



Prisoners Of Childhood: The Drama of the Gifted Child and the Search for the True Self

Alice Miller

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The “drama” of the gifted—i.e., sensitive, alert—child consists of his recognition at a very early age of his parents’ needs and of his adaptation to those needs. In the process, he learns to repress rather than to acknowledge his own intense feelings because they are unacceptable to his parents. Although it will not always be possible to avoid these “ugly” feelings (anger, indignation, despair, jealousy, fear) in the future, they will split off, and the most vital part of the “true self” (a key phrase in Alice Miller’s works) will not be integrated into the personality. This leads to emotional insecurity and loss of self, which are revealed in depression or concealed behind a facade of grandiosity. Alice Miller defines the ideal state of genuine vitality, of free access to the true self and to authentic individual feelings that have their roots in childhood, as “healthy narcissism.” Narcissistic disturbances, on the other hand, represent for her solitary confinement of the true self within the prison of the false self. This is regarded less as an illness than as a tragedy. The examples Alice Miller presents make us aware of the child’s unarticulated suffering and of the tragedy of parents who are unavailable to their children—the same parents who, when they were children, were available to fill their parents’ needs. In her psychoanalytical work, Dr. Miller found that her patients’ ability to experience authentic feelings, especially feelings of sadness, had been for the most part destroyed; it was her task to help her patients try to regain that long-lost capacity for genuine feelings that is the source of natural vitality. Many people who have read her books have discovered within themselves for the first time in their lives the little child they once were. This may explain the unusually strong and deep reactions Alice Miller’s books have evoked in so many readers from different countries. *The Drama of the Gifted Child and the Search for the True Self* is the original title of the book, which was published in Germany.

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