
When Are We Done With Our Childhood?

For the first several years of my recovery, I spent a lot of time looking backward. Early on, it was suggested to me that part of the work ahead would involve taking a closer look at my formative years, particularly my family, the emotional environment I grew up in, and the experiences that had shaped me long before I understood that they were shaping me. This wasn't something I arrived at through some great insight of my own. It was simply part of the work I was encouraged to do, so I began doing it. Over time, though, I came to understand just how valuable it was. I began recognizing beliefs I had carried into adulthood without ever consciously choosing them. I started seeing the roles I had learned to play in my family, and I could trace certain fears, sensitivities, habits, and ways of relating to other people back to experiences that had happened many years earlier.

Sometimes this work was intellectual, but often it wasn't. There were stories I needed to tell, and some of them I needed to tell repeatedly. There were things I needed to cry about that I had never really allowed myself to grieve. There was anger that needed somewhere to go. There were experiences I had minimized for years because I had never understood their significance. There was something tremendously freeing about finally being able to say that this happened to me, that it affected me, and that it was part of how I learned to see myself and the world.

For a long time, I approached this work with enormous enthusiasm. It felt like an excavation. I kept digging and discovering things that had been buried there, and each discovery seemed to create a little more room inside me. Things that had once seemed mysterious about my adult life began to make sense. But eventually something changed. I would find myself telling a familiar story and notice that I wasn't discovering anything anymore. I knew what happened. I knew how I felt. I understood something about how it had affected me. I had cried about it and been angry about it and talked about it with people I trusted. Increasingly, I found myself wondering what I was hoping would happen by telling this particular story again.

That question made me uncomfortable because part of me wondered whether I was abandoning the work. Maybe I was becoming avoidant. Maybe there was another layer underneath everything that I hadn't gotten to yet. But another possibility slowly occurred to me. Maybe I wasn't avoiding the work. Maybe the work was changing.

I don't think we ever completely finish with our childhood. Life has a way of bringing us back to ourselves, and each new stage can show us something that an earlier stage couldn't. Marriage may show us something about our childhood that being single never could. Having children can suddenly illuminate our relationships with our own parents. Loss, aging, success, failure, friendship, conflict, and intimacy can all reveal parts of our history that we weren't capable of seeing before. Something we thought we had settled twenty years ago may suddenly look different at fifty. So I am skeptical of

the idea that we eventually become completely healed and never need to look backward again. But I am equally skeptical of the idea that healing requires permanent excavation.

There are seasons when looking backward is enormously important. We may need to understand the emotional atmosphere of the family we grew up in, what was safe to express and what wasn't, what we had to become in order to belong, and what we learned about anger, love, conflict, vulnerability, success, or failure. But our formation extends beyond the walls of our childhood homes. We were also shaped by schools and teachers, coaches and teammates, neighborhoods and friendships, religious communities and practices, and the larger culture we were trying to find our place within. Even the events happening in the world around us, whether war, economic uncertainty, social upheaval, or a pandemic, can become part of the emotional landscape in which a young person develops. There may also be a season of grieving what happened and what didn't happen. What did I need that I didn't receive? Where did I have to grow up too quickly? What parts of myself did I learn to hide? What experiences did I minimize because acknowledging their impact once felt impossible? Looking honestly at all of this can be painful work, but it can also be extraordinarily liberating. Eventually, though, another question begins to matter: Given everything I now understand about how I became this way, how do I want to live today?

One of the great gifts of understanding our childhood is that it can replace shame with context. Instead of asking what is wrong with me, we begin to wonder what happened that taught me to respond this way. Maybe I become frightened when someone withdraws because withdrawal once meant something dangerous. Maybe I struggle to rest because usefulness was one of the ways I learned to secure approval. Maybe I avoid conflict because conflict in my childhood home was explosive or humiliating. Behaviors that once seemed irrational begin to make sense. Of course I learned to do this. Of course this strategy developed. It helped me in the past.

That realization can produce enormous compassion, but it cannot be the final sentence. Eventually we have to ask what we are going to practice now. It is possible to become extraordinarily insightful about ourselves while remaining remarkably unchanged. I can know exactly why I avoid difficult conversations and continue avoiding them. I can understand why I seek approval and continue organizing my life around what other people think of me. I can explain why I become defensive and continue becoming defensive. At some point another explanation may not be what I need. I may need the experience of doing something differently.

This is where the question becomes a little uncomfortable, because introspection is generally considered a good thing, and usually it is. But introspection can also become a hiding place. There are moments when studying why we are afraid is easier than doing the thing we are afraid to do. It may be easier to explore why I fear intimacy than to tell another person what I actually need. It may be easier to understand my childhood experience of conflict than to have the difficult conversation sitting in front of me today. It may be easier to investigate why I lack confidence than to submit the application, publish the work, make the call, or risk being seen.

None of this makes the childhood work false or unimportant. It simply means that there can come a point when insight has to become behavior. Sometimes the next layer of healing isn't another realization. Sometimes it is discovering that I can do something today that I could not do then.

So how do we know when it is time to stop digging? I don't think there is a formula, but one question has become useful to me: Is revisiting this still creating movement? When I return to a memory or an old family dynamic, am I seeing something I haven't seen before? Am I becoming more compassionate toward myself or someone else? Is the story becoming more nuanced? Is it helping me understand something happening in my life today? Or am I simply telling the same story again?

There is a difference between processing an experience and rehearsing it. There is a difference between honoring a wound and organizing a life around it. There is also a difference between understanding why something happened and requiring the past to somehow become different before we permit ourselves to move forward. Perhaps we are never permanently finished with this work, but I think we can be finished for now. We can reach a point where we know the story, respect what happened there, understand something about what it did to us, and recognize that we don't need to dig there today. Our attention can return to the life that is actually happening.

I think another shift occurs as this work matures. Much of childhood healing understandably focuses on the child we were. We learn to recognize the frightened child, the lonely child, the angry child, the child who had to perform or disappear or take care of everyone else or grow up too quickly. There can be tremendous tenderness in finally seeing that child clearly. But eventually I think the work also becomes about developing the adult.

The goal cannot be to arrange our adult lives so that the wounded parts of us never feel frightened, rejected, disappointed, uncertain, or uncomfortable again. No adult life could satisfy those conditions. Instead we learn to become someone that younger part of us can trust. We can recognize that we are frightened and still have the conversation. We can understand why uncertainty feels dangerous without requiring ourselves to know exactly what happens next. We can recognize the old pull toward approval and discover that we can survive someone's disappointment. This, too, is childhood work, but we are no longer primarily studying childhood. We are practicing adulthood.

The goal was never to become unaffected by our childhood. I don't know that this is even possible. Certain experiences will probably always matter to us. Certain memories may always carry emotion, and particular interactions with our families may still have an uncanny ability to make us feel twelve years old again. Healing does not necessarily mean that none of this happens. Maybe it means that the past becomes something we carry rather than something that carries us.

We can remember without becoming completely transported. We can acknowledge what hurt us without allowing the hurt to explain everything about who we are. We can see our parents more completely without needing them to be either villains or saints. We can appreciate what was given while grieving what was missing. And perhaps most importantly, we can stop waiting for someone

from our past to finally understand, apologize, admit, repair, or become different before we give ourselves permission to live. The story remains true, but it becomes less total.

Childhood work helps us answer an important question: Why am I this way? There is tremendous compassion in that question. But eventually adult life asks another: Given that this is how I learned to survive, how do I want to live now? I think maturity requires us to hold both. I did not choose many of the forces that shaped me, and I am increasingly responsible for what I do with what shaped me. Responsibility does not mean that what happened no longer matters. It means that what happened does not get the final word.

Maybe this is one way to know when a season of childhood work has reached its natural conclusion. We begin feeling less interested in explaining ourselves and more interested in living. Not because the child we were has become irrelevant, not because everything has been resolved, and not because there won't be another season when life asks us to return and look again. We simply recognize that we may have learned what we needed to learn there, at least for now. There is a time to return to the old house and understand what happened there, and there is also a time to walk back out the door and build a life.