KNOTS, TIES, NETS, AND BONDS
IN RELATIONSHIPS

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In an earlier paper (Metzner, 1980), I described various metaphors and symbols that could be useful in understanding the process of self-transformation. The present paper, which grows out of that work, focuses on certain symbols that can be particularly useful in accommodating the dualistic nature of personal, group, and societal relationships. Because relationships are positive and negative connections between people, those symbols that can be interpreted in both ways are particularly apt metaphors for this purpose.

Obstructions to the free flow of awareness and energy in relationships are frequently experienced and described as "knots." These knots may actually exist in the body as tensed and contracted muscles, or congealed and congested connective or vascular tissue. We all know the knot-in-the-stomach of anxiety, and the lump-in-the-throat of inhibited sadness. These kinds of knots may make us feel tight, tense or tongue-tied, unable to express our feelings through words or gestures.

In various yogic systems the subtle body, with its energy channels (nadis) and centers (chakras), may have corresponding knots and ties. In the Indian Upanishads there are references to "knots in the heart" (granthi), that must surely refer to obstructions in the heart center. "When all the knots that fetter the heart are cut asunder, then a mortal becomes immortal," says the Katha Upanishad. The heart center, like the other centers, is a gateway to the higher realms, the transpersonal dimensions; when the blocks in that gateway are removed, the full splendor of the immortal being of light can be...
experienced and known. The *Mundaka Upanishad* states: "When the knot of the heart is unloosed, and all doubts are cut off, then man's work is finished, then is seen That which is above and below" (Radhakrishnan, 1953).

In our personal experience, the area of human life that probably gives rise to the most complex and difficult "knots in the heart," is the area of emotional and sexual relationships. We may be fascinated (literally, "bound") by the charm of a loved one. There are the ties of dependency, as in being tied to the mother's apron strings. When we solemnize the relationship in marriage (a state referred to as "the tender trap"), we speak of "getting hitched" and "tying the knot." People often feel trapped in a marriage or relationship that has become fixed, rigid or routine. And when a love relationship ends, there may be a painful feeling of a tie being cut, or an agonizing, constricting knot in the heart. The psychiatrist R.D. Laing (1972) has written a whole book of poems, *Knots*, on the convoluted entanglements of normal and disturbed relationships.

The Huiehol Indians of Mexico have the interesting custom, before setting out on their annual sacred tribal pilgrimage, of making knots in a piece of string for every intimate relationship they've had in the past year. They then burn the knotted string to symbolize the burning away of attachments. This is a metaphor for the purification of emotional knots and ties by inner fire, the alchemical calcinatio. In psychedelic or other kinds of deep experiential psychotherapy, a person may experience a knot, or lump, in the heart center dissolving or loosening, and their difficult, tense, anxious, angry and sad feelings toward a loved one releasing and letting go at the same time. And as the personal and interpersonal knots are untied, then the heart and mind become more open to receiving and perceiving the light-fire of Spirit, "that which is above and below."

The symbolic meaning of knots is not all "bad." As Mircea Eliade (1961) points out, knots have opposite meaning: "They can bring about illness, or cure it or drive it away; protect against bewitchment or bewitch; hinder childbirth or facilitate it; preserve newborns or make them ill; bring death or prevent it." There is, for example, the "endless knot," which is one of the eight emblems of good fortune in Chinese and Tibetan Buddhism. And the "figure of eight" knot is of course our symbol for infinity. Some see the two loops of this figure as representing the intertwined connection between spirit and matter, between inner and outer worlds of life.
Another, related kind of symbolism is that of nets. The feeling of immobilizing netting in the body may be based on such structures as rigid fascia, hardened and congested connective tissue, or tense nerve networks. In relationships we may get the feeling of being somehow entangled, or trapped, in a web or net of expectations, obligations, illusions and perhaps deceptions. If we find someone attractive, we may be captivated, bewitched, or spell-bound, or enthralled.

This theme was given a perceptively humorous rendering in the Greek myth of the liaison between Ares and Aphrodite. When the god of war and the goddess of love engaged in amorous dalliance, Aphrodite's official husband, the lame smith Hephaistos, was informed of this by Helios the sun god. The jealous Hephaistos then fashioned a gossamer thin, yet extraordinarily strong net of golden threads; and, in a surprise move, threw it over the couple as they lay in their bed of passion. Thereupon he invited the other gods to come and view the plight of the lovers. At the sight of the undignified entanglement of the impulsive Ares and the affectionate Aphrodite, the heavens echoed with the resounding, good-natured laughter of the Olympians. Just so, we may often feel ridiculous to the point of embarrassment at the indignities to which our romantic passions expose us.

Family relationships that involve ties of dependency and love can become so entangled and confused that one or several individuals may feel "caught in a bind," suffering anguish and conflict. One important theory of schizophrenia holds that this condition is at least partly caused by "double binds," contradictory patterns of communication (Bateson, 1979). The child may get conflicting messages (the voice speaks love, the eyes show hate)—this is a bind; what makes it a double bind is that s/he cannot leave the situation. Adult patterns of communication are often equally contradictory, confused and entangled, resisting the efforts of even the most skillful therapists or counselors.

Nets, like knots, have paradoxical meanings and values. The opposite feelings we have about them are reflected in etymology—c-language contains and reveals psychological truths. For example the words "net" and "noose," come from the Latin nectere, "to bind, fasten, or tie." But this is also the root word for "node," "nexus" and "connection." Our ties bind us, but also link and connect us. We may be imprisoned, in "bondage"; but we also desire close emotional "bonding" with family and friends. We may get trapped and entangled in nets, but we also use them to catch fish. And we have "networks" of relationships.
among people, that serve the purposes of communication and mutual support. The same Latin word, *ligate*, "to tie, or connect," underlies "ligaments," that connect bones; "obligations," that tie us to our fellow man; and "religion," that supposedly should "re-connect" us with the Divine.

**CONCLUSION**

The dual meanings of these symbols hint at the process of liberation. The net is not only something in which we are trapped and entangled, it is also the network for communication, for energy exchange. The entire world is seen, especially in the traditions of Tantra (a word related to words for "weaving," and "texture"), as a vast, interconnecting web, or woven fabric. Some modern scientists have similarly concluded that all phenomena are interrelated in complex interrelating networks of energy transformations. Teilhard de Chardin's concept of the noosphere, as a network of thought, encompassing the planet, is one such idea. The notion of networks of individuals who share a common interest, and provide, through the network, information and support to one another, is one that has enormous potential for furthering the processes of individual and social transformation.

The paradoxical nature of these symbols, that mean both captivity and liberation, is reflected in the concepts of "fate" and "destiny." Fate, which corresponds approximately with
what the Indian traditions call *karma*. Is unavoidable, fixed, based on the past: what has been decreed (fate), or our past actions (*karma*). We feel ourselves to be victims of fate, caught in its web or net. Destiny, on the other hand, which corresponds loosely with the Indian notion of *dharma*, is future-oriented, free and flexible: it is our purpose or destination, what we choose to be and do, our prime intention in this life. We fulfill our destiny by exercising our free will, in cooperative relationships with others. But until the will is in fact freed from the fateful, binding consequences of past karmic actions and tendencies, we cannot really exercise that freedom. We have free will in theory, potentially, but not in practice, or actuality—until we are liberated. When, through the process and practice of liberating transformation, we no longer experience ourselves as the victims of fate, we can become masters of destiny.

REFERENCES


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