

CHAPTER SEVEN

Stone Child

(What happened in the following account evolved over a three year period of work/play with Neil, prior to and in the Therapeutic Nursery classroom, when I was Neil's teacher.)

Neil's birth mother was compelled by circumstances to give him up when he was born. Though Neil wasn't told he was adopted, he didn't feel a sense of belonging to his parents, or to anyone. A vital core-connection seemed to be missing between each of the family members.

People who knew both Neil and his parents often said, "he looks as though his father spit him out", so strong was Neil's resemblance to his adoptive father. Each stood very tall and straight. From four year old Neil's behavior, it was clear he believed he had to take care of both himself and his mother. His father wasn't home much during the week. He worked long hours, and once in a while was home on Saturdays and Sundays. When he wasn't working, he often was involved in risky business ventures, which caused Neil's mother to feel angry, helpless, frightened, alone, and frequently, to cry. Neil's parents argued, fought, screamed and worried about money in front of Neil. Neil's mother, who wasn't well, felt compelled to consider going to work.

She often referred to Neil as her "little man", said things like: "It's nice to have a little man around the house", which Neil liked. Saying these words caused Neil to feel big, important.

Neil became upset when his mother wanted to exert her own authority. He felt challenged, confused, his sense of importance undermined. A battle would usually ensue. Neil would kick, scream and punch his mother. Wanting to desperately gain control, his mother returned her son's screams and blows. Many times though, she appreciated her *little man's* help. At those times she'd giggle, smile and pat her son's head. And so they were often caught between these confusing emotional extremes, each feeling trapped in futile, destructive interactions, each feeling thwarted and misunderstood, the one significant difference being one was parent, the other child.

Neil feared his father. When he yelled, he had a booming deep voice, he reminded Neil of the story of Jack and the Beanstalk - and the scary, bad Giant. His father would get his belt and threaten Neil with it. At these times, Neil stood especially straight, hid inside, and stuck out his chin. When he was hit, even though the blows hurt, he'd laugh. Eventually Neil was no longer aware of the pain. He was able to disown his real feelings. He didn't cry. Instead he hardened. Developed a protective covering to shield himself from pain. He learned the lesson that boys don't cry

early. Only babies cried. Neil believed he was never a baby. He disliked babies.

Neil felt compelled to do many things for his mother. So often she was sick. He enjoyed being her little man and taking care of her. When they went shopping, he put food in the cart for her. Once home, he helped her empty the packages. When his mother began to put items away, he interfered insisting, "that's my job." His mother protested, saying she would put the things away, but often, laughing helplessly, she gave in. Neil believed she really wanted him to do things for her. He even cleaned the house. Whatever his mother did, he did too.

Sometimes when his parents took him for a walk, Neil would run. He ran away from them as fast as he could. He'd run around the block and hide. Once behind a garbage can. Once down a ramp of a building. When Neil was only two, he ran away and boarded a bus. All by himself! He was like a balloon lost in space, its string floating in air, unattached, ungrounded.

When Neil ran away, his parents became hysterical. They screamed helplessly and ran after him. They were so frightened and afraid for him. When they finally caught up with him, panting and angry, they begged, hit, pleaded with Neil to be good. Neil eventually gave them his promise. He meant to keep it when he gave it, until the behavior happened all over again. They'd ask him, "Why, why, why are you doing this?" Neil looked at his parents, unable to provide any answer.

Neil became interested in his mother's make-up. He liked to watch her color her face, to see the way it made her look like a different person. When his parents were asleep, he'd get out of bed, take her make-up and draw all over the walls and furniture in the apartment. He put his mark everywhere. Was he trying to get closer to the mystery of who his mother was to him? Or he to himself? Was he trying to make his mark by becoming more visible? b Of course, when his parents awoke, they were very angry. His mother hid her makeup. Each time, Neil found it. To him, it was like a game. What was hidden, he could find. Had to find.

His parents worried about their stereo too, because of Neil's interest in it. He was drawn to it like flies to honey. He wanted to turn it on, take the arm of the record player, move it, and turn it into music. They desperately tried to control Neil. But they were unable to, for long.

In bed at night, Neil listened intently to his parents talking nearby, in the kitchen. He knew this was the best time for hearing things, when his parents believed he was asleep. They often talked about him. His heart pounded as he listened. He tried so hard to hear them. Their talking usually turned to arguing. About whose fault it was. About something wrong with Neil. Listening always made him feel bad, but still he had to do it.

Neil wondered what was wrong with him. He often heard his mother whispering about his genes and crying. He heard her tell his father that she wanted her life to be better when she got Neil. To

fill the empty places. The holes in her soul. She said bad things were happening. She was cursed. Neil wondered, by me?

Neil wanted to be a good boy. He tried harder to do more things for his mother. He wanted very much to please her. But then, she'd try to take charge again. Neil could not let that happen. That was his job. What would happen if he was not in charge?

His parents decided to take Neil to see a therapist. Neil did not want to go. Why do they think something's wrong with me, he wondered? Inside the therapist's office, Neil ran in circles. His mother and father pleaded with Neil to stop and sit with them. But Neil continued running. He needed to run. His mother said desperately to the therapist, "See, that's what I mean"! Neil took a pen from the doctor's desk and threw it. His parents stared at the doctor, anxiety and concern written on their faces. He instructed them to leave his office at once, to wait outside in the waiting room.

Neil was left alone with the therapist. Inwardly, he turned to stone. He showed no emotion. He stood very tall and straight, like his father. The doctor approached Neil, took him by the hand and led him to a nearby chair. Neil tried to get up, to run, but the therapist put his arm around Neil, holding him there.

"What's your name?" "Neil." "How old are you Neil?" "four." Neil tried to escape. But the doctor's hold was firm. "I want Mother. I want Father." "Are you afraid, Neil?" "Mother! Mother!" All right Neil, I'll get your mother and father." The doctor took Neil by the hand and opened the door to the waiting room. He said, "Take his hand," as he gave Neil to his mother.

But Neil escaped. His parents chased, threatened, and pleaded for an unendurably long time before they finally succeeded in getting him into the doctor's office. The doctor sat and watched. At one point Neil heard the doctor say he was hyperactive and had emotional problems. Neil's parents said they weren't ready to start therapy. The doctor suggested a nursery school that worked well with children like Neil. He offered his help in the future, if Neil's parents decided they needed it.

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Neil was enrolled at Beachbrook, when three children with serious emotional needs were integrated into a mainstream nursery classroom of approximately twenty-three children. (The Therapeutic Program was not yet in existence.)

Neil stood tall and straight as he observed the playing children. His handsome face looked serious and intense, in sharp contrast to many of the other children. He seemed lost in the life that moved around him, a fish out of water. Like an alien from another world, he watched, stunned, trying to make sense of his new environment.

Neil was as driven to do things for me, his teacher, as he was for his mother. But it was not as easy to accomplish. Sometimes though, he did manage to close our classroom door before I could get there. (He'd see me heading in that direction and beat me to

it.) There was nothing to do but laugh and thank him. Instead of playing, Neil paid attention to what I needed or what I was going to do. He'd say, "I'll do it. I'll get it Joan." I smiled at this serious, driven boy. I'd say, "I see how important it is for you to do things for me, Neil. But you know what? I'm here to take care of you!" It was evident that Neil was bewildered by what I said. It made no sense to him at all.

When Neil had trouble with his suspenders - he had to go to the bathroom - he refused my help, insisting he could do it himself. He struggled until he eventually accomplished the task. This boy was determined and had perseverance! Neil urgently needed to put away a large assortment of wooden blocks himself one day, (after a block building activity) - while his classmates sat together enjoying Group Time. He said as I helped him, "I'm getting bigger and stronger. I have muscles. I'm a little man." When children approached Neil, he'd aggressively push them away.

Neil watched me taking care of children. He looked with intense interest, disbelief and sometimes, disdain. He observed me helping them on with their clothing and changing them when they were wet. Neil called them babies - a real insult! If a child needed something, I tried to provide it, but Neil competed with me. Sometimes he was faster than me. Then once again I'd say that I saw how important it was for Neil to take care of people. He'd nod his serious face in agreement.

Neil followed me wherever I went. He seemed driven to see and to grasp how I took care of children. He stood near as I held a crying child. In a day, I held several crying children, with Neil always standing close by, watchful. He never cried. He was serious, the weight of existence upon his very young shoulders. He persisted in expressing his contempt toward crying children calling them babies. He watched as I said loving things, and as I sang to children. He could not believe that I would provide band-aids to invisible wounds.

Neil could become very explosive in school, attacking a child or me. At these times I would become a safe container for Neil's rage. I held him to prevent injury to himself, to a child or to me. (Two assistant teachers ran the classroom at these times.) Neil would turn red with rage and struggle against me with all his formidable strength. I was often winded. Though Neil was impressively strong, I proved I could protect both Neil and myself, and he eventually was able to surrender and become still. We sat in silence, quietly digesting what had just occurred.

Neil's violence included knocking down children's wooden buildings and destroying their artwork. With Neil standing near, I conveyed my sadness to the children whose feelings he injured. To Neil, I said, "I understand you feel angry Neil, but I can't allow you to hurt children's feelings and destroy their work. There will be no block building until I decide you can build safely with wooden blocks again."

Soon after, I arranged for Neil and me to be in the block area alone. I stacked a tall column of red brick cardboard blocks. Without a word of instruction from me, Neil kicked them hard and then jumped into them. Intuitively, he understood that I was providing him with a sanctioned opportunity to release repressed aggressive energy. Not speaking, I stacked the blocks again and again. Each time Neil kicked them hard and dove into the blocks. By now he was smiling, even laughing! Then we each stacked blocks, kicked them and jumped into them. We fell together into the scattered heap, Neil into my lap. Neil looked at me out of luminous blue eyes. He said, "I'm going to give you a present of some of my stones tomorrow. They're my best treasure." The next day as he entered our classroom, he rushed to deposit his treasure into my welcoming hands.

I permitted Neil to resume wooden block building when children were at Group Time. I stayed close to him. A wooden block could become a serious weapon. One day, Neil was hard at work constructing a bed large enough for him to rest on. He stretched out on the blocks periodically, testing it for size, making sure it was large enough to hold him. Completed at last, it was very roomy. Neil rested comfortably on his wooden bed. I offered him a blanket and the lullaby, "Hush Little Baby". Eyes closed, covered, with me sitting on the floor beside him, Neil listened as I sang to him.

As June approached, I informed Neil of an impending classroom change. (He was soon to become a member of Beachbrook's Therapeutic Program, a class for only six children.) We visited the Red Room to familiarize Neil with the new environment. The Red Room consisted of two comfortably sized connected rooms, separated by a door, which easily accommodated private work with one child. The front room was (and remains) a classical nursery playroom. The 'other room' was more like a living room, and contained a blue rug, couch, comfortable soft chairs, a large wooden chair, books, record player, many pillows, and a full length mirror; also a sink, which made water-play possible. The room was set-up to provide children (and parents at weekly parent group meetings) with a warm, intimate, homey, comfortable living, learning, Being environment.

Neil soon craved being alone with me in the Other Room. Each day, while entering the classroom, he announced his intention, or request, to go there. Sometimes he would have to wait until I was able to arrange coverage for my other children. We relied heavily on student teacher and intern help in those days. Sometimes we were able to go to the Other Room soon after Neil arrived.

Neil was drawn to the two part adult-sized sink, which stood high off the floor. He needed the large wooden chair to reach it, and once standing on it, filled the sink to the brink of overflowing. Having gone that far, he decided to go further. Turning the faucets on full force, and eyeing me as I stood near him, he kept the water pouring onto the floor.

What to do? An on the spot decision was required. I opted to dismiss what others might think, and my own concerns about possible

damage to the room - in favor of Neil, his need to unleash the water, and what this release might mean to him. This little boy was emotionally strung tight. In a flash, I decided to trust the force in Neil that needed to overflow. At a certain point though, I always took charge by turning the faucets off and when necessary overcoming Neil's physical resistance. Neil needed to know the flood could happen because I felt empathic to his need to make it, but that I was totally in control of this or any situation. When it was time to stop, he would have to stop. In other words, that I was providing safe boundaries to this otherwise overflowing, seemingly boundary-less experience.

Each day Neil thought of new things to do at the sink with water. While the sink was filling, he stuck his fingers up into the faucet spraying water wildly all over the floor. Laughing, he aimed some of it at me. Fortunately, it was summer and I was able to accept the playfulness (and hostility too) of Neil's behavior. I wanted to enable Neil to experience my genuine acceptance and warmth toward him, my trust in his goodness, and to be able to evolve similar feelings in Neil. For his emotional well-being Neil needed to be able to develop feelings of trust, of caring, of surrender toward a significant care-taker. In this case, *me*. He needed to be able to let his defense of inner hardness melt, and to find more useful ways of responding to difficulties when confronted by them.

When Neil looked at me to see how I'd respond, I smiled at him. (He was *looking* to see how I would respond!) I said, "I see what you're doing. Wetting the floor, and me too! That's okay, Neil. It's only water."

I saw the surprise written on Neil's face. I could see he expected me to get mad. But *surprise* was what I wanted! I wanted to dislodge his expectations, his rigid and tight way of being. Let the water flow and with it the birth of Neil's spontaneity.. and hopefully, good feelings about himself!

The flood-making continued and escalated. More and more water poured onto the floor. More water was directed at me. In the spirit of splashing water on hot summer days, laughing I told Neil I was going to bring something to protect my clothes, and a change of clothing too. As the water-play took wilder forms, (more spraying, increased flooding) I exerted more control. Neil struggled against me with all his strength - but I managed to prevail and to turn the water off. Neil needed to be sure that I was really able to take care of him, that I could stand up to whatever he presented. And stand up for myself too! That awareness energized the moment - and my resolve!

When our time together ended, Neil changed into dry clothes when necessary - and returned to the front room, while I remained and cleaned up the water logged room. (The blue rug was picked up when the flooding first began. The linoleum-tiled floor never looked so clean!)

On one of these flood soaked days, Neil and I jumped barefooted and splashed together in the water on the floor. Then he went out front while I cleaned up as usual. When I joined Neil, he said, "Joan, there's a fat lady - she has a big belly - and she sits on my wall at home." I hear what you're telling me Neil," I said, moved by the implications of Neil's fantasy.

Though I said nothing more to Neil, I immediately thought that Neil's "fat lady with 'a big belly' who sits on his wall at home" was a fantasy of his longed for, absent mother - his yearning for a mothering experience he could now begin to put into words. His fantasy was pregnant with the life force of hope.

When we returned to the Other Room, Neil asked for soap suds. He filled the sink almost to overflowing, with white glistening mounds of suds. He took huge handfuls and hurled them. He threw them and shouted, "I'm making shit!" (Making it and getting rid of it at the same time! I thought.) The soapy water spilled onto the floor. Taking handfuls, he walked about the room throwing it on chairs, on the couch. On walls. On me. The whole room was soaked in white, glistening suds, suds Neil repeatedly called "shit".

Neil looked at me to see my expression. (I had turned the faucet off.) "Do you see Joan? Do you see the shit I'm making?" I assured Neil that I saw what he was making; that I saw how important it was for him to put it on everything. Not only the room was soaked, but Neil too.

I brought a change of clothes for Neil, and two child sized chairs. I handed Neil garments as he needed them. He had difficulty fastening his pants. "Help me Joan," he said. "I like helping this boy," I answered as I buttoned his pants, my own heart melting. He asked if he could watch while I cleaned up. I agreed. While I was mopping the floor and putting newspapers down Neil said, "You know Joan, there's a fat lady who sits on my wall at home. She has a big belly." "Yes, Neil, you told me. Do you want to tell me about her?" "Just that she's very fat."

Neil's urgent need to be alone with me in the Other Room persisted. Each day, it was what he wanted most to do. I continued to try to arrange our time together as early in the school day as possible. In the course of time, Neil's interest in water and flood making waned, and then came to an end. I believe because it successfully served its purpose, Neil had no further need to pursue this activity.

What attracted his attention next was our record player. Neil and I listened to children's songs. Then Neil wanted to take the arm of the record player, move it, and turn it into music himself. I felt an inward gasp, a hesitation, as I considered the risk of losing the record player, a valued Red Room object. Up until now children were not permitted to touch it. But I decided to take the risk, to trust the promptings of Neil's being - and my own. Whatever happened, I knew I could guarantee Neil's safety and my own.

While the music was playing, Neil took me by the hand and led me to the large, straight backed, wooden chair. He gently moved me into it. He covered me with a large blanket that hung to the floor. Then he took one cushion after another and piled them up on my lap. All the way up to my chin. I didn't say a word. I knew I looked very fat.

Neil turned the music to the fastest frequency. The sound was very high, screechy, and penetratingly loud. Its assault upon my ears was unbearable - Another one of those moments requiring an instant decision -. I put my fingers in my ears. I said, "the sound hurts my ears."

The sound started to dance Neil's body wildly.

As though possessed, his legs went high in the air, wide apart, jumping from foot to foot and side to side in front of me. His head moved with a life force of its own, gyrating wildly. His hands and arms moved expressively in every direction. I watched in awed, amazed, silence, fingers in my ears.

Driven, his dance escalated in speed, intensity and wildness until he collapsed on the floor near my covered legs. He moved them wide apart and crawled to the back of the chair, behind me, where I sat quietly. He laboriously made his way under the blanket on the floor, pushing his way through my parted legs. He panted as he moved, exerting great effort. When he emerged, he breathed deeply, giving way on the floor. There he rested. Nothing was said.

How long we remained this way I do not know.

Then he removed the pillows one by one and the blanket from my body. Exhausted he sank into a soft chair, and I turned the unbearable sound off and sank into the couch. We sat in enveloping, silence. Out of the silence Neil said softly, "Joan, I'm a hurt boy." "You're feeling hurt, Neil?" I said softly.

Neil came to me. He curled up in my lap. He buried his head in my breasts. I could feel him melting into me. His eyes and face were wet. Newly born. He looked into my eyes. For the first time, Neil found himself there.

Throughout our work together, Neil used my nurturing presence in his life to give birth to himself, to emerge gradually, to become more genuinely himself. Knowing Neil was for me, an unforgettable self-exploration too. He taught me to trust my deepest, intuitive knowing.

Neil came to visit me at Beachbrook some years ago. He was grown-up by this time. I had just left for the day. I was touched that he had come to see me, and sorry I missed him, though in some important way, I know he'll always be with me.