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The Fifth Wheel Syndrome

By

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The *noun* fifth wheel has 2 meanings:

Meaning #1: an extra car wheel and tire

Synonym: spare

Meaning #2: a steering bearing that enables the front axle of a horse-drawn wagon to rotate

An extra and unnecessary person or thing, as in **He was the only one without a date, so he felt like a fifth wheel**. This expression, which alludes to an unneeded wheel on a four-wheel vehicle, may have originated as long ago as 1631, when Thomas Dekker wrote **Match Me in London**: "Thou tiest but wings to a swift gray Hounds heel, And addest to a running Chariot a fifth wheel."

In a recent therapy session, my patient complained that she feels like a "fifth wheel" in life of her children and grandchildren, ignored, marginalized and redundant. As I listened to her plight, a part of me could relate to the fifth wheel syndrome in my own life. As my wife continues to move on in her journey of personal and professional growth, as my children establish the momentum of their initiatives and autonomy, and as my grandchildren establish their peer relationships, I feel increasingly relativized, marginalized and fifth wheeled.

Motivated by my own narcissistic wounding and my patient's plight, I decided to reflect a bit deeper into the Numinous and the Demonic dimensions of the fifth wheel syndrome and what it adds to our soul journey. What is the experience like? What does it really mean? How do we harvest it to deepen our personal growth?

Both, for my patient and me, the experience was very painful initially. We felt like a non essential spare part in the psychic economy of the people we love the most. In lieu of legitimate self-esteem, we develop narcissistic ties to others based on their ability to make us feel important and relevant. This may help us to regulate our self-esteem; but the price tag for this prize is the reliance on others to define our self-image, and eventually our very sense of being.

Such an experience is a manifestation of narcissistic vulnerability. Vulnerability in self-esteem makes individuals with Narcissistic Personality Disorder very sensitive to "injury" from criticism or defeat. Although they may not show it outwardly, criticism may haunt these individuals and may leave them feeling humiliated, degraded, hollow, and empty. They may react with disdain, rage, or defiant counterattack. Such experiences often lead to social withdrawal or an appearance of humility that may mask and protect the grandiosity. Interpersonal relations are typically impaired due to problems derived from entitlement, the need for admiration, and the relative disregard for the sensitivities of

others. Though overweening ambition and confidence may lead to high achievement, performance may be disrupted due to intolerance of criticism or defeat¹.

However, if we can invoke Humility and Accept our role as the fifth wheel, we have the opportunity to find our inner source of self esteem and a capacity for authentic relatedness to others. We may now love them because of genuine attachment and not to secure constant supply of self esteem.

Such a transition calls for an archetypal shift in the context of our relationships. When we operate as the front wheel in lives of others, we operate out of the heroic Puer or Puella archetype. When we move back to the role of the fifth wheel, we must operate out of the mentor, Guru, Wiseman, Wise-women, Sophia archetype. In eastern framework, this calls for a shift from the third chakra to the seventh chakra mode of relatedness. It propels us from action oriented caretaking relatedness to reflective mutuality. It means that rather than being the Plan A or front lines of the relationship, we become the Plan B or the back up position in lives of those we love. It means we move from a manifest to a latent or potential role in lives of our loved ones.

There is another side to this coin however. In crisis or emergencies, a fifth wheel can be live saving. When we breakdown in the middle of nowhere with a flat tire with little children in the car, the fifth wheel comes to the rescue. If the fifth wheel is not in good condition, we would be stranded and jeopardized. A fifth wheel must always be present, available, in good condition and nurtured. It is our hedge against disaster. If we ignore the fifth wheel, we do so at our own peril. We may never need the fire department, but we would never want to be without it.

Those of us who are the fifth wheel must insist on being included, honored and treated with respect due to us. This is healthy narcissism. Without this recognition, we would not be in the paradigm of support system for those we love. They would not know how to use our input and life renewing guidance in time of crisis and trauma. In the Eastern culture, there is institutionalized respect for the grandparents, uncles, aunts and the extended family network that constitutes one dimension of the fifth wheel. Increasingly, in the West the grandparents are stepping in at crucial transition points in lives of their children but more importantly, the grandchildren. We need to be acknowledge the importance of this resource to maintain the integrity, continuity and survival of the precious institution of the Family and its most vital resource in time of change and crisis.

More than six million children² - approximately 1 in 12 - are living in households are headed by grandparents (4.5 million children) or other relatives (1.5 million children). U.S. Census 2000 data tell us that 2.4 million grandparents are taking on primary responsibility for their grandchildren's basic needs. Many of these grandparents have assumed this responsibility without the parent of the child being in the home.

¹ DSM 4- TR: Narcissistic Personality Disorder - APA 2007

² Fact Sheet AARP 2006: AARP Foundation Grandparent Information Center, 601 E Street, NW, Washington, DC 20049-

While grandparents may play a crucial role in lives of children and grandchildren, they also have the potential to leave their unresolved psychological issues as a burden for several generations downstream. We as grandparents may leave both our blessings and curses to our grandchildren and their children. Optimal ways to manage this Family Karma has been explored in my book *Retire Your Family Karma*³ coauthored with Dr. Boris Matthews.



³ Retire Your Family Karma, Publisher: Nicholas-Hays, Inc. 2003

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Trained in India, Great Britain and the US, he is interested in the emerging frontiers of Spirituality and Healing and the synapses of the Mind, Body, Soul and Spirit. He is author of the book, Path to the Soul, Weiser Books, 2000, Awaken the Slumbering Goddess: The Latent Code of the Hindu Goddess Archetypes, Booksurge Publishers, 2007 and the coauthor of Retire Your Family Karma, Nicholas-Hays, Inc. 2003, These and his other upcoming presentations can be previewed at his website www.pathtothesoul.com

Ashok Bedi has been in practice in Milwaukee for over twenty-five years and specializes in Adult Psychotherapy and Jungian Psychoanalysis. He regularly presents lectures and seminars in India, Great Britain, Ireland and USA on the topic of the Spiritual and analytic dimensions of treatment, healing and personal growth. Over the last several years, he has been the International Association of Analytical Psychologists liaison person for developing Jungian training programs in India and travels annually to India to teach, train the consult with the Jungian Developing groups at several centers in India including Ahmedabad & Bangalore. He leads the annual "In the Footsteps of Carl Jung in India" study group to several centers in India under the auspices of the New York Jung Foundation.

