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SCAPEGOATING AN AGING PARENT – AN ESCAPE FROM MARITAL CONFLICT

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A scapegoat is as ancient as the Biblical white goat on which the priests heaped the sins of the people, then drove into the wilderness to die. Today we define a scapegoat as any person or group that becomes the object of displaced anger and is blamed for frustrations having other origins. An outcome of tensions, this anger is often caused by conflicts in cultural values.

Many writers have discussed the scapegoating of a disturbed child who is usually of lower intelligence and limited abilities, and against whom the family stand united in a pseudo-solidarity. Few writers, however, have written about the scapegoating of an aging parent as an escape from marital conflict. While the device temporarily relieves tension, it is not only harmful to its victim but also to its perpetrators, because it keeps the real conflict from awareness and attention, thus preventing the solution of problems.

This paper describes the scapegoating of a 76-year-old man by his wife, two married sons, and their spouses. It also shows how family relations can improve once scapegoating is reduced by recognition of its hidden, evasive purpose.

Initial help was sought by the hospital where Mrs. Gross, aged 66, about to be discharged after recovery from a stroke and broken hip, refused to return home to her husband and demanded placement in an old age home. Her doctors attributed her slow, only partial recovery of speech, locomotion, and balance to the woman's dislike of her husband. In view of the latter's eagerness to nurse his wife, her request appeared imprudent and financially burdensome to the sons.

Some background material is necessary. To escape an unhappy middle class home, Mrs. Gross at 19 married a prosperous shoe manufacturer ten years older than herself. Though less educated and of a lower socio-economic family, he seemed kind, industrious, and a good family provider. After the loss of his business during the depression in the '30s, he became a shoe salesman, and together

with his wife's earnings as a piano teacher, the two of them somehow managed to put both sons through college.

About ten years ago, a disabling kidney ailment forced Mr. Gross' retirement. To fill his leisure time he engrossed himself in Biblical and Talmudic studies at a nearby synagogue, where he consorted with old orthodox Jews. This so sparked an excessive piety and meticulous observance of dietary laws as to shock and embarrass his free-thinking family. In his youth, both his parents had considered him the most backward of six children, two of whom, younger brothers, he later put through college. His mother was depicted to me by the family as a slovenly, shrewish kind of ogre who rejected him as her black sheep.

A week prior to Mrs. Gross' homecoming I visited the husband to prepare plans. A modest, white-haired man in thick glasses, he welcomed me with a warm, gracious charm, delighting and impressing me with his quotations and anecdotes from the Talmud. His clothes as well as his three-room apartment exuded an odor and a shabby, genteel look of neglect. I observed that he had poor eyesight and was hard of hearing as he proudly paraded the wall photographs of his fine family while adding running commentaries about his wife, a wonderful housekeeper and cook as well as a fine pianist, his two devoted, successful sons, one an accountant, the other a drummer in a band. His only grievance was their violation of the Jewish dietary laws.

His denial of any material or family problem impelled me to state brusquely the purpose of my visit. I explained that his wife's four-month hospital stay and her impaired speech and locomotion might very well create fresh problems for them, and that in order to forestall their grating on each other's nerves, I would like to help plan for her homecoming. Genuinely grateful and eager to cooperate, he arranged to have me meet his sons and their families.

The meeting with the sons in the absence of the parents revealed their scapegoating. Both the sons and their wives challenged my optimism. "You mean that you can do something with him? He's so impossible! A fanatic, in his old age. He's so filthy and intolerant of people who aren't orthodox that before her stroke my mother used to run away from him and eat at our home. And he's stingy. Did you see how dirty the house is, and his shirts that he launders himself?"

As for their mother, they described her as an angel incarnate, an immaculate housekeeper, a marvelous cook and baker. At this point one daughter-in-law interrupted to tell me that Mrs. Gross had been more than a mother to her, for she had hated her own mother.

After listening to their eulogies, I admitted that the father might indeedbe difficult, but the problem was a complex one, and I wondered how well they were coping with it. By background, training, and temperament, he was obviously no homemaker or housekeeper. Why not get a cleaning woman to scrub the apartment and put on fresh bed linen before Mrs. Gross' homecoming?

As for their charge of his belated piety, my question disconcerted them. Did they ever hear of co-existence? We must learn to live with Catholics, Protestants and even orthodox Jews. Perhaps at this time his piety filled a deeply felt need in him.

My next question disconcerted them just as much. Did they have anything good to say about the old man? After all, they must have inherited or picked up *some* of his good traits.

After a protracted silence, one son ventured that his father had been a good, steady provider during affluent days and even during the depression, that he had

always venerated people of education and talent, especially musical talent like his mother's. He wasn't mean or dishonest. And as for their contempt for him, they admitted that they did little to dissemble their feelings towards him. Whereupon I asked whether perceiving their contempt did not make the old man feel rejected and have something to do with his present negative behavior.

During the next few sessions it was not hard to win rapport, particularly with the daughters-in-law, who did not relish the prospect of their husbands' shelling out money for an old-age home. As for the sons, while venting their feeling afforded them some relief, the intemperate degree of their resentment also stirred inchoate misgivings about their objectivity.

One sophisticated daughter-in-law was quite outspoken. "You say we make him feel rejected. This is the reality situation. We do not reject him. He's made our lives miserable, and we don't know how his wife put up with him all these years."

The second daughter-in-law chimed in. "When he comes to eat at our home, he insults me by asking if my food is kosher."

To this her husband added this tidbit from his unresolved sibling rivalry. "I'm supposed to be his favorite son, the youngest, who worked in his store during the summer, when he'd brag about my playing one day in a symphony orchestra. If you knew how he hurt me ... !"

Since their parents had never considered a separation or divorce, I ventured a tentative opinion. Could it be that despite the old man's shortcomings, the parents might be fond of each other? My question struck them at this time as fantastic, preposterous!

My first visit one evening after Mrs. Gross' return to the couple's three-room apartment called for an auspicious family gathering that included a granddaughter with a sleeping infant in her arms. While old Mr. Gross meekly retired out of earshot to his bedroom to busy himself with some odd chores, the rest of the family assailed him to the accompaniment of Mrs. Gross' weeping and feeble, halting attempts at verbal corroboration. She still dragged one leg, was inept in the use of one hand, and her balance was so precarious that she feared a fall. As her anger at her husband mounted, her speech dwindled appallingly to the muteness of aphasia.

While waiting for her rage to subside, the others seemed to vie with each other in piling up complaints. I was shown smoky, improperly washed glasses, the lack of soap, a refrigerator cluttered with spoiled food, putrid hamburgers, and spicy delectables to suit his palate rather than hers, even the gray, unchanged bedlinen. On it went. Finally I had to interrupt. I agreed that he was difficult and assuredly no housekeeper. But I told them that their hopelessness and their unremitting criticism, uttered in a carping, unloving spirit, was hurting the old man.

The only one who seemed to understand me or show some compassion for Mr. Gross was the married granddaughter holding her infant. She agreed that the quantity of criticism, with no let up, did something dreadful to her grandfather.

Her observations, feelingly expressed, affected them so deeply that I urged them to focus on the present from now on—and on the future. For the next week or two I urged an experiment: an enjoinder in which they were to refrain from all criticism. Perhaps this might help to restore Mr. Gross' confidence in his ability to care for his wife.

By now Mr. Gross had returned to the discussion, and in a spirit of levity I asked him and his wife each to define their separate "departments." Mrs. Gross agreed to do the cooking and the dishwashing (with plenty of soap available). Mr.

Gross agreed to shop with shopping cart and a list dictated by his wife. Good-humoredly each promised to fulfill his share in his own department. I solicited from Mrs. Gross a reward for my services—some of her fabulous home-baked cookies on my next visit.

Even in this first contact with Mrs. Gross, I observed how easily she wept and used her family as allies to scapegoat her husband. And when I reported to the head social worker at the hospital how the entire family seemed to be ganged-up against the old man, who was using his own devices for self-protection, the staff confirmed my impression, adding that it was Mrs. Gross' failure to control everything that was impeding her speech recovery.

On my first visit to the couple alone, their interaction in my presence enabled me to point out the childlike pattern of their behavior. I accepted their old world hospitality—a cup of tea. But when the husband served me an ordinary cup without a saucer, she banged her fist on the table and loudly abused him for not offering me a fancy tea cup and saucer from a top shelf of her closet.

When I told her it was the spirit of hospitality that counted, not such externals, she tearfully complained that last night she had gone to bed without supper because the portions of food he served her were too small. When Mr. Gross promised hereafter to let her serve herself from a large dish, she interrupted, "Shut up!" lapsed into tears, called him her enemy, and renewed her request for an old-age home. Her rage and self-pity rose to such intensity that she could barely finish a sentence.

She calmed down when I convinced her that not her husband but her rage was her real enemy and that despite his gaucherie, he was her best friend and did his utmost to help her. Thousands of women would give their right arm to have a husband and his companionship. I also took the opportunity to disabuse her of any illusions she harbored about life in an institution, picturing for her its regimentation, its circumscribed freedom and privacy, its fixed visiting hours, etc.

The old man's miserliness was indeed ludicrous, the way he economized on soap and bragged that he used the same tea bag five times. In defense he said that they had little money and that he didn't want to throw any of it away. Too proud to depend on his children for financial help, they managed on social security and their dwindling savings, with an occasional gift from their children, such as a radio or a television set.

The couple responded well to my weekly visits and my separate talks with each of them. Mr. Gross admitted that he could make more effort to please and humor his frightened wife and to show more tolerance towards his family in the matter of religious observances. The whole concept of democracy and co-existence—"to live and let live"—was still too alien to him, but some of it did seep through, as evidenced by his compromise decision to partake of dairy food at their children's home and to abstain only from their meat dishes.

As for Mrs. Gross, her speech improved steadily as she curbed her bouts of rage and impatience at her lack of control. Aided by their doctor, we planned a program: a weekly bath by a visiting nurse, routine visits by a homemaker, and weekly or semi-weekly trips to a nearby community center in order to break their social isolation. There Mrs. Gross became involved in a music program and in party activities, and Mr. Gross joined a discussion group. To reduce the friction between them, he was advised and persuaded to get out more, even at the expense of bus or taxi fare. For by sticking too closely to the house, he often grated on her nerves.

After a few months the family acknowledged a change in both parents. They seemed more cheerful, quarrelled less, laughed more. She showed more forbearance towards his shortcomings, and he became more tender and less mechanical in his attentiveness. In discussing the expense of transportation to and from the community center, he inadvertently mentioned his daughter-in-law's refusal to give him a ride in her car and her subtle hints that he come only by invitation and stay away when company was expected. Mrs. Gross commented that he was painfully self-conscious about treading on this daughter-in-law's white rugs.

When I later inquired if this were true, the sophisticated wife of the accountant reaffirmed her antipathy. "He reminds me too much of my own father, whom I hated all my life. And frankly I *am* ashamed of him." Knowing that her daughter was about to enter college, I asked, "What kind of values are you giving her before she leaves?" I got no answer.

The wife of the drummer protested that her husband's income was too inadequate to share the added, but equally shared expense of helping the couple. The financial fracas that ensued between these controlling wives charged the air with such tension that it was no surprise when each of the sons later came to see me privately.

The accountant contritely said, "I guess I'm not very loyal to my father, but I can't do a thing about my wife's snobbery." I told him that it was not so much a matter of loyalty as it was of behaving in a human way, showing respect for an older person and setting an example for their children.

The drummer nearly broke down at his admission that he had unwittingly abetted his wife's antagonism towards his father, and now it made him sick to his stomach. Like his mother, she was a compulsive housekeeper who worships at the shrine of cleanliness. For the first time he saw through the scapegoating game they had all played in order to escape the conflicts in their marriage: first, his mother exploiting her sons by fostering contempt for their father and now, his wife manipulating him to have her own way. Formerly, he had passively deplored his wife's rebuffs towards his father. Now he wished to do something about it.

I assured him that it wasn't easy for his wife or for anyone to change. Defenses like prejudice and scapegoating are generally given up only when they are no longer needed. But hopefully she might take the cue from his own lessened anger at his father and from his more realistic acceptance of the old man.

The game exposed is the familiar "If it weren't for my husband, my father, or my father-in-law, I could be happy." Whatever its name, externalization, projection, etc., scapegoating is an evasion and an unhealthy substitute for confronting one's real problems.

The goal of my continued visits was to help the elderly couple to integrate themselves into the life of the community center to the point that I would no longer be needed. Although the married children still did not believe the couple could be fond of each other, they saw that Mrs. Gross' speech and balance improved and that she was beginning to enjoy and appreciate her husband's companionship. And while the family still ridiculed the old man's clumsiness and miserliness, they also saw him as a good person, eager to help his ailing wife.

Thus, the recognition of the futility and destructiveness of scapegoating helped to remove a barrier to family harmony.