

What is at stake:

Think for a moment of the way life or people hurt you. What gets bruised is your self-esteem – the value you place on yourself. When your self-esteem is hurt something fundamental in you is threatened if not violated. It is your sense of importance in life.

There is really nothing more devastating for any of us than to feel that our sense of significance, no matter how small, is dismissed or taken away from us. Nothing else can leave us so utterly naked and exposed.

This is the only way one can understand the ferocious intensity expressed and displayed by people in relationships when slights, offences, insults, occur. The life defining importance we place on what are objectively unimportant issues, actually reveal our true concerns.

The motive for your frustration and defensiveness is never what you say it is. Your motive is actually your real dread of insignificance. Your everyday defensiveness is revealed as your compulsive urge for some heroic standing in life.

So you cling to your position and arguments with a ferocity and an intensity because these positions seem to offer some protection from your solitary vulnerability. They are your security blankets against the wind of powerlessness and, yes, death.

When you begin to fight with your partner or your children more often than not your arguments, your defences, your irrationalities, and your outbursts are the domestic version of an angry dance against the gods. In winning the argument, in proving yourself right, in attacking the other person you are, in effect, warding off what you feel is a demon that reminds you of your smallness and your vulnerability. “If he wins this argument then I’ll die”, your superstitious emotional self feels.

To have one’s efforts dismissed is more than just a rebuttal of one’s efforts, but of one’s efforts to remain equal to life. It may be no more than a smart comment by your partner, an unintentional put-down, or a dismissive attitude. But what it does is attack your precarious sense of yourself. It makes you ask, “What is the point. What is the point of *trying*?” This, in truth, is the struggle for a heroic life.

This is all revealed in its desperate fury when a relationship breaks down. A relationship battle of “who is right” becomes a religious and symbolic war. The consequences are often tragic because the war becomes a *holy* one in that one begins to feel that one’s existential, if not religious, significance is being assaulted. Most lawyers, psychologists, and psychiatrists do not appreciate that what is at stake in separation and divorce battles is a kind of existential if not religious worth.

Part of you wants your partner to be a symbol, not of death, decay, vulnerability and frailty but as a symbol of a triumph over death. He/she does this by being perfect, by anticipating your needs, by confirming your beliefs, by soothing your anxieties. When your partner falls short, becomes imperfect, is unable to meet your needs, grows old,

has bad habits, develops the images of decay, there rises up an awful terror and betrayal – unless it is infused with spirituality!