

RITUAL AND SELF-ESTEEM IN VICTOR TURNER AND HEINZ KOHUT

by *Volney P. Gay*

Abstract. This paper uses Victor Turner's recent discussion of liminal and liminoid forms of *communitas* to criticize psychoanalytic praxis, both theory and therapy. In so doing it argues that Turner's distinction can be sharpened by assimilating it to the Marxist concept of commoditization. Heinz Kohut's analysis of narcissism can be supplemented by considering how self-esteem, like other forms of behavior, is ritualized, particularly in the mother-child matrix. We can account for the recent increase in narcissistic disorders, in part, by noting how liminal forms of *communitas* have given way to liminoid forms. Liminoid forms of *communitas*, like that established in the analytic relationship, secure self-esteem less adequately than do liminal forms.

The concept of developmental hierarchy links two parallel but unconnected fields: psychoanalytic ego psychology and social anthropology. The late Heinz Kohut, a member of the University of Chicago faculty, and Victor Turner, also a former faculty member of that university, represent these two fields. Turner has long been familiar with psychoanalytic principles; psychoanalytic theory figures in his study on the Ndembu and in a recent address.¹ Kohut is best known for his two monographs on the psychoanalytic treatment of narcissism, a form of pathological self-esteem.²

I think we can link together Turner's and Kohut's distinct theories and can then suggest why self-esteem is born and maintained through ritual interactions. To do this I first will sketch out Turner's distinction between liminal and liminoid forms of *communitas*. I then will elaborate on that distinction to criticize psychoanalytic praxis.

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[*Zygon*, vol. 18, no. 3 (September 1983).]

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RITUAL REGULATION OF SELF-ESTEEM IN TURNER

This subtitle is misleading. It suggests Turner is concerned to explicate the ways in which self-esteem is regulated through rituals. This is not true. He has written on rituals of status elevation and status reversal, but social status and self-esteem are not identical.

In his influential discussion of "communitas" in *The Ritual Process*, Turner focuses upon the way rituals affect an individual's status within a particular group. His or her feelings, much less unconscious fantasies, are not of central importance. Of course we can guess that underlings, like British privates, enjoy mightily the annual Christmas party when they are served by their usual superiors. Many institutions, including religious ones, have similar rituals of status reversal, the duration and extent of which are carefully controlled.

A recent Cuban film, "The Last Supper," directed by Thomas Gutierrez Alea in 1978, portrays such a reversal. A wealthy eighteenth-century planter chooses to emulate Christ's paradigmatic act of reversal: washing his follower's feet. The planter invites a motley group of his slaves to his mansion to partake of a ritual feast at his splendid table. There they are to suffer themselves to be served and cleansed by the Master. After a drunken and maudlin evening, the Master tells these chosen ones they need not work the following day, Good Friday. They believe him, refuse to work, are beaten by the slave master, and realize the master has forgotten his pious promises. A revolutionary message, with its denunciation of religion, becomes personified in the Master's bloody punishment of the entire group in retaliation for the murder of the slave driver.

Turner is less pessimistic. The majority of rituals of reversals he describes are of a more positive sort. Alea and Turner both raise questions of social relations. Turner says rituals of status reversal not only "... affirm the order of structure; they also restore relations between the actual historical individuals who occupy positions in that structure."³

Turner's decision to focus upon interpersonal rituals of status reversal is not haphazard. He knows psychoanalytic theory and recognizes its emphasis upon intrapsychic defense. But he wishes to illuminate an interpersonal phenomenon, communitas, not an intrapsychic one, self-esteem. His recent essays on the nature of communitas, and how it in turn has two distinct forms, clarify this difference.

If he is not concerned with self-esteem, in the way psychoanalysts are, why force him into an alliance he has not chosen for himself? His remarks on interpersonal aspects of ritual are pertinent to the anthropology of psychoanalysis itself. Most psychoanalysts view their

profession as a type of medicine, and professional medicine, as practiced in North America, is not keen to see itself as ritualistic.

LIMINAL AND LIMINOID FORMS OF COMMUNITAS

In his initial explications of the concept of *communitas*, Turner took a global, social-psychological view. *Communitas* was the implicit cognitive, emotional model or idea every culture has of itself. It was the inverse or antistructure to the "jural, political and economic positions, offices, statuses, and roles; in which the individual is only ambiguously grasped behind the social persona."⁴ He amplifies the totalistic qualities of *communitas* when, a few pages later, he criticizes McKim Marriott's Freudian interpretation of an Indian rite of status reversal, "*communitas* is not merely instinctual; it involves consciousness and volition."⁵

Turner recognized that to this union of opposites, of society versus *communitas*, he had to admit many impediments. Chief of those is the common difficulty of using theorems derived from the study of preindustrial societies to account for social behavior within the industrial West. He responded to this problem in his recent essay, "Liminal and Liminoid." He does so by distinguishing all preindustrial from industrial societies. The latter are marked by a unique triad of social relations denoted by the terms "work," "play," and "leisure."⁶ I cannot summarize here this rich discussion. For our purposes I will note that he now distinguishes the liminal quality of tribal religion and play, which is itself a form of serious work, from the liminoid quality of leisure activities. Following Karl Marx he notes how the Industrial Revolution created the arbitrary and compulsive "workday" and its antithesis "free time." Since time is money, and wasted time wasted money or wasted profits, the worker's free time became another market to exploit. Turner does not pursue this Marxist issue. His is not a Marxist theory. This is evident when he says that in liminoid periods human beings are able to alter their environment. Thus he includes scholars and scientists among the liminoid actors since both groups act in "neutral space."

Given this new triad of work, play, and leisure, leisure becomes both highly structured and privatized. "Society ceases to govern its activities by means of common ritual obligations; some activities, including work and leisure, become, at least in theory, *subject to individual choice*."⁷

It is this element of individual choice, the privatization of "nonwork" into leisure, which distinguishes liminoid from liminal activities. Liminal activities, the great feasts and rituals of reversal typical of preindustrial societies, are conservative. In Turner's fine phrase, they are like satire, which while exposing folly and vice uphold the standard and official moral code. They act as a mirror which "inverts but also reflects

an object. It does not break it down into constituents in order to remold it, far less does it annihilate and replace that object."⁸ Liminoid behaviors, like philosophy and art, often do these things. Hence he distinguishes *liminal* forms of traditional (and ritualistic) drama, like Noh plays and Greek theatre, from the *liminoid* theatre and novels of the nineteenth century.

As leisure assumes a status coequal to that of work and play, it vitiates the claims of traditional ritual. For with leisure time comes the privatization of individual opinions and actions. We are free to choose how we spend our offtime, and, at the level of culture itself, surplus wealth makes possible a whole class of leisured professionals, like professors. They are encouraged to "experiment" with the very foundations of a culture: its beliefs and institutions. This triumph of individualism increases the distance between self and group. One is free to avoid ritual duties.

But what of self-esteem? As I read him, Turner's distinction between native liminality and modern liminoid states is also a social-psychological theorem: that the more "equal" one is to fellow participants in *communitas*, the more individual one may be. This paradox is only apparent, for with the experience of *communitas* each ritual actor is reminded of his or her place in the group and at the same time of its "sacred" quality, that is, of its numinous dimension. While liminality may evoke terror, dread, and despair, it does not evoke "*anomie*, alienation, *angst*, the three fatal *alpha* sisters of modern myths."⁹ These are precisely the feelings which dominate the inner experience of the narcissistic personality.

Turner makes broad distinctions between liminal and liminoid forms of *communitas*. I push his distinctions toward a dichotomy stronger than he might wish to support. But it helps clarify some aspects of the psychoanalytic establishment and some aspects of modern psychotherapeutic rituals. Liminal forms of *communitas* are unrestricted, eufunctional, everyday, reinforcing of general social norms and social hierarchies. Typically they are fixed by seasonal or other universal temporal and spatial features. They are *not* commodities. Liminoid forms of *communitas* are the opposite: they are partial social processes, restricted in membership and access, potentially revolutionary, suspect to those in power, focused on the individual, and typically expensive commodities, for example, psychoanalytic treatment.

Both narcissism and its psychoanalytic treatment are liminoid. Psychoanalysts, psychoanalytic theory, and psychoanalytic treatment are restrictive, individual, arranged in schools, potentially revolutionary, ritualized but not religious, and shaped by the commodity

dimension of our culture. More importantly, the problems with which psychoanalysis is designed to deal are, in part, products of the dissolution of liminal *communitas*. Or as Sigmund Freud said a number of times, with the waning of religion came psychoanalysis. It is an anticultural (liminoid) mode of treatment of private "institutions," the neuroses, which are structural caricatures of public institutions. For example, obsessional neurosis caricaturizes religion; hysteria, art; and paranoia, metaphysics.¹⁰

Freud was serious when he made these remarks. His essays on the "cost" of civilization, like his later treatise, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, denounce the restrictions bourgeoisie civilization places upon its members. While he hoped psychoanalysis would enter the mansion of official science, Freud also recognized how unpalatable its claims were. More pertinent to Turner's conception of the liminoid, psychoanalysis has not flourished within the university. As Roy Schafer notes, it has not assumed the status and security within official science that Darwinism, its intellectual brother, enjoys universally. Turner permits us to explain why there are no "Institutes of Darwinism" alongside those of Freudianism. There are none because the latter is particularly liminoid; it works against the grain of official ideology and it requires, with the utmost stringency, an alteration of the inner self through the long initiation of the training analysis.

Psychoanalysis has developed in tandem with the forms of self-pathology which are themselves products of the dissolution of liminal *communitas*. This is most obvious in Kohut's extensive critique of Freud and in his re-evaluation of the classical theory of narcissism.¹¹

NARCISSISM AND THE RITUAL RESTORATION OF SELF-ESTEEM

Narcissism is the inordinate love of self. This is not a quantitative definition, but it captures the general semantic implications of the term. In traditional moralistic understandings narcissism is a form of spiritual error and weakness. Its remedy is therefore some form of admonition, punishment, or penance. With the advent of psychoanalysis similar "interpersonal difficulties," such as sexual oddities, were subsumed under the rubric of illness and disease. Hence admonition, punishment, and other moralisms disappeared from the treatment regimen. The search for historical causes and the delineation of traumatic origins became hallmarks of the psychoanalytic approach. However, narcissism was not placed under this clinical umbrella. Freud and others retained a moralistic attitude toward narcissism in all its forms. Freud did proffer theoretical reasons for his conclusion that narcissists were suitable neither as patients nor as

students. Principal among these was their apparent inability to have strong, direct transference feelings towards the therapist.

Kohut challenged Freud and his claim that narcissists were not amenable to psychoanalytic treatment. In place of Freud's "u-tube" theory, which assumes that narcissistic libido increases as object libido decreases, Kohut argued there was a line of narcissistic libidinal development distinct from that of object libido but subject to the same kinds of pathological and sublimatory transformations. While Freud had dismissed narcissists, Kohut trained the *sine qua non* of analysis, empathy, upon their suffering. Classical theory held that the psyche had two kinds of internal images: representations of self and representations of others (objects). Narcissists experience extreme and painful gyrations in their self-representations. In place of the "healthy glow" of consistent self-esteem, they feel either powerful and awesome or deeply despondent. At first glance, their extreme mood swings and sexual perversions appear to mark them as borderline patients. Kohut distinguishes the two forms of pathology on the criteria of analyzability and the presence of a coherent ego. A narcissistic patient dreams of himself circling the earth, like a satellite, *nearly* out of touch (psychotic) but still tied to the earth (the analyst) by the impersonal force of gravity. Narcissistic personality types retain at one and the same time self images of immense power and attractiveness and, with equal passion, images of themselves as worthless objects.

Kohut differs from Turner. He retains Freud's goal of assimilating psychoanalysis into the realms of the natural sciences (though with a more contemporary philosophy of science). This not unattractive ideal entails a particular view of ritual: it is antithetical to scientific practice. I am fond of recalling that one reads over the entrance to a famous psychiatric hospital in Chicago, "we shall not ritualize our practices." Turner's more global concept of the liminoid gives us another view of this psychiatric commandment.

Liminoid phenomena, like the analytic hour, are highly ritualized. As conveyers and also containers of *communitas*—an intrinsic dimension of human existence—they manifest numinous qualities which confirm the ideology (or theology) associated with the event. One gains conviction, insight, and relief. The important truism, that psychotherapeutic organizations and political groups may operate like religious sects, is here amplified. We have to stress the word "like." Psychoanalysis and other forms of psychotherapy are not religions, neither are all their practices ritualized. Rather they are liminoid types of praxis that occur within a human world divided into distinct arenas: the worlds of work, play, and leisure. Psychoanalysis is an immensely private, immensely selective, and immensely arcane form of action. It is

exactly what Turner described as liminoid, a rubric under which we may place also most of the natural sciences.

Turner helps us think about psychoanalysis. Is the reverse true, as well? I think contemporary ego psychology can help explain the ubiquity of ritual actions in all cultures, preindustrial as well as industrial. One task of ritual institutions is to help shape a homogeneous and coherent sense of self and self worth. George Mahl put together a convenient chart that lists the kinds of behavior subject to neurotic and psychotic disturbances. Thus eating may be mildly disturbed by temporary loss of appetite (as occurs in neurotics), or by chronic loss of all feelings of hunger (as occurs in anorexia nervosa). We find a similar range of problems associated with elimination, sexuality, perception, and memory.¹² Behavioral disturbances can be placed along a spectrum. It runs from temporary and mild behaviors, the causes of which are obvious, to chronic, severe impairments, the causes of which are not obvious and sometimes undiscoverable. Each class of behavior depends upon the correct functioning of the autonomic nervous system. One cannot will a good appetite, nor stable bowels, nor an erection, nor any of the other behaviors on this list.

In addition to the items listed above, Mahl includes thinking and learning, speech, and social relations. He does not single out self-perception and self-esteem, but I think he should. Self-esteem does not appear in Mahl's list, in part, because he shares the traditional psychoanalytic view that issues of self-esteem are not amenable to psychoanalytic investigation. Yet self-esteem has all the characteristics of the behaviors Mahl describes. We can summarize them under five headings.

First, self-esteem depends upon the ego's direct perception (both internal and external) of the body. As Freud and many others point out, we know ourselves in a uniquely private way: we can see and touch our bodies as we do other objects in the world *and* we perceive our touching, as it were, from the inside. Who we are and how we esteem ourselves has, therefore, as much a somatic grounding as do sexuality and affective reactions.

Second, there appear to be as many gradations and forms of self pathologies as there are gradations and forms of sexual disturbances. Each of us has experienced the peculiar and intense pain occasioned by attacks to our feelings of self-worth. Kohut began his research into the genesis and treatment of narcissistic disorders when he observed how intense and long-lived were the effects of narcissistic injury among his colleagues, each of whom was both trained and analyzed with great rigor.

Third, one cannot will an alteration in one's self-esteem, any more than one can will a good appetite or restful sleep. Like these maladies,

for which billions of dollars are spent in the search for palliatives, self-esteem is not subject to conscious control.

Fourth, each of the behavior classes on Mahl's list can serve as a "somatic foundation" upon which religious rituals may be elaborated. This is true of self-esteem as well. Eating and drinking are universal behaviors that figure into or "under" numerous religious rituals, the Eucharist being an obvious example. Elimination does not serve official religious rituals in the West, but it does in American Indian religion.¹³

Fifth, not only does each class provide a potential somatic base for overt rituals, but each also is consolidated through the *ritual interaction of parent and child*. Erik Erikson's fundamental concept of mutual regulation is pertinent here. As we know now from numerous studies of infants and primates, complex mammals cannot acquire their full repertoire of behavioral skills without the mutual interaction of caring adults. The paradigmatic example is the nursing pair; the infant's *need* to nurse coincides, through the initial attempts at feeding, with its mother's *need* to give suck. Hence the mother and infant activate each other mutually; their love for one another is secured and made permanent by that mutual physical need, just as married love is secured through sexuality. Self-esteem appears to be a similar form of behavior. It has somatic roots, including the "self preservative instinct," that are shaped and controlled through ritualized interaction with others.¹⁴

Kohut accepts Erikson's basic premise but extends it to argue that, like eating, self-esteem cannot become autonomous and conflict free without the environmental support of a loving, empathic adult. Rituals constrain the individual adult's choice to a few proven modes of behavior, like child rearing, which must be carried out successfully if the next generation is to survive. Hence they promote the general good, perhaps at the expense of the individual's pleasures.

Such rituals are necessarily liminoid in character and mysterious in operation, for they hallow and sacralize behaviors the forms of which are variable and therefore liable to replacement. Anthony F. C. Wallace argued this point in his essays on "mazeways." He suggested it was not necessary for all members of a society to understand intellectually how it operated.¹⁵ Intense effort and talent is required to comprehend how the abstract categories of one's culture operate and how they condition one's experience. Few persons have the interest, and fewer have the capacity of Immanuel Kant to forge the tools for such an investigation. Hence, when that cultural superstructure is under assault, few people have the skill or strength to defend it, or tolerate its destruction.

At the level of the individual ego, a loss of supportive, ritually justified, superior persons or transcendent beliefs is equally threaten-

ing for it is tantamount to an attack on its own integrity. Hence, even symbolic representations of both loving objects and of oneself are protected and sacralized. Paintings, poems, and other artifacts have a durability and substance about them which is reassuring, quite apart from their emotional or symbolic values. It is their durability and their structural integrity which provide human beings objective referents of themselves.¹⁶

In Erikson's terms, human infants, like human adults, require the presence of others for their self-regulation. Why should the behaviors Mahl listed, even if dependent upon the mutual stimulation of loving partners, be ritualized as well? There are at least three good reasons. First, they depend upon drive elements: like hunger and libido they occur in unison with the upsurge in drive pressure. Some behaviors are more distant from drive pressure than others and are relatively autonomous; all are affected by alterations in the drives. Second, as Freud said about religious ritual, to the degree that an action which aims at satisfaction is governed by archaic object representations, upsurge in the drives will cause repetition because the original objects are not available. The ego is doomed to search for an object it can imagine and recall but cannot have.

A third reason is a variant of Turner's remark about the degree to which rituals conserve the status quo in all its dimensions. Self-esteem, like the related concept of face is susceptible to any change in social relation, status, or social position. Rituals of dress, comportment, and personal style all support the view and status of oneself one wishes to project. Religious rituals, particularly theistic ones, aid the ego because they quiet one of its greatest fears, that of being unloved by the superego. In religious language, a loving god will not let us fall out of the world. There always will be a loving other, waiting for us just beyond despair and death.

If, with Freud, we assume that the amount of "work" the ego must perform remains constant, including the amount for maintaining self-esteem, then the following formula ought to be correct: *amount of work performed* = *amount of energy expended* × *amount of information directing expenditure*. Freud's perennial "pessimism" about the cost of cultural renunciations and the burden of civilization makes no sense without some such formula. For if the amount of energy (or libido if one wishes to call it that) remains constant, one cannot increase the amount of work performed without increasing the amount of information which is to control it. Information in this formula stands for the entire set of intellectual structures, including religious ideologies, which are systematically meaningful. Their truth and the validity of the propositions in which they are expressed are not pertinent to their informational quotient.¹⁷

Religious rituals are rich with symbols, encased in elaborate ideologies, and often choreographed. Hence they are rich in information—again, defining that as a measure of nonarbitrary organization. Although the plausibility of religious rituals and the truth value of their ideologies remain distinct problems, when we place them in my simple formula, we see that their use should increase the amount of work a given culture can extract from its members. Hence they contribute to the general good.

CONCLUSIONS: THE LIMINOID OF SELF-PATHOLOGY

Kohut recognized contemporary American social structures were not identical to those of Freud's Vienna, and he noted in *The Restoration of the Self* that the dramatic increase in narcissistic pathologies were causally related to shifts in family and social life. Turner's distinction between liminal and liminoid forms of *communitas* is relevant to this question of social causality. If psychoanalysis is a liminoid form of praxis, dependent upon the organization of work, play, and leisure, then massive alterations in the organization of these should alter it as well. At the same time, because it is a liminoid form, psychoanalysis is not beholden to the party in power. It can criticize its parent civilization, as Freud did in the nineteenth century and as Kohut has in our times.

Turner allows us better to define narcissism and to amplify Kohut's conception of its genesis. Kohut argues a causal theorem: actual failures in the parent's empathy toward the infant and young child create a condition in which narcissistic self-regulation cannot occur. With either too much or too little empathic and mutual interaction, the immature ego cannot constrain the organism's natural tendencies toward grandiosity and its opposite, self abasement.¹⁸ Narcissistic wholeness, a feeling of self-worth and confidence, is not an intrapsychic skill. Rather it is the reflection of adequate relationships and an adequate capacity to find in one's environment the persons and experiences which will serve self-regulation.

The parents' failure is a liminoid one: they cannot convey to their child a belief in and use of "*communitas*," that is, an intrinsic pleasure in being a human being who is valued and loved for his or her own self. The narcissistic use of another person is a systematic denial of *communitas* in either form, liminal or liminoid. If, as many assert, there has been an increase in the frequency and severity of narcissistic disorders in this century, it may be related to a degradation of *communitas*.

When *communitas* is compartmentalized into private forms of behavior, when liminality gives way to liminoid forms, it loses its ability to cement a universal identity and value system to a singular and domi-

nant ideology. Since practices such as child rearing and sexuality are themselves constrained by such ideologies, the absence of a dominant ideology brings chaos and anxiety. When liminality is converted to the liminoid it becomes a commodity. In capitalism this means it becomes priced according to the market. The structure of American mental health professions, including pastoral care, is a reflection of the dominance of a commodity market: the "best" treatment is also the most costly; the price for services falls with too many practitioners; hence professional organizations control access to training; and so on. The Christian church has long championed a view of human beings that is intrinsically liminal: we are all children of god, not self-created but created, loved for our intrinsic nature, listened to, consoled and esteemed by our creator. Whether or not such a doctrine can coexist easily with the transformation of *communitas* into commodities is no small question.

NOTES

1. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969); "Conflict in Social, Anthropological and Psychoanalytic Theory" (videotape, Charlottesville, Va.: University of Virginia, School of Medicine, 24 February 1981).
2. Heinz Kohut, *The Analysis of the Self* (New York: International Universities Press, 1971); *The Restoration of the Self* (New York: International Universities Press, 1977).
3. Turner, *Ritual Process*, p. 177.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, p. 188.
6. Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982), pp. 20-60.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 40-41.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 46.
10. Freud's most succinct expression occurs in *Totem and Taboo* (1912-1913), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey et al., 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974), 13 (1953):1-161.
11. Kohut, *Analysis of the Self*, pp. 1-34.
12. George F. Mahl, *Psychological Conflict and Defense* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1969), pp. 5-6.
13. See George Devereux, *Mohave Ethnopsychiatry and Suicide* (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of American Ethnology, 1961).
14. Freud did not deny that narcissism was "natural." In both his early and later theories of libido he held that the original state of the psyche was one of narcissistic pleasures, interrupted only by the intrusions of a painful reality. Among those intrusions was the parents' failure to meet the infant's immense narcissistic demands. For Freud, the capacity to love others occurs only when one can put aside that original selfish orientation long enough to seek to give pleasure to persons other than oneself. The "u-tube" theory of libidinal energy entailed the claim that object love could be increased only by a similar decrease in narcissistic libido (hence the model of a single tube of "libido"). Freud denied that narcissism could be sublimated into adaptive and adult actions. Because he did not hold the "u-tube" theory, Kohut believed that adaptation and sublimation of both narcissistic and object libido occurs and can be fostered by psychoanalytic treatment.
15. Anthony F. C. Wallace, *Culture and Personality* (New York: Random, 1961), p. 35.
16. See Adrian Stokes, *Greek Culture and the Ego* (London: Tavistock, 1958).

17. See Volney P. Gay, "Reductionism and Redundancy in the Analysis of Religious Forms," *Zygon* 13 (1978): 169-83.

18. That Kohut is sympathetic to Erikson's basic understanding of mutuality is illustrated in Kohut's discussion of the narcissistic trauma suffered by children of psychoanalysts. Their parents were *too* "understanding," that is, too intrusive and too accurate in their assessment of their children's internal states. A more balanced relationship, in which the child is permitted to retain its inner privacy, as the adults retain theirs, produces happier children.

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