

# THE KING INSIDE

Words Sarah Fordham  
Illustration Piero

FRITZ KUNKEL, FOUNDER OF THE HIGHLY ORIGINAL 'WE PSYCHOLOGY', DEFINED EGOISM AS 'WANTING HAPPINESS REGARDLESS OF THE WELFARE OF OTHERS'. HE BELIEVED THAT THE ONLY WAY TO CURB THE EGO'S DESTRUCTIVE EFFECTS WAS TO CULTIVATE 'WE EXPERIENCES'

Sharing as much as possible, most would agree, is a good philosophy to live by, so why is it so hard to achieve? Is it my Ego's fault? Is my Ego really all bad? Who exactly is the Real Me? Is to be selfish a consequence of human nature or nurture?

There's not a lot of agreement from professional psychologists as to what the Ego is, but we experience the effects of egoism all the time – our own and other people's: a neighbour who plays dance music all night long, keeping you tossing and turning, causing you to be unfit for human interaction the following day; your boss, neglecting to commend you for all your hard work – and even taking the credit for it.

We may not be quite so aware of our own egoism: too tired perhaps to see the old lady struggling with her shopping on the Tube as we collapse into the last seat and shut our eyes after another gruelling day at the office; forgetting again to make that call home, show appreciation for loved ones, and so it goes on ...To say nothing of contemplating the global environmental

crisis, the plight of the poor and the injustices in world affairs. Surely you can't blame someone for embracing a philosophy that will shore them up against the difficult, unpleasant and painful elements of life 'out there' or, more poignantly perhaps, 'over there'.

Webster's dictionary describes the Ego as: 'the self as distinct from the external world'. The indication here is that when we live from the Ego only, we cut ourselves off from experiencing the world in a holistic way. The Ego is constantly thinking, observing, judging (it doesn't take into account the 'feelings' part of life), and in that way gives us the illusion of 'safety' within our thought patterns.

These thought patterns are usually based on belief systems that we created as children. Take, for example, a woman whose father was constantly critical of her as a child. Her mind records this as 'all men will put me down'. As an adult she now believes this to be true because it was her actual experience, and automatically reacts with distrust because her belief system tells her all men are uncaring, even cruel. Of course this can be overcome, but not if the Ego has anything to do with it. The Ego is threatened by new experiences and will defend its position as the King of our lives, even to our very great unhappiness.

Kunkel explains it well: 'Fear leads you to the very thing you are afraid of.' In your search for true love, do you end up falling for the same 'type' . . .? Kunkel would say it is the drive to wholeness that is causing the same thing to happen over and over. In other words, there is a lesson to be learned, and we will always end up in the Doghouse (the place where our fears become reality) unless we take notice and take action.

So what purpose does the Ego serve? Obviously we need to think problems through, observe behaviours, and make judgements, but that will not tell us all there is to know about life. The Ego does not take into account feelings and intuition, because it is a product of the mind – it is not a heart-based method of understanding the world.

Harry M. Tiebout, MD, in his essay, 'The Ego Factors In Surrender In Alcoholism', tells how an alcoholic finally surrenders to therapy. In their first session together this man has a revelation: "My goodness, I never knew that. You don't do your thinking up here" (pointing to his head), "you think down here where you feel" (placing his hands on his stomach)... He was learning that his feelings had a 'mind' of their own and that he needed to listen – indeed his very life depended on it.

We need to become aware of how to use our minds, but also to learn to trust the flow of information coming from our intelligent hearts to guide us. We will then live nearer to our true centre, or real self, and experience healing of the head-heart split. Jung compared this process of integration, which he called 'individuation', to the process of alchemy – the changing of base metal into gold. There is great promise in the process if we are brave enough to dethrone our Inner King.

Kunkel believed that the Ego, in its denial of insight and its refusal to accept the entire personality, contributes to more evil than the Shadow. (The Jungian definition of the Shadow was described well by Edward C. Whitmont, a New York analyst: 'The

SHARING AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE, MOST WOULD AGREE, IS A GOOD PHILOSOPHY TO LIVE BY, SO WHY IS IT SO HARD TO ACHIEVE?

Shadow is everything that has been rejected during the development of the personality because it did not fit into the Ego ideal.') The Shadow never lies; it's the Ego that lies about its real motives.

That's why successful psychotherapy (and any genuine religious conversion) requires absolute honesty about oneself. The first of Alcoholics Anonymous Twelve Step recovery programme is a startling admission: 'We admitted we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives had become unmanageable.'

Tiebout sees the Ego as an aspect of personality carried over from infancy into adulthood. It is characterised by three things: a feeling of omnipotence, an inability to tolerate frustration, and an excessive drive, exhibited in the need to do all things precipitously (careless, fast). Does that remind you of anybody?

This is what an immature man looks like, says Tiebout. 'He is possessed by an Inner King who not only must do things in a hurry, but has no capacity for taking frustration in his stride. He seeks a life which will not stop him and finds himself in a ceaseless rat race.' The Ego is thus defined: a residual of the initial feeling life of the infant.

The analysts of our time recognise the same truth: Freud saw therapy as a running battle between the original narcissism of the infant (his term for Ego) and the therapist, whose task it was to reduce that original state to more manageable proportions. Since Freud could not conceive of life without some measure of Ego, he never resolved the riddle of how contentment is achieved, believing man and woman were doomed to unhappiness.

Kunkel believed that the need for Ego reduction is vital for us to live creative lives, for being egotistical requires a lot of energy. But it is common knowledge (particularly to alcoholics) that a return of the full-fledged Ego can happen at any time. Years of sobriety (or apparent egolessness) is no insurance against its resurgence. So a way of life is called for that will check the Ego's inevitable return.

All this may sound like an awful lot of effort. AA has its Twelve Steps, and religious traditions have their practices. It is often a crisis that forces us to change, but once we have said, 'OK, I give up on my headstrong ways, I've learned my lesson,' we can begin a journey. The headlong pace has been halted and we can surrender. A single surrender may not be enough, but it's a start and it creates a whole new set of possibilities. New things can now happen.

Could this really be the way of happiness? To surrender the Ego? But what will happen to me if I do that?

A veteran of the Twelve Steps programme put it well when he said: 'The continued practice of the Steps has substantially eliminated the old clawing, clinging, scrapping, unloving and unlovable ME, and given me a loving I AM that is so much more than I could ever have imagined at the time.' ■

*Sarah Fordham has developed therapeutic creative writing workshops and has experience of helping those recovering from addictions.*