Chapter One

Personality . . . or,
How You Became You

If you want to find out what someone knows, you might try handing him a test and a pen to take it with. If you want to find out who someone is, you might try flipping that test sheet over, breaking the pen in half, dripping its contents onto the blank page, and asking him what he sees in all that spilled ink.

At least, that was Rorschach’s approach.

You’ve probably heard of Hermann Rorschach, whether you’ve ever actually taken his famous inkblot test or not. In 1921, Rorschach, a young Swiss psychiatrist, published a series of ten plates, each with random-looking (though, in reality, carefully designed) ink patterns. Some are black ink on a white background, and some have splashes of color added in. The ten plates comprise the Rorschach test, which for more than eight decades has been the subject of endless debate among psychologists.

Theoretically, the test is standardized: everyone given the Rorschach is supposed to be shown the ten plates in the exact same size, order, and facing the same direction. The test-giver is meant to present each without comment and answer any questions a subject might have with a series of prepared answers. In other words, if you take the Rorschach in Davenport, Iowa, and I take it in a little village in Costa Rica, we experience it in exactly the same way.

Which is to say you and I would both be asked to respond to the ten plates in the same order, a certain number of times. Our responses are meant to be completely our own, with no help or encouragement from our respective test-givers. And because there are no right or wrong answers—we are, after all, telling our testers what we “see” in basically random patterns—the standardized way in which we take the test theoretically ensures that our differing reactions to those cards are very telling about us as individuals. (If you see nothing but scary monsters, it’s a safe bet you’ve got a great deal of anxiety, and if I see nothing but genitals . . . well, they might ask the men in the white lab coats to pick me up from the office after the test.)

The thing is, nearly a century after Rorschach gave his first inkblot test, there’s still a lot of debate among mental health professionals as to its usefulness. Some argue that it’s impossible to “standardize” a test like the Rorschach: how do you account for the effects of location, time of day, the mood of the subject, or how good the tester is at sticking to the test-giving script? If someone takes the inkblot test while experiencing hunger pains, can their results be fairly compared to those of someone who is perfectly comfortable? Others believe that, aside from finding basic areas of obsession, the test isn’t reliable in predicting or diagnosing serious psychological disorders. In the eyes of many psychiatrists, psychologists, and therapists, the Rorschach test is so subjective that it proves absolutely nothing.
Which is just plain wrong, as anyone who grew up on Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood can tell you.

The Rorschach test has, for nearly a century, offered a steady stream of evidence for one psychological fact that is beyond debate: no two human beings are exactly alike, personality-wise. For in all of the tests, given in all of the settings, no two people have ever responded to Hermann Rorschach’s smears of ink in exactly the same way. In hundreds of thousands of tests, no two sets of results have ever matched up. Which just proves that Fred Rogers was right when, after putting on his sneakers and sweater at the start of every episode, he assured us that, “There’s no one quite like you. You’re special.”

You are a unique constellation of thoughts, emotions, behaviors, motives, perceptions, values, and ways of relating to other people. You have your very own history, or “backstory” (as screenwriters like to say), which has distinctive geographical and socioeconomic settings and boasts a colorful cast of characters; namely your parents, siblings, teachers, friends, and so on. All of these circumstances, places, and people are forces that have shaped in you the qualities and traits that collectively make up what’s known as your personality. It’s that personality of yours, developed almost entirely by early adolescence, that dictates every romantic choice you’ve made or will make, and that determines much of the course of every relationship you’ll ever have, romantic or otherwise.

The reason that your personality is so unique—the same reason you’ll never duplicate anyone else’s Rorschach test answers—is that no one else has had exactly the same collection of circumstances and experiences as you. Not your parents, not your best friends, not your lovers, not even your siblings. In fact, before we jump into the basic truths Bernie Katz has learned about personality, let’s talk about siblings for a moment, and look at the role of “nature” in the nature versus nurture debate as it relates to personality.

I come from a family of eight children, with a ten-year spread between the oldest and youngest. (A little quick math indicates that my mom spent 60 percent of the decade between 1955 and 1965 pregnant. We’re still debating whether this means she deserves a medal or a thorough psychological exam.) And in many ways, we’re all alike. The children of Peggy and Leo Van Munching, Jr., are all polite: we all hold doors and say “thank you” and offer to sit in the middle seat when on an airplane with a spouse. We all tend toward sarcasm . . . though some try a little too hard (that’d be me) and some can bring down the house almost effortlessly (that’d be my brothers Pieter and Chris). To be sure, there are dozens of other ways in which the eight of us can be used as evidence for the “nature” argument.

Which might mean something if there weren’t hundreds of ways in which each of us is completely different from the other seven, and maybe more tellingly, from either of our parents.
Here’s the correct, scientifically based response to the person who points to the almost eerie similarities among some siblings over the course of a “nature versus nurture” debate: “Well . . . duh.” Of course some siblings are very much alike, even beyond their looks and their basic genetic predispositions. Considering that brothers and sisters spend their earliest years sharing many (if not most) circumstances and relationships, there’s no surprise that their experiences are comparable. In my family’s case, eight kids in ten years makes for some very similar formative experiences: we shared parents and bedrooms and neighborhood kids and hand-me-downs and all of the other things siblings share when they grow up close in age. The key word here is similar.

Our experiences, and ultimately our personalities, are never precisely the same as anyone else’s though. Even if we share genetic predispositions, as we’ll discuss a few pages from now. We may share some common personality traits with friends, and even more with family, but it’s inconceivable that anyone on the planet has a personality exactly like ours, for reasons that will become obvious as we explore Bernie’s Six Basic Truths About Personality:

1. It’s Nurture, Not Nature.
2. Personality Is Experience, Internalized.
3. Your Personality Wasn’t Built in a Day.
4. There Are Parts of Your Personality That No One Can See. (Even You.)
5. You Really Are “So Predictable.”

And


It’s Nurture, Not Nature

Ever spend any time looking through the glass window of a hospital nursery? Because babies tend to be wrapped in the same hospital-issue blankets and sport identical cotton caps, without obvious ethnic differences it can be awfully hard for you or me to tell one baby from the next. It’s not so hard for the nurses though. Given several hours with a group of babies, a nurse with any experience can spot different behaviors in even the most recent arrivals to the nursery. For such tiny creatures, it’s really remarkable just how different babies can be from one another: they cry differently, eat differently, and even react to noise, light, and touch differently. That’s because there are indeed genetic influences that dictate the earliest responses of newborn babies. (Although nurture might
play a role in a baby’s earliest days as well: some doctors believe that a mother’s behavior during pregnancy can actually produce certain responses in her newborn.)

What newborns don’t show us, however, are any signs of personality. They’re merely showing basic responses brought on by very basic needs: the need to eat, to sleep, to be comforted, to have their diapers changed, and so on. The one common need of all babies at all times is the need to reach out and adapt to the external world: that is, the need to figure out how to get their needs met. Those early responses start to change as infants adapt to the reactions they elicit from parents and caregivers . . . for example, the baby who isn’t looked after until his cries become earsplitting wails learns to jump straight to siren-mode when hungry.

From the moment of birth, it’s the way in which a parent responds to an infant’s needs that serves as the primary influence in the shaping of that child’s personality. Notice I didn’t say “the degree to which a parent fulfills an infant’s needs.” No, the key to a child’s personality development is found in the personality of the parent: in other words, it’s not just what a parent does for a child that shapes that child’s personality, it’s the way a parent does it.

To understand that thought a little more fully, let’s back up for a moment and look at the very powerful requirements all children bring with them into the world. There are the obvious physical needs, like food, water, and shelter. The psychological needs of a child, however, are much less obvious. Parenting is often practiced by people who can meet the physical needs of a child, but who haven’t much awareness of those psychological needs. In such homes, parenting is shaped by how the child’s mother and father were parented, and by all the personality traits—both good and bad—the mother and father possess. Which is swell when the mother and father were raised in nurturing, affectionate, sensitive families . . . but not so swell when the parents that produced the mother and father were self-absorbed, anxious, envious, or emotionally distant.

The psychological needs of children, while not obvious, are really very simple. They need unconditional love, recognition, respect, and need to be related to in ways that will produce positive self-esteem. If a parent treats a child in a way that shows the child is special and important then—presto!—the child comes to experience him or herself as special and important. Conversely, if a parent treats a child as though the child is stupid or “useless,” the child will grow up feeling stupid and useless, no matter how successful he or she might be in school or in other activities.

From infancy on, a child needs to feel connected to a parent emotionally, perceptually, and cognitively; that is, a child needs the parent to be attuned to the child’s feelings and worldview. To feel simpatico with a parent, if you will. When that kind of connection exists—and more important, when a child has that attunement pointed out to her or in any way reinforced (“I know just how you feel, Susie”)—she experiences it as love and support. As warmth and gratification. Along with this connection, children need their parents and adult caregivers to perform three basic psychological tasks. First, they need to have their anxiety and distress reduced; they need to feel protected and secure. Second,
they need to have appropriate behavioral limits set for them; they need to know what’s expected of them so they can be confident that there is some order in the world, and that someone is looking out for them.

Third—and here’s the biggie—children need their parents to love them and feel good about them. If children’s main experience is that they are part of a supportive, warm, respectful relationship with their parents, they’ll thrive psychologically and physically as well. They’ll smile easily, show very little anxiety about strangers, eat and sleep well, and play and learn with enthusiasm.

When those basic psychological needs are not met, because a parent isn’t able to create or sustain that connection with a child, you end up with what psychologists call “environmental failure.” It’s as bad as it sounds: children who are raised in a failed environment—that is, by parents or caregivers who can’t fulfill their basic psychological needs—often grow up to be what the world calls “problem children.” These are the kids who have a hard time relating to other kids (which can mean they’re fearful, tearful, rejecting, or bullying), or who are constantly frustrated, angry, or seem excessively attached to a parent.

The real answer to the question of nature versus nurture isn’t terribly sexy: your personality is a combination of both . . . but with far more nurture in the stew. Though it’s true and well-documented that each of us is born with certain genetic predispositions, it’s our upbringing that ultimately determines which of those predispositions are reinforced and which are weeded out of us. The stuff we’re born with is substantially modifiable; the stuff we take in as we’re being raised . . . that’s a lot harder to change.

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