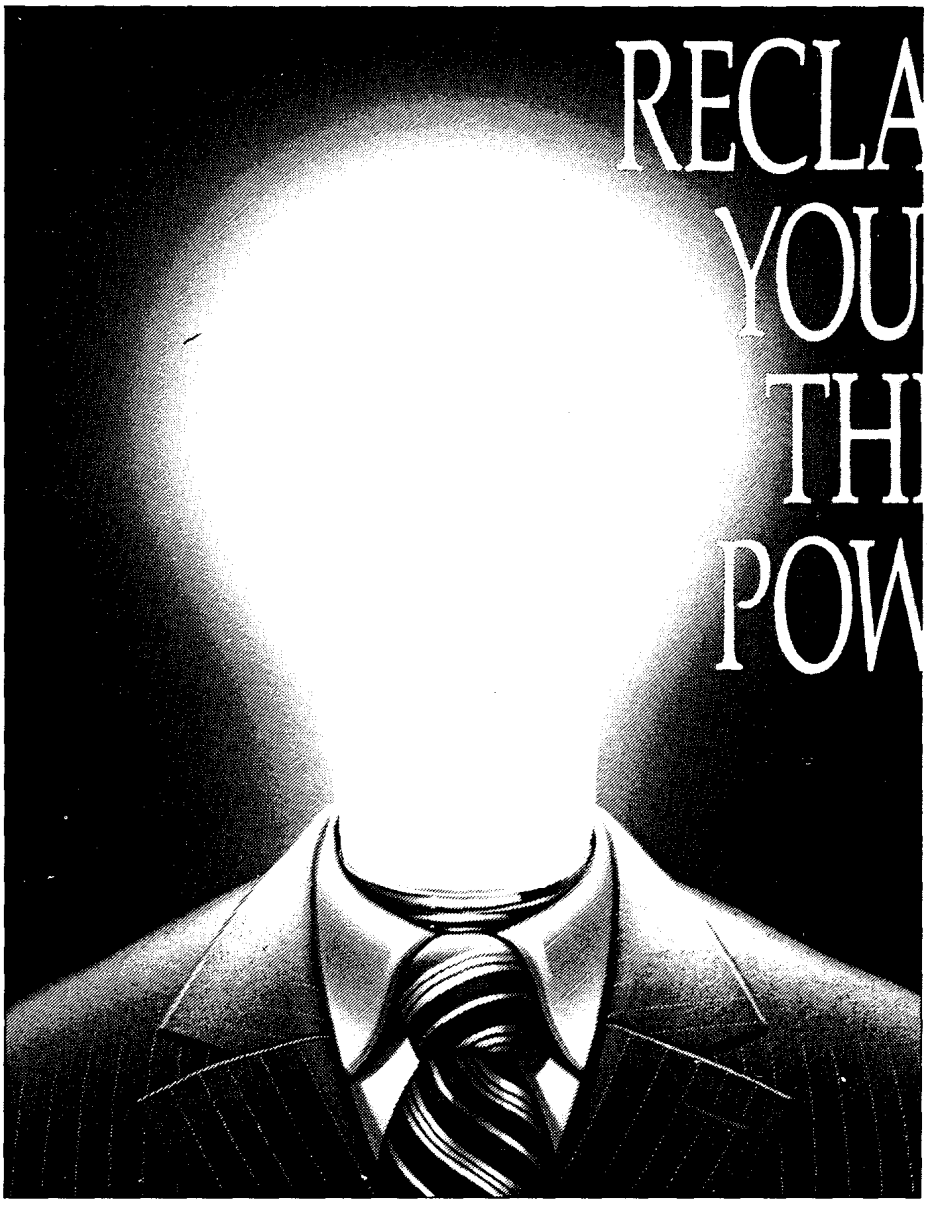

RECLAIMING YOUR THINKING POWER

BY PAMELA LEVIN

David H. is a bright, energetic young man of 28. He has done very well working for a computer company since graduating from college, but now he's feeling stuck. "This job was perfect for me then," he complained, "but now I can't imagine how I could have thought so. There's no room to be *me* here. There's just company rules, company policy and the *traditions*, the sacred traditions, sitting everywhere like stuffy old grandfathers. I don't know if I'll be able to keep this job any longer - or if I want to! I want to be a person in my own right, not somebody that fits into their mold! Maybe it's time I struck out on my own."

David is experiencing a conflict over separation from and thinking independently of his employer. It is a conflict borne of health, not sickness. Just as a two-year-old child needs to push and test, discover limits and learn how to say no, so do we as adults need to support our independent thinking and allow ourselves to *think about feelings.* It is a part of growing up.

For adults who are on a path of recovery, learning separation and independent thinking can be an uncertain time. We may dream of being stuck, as if our feet are planted in mud and we're struggling to get free. We become acutely aware of issues involving resistance, compliance and rebellion, as well as contrariness and control.

"I know I'm beginning to separate because I'm repeatedly finding things wrong," says Sarah D., an attractive 54-year-old educator who found that developing independence sometimes means reclaiming territory others had tried to take away. The first people to notice Sarah's new-found assertiveness were her husband and children.

"I had been thinking so much about them that I hadn't left any time to think about *me,*" she said. "Eventually, I started getting really angry and we were pushing each other. Still, I think they're happy I'm learning to say no."

Sarah even took on "the big kids" at work by raising cane about a company policy. Some of the chief executives ended up thanking her for her feedback.

"I feel so good exerting my opinion!" Sarah said.

But learning healthy autonomy is not always easy.

Culture sometimes encourages accepting limitations of personal power. In Ashley Montague's opinion, Western culture has mounted a conspiracy against us. He says that human beings are not supposed to become old, that we develop best in a climate accentuating the characteristics of childhood, but that our culture tries to stifle such environments, considering them childish. This point of view is also confirmed by the work of Charlotte Buhler at the University of Chicago. She points out that where society values industry and commerce to excess, the acts of people that do not serve the goals of industry and commerce, such as natural youthfulness, are suppressed. Thus, people sacrifice their relationships with others, become out of synchronization with their own timing, with others, become unauthentic and experience life as empty of meaning.

When we give in to cultural pressures, deny our birthright and adopt behavior incompatible with the natural cycle, we become incapable of realizing our vision for life. We begin a process that is one of the most destructive to human beings. We lose our dreams, we lose our hope and become dispirited.

This is not to say that adults should never be dependent on others. Quite the contrary. Refusing to get dependency needs met is just the other side of the same dysfunctional coin. I call these two extremes "Hurry up and grow up" and "Stay little." They could also be called "Don't be dependent" and "Don't grow up."

People who "hurry up and grow up" may not have had their dependency needs met or weren't offered enough protection when they were helpless babies. They decide that telling the world they need something will bring on a disaster and is therefore to be avoided.

People who "stay little" may not have had the support for growing up or weren't offered the structures and limits they needed to develop power. They decide that they aren't adequate to do things for themselves and survival depends on getting others to do things for them.

In conflict situations around autonomy and separation, the "Hurry up" tape encourages acting powerful and demanding instead of dealing with feelings or needs. People in a "Hurry up" mode are often trying to control events. The "Stay little" tape encourages acting agreeable instead of resisting, refusing to think when angry, and acting charming or cute instead of thinking. People in a "Stay little" mode are often controlled by events.

Overcoming being hemmed in by either of these extremes and reclaiming independent thought that is neither passive nor reactive is a life-long struggle. It begins with the two-year-old asking questions like this: "Do I have to recognize you and what you want?" or "Will you still love me if I think for myself?" or "Will you still help me stay safe if I become an individual in my own right?"

By asking these questions and testing

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hypotheses with our behavior, we discover our importance in relation to others. We learn a sense of control that is able to distinguish between what others want and what we want, and what belongs to others and what is ours. We also become able to exert our opinion, test reality, express feelings of negativity or ambivalence, and make connections between sensory events. Hopefully, we find out that it is safe to be separate and safe to think.

Feeling angry is typical during this stage of development, whether as a child or as an adult working through separation and independence. The anger generated here is often called *separation anger* because it is a tool used to break out of dependency. Temper tantrums are one form: Some adults kick and scream, throw things or make messes. Sometimes we may not be able to discern the cause of our anger. Separation anger helps us create boundaries with each other. But once the boundary is established, it is necessary to resolve the anger and move on. This is really no different than letting go of a toy shovel or spoon after finishing with them.

Beatrice, a middle-aged perfectionist who used to purge her breakfasts rather than face the anxieties of feeling she had to conquer the world, took her separation issues to a weekend workshop, with interesting results.

"At first I was really stuck," Beatrice said. "I wanted someone to give me something to adapt to, to tell me, 'Now we're going to work in this stage, Bea, and this is where you fit in . . .' But no one did that."

The second day of this workshop, Beatrice got a little rowdy. As an honor student she had never had the luxury of letting go of the anger she felt. Now she was surrounded by two other adults, also playing at being two-year-olds, and designated leaders who played the grown-up roles.

"The grown-ups set boundaries," Beatrice said. "They would say, 'Now, look — you can play together if you don't hurt each other. You can throw the blocks without hurting each other. Watch them bounce off these pillows . .' "

These adults are learning to complete developmental tasks that have lingered unfinished. Their anxieties probably have more to do with their own childhood development than current problems. Whether we always want to "hurry up" or "stay little," unfinished childhood business can hurt our thinking. It can lead to problems in saying, "That's enough," or in making and carrying out decisions that affect how we feel. We may remain stuck, unable to get past, "I won't," or "I don't like it." We simply do not bring the power of reason to bear on our personal issues because we haven't done the developmental tasks that would make it simple.

To further her separation in developing independence, Beatrice returned for a second weekend workshop. This time there was a large room set up for eight fully-grown "toddlers," ready to tear the place apart.

"I remember us going in there like a herd of elephants," Beatrice said. "I was thinking, 'Oh, boy, lemme at it! I'm going to have fun and not let them control me!' We grabbed a big glob of

pink Playdough. We fought over it, trying to put it in each other's hair and eyes.

"The grown-ups gently but firmly said, 'No, no hurting each other, no putting it in each other's eyes. But you *can* play with it, you can mix it up with water and sift it into different shapes,' "

Beatrice found that the workshop gave her the first opportunity she'd had in her life to be a kid. No longer did she feel always up against black-and-white alternatives setting up no-win situations.

"It was so important, not having to be stuck between doing something wrong or not doing it at all," she said. It gave me new roads, building alternative routes instead of just being stuck."

Having adapted to a rigid "either/or" parenting style of her mother and father, Beatrice had forgotten the creative power of her own mind. She also learned that she could think more for herself and less for others.

"Stupid" is played by people who got stuck in refusing to think.

"I'm deciding I can be my own person and do it my way; that doesn't mean I'm in disharmony with other people," she said.

Beatrice is far from unique among adults from dysfunctional homes. The road to autonomy always involves separation, and separation is a balancing act few have mastered.

Here are some of the games played by people who are working harder on justifying problems than on becoming independent:

Look What You Made Me Do is played by people who didn't separate. Because they didn't establish boundaries between themselves and others, they still expect other people to be responsible for their behavior. What others do is seen as the reason they didn't act adequately or they let someone down.

Schlemiel is played by people who got stuck in testing activity. They make messes and then apologize, proving they don't have to abide by the social rules others obey because nobody can make them do it.

Tidy-Didie is a corollary to Schlemiel. Instead of making messes these people clean them up, thus proving what good little people they are.

Stupid is played by people who got stuck in refusing to think as a way of finding out what they can control.

As you change these patterns in yourself, know that you are altering your life's script. Though you never wrote the original script, the pen is in your hand today.

Unfortunately, they found out they could control their caretakers by acting ignorant and unable to think. They've been stuck with it ever since.

Sunny Side Up is played by people who mask the depression they feel from losing affection when they wanted to separate. They see everything with rose-colored glasses and sometimes through a haze of alcohol or other drugs.

Tell Me This is played by people whose caretakers refused to support them for thinking. They get others to fill in their thoughts for them because they fear losing recognition if they really think for themselves.

I'll Show Them is played by people who got stuck in a rebellious position when they wanted to separate. They're always proving how right they are by manipulating others into trying to stop them from doing something. They get someone else to attempt to control their behavior and then show others how impotent they really are by refusing to be controlled.

Body Language of Thinking

The resistance characteristic of this stage is often physically expressed by holding the breath, thus limiting the brain's oxygen supply and the ability to think. Some people also tighten or constrict their neck muscles where the head pivots on the spine, a mechanism which controls how or even whether sensory impulses reach the higher centers of the brain.

Many people experience disturbances in their assimilation or elimination of food. When working through developmental tasks from this stage, they may have diarrhea or constipation or both, a temporary situation, which subsides along with testing activity.

When the two-year-old inside a grown-up is convinced that separation into independence and thinking for oneself means inability to survive, thinking becomes an activity to be avoided at all costs, instead of a power to be developed.

Such thinking disturbances are:

Overdetailing or breaking reality down into small details to avoid the whole picture;

Overgeneralizing or focusing on the large picture to avoid an unacceptable detail;

Obsessing or churning thoughts over and over to leave no space for a threatening feeling; or

Not completing thoughts, leaving them for someone else to finish.

Usually we disturb our thinking process in direct proportion to the level of danger we experience in separating. Thinking disturbances are a control mechanism or a protective device used to cope with a potential danger.

You may want to develop some untapped power potential around separation and autonomy if: (1) You act as if someone said, "Don't think," "Don't separate from me" or "Don't be Angry;" or (2) "Don't want to," "I dare you," "Can't make me," "Feel resistant" and "Not sure" are recurrent themes for you.

Brit H., a hard-driving 42-year-old-woman, identified with these issues more than she knew. She joined a group which had a no-smoking rule. Chain smoking, of course, is a game played out by adults who as infants were in a perpetual state of anxiety about supply. The guiding thought for a chain-smoker might be, "If it isn't in my mouth now, I'm not going to get it." We smoke when what we really need is affection, food, comfort, connection or rest.

Brit learned that the group really did have limits and really was serious about its no-smoking rule. She still remembers how shocked she felt when everyone reminded her of the no-smoking agreement. She said, "I know you showed me the rules (posted on the wall), but I swear I never saw 'no smoking' on it. At first I was furious but then I was scared. I thought, "I'm going to have to tough this out, too, just like I've had to all my life."

Although the separation struggle first begins between 18 months and three years of age, many things can trigger it anew, among them:

- Taking care of a two-year-old;
- Breaking out of a dependency relationship;
- Developing new thinking abilities or learning new information;
- Developing a new personal position or taking a stand on an issue; or
- Changing agreements with others.

Whether you identify most with David, Sarah, Beatrice or Brit, reclaiming your power of thinking is an exhilarating experience. As you change these patterns in yourself, know that you are altering your life's script, which is not an easy thing to do. Though you never wrote the original script, the pen is in your hand today.

If you feel resistance, know that you have hit the jackpot.

Like many of us who want to be thinking, feeling human beings who interact cleanly with others, you may have trouble separating the thinking from the feeling, or in giving yourself permission to do both. Here are a few affirmations for a more independent you:

- It's okay for you to push and test, to find out limits, to say no and become separate from me.
- You can think for yourself . . . you don't have to take care of other people by thinking for them.
- You don't have to be uncertain; you can be sure about what you need.
- You can think about your feelings and you can feel about your thinking.
- You can let people know when you feel angry.

Happy growing up!

Pamela Levin, R.N., is the author of Cycles of Power — A User's Guide to the Seven Seasons of Life *(Health Communications, fall 1988), from which this article was excerpted.*