



Dissociation, Repression, Denial, and Avoidance: “Where did kindergarten and first grade go?”

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This is a case study from my (Karl's) personal experience with repression, denial, avoidance, and “middle range” dissociative phenomena. It provides an example of combined repression, denial, avoidance, and dissociation where visual memories are completely missing, and also my attempt at describing what repressed and dissociated memories “feel” like as they come back. This case study also describes the perceptions (lies), thoughts (lies), and emotions that are triggered when I can't solve a problem. As you will see, this case study is still “in progress.”

Introductory Comments About Dissociation, Repression, Denial, and Avoidance

Repression and Dissociation: Repression and dissociation are psychological defense mechanisms the mind uses to cope with traumatic events that are too painful/stressful/overwhelming to hold in normal memory in their full intensity. Repression causes memories to be modified and/or forgotten gradually. If an experience is too painful to “live with,” repression progressively modifies the memory in order to make it less painful. The most painful details of the memory fade, becoming faint, vague, or forgotten completely. Painful implications of the memory are obscured. The most painful emotions are blunted, muted. Sometimes the entire memory is repressed to the point of being “forgotten” (unavailable to the conscious adult mind). Repressed memories come back “repression style.” They come back slowly, with a lot of work. The clarity of the details increase slowly. Once any part of a repressed memory comes back, it stays and is accessible any time the adult conscious mind wants to look at it. Dissociation¹, on the other hand, causes memories to be “forgotten” instantly. If a memory is immediately unbearable (for example, unbearably overwhelming, unbearably frightening, or unbearably painful), a “part” of the mind is given the task of carrying the traumatic memory. This part then disconnects (dissociates) from the rest of the mind, so that the person is left feeling like “nothing happened.” The trauma is “gone,” except for the part that carries it. Dissociated memories come back “dissociation style.”² When the internal dissociated part carrying the memory connects, the memory comes back quickly, and with the clarity and intensity of the original experience. The memory leaves just as quickly and dramatically when the internal dissociated part disconnects. If a person works repeatedly with a dissociated memory over time, it becomes gradually more available to the adult conscious mind.

¹ This is a very brief summary of “complete” or severe dissociation, which is what most authors are describing/referring to when they talk about dissociation. See “‘now that we have tools that work, we can look at all this stuff,’ Dissociative Phenomena: Case Study & Reflections” for a discussion of “partial” or mild-moderate dissociation.

² Note: My perception (from my own experience, work with our clients, and reviewing the literature) is that the first connection of a dissociated memory can look a lot like a repressed memory that is just beginning to be recovered. A dissociated part will sometimes give a “hint” of a dissociated memory before coming forward with a much clearer connection of the dissociated memory. This initial “hint” can have the faint, vague, tenuous feel of a repressed memory in the early stages of recovery.

Also, if the dissociated part receives Theophostic^{®3} healing, so that the lie is removed, the pain is then also gone and the part can “integrate” because there is no longer pain that needs to be carried separately. When integration occurs, the painful emotions are already gone, and all other aspects of the memory remain connected/available to the adult conscious mind.

If dissociation and repression worked perfectly, we probably wouldn’t even know about them. The reason we do know about them is that the painful emotions from the repressed and dissociated traumatic memories “leak” back into the person’s life when something in the person’s present experience “triggers” the lies that the repressed and/or dissociated memories carry. The repression and dissociation have been useful tools to help the person survive through childhood⁴, but at this point they hinder the healing process by making the traumatic memories hard to find (we have to be able to find them and go to them in order for the Lord to heal them).

Denial: Denial is *choosing* to “look away” from the stuff in our lives that we don’t want to deal with. We know it is there. It is accessible to our conscious adult minds – we could see it if we chose to look at it. We just choose not to look. It is like walking around the edge of the living room looking at the walls, vaguely aware that we are avoiding the middle of the room (and the possibility that there could be an elephant there), but choosing not to look at the middle of the room and choosing not to look at the fact that we are avoiding the middle of the room. “I’m not avoiding anything, I’m walking around the edge of the room and looking at the walls so that I can see all of these nice pictures on the walls.”

Avoidance: In some ways, avoidance is especially sneaky because it pretends to acknowledge the full magnitude of a trauma and/or sin (“Oh, yes, I can see there is an elephant in the living room. I agree there is an elephant in the living room, and that it is a big problem”), but then very subtly reduces the apparent size by moving the problem into the future (“I’m going to deal with it, but just not right now. Tomorrow–maybe next week– maybe when I have the time and money for more appointments”). There is always a reason to not deal with it right here, right now.

Many authors seem to think “either or” regarding dissociation, repression, denial, and avoidance for a given memory or set of memories. This case study provides an example of memories where repression, dissociation, denial, and avoidance are all present. Some aspects of these memories are classic for dissociation, other aspects behave like repression, and denial and avoidance are constantly providing “cover-up” for whatever else is going on. Repression: Most of the visual memories from kindergarten and first grade have been repressed over time, even to the point of being completely unavailable to my adult, conscious mind. These visual memories have certainly been coming back “repression style”– slowly, with lots of hard work. The clarity of the visual images is increasing slowly over time. Dissociation: The painful emotions seem to have been dissociated at the time of the actual events, and come back “dissociation style.” They come back suddenly, with the clarity and intensity of the original event when the part carrying them connects, and then leave just as suddenly when the part disconnects. Denial: At some level I chose not to notice that there was a big hole. I chose to “look the other way.” Denial provided “cover up” for the immediate dissociation of the emotions and for the gradual repression of the visual

³®Theophostic Ministry is a trademark of Dr. Ed Smith and Alathia Ministries, Inc., of Campbellsville, Kentucky.

† *Unfinished footnote*: “See ... for an excellent discussion of how dissociation is a valuable tool in helping children get through childhood without being destroyed by traumatic events”]

memories. Avoidance: At an even more subtle level, I chose not to think about the vague awareness that I was pretending everything was okay, but that there was “something wrong with the picture.” The case study “now that we have tools that work, we can look at all this stuff” also provides examples of memories where repression, dissociation, denial, and avoidance were tangled together (see the endnote).

Case Study: “I can’t solve the problem,” “I can’t figure it out,” “I’m stuck”

The adventure described in this case study began with working on my “I can’t solve the problem,” “I can’t figure it out,” “I’m stuck” triggers. For as long as I can remember, I have gotten intensely triggered when I can’t solve a problem – when I have tried everything I can think of and am still stuck. I get especially triggered when I have asked the Lord for help and I do not perceive any response.

Facilitating Theophostic[®] sessions has been the most incredibly effective trigger for this particular target. I seemed to have an anointing for setting people on fire—for helping them find the wounds and lies, and connect with the painful emotions, but then was handicapped with respect to discerning and removing clutter. The result was that I experienced many sessions where, after 90 to 120 minutes of hard work, I had tried everything I could think of and the person receiving ministry was still stuck in intense pain. I had begged God for help for at least the last 30 minutes, and did not perceive any guidance, direction, or help of any kind. At this point, I was often as intensely triggered as the person receiving ministry:

I would usually feel like I was doing everything I could, but that I just couldn’t figure it out/fix it/make it work/get the job done.

I would always feel that it was *not* okay that the session was stuck. It was *my* responsibility to fix the problem – *I* had to figure out what was in the way and make the session work, and it was *not* okay if I couldn’t do this. If I couldn’t figure it out and fix the problem, something bad would happen and it would be my fault.

My mind would fill with thoughts such as “I can’t do it,” “I can’t figure it out,” “I’m stuck, and nobody is going to help me” (and combinations of all the other lies described below).

I would often feel like God wasn’t with me, and the feeling of being alone in the problem of course made everything worse.

I would often have the feeling that I was asking and pleading for God to come, but with the expectation that He wouldn’t. I would feel confused – I couldn’t understand why He wouldn’t come, and I would feel deep discouragement – I “knew” that no matter what I did, He wouldn’t come.

I would often think of all the explanations I have heard about why God doesn’t answer our prayers in the way we want Him to, all of the complicated theological reasons why the Lord “wasn’t allowed” to help me. But at these times of triggering, all of these explanations seemed pretty worthless. “I love you blah blah blah, but there is some important reason why I cannot help you right now. You need to learn, blah, blah, blah, etc.” Everything except: “I love you, son, of course I will help you.”

I would often experience baffled confusion: “I just don’t understand why you can’t help me figure this out.” Sometimes I would get a vague perception that there must be some complicated reason that God wasn’t helping me, but what I really wanted was “Here I am. You can trust me. Call me when you are stuck, I will always guide you when you need me.” At this point, I would often experience intense anger and frustration, “Why can’t you just skip the #\$\$%&! excuses and help me!”, “God, why don’t you give me a job I can do or give me what I need to do the job you have given me!”, “Let somebody else do Theophostic®, I’ll just go back to painting houses. I know how to paint houses – that’s a job I can do. LET ME PAINT HOUSES!”

Sometimes I would feel like there was something wrong with me – that I had done something wrong, so that God didn’t want to come and help me. Sometimes I would feel like I just wasn’t important enough or special enough for the Lord to want to be with me.

At other times, I would feel like God was present, and even that He was watching me, but that He was not helping. Even as I was begging Him for help – “Please show me what to do. I will do whatever you ask, just please tell me what to do” – I would feel like he was sitting there watching me, but not doing a thing. In fact, I would feel like He was unhappy with me for not being able to do it—complaining that I wasn’t getting the job done and blaming me for not getting the job done – as if I could just choose to get the job done if I wanted to. He was watching, complaining, and blaming, but not helping me figure out what to do.

Sometimes I would feel like God was telling me to do a job that He did not give me the tools for – like he was telling me I had to make it work, but He was not giving me the resources and/or assistance that I needed to be able to succeed.

Eventually, I would sink into immobilizing discouragement. Even when my adult cognitive mind would have ideas, an increasingly intense feeling of discouragement and hopelessness would take over my emotions. “You know He’s not going to come, so why are you even bothering to ask?” and “You know you can’t figure it out, so why don’t you just quit now and save yourself the trouble. You have already tried everything. Nothing works. What’s the point?”

As described below, we eventually figured out that many different underlying wounds and lies were being triggered. I would experience different combinations of the distorted perceptions (lies) and emotions just described, depending on subtle variables in each individual session.

Charlotte and I have been working on these targets/triggers on and off since beginning Theophostic®-based ministry on ourselves in October of 1998. As discussed below, it has been slow and difficult work, but the reason for this is becoming clear.

Thanksgiving 1999, Mom and I were sitting in their living room and discussing the “I’m too stupid” case study. She commented “That really would have set you up for feeling stupid when you couldn’t read because of your dyslexia. I can’t imagine it wouldn’t have affected you when other kids had to read your math problems for you.” She continued to talk about my years at Oakton grade school, mentioning a number of details. She described how she and Dad had become concerned that my reading was so far behind my other skills, but that the teachers wouldn’t take them seriously because I was not a problem in the classroom and was doing better than some.

Over the years Mom and Dad had often mentioned my dyslexia, but I never really took them seriously when they spoke about this as something that might have been traumatic. The memories I had about being dyslexic included being tested at Northwestern, and some vague talk about a reading disability. They said I would not be good at science and math, but I never understood this since these were my favorite subjects. The whole thing never really made sense to me, so I mostly ignored it. These memories didn't feel scary or upsetting, and when Mom and Dad would imply that my dyslexia could have been a significant trauma, I would think inside "I don't remember feeling like my dyslexia was traumatic—by some fluke or the grace of God it just didn't seem to affect me."

As Mom began her comments about my dyslexia, I responded internally with the usual "I know you think my dyslexia was important, but it just didn't seem to affect me." I began to feel strange as she described more of the details from kindergarten and first grade. Eventually I blurted out: "I know you and Dad think the dyslexia stuff affected me so much, but I have no memory of anything you're talking about." As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I thought. "My gosh, it's true. I don't remember anything she is describing." I almost said something like: "Mom, you know I never went to Oakton. I went and stood in the playground before school started for a couple days and then they transferred me to Central." I had the strange experience of cognitively realizing this wasn't true, even as it felt so true that I almost spoke the words. I had always been vaguely aware that it felt strange to know cognitively I had gone to Oakton for kindergarten, but to feel like I hadn't. Until this conversation with Mom I would have told you that I went to Central from first grade to fifth. I didn't fully believe that I had gone to Oakton for two full years of kindergarten and first grade until Mom found my report cards and I read them myself.

I have many clear memories of grades two through five. I can remember thousands of details from Central school – from the playground to the library to gym class to drum lessons. I can remember my classrooms – the layout of the windows, chalk boards, fish tanks/animals, student desks, door, and teacher's desk. I can remember the names and appearance of every teacher at Central – including the gym teacher, the music teacher, and the kindergarten and first grade teachers that I never had myself. When Mom recently found my report cards from grade school, I had even correctly remembered the spelling of my second grade teacher's name.

I can remember walking to Oakton school, including many of the houses along the way and the bully that used to chase and frighten me. I can remember the candy store we would stop at on the way home and the size, color, cost (five cents), smell, and taste of the fireballs we would buy. I can remember playing in the snow at the side of the street by the corner of Oakton and Ridge, and I can remember getting taken to the Principal's office by the crossing guard. I can remember walking home with the girl I was engaged to in kindergarten. I can remember the playground. I can remember the "woods" on the edge of the school property. I can remember the place just inside the school doors where they sold war bond stamps.

At the time of the initial conversation with Mom I couldn't remember a single minute of time inside of a classroom at Oakton school. Two years of classroom time were completely missing. I had one very vague memory – a single image – of what I think is my kindergarten or first grade classroom. I had no memories of my kindergarten and first grade teachers. I can't even remember their race or gender. My parents tell me that my kindergarten teacher was a white woman, and that she was a dwarf. I have no memory of this. You would think that if I can remember the sex, race, age, height, body type, complexion, hair color, hair style, and usual dress of my second

grade teacher, I would have at least an image or two of a kindergarten teacher who was a dwarf.

I have had many clients comment “There can’t be something important in here that I just can’t see and/or remember – I’m sure I could feel it.” It still feels very strange and striking to me how unaware I was of this “missing” memory. When something is missing, you don’t see it. Somehow I always thought I would be able to “feel the hole,” I would be able to tell something was missing as if you walked into a room and there was a large hole in the floor. Instead, it feels much more like walking into a room and not seeing a coffee table. Unless you were aware of other evidence/information that there had been a coffee table/should be a coffee table, you would never think/feel “The coffee table is missing.” My subjective feeling was something along the lines of “There can’t be something in here that is really important but that I can’t see. I live in here – I can see/feel perfectly well that there is NOT a big hole in the living room floor. I would certainly be able to feel it if there was some important memory that I was repressing and/or dissociating.”

Several days later I was telling one of my friends about this. I made the simple comment “I don’t have any memories of being in a classroom at Oakton school,” and was surprised to feel my voice choking up and tears coming to my eyes.

Some time during the following week I called Mom to ask her more about my years at Oakton. I immediately experienced intense emotions and almost started crying when she responded: “We don’t know much about your experience at Oakton because we couldn’t get you to talk about it. You wouldn’t say anything about it.”

Several weeks after this conversation with Mom, Charlotte and I watched a movie about a skinny blonde kid with dyslexia (he looked a lot like myself as a child). I cried through most of the movie. When they called the kid “stupid” I wanted to jump off the couch and scream “What’s the matter with you people! Why does anybody call a kid ‘stupid’!” When the teacher explained “I put him in the dunce section to motivate him,” I wanted to yell “Can’t you see he’s stuck! He’s doing the best he can!”

Sometime in the winter of 2000 I came across a story about a handicapped kid who spent 20 years learning to read. I cried through the whole thing.

In the spring of 2000 Charlotte and I taught Introduction to Pastoral Counseling at North Park Seminary. We were talking about Theophostic[®], the lasting effects of trauma, and specifically about how “small” childhood traumas can leave lasting impairment. On the spur of the moment I decided to use my own childhood dyslexia as an example of something “small” that could leave lasting wounds and lies. I still didn’t have any specific memories of my own, but as I started to give the example as a general scenario, a specific example “just sort of came out of my mouth.” “The average person would not think of dyslexia as being a major trauma. But if you were a six year old kid with dyslexia, if you tried and tried but you couldn’t figure out how to read, if you were called up in front of the class and you couldn’t figure out what was on the board, if you were just guessing and waiting for everybody to laugh at you – maybe hoping to yourself ‘If I get close maybe it won’t be too bad’ – it could be a pretty traumatic experience for a six year old kid. Maybe you would start to believe the lie ‘I just can’t do it – maybe I’m just stupid’.” As I was describing this “hypothetical situation” a vague image of a small, skinny blonde kid standing in front of a blackboard “just came to me.” Feelings of intense sadness came suddenly and I started crying in front of the class so that I had to pause before I could continue speaking.

Later in the spring of 2000 I got intensely triggered by a particularly difficult session that I was facilitating (trying to facilitate). As soon as we got time, Charlotte and I sat down and used the eye contact technique. “Can I talk to the little boy who feels so discouraged, ‘I just can’t do it. I can’t figure it out.’” I connected with this kid part that carried the most immobilizing discouragement and helplessness that I have ever experienced – like a kid might feel if he had worked on a problem every day for a couple years of school and just couldn’t figure it out. I felt like I had tried everything I could think of so many hundreds of times that I couldn’t even try again– like I already knew it was hopeless, so why even try. I remember feeling so immobilized by this place of mental exhaustion and discouragement that I couldn’t even move my eyes or blink (one of the last things that goes when a person is totally paralyzed). Later I realized “This is exactly the ‘I’m totally stuck. I don’t have any options left. I can’t take it anymore – I can’t stay here” kind of place that kids dissociate out of.

As described below, during a Theophostic[®] session in June of 2000 I had a brief and vague image of a little kid sitting at a desk with a woman standing over him. Intense perceptions, thoughts, and emotions came spontaneously within moments. I cried intensely for several minutes and then suddenly “saw” insights and connections that felt very true.

“These images don’t feel like memories”

Our clients frequently comment “These images don’t feel like memories,” and then ask “How do I know I am not just making this up? What if this is just my imagination?” I have had these same thoughts many times as visual images are slowly returning from my repressed and dissociated classroom memories. Recent neuropsychological research with functional MRI, PET, and SPECT scans has been very helpful in understanding the subjective experience that the dissociative memory images “don’t feel like memories.” This research reveals that dissociated memories are not stored or processed in the same way as “regular” or “normal” memories, so it makes sense that they would feel subjectively different. This has certainly been true in my experience. None of these images “feel” like memories. They feel qualitatively more like the images I get when I read a book and try to imagine the story in my “mind’s eye,” or the images I get when someone else is describing his or her experience and I am trying to imagine what it would have looked like. Sometimes the initial connections of returning dissociative memory images are very brief and tentative, and feel even more vague, less clear, and less “real” than imaginary images.

Although the memory images sometimes don’t “feel” any different qualitatively, I perceive several larger patterns that distinguish them from imaginary images. One is that the same images keep coming back. When I keep doing Theophostic[®] work when I am stirred up by certain triggers, the same images keep “volunteering” themselves. When I focus on the trigger of being stuck in a tough session, the thought “I am stuck,” and the perception that God is watching and complaining but not helping, images of being in first grade with dyslexia keep “volunteering” themselves. A second pattern is that I begin to spontaneously experience certain recurrent thoughts and emotions associated with the vague images. When I focus on the images of being in first grade with dyslexia (even though they are vague and tenuous), ideas will “just come into my head” regarding what a first grade kid might have thought if he had dyslexia and couldn’t read. Feelings “just show up” with the images and thoughts, and if I try to talk about what is happening I start crying within seconds. A third larger pattern is that the memory images, thoughts, and emotions start to connect with other pieces of the puzzle – information and observations from other parts of the person’s life. Insights about connections “volunteer” themselves and the bigger picture begins to make more and more sense. “Oh my Gosh! This memory has the exact same psychological dynamics as the therapy sessions that trigger me so intensely. The perceptions,

thoughts, and emotions towards my teacher in this memory are exactly like those towards the Lord in the sessions that trigger me. Look at this! The words (lies) I spoke in this memory are the exact same words I have spoken so many times in my life – the same words I have spoken every time I have gotten stuck and given up. And the feelings! These are the same feelings that have welled up from somewhere whenever I haven't been able to solve a problem – these are the feelings of powerlessness and discouragement that have disabled me whenever I encountered a really difficult problem.”

In summary: 1) The images themselves don't look or feel any different qualitatively. They don't “feel” clearer or more “real” or more “true.” They just “happen” to keep coming back in association with certain triggers. 2) Certain thoughts and feelings just “happen” to start coming with them, and these thoughts and feelings come with the corresponding images with increasing consistency. 3) The images, thoughts, and emotions from real memories fit together with other pieces of the puzzle so that the whole picture makes more sense (as would be expected for anything that is true and real).

My image of a little kid at a desk with a woman standing over him illustrates the second and third patterns (all the pieces came together within moments of this image coming for the first time, so there was no opportunity for this image to illustrate the first point by coming back repeatedly as I worked with the same trigger on multiple occasions). I was focusing on the “I'm stuck in a tough session and God isn't helping me” trigger. A vague and tenuous image of a little kid at a desk with a woman standing over him just “volunteered” itself. When the image appeared, even though it was vague and “felt” like an imaginary image, I immediately “knew” that the woman was a teacher and that she was telling him he had to do his work. I “knew” that he was stuck – that he had tried everything he could think of but somehow he couldn't figure out how to do what he was being asked. I also “knew” that the teacher was “blaming” him—telling him that he should try harder and that he was bad for not doing the work, but that she was not helping him figure out why he was stuck. The thoughts “I can't do it, I can't figure it out – I'm stuck” and “Why don't you give me some help instead of just telling me it's my fault?” came into my mind along with the image. Intense feelings of helplessness, discouragement, and anger came with the image, perceptions, and thoughts.

I also suddenly realized that I have **exactly** the same perceptions (lies), thoughts (lies), and emotions with respect to the Lord when I am really stuck in a therapy session – when I have tried everything I can think of and have also asked the Lord for help but do not perceive any help and/or guidance in response to my prayers. I feel like the Lord is standing over my chair and telling me I have to fix it/solve the problem. I feel like I have tried everything I can think of but that there is something missing and/or stuck – that no matter how hard I try I can't figure it out. I also feel that the Lord cannot be trusted to really take care of me – that He hasn't given me the tools I need, that He is complaining that I am not getting the job done, and that He is blaming me for not getting the job done. The exact same thoughts come: “I can't do it, I can't figure it out – I'm stuck” and “Why don't you give me some help instead of just complaining and telling me it's my fault?” The exact same emotions come with these perceptions and thoughts – intense helplessness and discouragement regarding my “stuckness” and intense anger at the Lord for choosing to complain and blame instead of helping me get un-stuck.

The vague image of the teacher standing over the kid in the desk, the thoughts, the feelings, and the insights about connections all came in a few moments. When I started to describe what I was seeing, thinking, and feeling I began crying intensely and continued crying for several minutes.

As Charlotte and I have stayed with this work regarding my dyslexia in first grade, connections and insights “volunteer” themselves – not as the result of discussion and analysis, but coming spontaneously as I focus on the triggers, images, perceptions, thoughts, and emotions. As we continue to test these connections and insights they make more and more sense, and the “big picture” fits together more and more clearly.

Not guided imagery, Not practice imagination

To do this Theophostic[®] work I would focus on an initial “target” trigger. The initial target trigger could contain any component of the picture. It might be an image from a movie about a dyslexic kid that volunteers itself as a trigger because I start churning emotionally as I watch that particular scene. It might be a difficult clinical session in which I am feeling discouraged and helpless and in which I perceive the Lord to be present but not helping. It might be the just the words “I am stuck, I can’t do it, I can’t figure it out” that volunteer themselves as the initial target trigger by coming out of my mouth 100,000 times in the past 40 years. As I would focus on whichever piece provided the initial trigger, the “missing” pieces would start to come forward spontaneously (“volunteer themselves”). When one or more other pieces came forward I would focus my attention on the original trigger along with these additional pieces and then more “missing” pieces would “volunteer” themselves. Note that I would not go looking for the missing pieces – I would focus on what I already had and new pieces would come forward spontaneously. Note also that I would not “search” for traumatic memories by coming up with an hypothesis and then “testing” it in my imagination to see whether it felt real (for example: “Picture yourself as a little kid sitting in a desk, imagine that you have dyslexia and can’t read, imagine that you have tried and tried but just can’t do it, imagine that your teacher is complaining and blaming you, imagine thinking..., imagine feeling...”) ⁵.

Why this target has been so difficult, the big picture

While some of my Theophostic[®] targets have resolved in a single session, this one has been especially difficult. I have been working on “I can’t do it, I’m stuck, I can’t figure it out – why won’t you help me, Lord?” since October of 1998, and I have been focusing on the connections to my dyslexia since discovering that kindergarten and first grade were missing (I thought this might be reassuring for some of you who have found Theophostic[®] targets that take a long time to untangle). The “big picture” is making more and more sense. I can quickly recognize the internal child part when he is triggered forward with these lies. The true roots of the core lies and associated emotions are becoming increasingly clear. This progress seems to be resulting in these lies getting harder to trigger and the negative emotions becoming less intense. The visual memories, however, have been quite stubborn, and I think they are somehow necessary for these wounds and lies to be fully resolved. As of July 2000 I have a vague image of sitting in a small desk at the rear left side of a class room with the door at the left front of the room and the front wall covered by a large chalk board. I have a vague image of a skinny little kid standing in front of the class trying to do something on the blackboard. I have a vague image of a little kid sitting at a desk with a woman standing over him. I have a vague image of a middle age woman who is a dwarf, but no memories of any connection between her and school or her and myself.

⁵ Research indicates that an imaginary, fictitious scenario (including visual images) will begin to feel subjectively more and more “real” and “true” if a person repeatedly imagines the fictitious scenario in a setting where it is presented as a possible/probable real scenario. Over time the person can forget the original source and come to believe the images are a real memory. This is an important reason to not suggest specifics or use imagination tools to “search” for traumatic memories. See “False Memories?” on our web site for additional comments.

The bigger picture is slowly but steadily making more and more sense. I am beginning to understand why my brain would turn into peanut butter at a certain point when I could not solve a problem. Charlotte and I are also beginning to understand why this work has been such a long and difficult battle. It is now clear that there have been a number of different memories that have usually gotten triggered as a group when I have been unable to solve a problem. Many of the memories had more than one lie, making them more confusing. Some of the lies were anchored in a number of different memories (memory linked lies), making them more difficult to dislodge. Lies from earlier memories would often be reinforced by misinterpretations in later memories, giving them more emotional power and making it more difficult to figure out where they really came from. They reinforced each other's negative impact and protected each other from being identified and resolved. All these pieces together made quite a web of disabling lies and emotions:

Memories of being separated from my parents for several weeks at 2 years old contributed lies: "God (Mom and Dad) won't come. Even if I ask, God (Mom and Dad) won't come. No matter what I do, God (Mom and Dad) just won't come." These memories also contributed confusion lies.⁶

Memories of being a white, middle class American in the 1960's contributed lies: "Every problem in the world is my fault because I am a white middle class American," "It's my job/responsibility because it's my fault," and even "I'm bad because I am white."

Memories of being a child in the 1960's, with constant press coverage about political broken promises and corruption contributed lies: "The people in charge (politicians/God) can't be trusted." The reasons/excuses are complicated and confusing, but the bottom line was "They will talk and promise, but don't deliver."

Memories of the 1960's constant press coverage about big business and environmental destruction contributed lies: the reasons/excuses were complicated and confusing, but the bottom line was "The people with all the power (big business/God) can't be trusted." "The bad guys win," and "God isn't taking care of the world."

Memories of the 1960's constant political activism contributed lies: "If I don't do something the whole world is going to fall apart," and "I can't quit because the whole world is going to fall apart if I don't fix it."

Memories of 1960's overall press focus on all the problems of the world (Native American genocide, racism against African Americans, environmental destruction, expectation of nuclear holocaust, the Viet Nam war, political corruption, economic oppression, starvation in Ethiopia, assassinations of Martin Luther King, John Kennedy, and Robert Kennedy) without adequate adult help to process it all contributed lies: "It's too big – it's hopeless," and again "God isn't taking care of the world."

Memories of disappointment with prayer (asking God to fix the world, but feeling like nothing happened), combined with lots of explanations about why prayer doesn't seem to work contributed lies: The explanations were complicated and confusing, but the bottom line was

⁶ Traumatic experiences that a young child is utterly unable to understand will often cause what Dr. Smith calls "confusion lies." (See Smith, Ed. *Beyond Tolerable Recovery*, Campbellsville KY: Alathia Publishing, 2000, p. 88.) Note that preverbal children are especially vulnerable to confusion lies, since they don't yet have language to help them organize and understand the world.

“God is supposed to help but He doesn’t. There is always a good reason/excuse.”

Disappointment with prayer combined with my earlier lies about politicians, big business, and God to give me “Nobody is going to help, but there is always a good reason/excuse.”

Memories of radical, activist, angry Christian “prophets” contributed lies: “I am bad because I am middle class,” “It is my responsibility to fix the world,” “There is nothing I can do to make them (‘prophets’/God) stop yelling at me,” “This is the way God is—God is angry with me, and His demands are impossible.”

Memories of inadequate safety or fairness in school and on the playground contributed lies: “Those in charge (teachers/God) won’t protect me. They may talk and promise, but they can’t/won’t deliver.”

The memory about the battering ram in the basement⁷ contributed lies: “It’s not safe to have a good idea and act on it” and then “I’m stupid because I never have good ideas.”

A memory of near drowning contributed lies: “I’m going to get sucked in over my head and drown.” The dissociated part that disconnected when I was underwater still carries “I am going to die” and “God will not help/is not helping me.”

Memories of Dad working a full time job and doing full time ministry contributed lies: “He can’t help, but there is always a good reason.”

Memories of Dad being called away to take care of people in crisis contributed lies: “I’m not important enough, special enough, or good enough for him (Dad/God) to stay with me and help me.”

The memories from kindergarten and first grade dyslexia contributed lies: “I’m stuck, I can’t do it,” “I have tried everything I can think of and I can’t figure it out,” “It’s hopeless so I might as well just give up,” “The person in charge (teacher/God) is telling me I have to do this, but they won’t help me get unstuck,” “It’s my job, but I haven’t been given the tools that I need – I don’t know what to do,” and “There’s something wrong with me – I’m just stupid.”

Many of these wounds and lies led to associated vows. Over time, most of these wounds and lies became infected with judgments, bitterness, and demonic spirits.

Not surprisingly, these lies, vows, judgments, and demonic spirits would produce an immobilizing morass of negative emotions – frustration, anger, bitterness, anxiety, being overwhelmed, disappointment, discouragement, hopelessness, powerlessness, guilt, shame, and sometimes even despair and self hatred. On one occasion when a clinical situation triggered a bunch of these lies, I woke up at 4:00 a.m. and was pacing around my bedroom in the dark. My heart was racing, and I was sweating from head to foot, hyperventilating, nauseated, and feeling like I was going to vomit. Unfortunately, this was before Charlotte and I knew Theophostic[®], so we weren’t able to use this miserable experience as a Theophostic[®] window of opportunity.

These perceptions (lies), thoughts (lies), and emotions also get in the way of the work I do with facilitating, teaching, and supervising Theophostic[®], not to mention my personal spiritual growth. If a complicated session gets stuck to the point where it triggers these lies, I am no longer able to trouble shoot effectively. These lies and emotions undermine my ability to think clearly, my confidence in the Lord’s goodness, my authority in prayer, and my ability to hear the Lord’s

⁷ See **“I’m Too Stupid” on the Case Study and Testimonies page of our website.**

guidance. They also leave me especially open to demonic attack and interference. All of this is certainly motivation to keep working on these traumatic memories and lies!

Summary comments

In summary, this case study illustrates a number of patterns and phenomena experienced by people who have memories that are guarded by a mixture of repression, avoidance, denial, and “middle range” dissociative phenomena:

- Memories (or certain components of memories) are completely missing from the adult mind. Initially kindergarten and first grade at Oakton School were so “gone” that I argued with my mother regarding whether I had gone to Oakton for more than two weeks. I was only convinced when she produced my report cards documenting two full years at Oakton School. I now have a few vague and cloudy visual memories of being in a classroom at Oakton, but 98% of kindergarten and first grade are still missing. (Both repression and dissociation)
- The amnesic barrier drops when the child part is connected with the present so that I experience “dual consciousness” (I am aware of both the 6 year old ego state and also aware of my current adult ego state). I can therefore remember afterwards any experiences during the time when the 6 year old part is connected. I can also remember afterwards any components of the original traumatic events that are released while the 6 year old part is connected. (Dissociation)
- The amnesic barrier is “one way,” in that this child part seems to be able to “watch from the inside” even when he is not more fully connected. He never seems to be disoriented when he connects – he seems to know what is going on and is not surprised to be in the year 2000, married to Charlotte, or living in an adult body. (Dissociation)
- Intense, clear thought and emotion memories come as a package along with a child ego state. All of this connects fairly quickly and in response to triggers. (Dissociation)
- The thought and emotion memories are clear and intense when they are connected, but then eventually disconnect, and seem “gone” once they have disconnected. (Dissociation)
- The images of returning visual memory don’t feel “real,” don’t feel like “regular” memory, don’t feel like they happened to me. (Dissociation)
- The images are vague, cloudy, but stay once they first appear. (Repression)
- Images, insights coming slowly, painfully, one little piece at a time over months of hard work. (Repression)
- The “hole” was guarded by a “look the other way” denial blind spot. Kindergarten and first grade were missing, and I didn’t seem to notice that kindergarten and first grade were missing. I chose to look the other way, and at an even more subtle level chose not to notice that I was choosing to look the other way. “I’m not avoiding the middle of the room, or the possibility that there is an elephant there. I am just walking around the edge of the room and looking at the wall so that I can admire all of these nice pictures.” I had just the vaguest awareness that something wasn’t right, and even less awareness that my internal defenses were steering me away from thinking about whatever it was that wasn’t right. The hole was so hard to see that I didn’t really believe it was there until I saw the report cards. (Avoidance)

and Denial)⁸

As mentioned above, I think this overall clinical picture is very common. In addition to my own experience, these patterns and phenomena have been described and/or displayed by many of our clients.

Hopefully my experience also illustrates that things can be complicated but that there is always a reason – there is always a reason I react the way I do in a certain situation, there is always a reason for the way Theophostic[®]-based ministry unfolds for a given individual, and there is always a reason if things appear stuck. It has been a lot of work and it has often been painful, but it has been profound and wonderful to see my life making more and more sense. It has been profound and wonderful to feel the Lord healing the wounds and removing the lies that have hindered me for so long. I feel like each time a lie is removed I am further released to use the gifts the Lord has given me.

End note: Some of you may be wondering how this case study relates to the “I’m too stupid” case study. My current perception is that the battering ram in the basement memory had to do with being afraid to think boldly: “It’s not safe to have a good idea and act on it” and then “I’m stupid because I never have good ideas.” These lies made it easier for me to get stuck by making it difficult for me to “think outside of the box” and by contributing to an expectation of failure. They also affected my baseline identity and self esteem – “I’m stupid.” I have been getting stuck less often since the healing described in the “I’m too stupid” case study. As described in that case study, I start with more confidence, I persevere longer, and I am able to think more creatively. My rope is longer and more flexible, I come to the end of it less often, but there are still times when I get stuck. This case study is about the perceptions (lies), thoughts (lies), and emotions that continue to be triggered when I have tried everything I can think of and am still stuck.

Brief update as of April 2006: I’m glad to say that the tendency to get stuck in facilitating ministry sessions which I describe in this case study has been dramatically reduced as I have received further healing. In places where I formerly would get triggered to the lies and emotions described in this case study, I often now feel faith in the Lord’s presence and goodness, and feel confidence that the situation will work out as I continue to listen to the Lord’s guidance and to use the tools He has given me. And this, of course, results in being able to think more clearly, in being able to perceive the Lord’s guidance more consistently, and in being able to help clients navigate past their stuck places more consistently. There’s always room for more healing and growth – but it’s encouraging that, in sticking with the commitment to a *lifestyle* of taking my triggered thoughts and emotions to the Lord in Theophostic[®]-based prayer, even such a morass of lies and dysfunctional emotions as described here, has been melting away and is being replaced with faith and confidence.

⁸ I think denial and avoidance were much more profound at the time I was in kindergarten and first grade. My mind would immediately dissociate some of the overwhelming emotions of powerlessness and despair. Repression, denial, and avoidance took care of the rest of the classroom memories. I would stop thinking about the classroom experience as soon as I left the building, and then come home every day and avoid any discussion of my school experience. “What happened in school today, Karl?” “Nothing.” I think I would change the subject or just refuse to talk about it if questions persisted. It took a lot of denial and avoidance to “just not think about” what happened in school every day, and to “not notice” that my emotions about school just seemed to go somewhere and never come back. By the time I was an adult, the comparative size of the hole was a lot smaller. Repression had also had a lot more time to work.