In Search of Ourselves . . .

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Topic:

The Woman Who Turns Back

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THE WOMAN WHO TURNS BACK

Escaping into Yesterday — In the course of this series of broadcasts we have heard about many different ways in which people react to difficulties and disappointments. For many, the emotional pain of failure, or the tensions of anxiety and fear, are translated into physical symptoms ("Escape into Illness"). For others, alcohol is an escape. For still others, the feelings of personal inadequacy are repressed entirely, and in order to keep these uncomfortable feelings and thoughts out of conscious mind, a heavy overlay of pious behaviour is adopted. We recognize that something like this happens in the "nice girl", and the "do-gooder", types, for instance.

But there is another important way of escaping from the pain and discomfort of anxiety. In some respects this way does more damage to the personality than the others. It is called the *Mechanism of Regression*, and as the term sug sts, it represents a turning back away from maturity and the responsibilities and feelings of adulthood into the more dependent phases of adolescence and childhood.

Growth in Personality — Psychologists recognize nowadays that personality is not something that is fixed and crystallized; a pattern of thinking, feeling and acting that once established can never change. On the contrary, there is something very dynamic and fluid about personality. Like the physical characteristics of the individual, it changes and grows and develops. This growth is not a steady, uniform, progressive movement. It takes place in fits and starts, one aspect developing more rapidly at one phase, only to be overtaken by another aspect at a later date. It's something like the tide coming in on a broad beach. The water never advances in a straight line, but in waves. And often there is even an apparent turning back.

In young children we see these changing, ebbing and flowing characteristics of personality most clearly. Frequently a child will appear to be making very rapid progress in growth and development. He learns his toilet habits perfectly, and he seems to be past the stage when he reacts to every minor obstacle or frustration by tears. Then for no very clear reason the child seems to go backwards in his development. He starts to wet the bed again, and may even become a cry-baby and have a brand new crop of temper tantrums. We have even seen children at the age of five or six so disturbed at the thought of having to go to school (ie., leave the protecting and dependent relationships with mother) that they almost seemed to want to become tiny

infants again. They want to be held in the mother's arms like babies, and have all the little attentions which babies must have, even to being fed. They are *regressing* into an earlier phase of development, because for one reason or another they are not quite ready to become independent individuals. Normally, after a little time, they are ready to go on with the growth process. The regression in these cases represents only a temporary set-back. It's just as if the child were saying "Ok, ok—but don't rush me. I'll go ahead when I'm ready".

Regression in Adults—A very similar process occurs in grown-ups, and in minor forms is familiar enough to all of us. We all like to daydream at times—and often we allow ourselves to drift back with nostalgic delight to the scenes of our childhood. Time seemed to move in a more leisurely manner then. There weren't too many responsibilities, and life could be pleasant. Sometimes we actually go back to places most commonly associated with pleasant childhood memories, only to be shocked by the change. Everything seems different — smaller, more untidy. Normally, we sadly shrug our shoulders and make some remark about the ravages of time, and go on with the reality of our present living.

But supposing instead of resuming our daily living at a realistic and reasonably mature level, we were to tarry over-long in an effort to recapture the delightfully secure feelings of childhood? Do you see the dangers in this tendency from the point of view of mental health? Once the process starts, it is apt to become a kind of vicious circle, with decreasing chances of making a successful adjustment socially and emotionally.

The Case of Dodie-Anne—Dodie-Anne, as her mother called her, was a college woman of 21, enrolled in the Faculty of Medicine. She made an appointment with the counselling services because she had been advised to drop out of her medical course on the grounds of "immaturity". She dressed and behaved like a High School first-former, rolled her big blue eyes, pouted and talked in a breathless, affected manner. At times, however, she was a very solemn, serious student, completely without humour or the ability to mix comfortably with others.

It became evident that her so-called "immaturity" had become more noticeable recently, as she attempted to compete (unsuccessfully) with other more attractive and more socially successful women. The men, previously repelled by her serious and stand-offish manner, now thought she was silly. She either didn't know this, or couldn't accept it, and redoubled her efforts to be attractive. She had a younger sister at home who was much preferred by her parents, and who also was much more popular in every way than she. This, coupled with a coldly critical

father, with whom she could not relate in any way, provided the background setting.

She had become a successful student academically, but the increasing anxiety, associated with her lack of success with both boy and girl friends, heightened by the contrast between herself and her sister, finally led her naively into increasingly immature and regressive forms of behaviour.

Questions about the Broadcast — Ruby is something like Dodie-Anne, isn't she? Only here we see a more pathological type of regression. Unsuccessful in her relationships with men, she gains some satisfaction in a temporary but close emotional relationship to Frances, her room mate. Rebuffed on this, she retreats even more seriously into herself.

1. What phases of personality growth and development is Ruby passing through on her backward journey?
2. Have you any suggestions as to why she was not successful in her affair with Lee?
3. Was her unsuccessful love affair the cause of all her trouble?
4. What do you think of the way Frances handled the situation? What would you have done?

Further Reading

"Attaining Maturity"—by Luella Cole (Farrar & Rinehart, Inc.)
"The Human Mind"—by Karl Menninger (Alfred A. Knopf, publisher) page 518.

"In Search of Ourselves" is heard over the Dominion Network of the CBC on Fridays

Stations and Times

9.00 p.m. AST
CKNB Campbellton
CFBC Saint John
CKCW Moncton
CFCY Charlottetown
CJFX Antigonish
CHNS Halifax
CJLS Yarmouth

8.00 p.m. EST
CKTS Sherbrooke
CFCF Montreal
CFCO Ottawa
CHOV Pembroke
CFJM Brockville
CJBC Toronto
CFOR Orillia
CHEX Peterborough
CFPL London
CFCO Chatham
CHNO Sudbury
CFPA Port Arthur

10.30 p.m. CST
CJRL Kenora
CKRC Winnipeg
CKX Brandon
CJGX Yorkton

9.30 p.m. MST
CFQC Saskatoon
CKBI Prince Albert
CFCN Calgary
CFRN Edmonton
CKRM Regina
CHAB Moose Jaw

8.30 p.m. PST
CHWK Chilliwack
CJOR Vancouver
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