

THE POWER OF WE

We either live a creative life from the self or a constricted life from the egocentric ego. The choice is ours, dependent only on our willingness to overcome our fears.

By Sarah Fordham

Psychotherapist Fritz Kunkel was born in 1889 in Brandenburg (now in Poland), and can be considered the forefather of the modern self-help industry. A prolific writer and scholar, Kunkel's books were written for the general reader not professionals and a deep concern for the psychological and spiritual welfare of individuals shines through his works.

Kunkel studied medicine at the University of Munich but, after losing his left arm while treating the wounded at the Battle of Verdun during the First World War, retrained as a psychotherapist, opened a practice in Berlin and founded his school of We-Psychology. Though he died 50 years ago, Kunkel's We-psychology is very much of our time.

You can sum up Kunkel's thesis in a simple sentence: we either live a creative life from the self or a constricted life from the egocentric ego. The choice is ours, dependent only on our willingness to overcome our fears. For it is only fear that holds our ego in place and gives it such tremendous power in determining what kind of life we live.

Kunkel said: 'The amazing process...begins with a decision not to fight against our vices, not to run away from them nor conceal them, but to bring them into the light. To be mature means to face, and not evade, every fresh crisis that comes.'

According to Kunkel, our ego is made up of a positive ideal (what we want to be) and a negative ideal (what we don't want to be). Though we are driven towards the ideal we are conversely afraid we will never get there, and this fear leads us to the very thing we are afraid of. 'The egocentric person,' Kunkel said, 'is exclusively interested in reaching his egocentric goal, and is accordingly afraid of becoming what he does not want to be.'

Kunkel believed a devastating collapse of We follows a breakdown in unity with our parents (caused by egocentricity). Life is then organised apart from our true self and as the ego takes over, pressure and anxiety mount. The various life crises that follow are meant to drive us towards facing our own egocentricity, defined by Kunkel as 'wanting happiness, regardless of the welfare of others'.

To help us understand our own egocentricity, Kunkel suggested drawing a vertical line, at the top of which is +100, symbolising our highest ideals and at the bottom of which is -100, symbolizing our deepest fears, a place he calls the doghouse. Kunkel believed that every ideal corresponds with a fear, and that knowing the egocentric goal (for example wealth), means you can then figure out with mathematical precision what the doghouse will be (for example poverty) and vice versa.

When I drew that vertical line and wrote my +100 and -100, I knew I was onto something. When I

identified my worst fears, I discovered that their opposites were my highest goals. I saw how I was always thwarted in reaching those goals and that it was my fear of the exact opposite happening that was driving me constantly to the doghouse.

Kunkel believed that we rush from one egocentric pattern to another in order to avoid the doghouse. Underpinning this, he pointed to four types of egocentricity: the Star, who wants admiration and hates ridicule; the Bully, who wants power and hates to be bullied; the Clinging Vine, who wants protection, hates responsibility and shuns decisions; and the Turtle, who wants to be left alone and hates to be involved in the drama of life. None of the four types exclude each other. When one fails, we switch to our reserve type, and if this attitude fails, we may go on to a third one.

But, says Kunkel, the doghouse is inevitable. It is waiting for us all and its exploration is indispensable for achieving maturity.

'If you find yourself in the doghouse, crushed by defeat or completely discouraged by pain, all rebellion is useless,' said Kunkel. 'All pride is gone, and all complaints about injustice or the cruelty of fate only makes matters worse. If you accept the situation as it is, looking around like an explorer trying to learn what can be learned, you will discover an amazing fact. There is no doghouse at all. It only exists in our imagination. If you think you are in it, you suffer cruelly. But the more you explore it, the less real it is and very soon it disappears altogether. In other words, it is only our ego that suffers; but in suffering, the ego dissolves as snow dissolves in the sunshine, and with the ego gone, all suffering ends. We can walk clear through the doghouse and come out the other side without our ego. This is what "maturity" means: living without egocentricity, loving our fellow men, serving the right causes, sober in success and calm in failure, the best guarantee for happiness.'

After exploring the doghouse, then, what are we to do? Have we-experiences, says Kunkel, since our egocentricity decreases to the same extent as our we-feeling increases.

If you are walking along with a friend and have an apple in your pocket, don't hide it away or try to eat it clandestinely. Don't give it away either: if you give the whole apple to your friend, you are altruistic (altruism is the opposite of egoism). Share the apple and have a we-experience. And if you are a Star, refrain from showing off; if a Bully, submit to the will of another; if a Clinging Vine, take a risk; and if a Turtle, go ahead and serve others. Do it for a month and see what happens. You may just find it's true that 'the real Self is not I but We'.