

From: Fraiberg, Selma: The Magic Years.

## **ABOUT THE OEDIPUS COMPLEX.**

"WHEN I grow up," says Jimmy at the dinner table, "I'm gonna marry Mama." "Jimmy's nuts" says the sensible voice of eight-year-old Jane. "You can't marry Mama and anyway what would happen to Daddy?" Exasperating, logical female! Who cares about your good reasons and your dull good sense! There's an answer for that, too. "He'll be old," says the dreamer, through a mouthful of string-beans. And he'll be dead." Then, awed by the enormity of his words, the dreamer adds hastily, "But he might not be dead, and maybe I'll marry Marcia instead."

It's absurd, of course. It's another one of the impossible day-dreams of childhood. If Jimmy announces at the dinner table that he has decided to marry Mama when he grows up, is that so different from a number of other plans that originate in the fertile imagination of this four year old? He is also going to be a bus driver when he grows up. Last week he was going to be a garbage man. And recently he made reservations for the first trip to the moon. (Five years before Sputnik!) (He had kindly offered advance reservations to other members of his family and was surprised by the lack of interest and foresight they revealed.) And now he proposes to marry Mama when he grows up.

If this is a childhood day-dream why do we attach more significance to it than any other day-dream? Well, first of all, because the child himself attaches great importance to it. The love expressed in this childhood fantasy is deeply felt. The wish to replace the father in the small boy's fantasy has a parallel in the little girl's fantasy of replacing the mother. In the case of both sexes the wish is strong enough to create a period of conflict in the child, for the very nature of the wish implies rivalry with the parent of his own sex and aggressive wishes toward that parent. But this love of early childhood creates the impossible situation in which the rival parent is also the object of love. When Jimmy imagines his father's death and his replacement of his father, he comes face to face with a powerful contradictory feeling. He also loves his father very much and the thought of his father's death fills him with horror. We do not normally encounter such difficulties in the love experience of later life.

This love attachment in early childhood to the parent of the opposite sex and its many ramifications in the conflict with the rival parent -- the aggression, the guilt feelings and the form of its resolution -- was given the name "Oedipus complex" by Freud. It was discovered, as everyone knows, through Freud's self-analysis and through the analysis of neurotic patients. Later, direct observations of small children showed unmistakably that all normal children go through such a phase in their development and that it need not, of course, result in neurosis. The Oedipus complex is not, in itself, pathological or pathogenic. Normally, its conflicts are resolved, and -- what is also interesting -- will usually not even be remembered.

We need to remind ourselves that this impossible day-dream is probably as old as the human race, and for thousands of years before it was discovered and investigated psychoanalytically little children had dreamed the impossible day-dream, experienced its conflicting passions and finally renounced it without anyone being the

wiser. There are millions of parents today who have never heard of the Oedipus complex and wouldn't recognize it if they saw it in their children, and most of these parents are successfully rearing their children without this information. For the truth of the matter is whether we know about an Oedipus complex or don't know about it the outcome for the child remains the same. It's a day-dream without any possibility of fulfilment, now or ever. It is a dream of love that must end in disappointment and renunciation for all children. It ends in renunciation of the impossible wishes and, normally, in the resolution of the conflicts engendered by them. The rivalries subside and the personality reintegrates in the most promising fashion. For we find that the rivalry with the parent of own sex is finally overcome by the strength of the positive ties. The child around the age of six reveals a strengthened identification with the parent who had so recently been his rival. It's as if the child says, "Since I cannot take my father's place, be my father, I will be *like* him," and now begins to model himself after his father. Normally, this is the outcome for all boys, with a parallel process of identification with the mother in the case of girls.

But in a study of child development we need to give an important place to the role of the Oedipus complex in emotional development of the three to five year old. Parental understanding can be a great aid in helping the child to successful resolution of the conflicts of this age. (And there has been so much misunderstanding among enlightened parents on the meaning of the oedipal phase and "correct" or "incorrect" parental attitudes that there is much need for clarification) Furthermore, certain disturbances of this period can only be understood when we view them as disturbances in the love relationships of the child to his parents which are centered in oedipal strivings.

At first glance, these disturbances seem to have no apparent connection with the oedipal conflicts. For let no one imagine that the child between three and five acts out a drama of love and rivalry within his family in explicit terms. Nor should we imagine that everything he does in this period of development is somehow connected with the Oedipus complex. He is developing in many other directions and he has many other things to think about during these years. But there are certain typical disturbances for this age that are connected with oedipal conflicts although we might not immediately guess these connections from the various disguises they assume.

Let's follow the story of Jimmy a little further and see how some of the apparently inexplicable behavior and fears of a child of this age can be connected with oedipal conflicts:

Jimmy was uncomfortable after he exposed his day-dream at the dinner table, though only the cynical Jane had addressed herself to the topic. He didn't really wish his father to grow old and die; he loved him very much. And there is enough magic in the thinking of the four year old to cause Jimmy great discomfort after he uttered this thought. Suppose the bad thought should come true? Suppose his father should die?

Jimmy spent the rest of the evening in dark moodiness and irritability. He seemed to be having one of his difficult times. At bedtime he wanted Daddy to read him a story. No, he didn't want *that* story. This one, then? No. Oh, he didn't want a story at all, What did he want? Well, records. Would Daddy play records for him? No, not this one -- that one, No, not that one -- this one, But what *did* he want then? And he cried that everyone was mean to him and he hated this old house and he would go to live at Allen's house and never, never come back and then in a cold fury he struck out at his father. The balled parents didn't know what to make of this behavior.

Finally, his father said that he had had enough of this and Jimmy was to go to his room until he calmed down and there would be no story and no records for tonight. Ah, this was what Jimmy seemed to be waiting for. "You're mean. You're the meanest father in the whole world and I wish you was dead!" And he stomped off to his room, slamming the door behind him.

"What on earth got into that child tonight?" his parents asked each other. And by this time everyone had forgotten the dinner table conversation. After all who can keep all these things in mind in the course of a busy day? And who would have connected this temperamental behavior with the conversation at the dinner table even if he had remembered it?

Certainly there are no obvious connections when we first follow these bedtime events, But let's see if we can make some sense out of the sequence of events. At dinner Jimmy confides his day-dream about marrying mama after his father's death and then, guilty and troubled, hastily tried to take back his words. Later during story time, usually one of the pleasantest times with his father, he is irritable and whiny. Nothing satisfies him. He wants this; no he doesn't. he can't make up his mind about the simplest decision and wavers back and forth in exasperating fashion. Here we suspect that Jimmy can't make up his mind about something a lot more important than the choice of a story or phonograph record. It's really the "do I want?" or "don't I want?" that occupied him at the dinner table. "Do I want my Daddy to be dead?" "Don't I want him to be dead?" The indecision that belongs to this terrible problem is transferred to the relatively unimportant problem of a choice in story and records.

Then, although his father is patient with him in this yes-no-no-yes period of the story hour, Jimmy's own frustration mounts and becomes intolerable, Now he screams out his accusation that everyone is mean to him, that he hates this old house and will go to live at a friend's house and never, never come back. What nonsense is this? If we take this only as a reaction to the problem of choosing a story or a phonograph record the whole business is merely ludicrous. First of all, his father had not been mean to him and had been the model of patience throughout this yes-no scene, and second, why leave home over the problem of choosing a story? Again, none of this makes sense unless we know the play-within-the-play. For the inner drama has to do with Jimmy's conflict in relation to his parents, a wanting and not wanting his mother, a wanting and not wanting to get rid of his father, Jimmy does not know why he is so upset about the stories and the records and his parents don't know either. The announcement that he will leave home has nothing to do really with the story hour and nothing to do with his father's attitude about the stories. It is part of the unconscious dialogue; it belongs to the play within the play. Perhaps it is like saying, "There is *no* solution to such a problem; it would be better to find another family."

But there is something else, too. He is goading his father, trying his father's patience to the extreme, Unconsciously, he wants his father to get angry, to put a stop to this. And, of course, his father does reach the limits of his patience and becomes stem and tells Jimmy to go to his room. And now, as if this were just what Jimmy wanted, he cries out that Daddy is mean and he wishes he were dead. It's as if Jimmy were asking for punishment for his bad wishes and, at the same time uses the occasion of the punishment to justify his angry feelings toward his father and with it to justify the bad wish, for now he says in his fury, "I wish you was dead!"

There is a last episode in this story of Jimmy's day that should be told:

That night Jimmy wakened from a terrible dream and cried out for his Daddy. A tiger broke out of his cage in the zoo and I came through the window of the living room and chased Jimmy through the house. Jimmy ran up to his room and slammed

the door. The tiger tried to crash down the door to kill Jimmy and Jimmy was trying to hold the door closed and he screamed and screamed for Daddy and nobody came and he was afraid that Daddy was dead. And then he woke up.

There was nothing that Jimmy's father could do except comfort the child and reassure him, of course. But since we are interested in finding connections between certain fears and the oedipal conflicts of this age, let's see if we can understand some aspects of Jimmy's anxiety dream.

In the dream Jimmy is being chased by an enraged tiger who wants to kill him. In reality, on the evening of the dream, an enraged little boy had told his father he wished he were dead and had stalked off to his room in a temper. So the anger of the little boy is transformed in the dream into the anger of a tiger, the dangerous wish to have someone dead boomerangs and the little boy is in danger of his life. But in the dream we notice, too, that Jimmy's anger and his bad wishes are attributed to the tiger who pursues him and we suspect that the tiger also stands for the father who, in a small boy's imagination will punish him for his bad wishes, do to him what he wished to do to the father. And the little boy who, in real life, ran up to his room and slammed the door in anger, is a little boy in the dream who escapes to his room with a tiger in pursuit and slams the door to keep the tiger out. The little boy who had announced his independence at eight in the evening, the boy who did not need his father, is a little boy in the dream who screams for his daddy's protection and help in the dream. For Jimmy is afraid of his bad wishes and wants to be protected from his own bad impulses. He loves his father dearly and in the dream when he called for Daddy and Daddy didn't come, he was *afraid* that Daddy was dead, that the bad wish had come true.

So we see how the dream represents the punishment for the bad wishes, how all the bad thoughts and the events of the day are reversed and the punishment appears as exact retribution for the bad wishes.

From the story of Jimmy we can see how an oedipal conflict reveals itself in occasional distortions of conduct (as in the bedtime scene over the books and records), in excessive guilt feelings, in occasional bad dreams, in various manifestations that would not immediately be recognized as belonging to the Oedipus complex. In fact, we are much more likely to see oedipal feelings masked in a puzzling piece of behavior or an anxiety than to hear the child outspokenly profess his love for his mother and his wish to replace his father. There are likely to be few instances of the kind of proposal Jimmy made at the dinner table during the whole period known as the oedipal phase. This is because these ideas evoke guilt feelings in the child and they are already in a state of partial repression in the very young child. Somewhere in the fifth or sixth year -- perhaps a little later -- the impossible daydream begins to fade and is finally banished to the subterranean depths where the ghosts of all discarded day-dreams lie. It may never be remembered. It need not be remembered at all. It is only necessary that the impossible aims of this day-dream be renounced without disturbing the love ties between a child and his parents and without crippling the capacity for love in later years.

