



The Weiner-Weinstein Effect

Anthony Weiner, AKA Carlos Danger, Congressman Weiner, now felon Weiner, is a man I don't know and yet sadly know well. Harvey Weinstein I also don't know but has always been a much heavier dot on my radar beginning with his movie Sex, Lies, and Videotape, eerily prescient given the current revelations. Within their stories sit the ugly parallels of many others that don't make it into the public domain and yet blow up lives in much the same way that theirs have. Men, and I say men because men continue to hold the dubious honor of leading this grave statistic, who despite on the surface appear to have everything, skunk around in underground tunnels hoping to hide their fears, fetishes, foolishness, and fanaticism. I can't comment either personally or professionally on Anthony Weiner or Harvey Weinstein so instead I offer a generalized glimpse into the delusional and deluded thought process that catapults someone who has everything, onto a satellite planet that in order to survive will require them to rebuild themselves from the bottom up, if they want to survive that is.

I am not talking about common-or-garden infidelities here. Nor am I referring to people with erotic interests that though perhaps not mainstream are practiced privately and with honesty; people who don't require the respectability or cover that a marriage provides. I am talking about someone who repeatedly behaves in ways that transgress their own overtly declared personal morality, as well as that of their partners, families, and employers, sometimes rising to a level that includes breaking the law. "Who does that?" is a refrain I hear commonly. "Why would someone so smart act so stupidly? What were they thinking?" The common theme between these three questions of course is that there is no adequate answer that will explain the degree of damage that occurs when a life, a family, even sometimes a community has been battered by a deception that sometimes far exceeds the sexual behavior that has been exposed.

In my experience, people who ‘act out’ in sexually compulsive ways don’t necessarily start out hiding sexual secrets but they do start out with secrets. Little ones that they pick up while three year olds who have learned that some confessions garner disapproval and others laughter or pride. Secrets that morph in the right brain with the right character and the right environment into deceptions that further fracture the unsteady foundation upon which they are constructing self. While it is definitely true that many people who struggle with a compulsive sexuality have experienced early childhood trauma, not always of a sexual nature, it is equally true that many people who have been sexually abused do not go on to act out sexually. I am fascinated by the differences between these two groups and no, I don’t have an answer for you, only empirical observations and clinical correlations that over my years of living and practice seem to hold some veracity. All abuse requires a perpetrator and a victim; a person with power, a power that can be exerted upon a person or entity without such power. It is after all in the space between the powerful and the powerless that the potential for any damage lies. We all enter the world powerless and reliant upon a primal hope that by the very nature of our innocence those who are charged with our care will indeed respond to that charge. That we will cry and be consoled, express hunger and be fed. This is the dance of the caregiver and the infant which over time must change pace to keep up with life’s evolving demands.

The early dance is important because it begins with an assumption of purity. Babies don’t have agendas or tricks, they just have needs. Of course although the basic needs might be the same for all babies how they are expressed and responded to forms the core steps of the dance so everyone’s dance to some extent is the same but different. Some babies are disorganized and fragile, others robust and self-soothing. Some caregivers exude patience and confidence while others are hesitant and regretful. If you are the caregiver at this early stage choreography can feel like everything, one foot wrong and the whole shebang comes tumbling. Of course we eventually discover that there is room for lots of error. Trial and error, that’s how approximations toward something better get made. We learn as we go just as we learn who our children are as they grow.

Some children stride into their lives a dominant force to be reckoned with and others sit off to the side waiting for an invitation, and every posture in between is fair game. Them’s the rules for all of us whether we are raised by solid parents or in a group home, our character will emerge and continue to be influenced by our experiences and our biology and, some of us just survive and some of us will thrive. What I have discerned about people who sabotage their own lives and those of the people they say they care about is that they perform prosperity to camouflage fear. The size of the performance is both related to the degree of the fear and the scope of the impression that a person wants to make. Telling your middle school class that your drunken, unemployed father is a firefighter has far less impact than telling your fiancé that you are attending medical school when you didn’t actually finish 12th grade. The lie however comes from the same place, the belief that telling the truth won’t be good enough to get you what you want and believe you need. And make no mistake, there is always a want attached to the lie. I want to be admired, seen as worthy, envied and idolized, worshipped, even feared. The lie develops as an option when the truth has failed to deliver and usually there are many early failures that can be identified. These failures are not justifications. They are trails to follow when trying to answer the question “who does that?” He or she does that! Even why they do that has no satisfactory answer and ‘it’s a disease’ certainly isn’t an answer.

As much as many in the mental health field would like to reduce sexual compulsivity to an addiction or disease over which sufferers again become powerless, sexual addiction currently doesn't have its own diagnostic category in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). The jury continues to be out, although I would say that any habitual behavior has the potential to change brain function, if not on a neurochemical level, at the very least on an operative level. The more we do something the better we get at it – this is the same whether we are doing something that is constructive or destructive. Impose upon the practice of small lies and omissions the influence of an emerging personality and voila, there you have the beginning of insecure ego development and a pathway toward, at the very least, unstable attachment and at the extreme sociopathology.

Sex of course has a transcendent power calling us as much to shame as it does to the lascivious. It crosses boundaries and ruptures values, starts wars and ends lives. Sex has power and historically sex has been used to oppress the powerless. Sex in the hands of the compulsive personality begins with power. It is a currency that buys affection, pleasure, gratitude, certainty. It has reward and often it has memory, ironically not always joyful memory, but memory that over time can get reclaimed from a past oppressor only to be re-enacted by a developing perpetrator. And yes you and I and often the person who is acting out might step back from this scene and say, “that makes no sense, why would you do the very thing to yourself that was done to you as harm?” The unfortunate thing about sex, and a lot of other behaviors that become compulsive, is that they are devoid of logic. The sexual circuitry is not centered in the left frontal lobe where sense and judgment are filtered through the lens of experience and consequence. It is set back deep in the brain where it plays hooky from reason, where arousal is its master, in a place where the peaks and plummets of anxiety, anticipation, anger, and recklessness say “fuck it” to the world.

Partner these instincts with intellect and you have created a 21st century lothario, albeit a lothario dull on gloss and often distinctly seedy, but a 21st century lothario nonetheless with all the fast track pornucopia a damaged ego can consume. There isn't anything you can't find on the internet, dark web, back pages, or Craig's List, and all from the comfort of your own laptop and often from your own shared home with your partner next door and the children upstairs, even sometimes with them right next to you in the bed. Where the thinking or unthinking brain reemerges in these scenarios is in the ability to produce and hold the lie; in the planning and the execution of the peccadillo, and in the stories that are told to disguise the tracks. This takes thought, intention, entitlement and the desire to remain in the shadows. After all, the educated mind of a doctor, lawyer, CEO, politician knows that to be a cad is an image breaker, and as I mentioned earlier, keeping secrets is about fabricating or maintaining a desired image and *desire* and *image* are cunning foes that play both sides of the fickle love/lust equation.

When *desire* finds its home in the mind of the entitled it recruits resentment, hubris, and duplicity as its companions. Let me call these fine nouns the four musketeers of sexual compulsivity, there are likely more but these are the ones that do the most damage. They find the want, they justify the want, they take the want, and then they misrepresent the want, and they take no prisoners. They don't care who is in their way and who is going down, including themselves. But as is so often the case they are not usually only taking down them. There are long lines of victims, both in their direct orbit and on far flung virtual satellites, who fall down their interminable rabbit hole. There are no stops in that rabbit hole. No stops for compassion, no

stops for empathy, no stops for accountability. Even discovery and exposure often isn't enough to abate the lies, although sometimes it can be. Remember, it takes time to cultivate a parallel universe and the time it takes to undo the tangled crash of battered bodies that are left in discovery's aftermath is no less, maybe even infinite. The sad reality is that very few people struggling with sexual compulsivity come into the light on their own beam. Typically they become sloppy, if possible more arrogant, denial is already heavy so rejecting the possibility of getting caught is easy breezy and when caught their conscience needs a lot of time to catch up with their behavior.

Therapy helps, like it helps with many things when the commitment to change meets a path for that change. Prison is sobering and for some people a rescue that drags them into respite if not recovery, whether they seek it or not. The damage is deep and although some relationships can be recovered many are lost or permanently wounded. This is not a malady of one class or one culture but those with more social capital make bigger stories because they have further to fall and sometimes stay in hiding for much longer because money is also power, and they can buy longer periods of subterfuge.

Is there a personality type that becomes sexually compulsive? Well there are some that are more likely to and features of several of the personality disorders that are often present in someone who is in this struggle: narcissism, dependence, detachment, avoidance, perfectionism and control. But what likely heads the list is the "pattern of disregard for, and violation of the rights of others," seen with anti-social personality disorder (DSM-5, 2013). Even if someone does not fit the criteria for a strict diagnosis of anti-social personality disorder the violation of the rights of others that is a hallmark of this dis-ease means that this is often classified, along with sexual compulsivity or addiction, as a co-morbid condition. Maybe even a pre-morbid condition that by its existence sets the stage for sexual acting out to become inevitable in some people. This kind of behavior is also considered an intimacy disorder which is likely no surprise to anyone reading this and doesn't, for all intents and purposes, change the impact of this condition on everyone who is affected but might influence the potential for establishing a meaningful recovery. Bottom line – despite years of education, clinical practice, and professional jargon – I have discovered if healing is to be a possibility what it comes down to first and foremost is an individual being willing to accept you *don't* get to have your cake and eat it too.

© O'Donnell, 2017