



P.O. Box 66540
Albuquerque, NM 87193
505.890.6806
E-mail: irm@liferesource.org
Website: www.liferesource.org

Presentation Transcript
Relational Rupture and Repair – Part 2
By Bill Jacobs
December 21, 2006

(This is the second part of a presentation titled *Relational Rupture and Repair*.)

...and they surprisingly found that there were four major ways kids reacted to that kind of situation – not as many different ways as there were kids, but just four. What they learned from that is, that there is a structure in the brain that allows babies to attach to their mothers in four different ways, depending on how the mother treats them. It's organized. It's not just fractured or random. It's predictable.

Now that was going on in the fifties. And there's a huge base of research that's been ongoing since that time. If you wanted to go take the adult attachment interview – AAI – it would cost you about two hundred and fifty bucks. And they can, pretty much, tell you how you were treated by your mother. It's just amazing. It has a lot to do with the language we use as adults, actually.

What's good about that? Well, if you're a therapist, you can listen to people talk and you can, pretty well, zero in on what's happened. So you can go right to it. You don't have to spend a year helping them dig around. You can go right to it.

I wanted to tell you that so you would have some measure of confidence that what I'm going to say next has some sort of background behind it – that's verifiable. The area of study is called *attachment theory*. One of the things they've noticed about families that are what they call, securely attached – that's one of the four.... There's always more bad ways than there are good, right? One of the four ways is *securely attached*. When there is a family that has securely attached kids, they know that when there are ruptures in their relationships in that family, they know how to reattach. That's the thing that they've learned about them.

Now, all families – healthy or dysfunctional – all suffer ruptures in relationships. That's just human. People have problems. But the healthy families know how to repair them. So there's a whole field within attachment theory called *rupture and repair*. That's the area that I've wanted to focus on today, because it has a lot to do with forgiveness.

The command to go to our brother and talk things out? That has to do with rupture and repair, doesn't it? And to return good for evil? That has to do with rupture and repair. Those are biblical terms. Rupture and repair isn't, but it's the same thing. They're only *discovering* what God has already invented.

So we can know from statements like this in the Bible – you know, “return good for evil,” and “not to be overcome by evil, but to prevail over it,” and to “go to our brother” and talk things out – that God wants us to be healthy and to repair the inevitable ruptures that are going to take place in our relationships, because of our biases, because of our miscommunication, because of unfinished things from the past.

In a family, to be unable to participate in repair work means that we're not emotionally healthy. But when we can't do that as the church, it means that we're not spiritually healthy either.

So, I want to look at some of the things that the attachment literature talks about when it talks about rupture and repair. It talks about two ways of thinking. It's calls it the *high-road* and the *low-road*. Okay? Here's high-road thinking. When you are in high-road mode, all the parts of your brain are all working together. The left side and the right side are communicating. If this is your head, set on your spinal column, and these are your two eye sockets, the outside of your brain – the cortex – is communicating with the amygdala and the hippocampus down in here. You know, this stuff that sits right on top of the brain stem? All that's working together when we're in high-road mode. We're rational. We have the ability to think about what's happening to us, to sense what's going on in our bodies, to understand what that means. It allows us to be mindful and to think about how other people are acting and thinking and feeling. If something happens, that's out of what we're used to or ready for, it allows us to be flexible and deal with it on a contingency basis and roll with the punches. It allows us to be self-aware, because all parts of the brain are working together.

Okay. Now low-road thinking is when this part here – the part that does all the thinking and analyzing – turns off. It turns off. It's gone. Have you ever tried to reason with somebody that's in the middle of a tantrum? It just “ain't gonna” happen, is it? Because this part's not working! It's shut down. So it leaves us in a state of intense emotions, impulsive actions, rigid and repetitive responses. You know, if Dad ever gets mad, look out, because we know what he's going to do. There's no talking to him. He just going to get the belt, or whatever.

It's very hard when we're in low-road state to reflect on our own state of mind. And it's also impossible for us to think about somebody else's point of view at that point. And it's also in this state that we usually do the damage. This is where the offenses come. Now, don't think that low-road state means that people are necessarily just screaming at each other and throwing tantrums. It doesn't always have to be like that. People can be in a low-road state and be very quiet. It has to do with how angry we are – how upset.

Several years ago, in Albuquerque, we were looking for a new hall to rent. Two men in the congregation volunteered to look for a place for us to meet, which was really nice of them. They found a place they thought might work, so they took a video camera and took some pictures of the hall so that we could all see it. And they played the video after services for us to look at. Then after services, they asked for comments and questions. Really good, right? It was. It was really nice of them to do that, and thoughtful, and really smart of them to bring that camera so we could see what it looked like. They wanted us to give input. They didn't want to pick a place that wouldn't be good, so they were asking us what we thought of it.

So people began to do what they were asked to do, which was ask questions. And one of these men instantly became *extremely* defensive. He raised his voice. He spoke sharply to several people. His response was totally out of sync with what was actually going on there. Well, that's an example of somebody going into low-road processing.

Something from his past just turned off his thinking part of his brain, and all he had left was emotional reaction. He was no longer aware that he'd asked for questions and comments. Everything was a personal attack on him. I later learned that he'd been severely abused by his father as a child. So my theory is, that unfinished stuff from the past was contaminating his present. I don't know the dynamics of it, but I can imagine that he probably felt very defensive and afraid, and probably received a lot of criticism when he was a child.

Now the reaction by the group was really interesting. Some tried to restore him by saying, "Oh, nothing personal. We just want to know about the place. Take it easy." But most of us just withdrew from him. "Oooh...." So there was a rupture that was created between him and the group.

Later, after he went home and he returned to his high-road functioning, he felt really ashamed and embarrassed by what he did. And he expressed regret to the ones that he spoke sharply to. I think most of them let go of it. That's good. But it was just *so* obvious to everyone that something wasn't connecting. That's because he had shut down the part of his brain where he could rationally analyze what was coming in.

Now, there are four elements to this low-road thinking. There are *triggers*. That's the first thing that happens. We get triggered by something. You know, everybody talks about how somebody pushes their buttons? That's another word to talk about – triggers. Those are sometimes unresolved things from the past. We all have these triggers that bring up stuff from the past. Like with me, that thing that happened to me five years earlier...that wasn't from my childhood. Or you know, you can have your boss chew you out and your wife come home and look at you the same way he looked at you, and boom! You're right there again. And it was just a few minutes ago. So, triggers.

Then there's the *transition*, where we move out of that integrated, fully functional mode to where all we've got left is this. You can feel it building, can't you? My last thought

usually is, before I completely leave that is, “I’d better not say anything.” But then, if I can’t pull it back from that place, I usually wind up saying something I shouldn’t say.

Then there is the state of *emersion*, where attunement – attunement is the ability to connect with how someone else feels – self-reflection – the ability to understand how we’re feeling – they just become suspended. And we’re just grrrrrrr!

Then the fourth one is *recovery*. That’s where, as we burn all the bad chemicals out of our system by hyperventilating and sleeping and whatever else we have to do to recover, we start reactivating that integrative process.

Now, you know, I used to really rebel against the idea that my brain was like a machine that had different parts and functions. But it *is*. It is. And they know that when these different states are going on, there’s different firing places in the brain where these kind of things are taking place. Different parts of the brain serve different functions.

So what good is this going to do? Well, there’s another term that they use in this process of recovery called *centering*. This is how we get out of, or prevent ourselves from, going into low-road.

What do you do to center yourself? It seems like I spend my days teaching little kids how to center themselves after they’ve totally lost it, or before they totally lose it. One thing we teach them to do is to go away from the stimulation – trigger – whatever it is. We teach them to learn what the triggers are and where they first feel it in their body. Some people feel it behind their eyes. Some in their foreheads. Some in the back of their neck. Some in their chest. Some in their stomach. Different people feel it differently. So, where do you feel it first when you get angry? Pay attention to it. Before you lose the ability to pay attention to it, be aware. Be self-aware. Take time away from the event before you lose it, or afterwards. You know, cool off. Try to gain perspective and clarity. Pray. Fast. All of those things get the brain working again.

I taught this one little guy.... He just freaks at school when anybody does anything to him – even just bump into him by accident. He just starts wailing on them. So, I was teaching him how to breathe so that nobody would know that he was doing it, and that he could burn off the chemicals that throw you into low-road state. Now I saw him this week, and I said, “Well, how is the breathing going?” So he recounted the story of this kid being shoved by another kid into him, and how he wanted to hit him. But he turned away and started doing his breathing. So, he’s learning how to prevent himself from going all the way down.

I think it’s really important to realize that we can catch ourselves if we’re self-aware. It doesn’t have to develop into a full-force bitterness, or anger, or tantrum, or however we like to do it. It’s helpful for me to realize that, when we are in that angry state, we have shut off the ability to think about others and about how we’re functioning. If we know that ahead of time, it helps us to be able to take control of ourselves. You know, remove ourselves from the situation if we can – if not physically, then we can remove ourselves

emotionally from the situation, and continue trying to use our cognitive capabilities to think about things, and to realize there is that place we don't want to go within ourselves.

Once we've centered ourselves and we've got our whole brain working on the situation again, then we can think about why we overreacted so much. You know, when I was in that room with that kid that had been abusive – or harassed that girl – while I was feeling all that anxiety, there was no way that I could think about what was causing it. I had to remove myself, and it took several days before it finally came into my mind what that was. It took self reflection to do that.

It's also good to think about how the other person experiences our reaction. If we do lose it, and we explode, what can we do to make amends? How can we reconnect to that person? Once we do that we usually put distance between somebody that's having a tantrum and ourselves. We don't want to be attacked. So if we can't get away from them physically, we throw a wall up emotionally, don't we? And what we do is, we disconnect from them. We pull back within the boundaries of our own body, and we try to keep emotional distance from them. So, if we've offended somebody in that way, how do we reconnect? How do you do that?

Well, here comes another word. *Repair* of a broken relationship says it's a loss of connection. The way you *reconnect* with somebody is you start *attuning* yourself to how their feeling. So the key to repair is *attunement*. The problem there is that often when we rupture a relationship by taking that low-road with somebody, we feel so angry with ourselves and so ashamed, it's hard to even go to them face-to-face, because we just feel so bad about it.

You know that man who overreacted at church felt that way. He just felt so humiliated by his own behavior, he just wanted to never come back. You know, "I've blown it!" It's funny about us.... While we also feel that shame, at the very same time, when we do something to hurt other people, we tend to want to defend ourselves, too. It's really easy to send mixed messages. I was talking to him about this. He told me he wanted to explain to everyone why he reacted the way he did. But that doesn't really help. That sounds like making excuses to people. Instead, what we need to do is to attune ourselves to the other person's feelings and perceptions. And that helps them know that we understand how they feel. And that *is* reconnecting with them. That's what that is.

So the question becomes, "How can we attune to their experience so that they know that we're now *with* them?" Well, this man who got upset told one fellow, "I think that my angry tone was hurtful to you and it damaged our relationship." He said, "I think you were probably really shocked and surprised that I would talk to you that way when all that you were doing was asking a legitimate question." See, after you say that to somebody, you just stop and you wait, because that begs them to say something about how *they* were feeling. So then they have a chance to express everything they had. And you can respond to that. And that helps them go deeper into it. And I think he wound up finally by saying, "I'm so sorry that I reacted that way. You gave me no reason to act like that."

I had a mother and daughter in my office recently. The little girl was thirteen. She is one of the prettiest little girls I have ever laid eyes on. And she has one of the ugliest attitudes I have ever seen in my life, too. Oh my! She called her mother names and made fun of her in front of me right in the office! Really angry. Really disrespectful. Really sarcastic. Just a pill! She came in, and for most of the session – except for angry outbursts toward her mother – she sat with her warm-up coat zipped all the way up to the edge of the collar, and her arms folded tightly across her chest, and her legs crossed. She was really buried back into the corner of the overstuffed couch with the pillows all around her. She wouldn't make eye contact with me. Really dug in. Really shut down.

After listening to her mother complain about her for half an hour, despite my best efforts to find out something positive about this child, I looked at the little girl, and I said, "Mary, it feels really uncomfortable to you to be listening to your mother say all these negative things, and personal things, about you to somebody you don't even know. It makes you angry. And it hurts you to hear these things said about you by your mother. And you think it's so unfair, because it really seems to you that *she* is the one with the problem and not you." She kind of cut...you know, she just did that...and then right back down. I said, "And yet you agreed to come here because you wish you and your mother could get along, and you are hoping somehow that this is going to help."

See, she was communicating to me without words. So I had to attune myself to the body language and understand what she was actually telling me. And I tried to put into words what she was feeling for her, so that she would know *I got it!* I got the communication that was being delivered. She listened to this little speech intently without looking at me, but she didn't respond. So I turned my attention back to her mom. And in the last part of the session, she took off her coat, and she came out of the couch a bit, and out of the corner of my eye, I saw her sneaking a few peeks at me. When the session was over, I patted her on the back as she walked out the door, and she looked up at me and smiled, and said, "Bye!"

So the next week we started out the same way. This time I asked her a few questions about what she wanted to see come out of our meetings. And she began to participate more. Her mother asked if she could bring in some books that she'd purchased on parenting, and go over them with me. I said, "We can do that, but Mary might not want to come since it will probably be really boring." And she looked at me, and she said, "I'm coming." And I said, "You don't want to miss anything." And I said, "You want to know what we're going to say about you. And you want to know what your mother's going to do to begin changing your relationship." And she grinned at me, and said, "That's right!" She's really feisty. And I said, "You want to be fully included in this whole process." And she said, "Yes." See, that's all really good, because she's starting to understand that there's at least one person in the room that gets it.

So later in that session she excused herself to use the restroom, and I asked her mother if she noticed that Mary was getting more involved? And she said, "Yeah, I'm really amazed! She never does that at home." And I said, "It really surprises you she's reacting

so favorably so quickly. And it gives you hope that something good can happen from this work that we're going to do." And she started to cry at that point, because I hit it right on the head. And I said, "Mary's the most important person in your life, and it really hurts you that things have gone like they have gone, and you want this to work really badly." She nodded.

See, I'm attuning myself to *her* feelings now. And she's encouraged that something can happen. She smiled at me with tears running down her face, and I said, "You know, I just did the same thing with you that I did with your daughter to help her feel a part of things." I said, "I attuned myself to your situation and your feelings so that you could understand what that feels like – how encouraging it is." She smiled and nodded some more. I said, "I'm going to teach you how to do that with Mary so that she can feel that way toward you. And as you get better at it, it will help her *know* that you love her. And it's going to make it easier for her to talk with you about what's really bothering her."

That's what attunement does for you. When people feel like the other person gets it, then things can go forward. Because what's been lost is a lack of connection. And what attuning does is put us back in connection with that person. We're actually going outside the boundaries of our own skin, and we're connecting with what's going on in their heads. That's what we do.

Let's think about strategies for response. When a relationship is ruptured, there are two people who are hurt. The person who is on the receiving end gets hurt. They withdraw. But the person who does the rupturing, they also feel shame and isolation from it. So it takes both to repair a relationship. That's what is so good about this mother and her daughter that have come to my office for family therapy. Her mother's taking the lead, but Mary wants to be there, too. And she's really angry, but she's still there. She's still there.

Going back to our man in the church, some of the people in the group realized this man had some unfinished business from his past and, until that was resolved, they knew that he would probably overreact again, despite his best intentions, which he surely did. But how would you handle that situation? What would you do if he got upset once again? Would you pretend the incident never happened? Would you never talk to him again? Or just dismiss him from your life? Would you get offended all over again, even though you know it wasn't really about you? Or would you accept him as part of the human family – you know, the walking wounded – and try to help him back to equilibrium when he would go out of control?

Only the last one of these indicates a rupture that has been repaired. Only the last one. What about the first one – pretend it never happened? You know, so many parents have lost their tempers with their kids, or they ignore their children, or they make them promises and don't keep them. All these things are offensive to kids. Then they feel bad about it later, but, rather than talking about it, they think, "Well, they'll get over it." You know, too ashamed to talk to their children. Or we're too ashamed to talk to other people in the church about our misbehavior.

What happens to the child or the adult when we're left to "get over it?" Well, a child feels a sense of shame, or frustration, or guilt, or anger toward the parent, depending on what's happened. And if that's not processed, it becomes unconscious over time. And that puts it in the unresolved category, where it just comes back and back and back to contaminate our future relationships.

Like our friend, who had that bad relationship with his dad, his anger would emerge full force with people who had done nothing to him. Because he never got a chance to resolve that.

So when ruptures take place, they need to be resolved. They need to be talked through. There needs to be face-to-face. It's only then that they become harmless. That's why God tells us to go to our brother when there's a rupture, rather than ignoring it, or stuffing it, or never forgiving them.

Now, Mary came to counseling because deep down she wanted to have a good relationship with her mother, though it was really hard for her to admit that. The walls were up so far. She's angry with her mother, but, bless her little heart, she's still hopeful. She's still hanging in there. And that willingness to participate in the repair is what's going to save her and her mom.

It's really easy to treat people well when we have a good relationship with them, but what do we do with people when we're at odds. You know, that this angry little girl is willing to participate in a process to repair the ruptured relationship with her mother says that, when she gets married, she's going to be able to hang in there with her husband when they have their ruptures. And when her kids get on her nerves, and she says stuff that she's embarrassed about later, she's going to be able to hang in there with them, too. The research shows that that's one of the greatest indicators of healthy attachment. If she blows her mom off at some point, the chances are that she'd blow off other relationships, too, because that's her attachment style. That's what she's learned to do.

I recall a situation where I was teasing one of the teenage girls in one of my congregations years ago. Several days later she made a pretty defensive comment about that. You know, it's really so hard to relate to people who are younger because you don't know anything about the world that they're in, and they don't know anything about ours. So it seems like I've got my foot in my mouth a lot of times. And I had it in there then. She made this statement that let me know that she didn't appreciate the way I'd teased her. I think I was teasing her about boys. I can't remember. But I said to her, "Part of you knows I was just kidding, but what I said also hurt you and I realize that that's a subject that's painful for you, because of what you just told me." When I said that, her eyes dropped and she nodded her head. And you know, right there, it's so hard for a teen to take on somebody – the minister, even – and confront them about what they've done. It takes a lot of courage, but she was willing to do that. She did that because she valued the relationship. She was willing to take the chance of me putting her down, teasing her again, or just blowing her off. But she came to me. She was willing to do the work of

repair. What I said was, “I didn’t realize that was a sore spot for you and I’m sorry. I promise I’ll never tease you about that again.” And she smiled, and shed a tear, and gave me a hug. We were okay after that.

But you know what else happened after that? I repented. She forgave me. But sometime later, she engaged me in a discussion about that hurtful area of her life. So even there, something that could have been enduringly hurtful to her actually became a source of connection for us. And I was able to add something to her in that part of her life. So she gave me a chance to show sensitivity and support her, where I had been, in the past, hurtful to her. I’ve thought a lot about that situation as I have progressed through my learning on this attachment stuff, and how healthy people...they always do get crosswise with each other, but they always go toward the relationship, because healthy attachment means desiring relationship – valuing it. I was so impressed with her relational intelligence and her graciousness.

So that’s a not-so-brief view of one tiny aspect of attachment theory – rupture and repair. Of course, all this talk of repairing ruptures is just modern language for something that’s really very old – learning how to forgive others their debts as we have been forgiven. It’s been so helpful to me to realize there *are* things we can do to repair relational ruptures, and that the science of relational repair is completely compatible with what the Bible teaches us to do. It’s also nice to know, at this season of the year, that God and Christ have reached into *our* lives to repair the rupture that we have experienced in our relationship with Them. That intervention is the forgiveness of our sins. And that empowers us, in turn, to put aside malice and our human hard-heartedness and move forward with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.