

The following three readings are for subsection 5 (*Innate Determinants of Affects*):

### ***Stimulus Density***

Donald Nathanson, M.D.

Shame and Affect Theory Forum

March 28, 1998

Tomkins coined the term “stimulus density” to register the fact that events occur both at specific rates of speed and at specific levels of intensity. The density of a stimulus is defined as the product of the rate at which the cell or system fires, multiplied by the intensity at which the firing takes place. Castanets and firecrackers can make noise at the same rate but very different levels of intensity. Tomkins likened stimulus density to an oscilloscope trace, which is brighter and “bigger” or “more” when the signal it displays has been set off by something that happens very rapidly at great intensity.

### ***Subject: A panic disorder parable***

**Date:** Sunday, October 12, 1997

**From:** Melvyn Hill, Ph.D.

**To:** Tomkins-Talk

I seem to keep stumbling upon clinical incidents that provide remarkably clear illustrations of how Affect Theory works in therapy. Here is another. I am beginning to think of these accounts as parables!

When I reached the office on Friday I found a message that Jeff had left for me at five in the morning. His voice was shaky and barely recognizable. “I am having a panic attack. I will be in the OR all day, but if you call my beeper I will get back to you. I need to talk to you urgently. I hope you will have some time for me.” By the time we spoke, his panic had subsided to a considerable extent, and he was in fact in the midst of an operation. We arranged for him to call me that evening.

Jeff is a brilliant young heart surgeon, age 34, and already distinguished in his field. I first met him five or six years ago, when he and his girlfriend, now his wife, were experiencing severe conflict around their plans to get married. I saw them together for a few sessions, and then I treated his wife for two or three years. Jeff would come in to see me when he felt he needed a session. I had not heard from him in over a year. And I had no idea that he suffered from “panic attacks” or “anxiety attacks,” as he called them.

He told me that he attributed these attacks to “separation anxiety.” “What do you mean by that?” I asked him. “They happen whenever I have to leave home on a trip.” “But you have traveled before, since I have known you,” I said, “and I have never heard you mention these attacks.” “I know,” he said, “and the only reason I am talking to you now is because of Julie. She insisted that I talk to you. I could barely bring myself to tell her. But she found me in the bathroom at four in the morning sobbing like a child.” “How does a child sob?” I asked. “Out of control. I am a grown man, an adult, I don’t cry like that,” he said. “Do you mean that a man is not supposed to cry?” I asked. “Well, no, not unless there is a reason. And I don’t have any reason for this.” “Do you mean that you don’t understand what is happening to you?” “Yes, that’s it. Why does this happen to me whenever I have to leave home?”

Jeff’s (shame based) anger at himself subsided, and so did his shame at talking to me about his problem. I began to play the sleuth in order to focus on the trigger for his attacks. They occurred whenever he had to travel any distance from home. They were modulated by the pre-

sence of his wife. And, he admitted to me sheepishly, “Believe it or not, my wife Julie knows how to handle this grown man when he is falling apart like a child. Whenever we are traveling together the situation is manageable. But if I go away on my own this can last as long as I am away. For part of the time I become dysfunctional. And when I have to travel to perform surgery in another city or out of the country, it’s hell. I can barely get a grip on myself.” The attack was triggered by his impending departure with a group of surgeons who were going to a foreign country where they donate their services for a week every six months.

“So tell me about leaving home,” I said. “I hated to leave home as a child. And I hated it when my parents left home. There was a time when they had to stop going out in the evenings without me, because I would cry hysterically and nobody could handle me. They did not know what to do with me. The same thing happened with summer camp, for instance. I loved summer camp and I always had a great time when I was there. But I would begin to cry and cry for months before I knew it was coming up and for at least two weeks at camp.”

“I would cry all the time, nobody knew what was wrong. I certainly didn’t. It wasn’t as if I was unhappy or anything. Eventually my parents took me to a therapist. I don’t know what he was. And when I was in college I went to a psychologist. But nothing helped. I know it didn’t help. I came to believe there is something terribly wrong with me, and nobody can help me with it.” What became apparent here was the overlay of shame that had accumulated around the failure of anyone in his environment, lay or professional, to identify his problem accurately and help him with it. He had adopted an *attack-self* script in relation to this shame.

I began to probe more deeply into the symptom. “What were you feeling as a child when you were crying like that?” I asked. In its milder stages, he would experience anguish, but when it reached its peak, usually when he awoke at night, he would be in a state of unmitigated terror. As we worked with these perceptions of his affect states, I asked him whether he could articulate any thoughts or perceptions or fantasies or images that entered his consciousness when he was so terrified. His answer came at once: “I am terrified that I will never be able to find my way home. I will get lost and never come back. Or my parents will get lost, and they will disappear.” Obviously the trigger had to do with an experience of abandonment.

I was startled. I knew a great deal about Jeff’s family background. He came from a close and caring family who adored him. The sleuth in me figured this could not have been an experience that he had in relation to his parents. Something must have happened to him away from home that his parents did not know about. It did not seem likely that it happened at summer camp. He had spoken to me about summer camp before, and he had always talked about having a wonderful time and forming bonds with the counselors and his friends. What could this be?

We did not have too much time left. He was leaving on his trip the next day. So I decided to rely on what my empathic link with him was telling me. “You know, it sounds to me as if you were, in fact, abandoned, at some point. You were a little boy at the time. And you did not know what to do, or who to ask for help. You were probably too young to know where you live or how to get back there. Maybe you were some distance from home, or visiting a strange place. And you were terrified that you would never find your way back home. In any case, the question that occurs to me is this: did you ever get lost in a supermarket or a department store when you were little?”

Apparently I had hit the spot. To his own amazement, as well as my own, in a faltering voice, and in bits and pieces, prompted by me, Jeff was able to put together the following story. At age four, when the family was staying at their summer home in the country, he was invited to accompany his little friend, Ken, and his Dad on a trip to a neighboring town where they would do some shopping. Sure enough, they went to an enormous (for a little child) store, and

Jeff got fascinated by something, and when he looked round Ken and his Dad had disappeared. He ran all over the store looking for them, and couldn't find them anywhere. He did not know what to do. He could not remember his address or phone number. He had no idea of where to turn. And he soon became so terrified that he was running around the store "crying and screaming hysterically."

After what seemed like an eternity to him, he found Ken's father in the men's clothing department, where he was trying on a jacket. Jeff ran up to him screaming and crying. He brushed him off and dismissed him with "What the hell's the matter with you. Calm down. Can't you see I'm trying on this jacket?" Jeff was horrified to realize that he had not even noticed that Jeff had been missing all this time. And he felt powerfully ashamed of his own terror. When he got home he pretended nothing had happened in order to hide his shame from his parents.

"Do you mean this is all there is to it?" he said to me, the anger rising in his voice. "I believe so," I said, but tell me about your anger. Do you realize how much suffering this has caused me? All my life I have felt ashamed of myself because of these attacks. I could never tell anybody. Even my parents thought I outgrew them. And the psychologist said it was separation anxiety. But I am a grown man with a wife and two kids, how can I be scared of separating from my parents? And do you realize how this has affected me? I have given up numerous opportunities to take trips and to travel because of this. And I have given up several major professional opportunities because I could not face the travel involved. And when I have traveled, you have no idea of what it has been like. I was a wreck!"

I told him that I was glad that he had called me, so that we could finally heal this trauma. I explained to him why this had nothing to do with the normal experience of separation as a child grows up. I told him it was abundantly clear that he had mastered that experience. And I explained the nature of the trauma to him: that it was not the fact of getting lost and terrified that did the damage, but the way he had been shamed by Ken's father. This shaming had, in turn, prevented him from telling his parents what had happened. And so his parents were unable to reassure him and teach him what to do if he ever got lost like that again. "What an asshole!" he shouted into the phone. "How can you treat a little kid like that? And I wonder what happened to poor Ken, with a father like that!"

To help him integrate his experience, I explained to Jeff how a normal adult would have behaved the minute they realized they had lost their son's little friend. And how they would have greeted him when they found him. "I know now about that!" And my last words to him were, "You also know that this could never happen to you again." "Of course not, I am a grown man. I know how to hail a cab to the airport!" And we enjoyed a good laugh.

This parable suggests that the key to Jeff's "panic attacks" was not actually the anguish and terror he experienced in the moment he felt abandoned, but the *attack-other* shaming that he experienced from Ken's father when he, the child, found him, the supposedly responsible adult. This shaming cut him off, even from his own loving and caring parents, and condemned him to a lifetime of suffering from what had been made into a trauma.

When he recalled this moment Jeff realized how menacing it was to relate to a narcissistic adult who had not even noticed that he had disappeared. For those of us who work frequently with people who have had to grow up with this kind of parenting, Jeff's short, sharp experience gives us an idea, in miniature, of how powerfully destructive that upbringing must be when it is the only game in town.