attests.

Her death awakened in me a new organ, as it were, a capability to see and realize certain things in life...I just ask myself whether this is weakness? It may be so, but this depends on the point of view. I only know that in the last few years I learned more than in my whole life. I have never had such full knowledge about myself, such an awareness of the meaning of life, and of duty. (Dabrowski, 1967:228)

But as his awareness of a transcendent ideal developed, so also did his sense of self-recrimination.

It is not uncommon for bereaved spouses to experience guilt, that is to feel in some way responsible for the death of their partner. Reporting on his study of London widows, Parkes reports that

Thirteen of the twenty-two London widows expressed self-reproachful ideas at some time in the course of the [first year] year [of bereavement]. In its mildest form this was no more than a tendency to go over the events of the death in order, apparently, to seek assurance that all was done that could have been done...

Seven widows expressed self-reproachful ideas centred on some act or omission which might have harmed the dying spouse or in some way disturbed his peace of mind. In agonizing over events which were often quite trivial they seemed to be looking for a chance to castigate themselves as if by accepting blame they could somehow reverse the course of events and get back the missing spouse. One widow attributed her husband's illness to overtiredness and blamed herself for not learning to drive: "If I'd drove," she said, "he'd probably be here today." (Parkes, 1975:106)

Certainly Dawid experienced similar feelings of self-reproach as can be seen from the quotation Dabrowski makes from one of Dawid's letters.

I loved my wife deeply, she filled the greater part of my life...it scorches me to think that I did nothing to save her, that in the course of many years I contributed to...[her suicide] through my behaviour...I was always cocksure, conceited, strong and a rigorous judge... (Dabrowski, 1967:227-228)

This sense of remorse although initially motivated by the loss of his wife became transformed into a multilevel struggle, the evidence for which Dabrowski finds in a biography of Dawid written by a close friend.

According to Lukrec, friend and biographer of Dawid, there was a "deadly struggle" in him between an empiricist and a mystic: "a titan of accurate knowledge, demanding proofs and facts, and a despairing, lonely man aspiring for faith and life after death and for the possibility of uniting himself with his beloved wife"... This struggle lasted for years and was accompanied by symptoms occurring in deep mysticism, namely, the feelings of inferiority in relations to others and oneself, the feeling of guilt, self-accusation, and asceticism. (Dabrowski, 1967:228-229)

## **Conclusion**

By synthesizing theoretical statements and interpretations of case studies from Dabrowski's major works, it is possible to arrive at a theory of the role of loss in personality development in terms of the theory of positive disintegration. For persons possessing psychic overexcitability and a developmental structure in which a multilevel perspective is prominent, personal loss may result in the provision, shaping or strengthening of an ideal of personality as well as of a set of corresponding self-critical dynamisms. And where the multilevel process is weak or where there is a risk of suicide or mental illness, external emotional support, encouragement and mentoring will play a critical role in facilitating the transformation of grieving into further personality growth.

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