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## Only The Powerful Survive

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Ten minutes past our appointed time, Ms. Portia Tillman stalked into the waiting room, nodded politely at me, glowered when I greeted her, then strode, all business, into my office. Her handsome dark blue suit and red and white striped scarf enhanced her natural attractiveness, and her worried eyes stared at me as she sat in the chair I indicated. She raised her eyebrows as if to say, “Well, what do you want?”

“When you called you said you needed to talk about a crisis at work. Is that a good place to start?” I asked.

With narrowed eyes and clenched jaw she stared at me, not answering for a full minute.

“I’m not the one having a crisis; I’m the one being blamed for it,” she said, at last, as if grinding nails.

“What happened?” I asked.

“One of my subordinates, Carmen’s her name,” Ms. Tillman made a disgusted face, “was ten minutes late to work yesterday, so I reprimanded her. Then she ran to my boss and had a tantrum, so I’m being told I need help.”

“How so?” I responded.

She shrugged. “Apparently, some of my employees saw what happened and told the CEO they would quit unless I stopped what they called my ‘mean, humiliating behavior.’ And then all hell broke loose.”

“How did that turn into all hell breaking loose?” I asked.

“Alex panicked!” she exclaimed. “You can’t mollycoddle your employees and still get the job done. Any CEO who doesn’t know that is a fool. If you don’t come down hard on them, they’ll try to get away with anything they think they can, and the damn unions and government will back them up.”

“Alex is your CEO?” I asked.

“Yes, and any executive who knuckles under and lets workers bully management ought to be the one in here, NOT ME. When you’re dealing with people, only the powerful survive,” she declared, red-faced.

“What do you do at your company?” I asked.

“I’m the Chief Operations Officer of a software production firm, and I oversee more than five hundred employees. I do a damn good job, too.” She abruptly stopped herself, then added, “And if an employee can’t keep up, she shouldn’t work there.”

“The only reason I’m here is because they gave me an ultimatum,” she said, and clenched her jaw again.

“What kind of ultimatum?” I asked.

She glared at me. “Alex said, ‘Get help or else.’ This was the third time in six months those same people had complained about me. They grumble all the time, but I’ve never been threatened before. Alex just knuckled under this time.” She crossed her arms and continued glaring.

“Say more about Alex knuckling under?” I asked.

“She said they had to find some solution that would work for both the employees and me. Well, screw them. For one thing, they put me in the same category as my employees.”

“It feels humiliating?” I asked.

“What do you mean, ‘It feels?’” she cried out, furious. “That’s psychobabble, it’s just one of the ways you people have of blaming the victim. It’s humiliating to be treated as if this is my problem rather than Carmen’s, or Alex’s, for that matter, for being such a coward.”

I realized I had been slightly surprised when, referring

to Alex, Ms. Tillman had said “she,” so I asked, “When you spoke of Alex, you said ‘she’?”

“Yes. Why do you ask?” she snapped.

“I must have thought that Alex was a man,” I said.

“There you go. You’re just like all other men. You assumed that if someone was a CEO, he’d have to be a man. Alex is a woman, and our Board Chair is also a woman, just like my workers. Almost everyone there is a woman. A group of women put together an all-women firm, and, so far, they’ve kept it that way. We have some token men on the Board and cleanup and utility crews, but most of the others are women. Maybe I didn’t actually say so, but I thought you knew it.”

When Ms. Tillman had first described her “crisis,” I had jumped to the conclusion she was being abused by a bunch of sexist males who resented a woman’s very presence and Ms. Tillman’s aggressive authority even more. I was primed for this view because I regularly see professional and business women who are treated unfairly at work, to the point where women lawyers, for example, intimidated by this abuse and concerned about vulnerability at their firms, are much more apt than men to cancel our appointments when work activities conflict. Women often do not feel as free as men to tell demanding superiors, possessive clients, or colleagues to “buzz off” for an hour while they attend to personal, even medical, business.

This was one of my many moments of personal growth resulting from experiences in my career. I had no reason to know Ms. Tillman worked for an all women firm, but my assumption that her CEO was a man told me a part of my mind was still behind the times, since women increasingly are in high business positions, just as in the professions. Because acquiring self knowledge involves working intensely with other people, a therapist is constantly faced with his or her blind spots and shortcomings and must accept every opportunity to grow with the challenges that arise in work with patients or clients.

“Before I asked you to clarify that Alex was a woman, you were annoyed that I hadn’t understood that Alex and

the Board had actually humiliated you when they treated this as your problem, rather than Carmen and Alex's, and that it was not just some feeling you had," I said.

She looked at me and nodded slightly. "Alex and the Board Chair also said, and I know it even better than they do, that if I left, the company wouldn't have anyone with my experience to come in overnight and replace me, and they'd face a production crisis. We've got a contract to deliver 100,000 pieces of software in ten days and that means I have to stay on top of every detail twenty-fours a day until the job's done. I also know that the company doesn't want the headaches that unions, and government agencies, and lawyers cause when they scream about the poor workers suffering injustices. So what do the idiots do? Instead of standing up for me, they humiliate me, they 'help me' arrange the time and expense of meeting with you," she sneered. "Well, BIG DEAL! Fuck 'em. I don't want their goddamn help."

"They're way off base when they think they're doing a good thing?" I asked.

"What do you mean, 'a good thing'?" she demanded.

"I think I may not have used the right term, because it appears, from what you said, that they want to keep people happy so the production wheels will turn, and you're having to pay the price for it."

"They're feeling so damn self-righteous when they ought to be hanging their heads in shame. I know the real reason Alex kowtowed to them and didn't fire their asses was because she and the Chair didn't have the guts to face down the workers and tell them we will not tolerate Carmen or anybody else not getting to work on time. They're all cowards, and they're treating me like I'm a nut," she yelled.

"You feel especially bitter about having to see me?" I asked.

"There you go again with your psychobabble when you say I *feel* bitter, like the problem was how I 'feel.' I don't *feel* bitter, I am bitter because I have stupid bosses, and frankly I don't think you're much different. I had no

say in the matter; it was this or get fired. I've put my heart and soul into this company for years, and I don't want to jeopardize my career, and they know it, so after all I've given them, they stab me in the back. It's blackmail. Even if they think I need help, this wasn't the way to do it. I hate people," she clenched her fist, "who misuse their authority and throw their weight around."

"It was in the midst of all that that you got my name?" I asked.

"When it became clear I didn't have a choice, I got your name from Mary Forester, who said she'd seen you a few years ago."

"Had anything like this ever happened before?" I asked.

Her frown eased slightly. "No, I've had a good career. I know I have exceptional organizational skills - I became COO by the time I was thirty-three - and I expect to make CEO when Alex leaves. A member of the Board told me the company has been more productive in my three years than under any other COO since the company began twelve years ago. That's what's crazy about this whole thing. How the hell," she threw her hands in the air, "do they think I've been so productive?" then slammed her hands down on the arms of her chair. "They act like they don't know the reason I've been successful is that I know how to handle employees and get the job done."

"The way you said that suggests Alex's attitude came as a surprise," I said.

Nodding, she scowled again. "Alex told me, 'Your production and management abilities are superior, but,'"  
"Ms. Tillman sneered, "'your insensitive and abusive behavior of employees is unacceptable and will get you fired.' Then she went on and on about 'legally enforceable respect for human rights these days.' I can't tell you how much I hate anybody who talks down to me and tries to control me that way."

"Alex seems not to have held anything back in getting her point across," I said.

Looking at me as if I were an idiot, she replied, "You

make it sound as if what happened was a good thing, so obviously you don't understand. Alex is presumptuous, heavy-handed, mean-spirited, and the worst CEO I know about misusing authority. After her ultimatum and lecture about human rights, Alex told me that I reminded her of Maria Callas, the opera singer, about how she was the world's greatest soprano, but was fired by every major opera house because, 'her behavior caused more trouble than her singing was worth.' "

"What about her behavior?" I asked.

"Alex said it was 'abusive and insensitive.' Well, screw you Alex! A singer's and my situations are completely different. Maria Callas was just a self-important prima donna, not someone who has to be clear-minded and strong in managing a bunch of trouble-making employees. My position is much closer to the opera house manager's who has to handle people like Maria Callas in order to produce the opera."

I said, "You said your position was like the opera manager's rather than Maria Callas', and of course you're absolutely right about the strengths necessary to be an effective manager. One must be firm, as well as clear-minded, about the organization's goals in order to gain the respect necessary to get the best from your personnel in achieving the task. So I'm not yet clear how the problem arose."

She gave me a disgusted look. "The problem arose," she said with disdain, "because little Miss Priss Carmen thought she could get away with ignoring my warnings and come to work late again, and Alex was totally irresponsible in not supporting the way I handled Carmen."

I replied, "Certainly both of them are responsible for their part in all this, but I'm sure you recognize that you are the only person who has any control over your response to whatever they do, and, in the end, that is all you and I can work with here. It sounds like a tough bunch that's ganged up on you, but can you say more about what Carmen reacted to and what Alex and the Board Chairman were upset about when they made you call me?"

She shot back immediately, "Well, first of all, stop patronizing me. I don't need you to tell me they're a 'tough

bunch that's ganged up' on me, I'm strong enough to deal with this myself without you treating me like I'm a child. The answer to your question is that I don't know what Carmen reacted to, and that doesn't make any difference anyway because she's just bitching about my coming down on her for being late. But Alex was upset because she said I 'overreacted.' " Ms. Tillman's voice was heated.

"Can you say more about 'overreacted'?" I asked.

"You're doing it again," she yelled. "You've already taken their side! You told me to say more about 'overreacted' as if that's what I actually did. That's not what I said. What I said was, 'Alex *said* that I overreacted.'" "With fire in her eyes and breathing heavily, she continued. "I don't know why I came here anyway. I knew you were a man and wouldn't understand, you're all alike. When Mary recommended you I started not to come because I knew a man couldn't understand how a woman feels, but when I told Mary my misgivings, she said, 'Yes, he's a man, and I know how you feel, but this one's okay.' I'm not sure now, though."

I responded, "I agree that a woman feels and experiences many things that a man can't understand - being the victim of male sexism and delivering a baby, to name only two - but what you've described is having not been understood by the women in your firm."

Ms. Tillman's face became expressionless as she stared at me for a few moments, then she turned and looked through the big picture window into my wooded back yard and the park beyond. While October's red, deep orange, and yellow leaves, and squirrels frisking on the oaks offer many people diversions from their emotional focus, the appeal of these scenes did not distract Ms. Tillman, too caught up in her reaction to notice.

She continued, "I need to think about that, but I guess our time is up today, because I heard someone come into the waiting room."

"Can you meet at this same time on Thursday?" I asked.

She paused a moment. "This is Tuesday, that'll be

at ten two days from now.” After entering a note in an appointment book she had taken from her purse, she said, “Fine, I’ll see you then.”

On Thursday, she again arrived ten minutes late, marched aggressively into the office, and, after taking her seat, said, “I want to begin where we left off last time.”

With her finger pointed accusingly at me, she began, “You people aren’t telling me anything new. I already know I have a short fuse.”

“Can you say more about ‘short fuse?’” I asked.

Her hand dropped to her lap, and she glared at me.

“Jennifer, my best friend since elementary school, told me she thinks I overreact to ‘everyday slights,’ and that I carry the anger around for hours.”

“Say more about what she’s referring to?” I asked.

Ms. Tillman opened her mouth to speak, then closed it and looked away. After a moment she opened her mouth again, then immediately closed it, pressing her lips together tightly.

“You started to say something and then stopped yourself. Do you know what was on the tip of your tongue?” I asked.

Tears formed in the corners of her eyes, then she looked away and swallowed hard. Turning back to me, she said, “I’m just not comfortable discussing this.”

“I know this is difficult, but of course that’s nature’s way of saying how important it is for us to talk about it. What about ‘not comfortable?’” I asked.

She stared out the window, then at me, before answering. “I get upset when I don’t control myself better, so for Jennifer to tell me about it, then to have to tell you, is humiliating. I don’t know which is worse, not controlling myself, or for Jennifer to be right, or telling you about it. Whatever it is, it’s too upsetting.”

“Are you saying it starts with being upset with yourself?” I asked.

She took a deep breath.

“Jennifer says I’m one of those people you read about with ‘road rage.’” She looked mortified, and shook her



head.

“You stopped yourself. Was something hard to say?” I asked.

She did not answer for a few moments. “Almost every day I get furious and flip ‘the bird’ at drivers who cut me off. Once I told a waiter, ‘PISS OFF,’ when he gave me a sarcastic ‘Thank you’ because I’d given him a small tip for his poor service.” She gave a slight triumphant smile. “Another time, I had to talk a policeman out of arresting me when I cursed him for giving me a parking ticket, and when things like that happen I stay so angry and upset I can hardly sleep at night.” Her voice was calm and her expression straightforward.

“That’s what you meant about your friend saying you overreact?” I asked.

“Yes,” she stated firmly.

“What do you think kept you from following up on her comments?” I asked.

Her frown had a puzzled, frustrated look.

“What do you mean, ‘Following up?’” she asked. “I already told you I know what the problem is. Being independent is the most important thing in my life. I’ve always been able to handle my problem by myself, and I sure as hell don’t need somebody like Alex telling me what to do. Even when I went along with the idea of seeing you, I thought, ‘What the hell did I agree to?’”

“Say more about the importance of being independent?” I asked.

She gaped at me, as though momentarily lost for words, then sat back in her chair and set her jaw.

“Are you saying you don’t understand why being independent is important?” she demanded.

I responded, “I think I understand, because being able to be independent is important to all of us. In fact, autonomy is usually a major goal of self-understanding. I think, though, I misstated the question. I asked if you could say more about the importance of being independent, when what you had said was not that it was important, but that it was ‘the most important thing in my life,’ and you said

it with a tone of almost desperate imperative. And that's really what I was asking you to say more about."

She crossed her arms and considered my question.

"Well, coming here is a perfect example. The company used their power over me to make me do this, and now look where I am. Everybody thinks I'm crazy, I'm humiliated in front of my workers, and my medical record shows I saw a psychiatrist. These things don't happen to you if you're independent." She sounded resigned, though her voice was hard.

"I can give you a thousand more examples just like that, and I don't need to go far to do it. It's happening right now. Here. Hear that noise?!"

Moments before, someone next door had begun creating an almost deafening roar by cleaning up fallen leaves with a gasoline powered blower.

"Those people are making so much noise we can't hear each other talk, and they don't give a damn about how much it bothers us. I know people like that. They enjoy having power over us while you and I sit here helpless. There are supposed to be laws against noise pollution, but the government doesn't do a damn thing to stop it, and you and I can't do anything about it."

Her tone reflected the frustration most people feel in such circumstances, though not the rage she had expressed earlier when talking about the factory workers' mutiny and Alex's sending her for treatment, rather than supporting her over the workers.

"That's why I'm independent. If it were up to me, I'd go out there right now and tell the bastards they'll have to do that some other time. I guess you're concerned about the people who live there, but I can tell you that if I had neighbors as inconsiderate as yours, I'd tell them I wouldn't put up with it. If you're not independent, people will walk all over you," she asserted, and recrossed her arms.

"Coming here is especially difficult because it makes you feel dependent?" I asked.

With a snort of disgust, she shook her head. "No, it doesn't make me feel dependent, it makes me *look* de-

pendent. But seeing you was the least of the evils of the options I had and the main reason I was willing to accept treatment at all.”

“Can you say more about options?” I asked.

She grimaced in annoyance.

“When Alex told me I had to get help or get fired, my first thought, once I got past my shock that they were serious about making me do this, was to get this ‘help’ business over as soon as possible, like a weekend group therapy marathon. But in the back of my mind, something told me that it would take more than a few days to figure this out and deal with it. I also knew drug treatment was out of the question because my job requires me to make specific, split-second decisions under pressure, which I’m told I excel at, and I can’t afford to walk around like a zombie.

“And anyway, and probably most important, if anything’s going to change, I have to understand why and how it’s happening, just like I fix other problems at work, or in myself. I know that half-assed solutions don’t work,” she said, with a slight smile.

She took a deep breath, looked out the window, then turned to me raising one eyebrow. “So, here I am. What do we do?”

I responded, “Well, the one-line answer is, ‘Actually, just what we’ve been doing already,’ but I have the impression from the way you spoke of having to ‘understand why and how’ things happen that you already have some sense of how this process of gaining self knowledge works.”

Her face slightly relaxed, and she leaned back in her chair.

After a long pause, she looked directly at me. “If we’re going to do this, and it looks like I have to, do you know how you can help me most?”

“How - ?” I started to ask, but she cut me off.

“You can shoot straight with me,” she went on, “and keep me honest with myself. I need to understand what my problems are and what I can do about them. Even when my friends and family try to tell me what I do wrong and what I

should do instead, they don't know what else to say. And I don't either. Sometimes they get frustrated and yell at me, and then I make it worse by lashing back at them."

She scowled. "One of the hardest parts of doing this is having to accept that Evelyn was right - Evelyn is my cousin. When I told her about what happened at work, and that I couldn't ask for anybody's help because I have to do things my way, Evelyn said, 'But your way isn't working.' " She heaved a big sigh. "I have to admit she was right, at least in this instance. But it's only because Alex and the company didn't back me up.

"I can talk to Evelyn about most things, she's an intelligent and kind person, but she won't challenge me, because when I start complaining about how people upset me, she feels so sorry for me she won't say anything she thinks might hurt me."

Ms. Tillman gazed out the window. "The trees are really pretty this time of year," she said, then sighed and turned back. "Sometimes I get a glimmer of what I do that causes me trouble, but it doesn't last very long, because when I try to think about it, other things start coming into my mind."

"Can you sense what happens inside to make you think about 'other things'?" I asked.

"I don't know, I just can't stay focused. That's what I mean about keeping me honest with myself, and why I need you to help me think about what's wrong long enough for me to do something about it. I solve my company's operational problems all the time, and I can solve my own, too, if I just know what they are and what I can do to fix them."

She paused momentarily and opened her mouth to speak but then stopped herself.

"You started to say something. Can you say what was on your mind?" I asked.

"I just realized we were near the end of the session, and I didn't want to start something new unless we'd have time to talk about it," she said.

"Perhaps you could give us some idea about it and then

we can go into it more fully next time,” I responded.

She heaved a deep sigh. “My meeting with Alex reminded me of something that’s been in the back of my mind. I’ve been in my current job three years, and during the first two I had very good relations with my employees, and my operational methods were highly productive. My problems with the workers didn’t begin until this past year.” She paused and looked thoughtful. “Uh, uh, I’ve always known I want to get back at people when they irritate me, but, uh, I never had trouble controlling it until, uh, these last several months.”

The hesitancy in her voice led me to ask, “You seem puzzled about what you just said?”

“Yes,” she replied. “I’ve never thought much about why I get angry with people who upset me, because I’ve always had what I thought were good reasons, and I knew I could control my reactions, but I can’t control my lashing out now, and I don’t know why.”

“What occurs to you?” I asked.

She narrowed her eyes.

“Well, I don’t know how anyone could be expected to deal with an infant like Carmen and not call her down for being ten minutes late, because that’s what a competent and responsible manager should do. She’d been late more times than I could count, and I’d already warned her, privately and quietly, a dozen times. And I’m absolutely sure she put the others up to complaining about me so she could get me off her back.”

Ms. Tillman looked through me for several moments. After refocusing her eyes, she said, “I’m not a total dummy, though. I can justify being angry at her, but I’ve never handled people by losing my temper and laying into them so hard before. I’m running a division of five hundred employees, for God’s sakes, not fighting in some drunken street brawl, but that’s what I did with Carmen.”

She covered her face with her hands, then averted her eyes in embarrassment.

“What did you mean, ‘That’s what I did with Carmen?’” I asked.

She said, "I knew I'd have to tell you sometime. I didn't just bawl out Carmen, I said things I shouldn't have. I was almost screaming, and I, . . ." She looked away, red-faced.

After several moments, I asked, "Something's hard to say?"

She screwed up her face, as if in pain. "I said something like, 'You're lazy just like everybody else that comes across the border.' And of all the things I could have said, that was the worst. Apart from being politically incorrect with her personally, what made it terrible was that fifty percent of our employees are immigrants, and what I said was absolutely untrue anyway. Our best workers are immigrants, I just said it in a fit of rage and didn't mean it at all.

"I've known for a long time something was wrong, although I don't know why." She looked worried. "But until this thing with Carmen happened, I still believed I could control myself. I've always been able to rely on will power, and I kept thinking I still could. Even when I knew I looked bad to other people, I didn't stop it or even consider doing something about it."

Sensing we were running late, we both looked at the clock and discovered we were well beyond our scheduled time.

"Can you meet at this same time next Tuesday?" I asked.

"I'll be here," she nodded, with a slight smile, and left.

She began the next session as she walked through the door. "I've felt better about doing this since last time, so I want to go back and tell you what I realized before I got here today."

She relaxed into her chair.

"I know we didn't come up with any deep answers last time, but I could tell we were on the right track of understanding why I am the way I am so I can do something about it.

"Like I said last time, I've always used will power to

control myself; I give myself lectures and bite my tongue. But at some point that stopped working. It's gotten easier just to say my workers are irresponsible, or that my CEO doesn't support me, but I know that doesn't solve anything either, because blaming and railing at a person can't make her be someone she's not.

"Then over the last several months, and I can't say exactly when, I could sense that when I got angry, something inside me was driving me to lash out, but even then I thought I could control myself. I don't know why I had to wait for this crisis, which could have ruined me, before I was ready to do something about it."

"When do you think the realization finally crystallized in your mind?" I asked.

She snickered. "Only when Alex laid down her ultimatum."

Resuming her serious expression, she continued.

"When you thought, in the first session, that Alex was a man, that was helpful, although I wasn't about to say it at the time, because it helped me think more about why I'm here. I often react to men and their sexist attitudes the way I did with Carmen, and then I think that men are my problem. But obviously my reaction to Carmen was not because she's a sexist male, so this problem has to be about more than men. The people who complain about me at work are not men, they're all women. And it's not just my employees either. Alex told me the senior executives, including Alex herself, said they'd had enough of 'your resentful attitude and dragging your feet every time they give you a directive.'"

She frowned in silence.

"If the frown could talk, what would it say?" I asked.

Raising her eyebrows, she smiled in surprise. "I didn't realize I was frowning. I guess it was because I hate to accept that this thing doesn't just involve men. I was frowning in concentration, because now that I'm starting to see what my problem is not, I'm becoming more clear what it is, that it's with anyone who tries to dominate or abuse me, not just men."

By now, Ms. Tillman's excessive rage that had spilled over into her every word and act had subsided enough for me to see her outstanding qualities that could make her an outstanding leader in any endeavor, whether industry or some other field. She was intelligent, well organized, and, when not defensively angry, likeable, sensitive to the needs of her employees, and clear and firm in implementing business goals. As she, herself, once said in passing, "I've always known I was a 'diamond in the rough' and had it in me to make it to the top, but, at the same time, I also knew that unless I found a way to smooth out my rough edges, I never would."

Likewise, her personal goals were sound, realistic, and unconflicted. In addition to her skills, she had an outstanding reputation and was determined to climb the corporate ladder to become her company's CEO.

But she also knew that her self-defeating behaviors were colliding with her career ambitions and her industry's high-performance demands, and that she must overcome these behaviors or likely have to sacrifice her goals. The crisis she had inflicted on herself had been inevitable, since her behaviors had arisen from deep-seated subconscious demons she only vaguely knew existed, much less identify and surmount.

The process that allows you to know your mind is no supernatural mystery and does not rely on magic. The procedure, "Emotional Debridement," for identifying and overcoming emotional demons, is based on the same principles used in the surgical technique "debridement."

Surgical debridement, the standard method for treating wounds of the flesh, involves three basic steps: first, identify and remove the harmful debris and no-longer-viable tissue from the injured area; second, analyze the removed debris and dead tissue to provide information for further treatment; and third, with the wound freed of inhibiting foreign substances, normal, healthy tissue can grow and heal the injured flesh. In surgical debridement, these three stages - identification and removal, analysis and study, and



healthy growth - occur largely as separate, distinct steps.

Overcoming flawed emotions through emotional debridement is incalculably more complex than surgical debridement, yet the steps are analogous: first, identify the flawed emotional structures, such as anxious dreads and self-defeating behaviors; second, eliminate the flawed structures by understanding their underlying causes; and third, supplant the removed troublemakers with one's own already proven, healthy strengths.

Emotional debridement is made possible by the capacity of one's mind to observe and master feelings and ideas at the same time one is experiencing those same feelings. While one part of the mind is experiencing an emotional pattern, another part of the mind can observe the pattern's meanings by studying its quality, function, origin, history, and associated feelings and ideas. A person can then decide whether the pattern has outlived its usefulness, and, if so, relinquish it.

Two critical distinctions differentiate surgical and emotional debridement. First, in surgical debridement, the steps are sharply defined and demarcated from each other, whereas in emotional debridement the steps overlap and become intertwined, with each step's advancement facilitating the progress of the others.

The second distinction is fundamental and crucial: in surgical debridement, the treating physician decides which, if any, noxious tissue to remove, while in emotional debridement, any decision to change one's emotional makeup is made entirely by the person seeking relief. The person desiring internal change is the one who decides whether or not to take each critical step of relinquishing painful anxieties and self-defeating behaviors, rooting out demons, and expanding her use of healthy, well-functioning emotional structures.

Ms. Tillman's mastery of her self-defeating behaviors, active-aggressive ones toward her employees and passive-aggressive ones toward her superiors, lay in her discovering and overcoming the demons underlying these behaviors, and then integrating this knowledge into her emotions. Her

common sense told her that her real strengths gained from her new self knowledge, would make unnecessary her illusory *felt* strengths of self-defeating “fierce independence” and non-verbal defiance.

The emotional changes resulting from emotional debridement do not happen simply by one person telling another what is wrong with him; they result from a working alliance between two people who make individual, indispensable contributions. A patient, or client, contributes his unique awareness of his troublesome thoughts and feelings, a self-honest willingness to study and understand them, and the motivation to endure the arduous steps necessary to make internal changes. A self-knowledge therapist brings her ability to detect even subtle versions of self-defeating mental-emotional patterns, a balanced objectivity and emotional interest in the therapeutic work, and the verbal skills to communicate that understanding and commitment to the client.

Still, no matter how much one wishes to overcome self-defeating patterns, the emotions underlying these patterns have tender spots that tenaciously, and often vehemently, resist being exposed; once the mind realizes it is in danger of pain, it protects itself by pushing the painful emotion out of conscious awareness. Since the mind fiercely resists meddlers, including therapists or even oneself, when they try to help one gain self-knowledge by making disturbing feelings accessible to one’s observing mind, the therapist’s empathic sensitivity and communication skills become critical. To achieve the rapport and trust necessary for focusing on tender emotions and painful conflicts, the self-knowledge therapist must be especially sensitive to, and respectful of, a patient or client’s attitudes and feelings.

Resistance to exposing dreaded feelings is a normal, recurrent part of the process of achieving self-knowledge. Overcoming this resistance involves defining the resistance itself and is often achieved only a small measure at a time. When a person seeking change needs help in facing and overcoming her resistances, the self-knowledge therapist must be emotionally and intellectually prepared to do what-

ever is necessary to help the procedure. This includes not only gentle nudges, but also firm confrontations when indicated and appropriate for the individual. In certain instances it means sensitively holding the person to the task by bringing her attention back, again and again, to the dreaded emotion, as Ms. Tillman's emotional debridement often required.

The therapist can ease this process, but the patient or client herself must be willing to expose her painful emotions to the work of gaining self-understanding, often using sheer will power to confront opportunities to experience and temporarily endure the disturbing feelings. The process can be helped by the person remembering her goals, as frequently as necessary, and contrasting them with the consequences of self-defeating alternatives, then to continue to do so until emotional debridement is accomplished and new, healthy patterns become ingrained.

After several weeks of working through her resistance to accepting emotionally what she had come to know intellectually - her subconscious emotions' role in creating her self-destructive behavior that resulted in her explosion at Carmen - Ms. Tillman began a session, "You've asked me several times to talk about the importance of being independent, but I've never answered you because your question implies that something is wrong with what I've always thought was a normal and desirable attribute. I think I can answer now because I finally realize you haven't meant normal independence; you've been asking about my 'fierce independence,' and I'm more aware now of how much trouble it's caused me."

Because independence not involved in conflict ordinarily is a healthy and beneficial emotion and character trait, her use of "fiercely" had caught my attention early on. It said this was a particularly strong emotion whose meaning and function would be important to understand in overcoming her most self-defeating character trait.

Immature behaviors are normal and constructive in a two year old child who is experimenting with her world and

testing the limits of acceptable behavior. A young child's crude pseudoindependence, stubbornness, and demanding tantrums are vital building stones for the refined adult strengths of autonomy, self-assertion, determination, and mastery. But infantile behaviors preserved in their original forms are completely out of place in the adult world, and almost always result in self-defeat. A production manager cannot reasonably expect to maintain high morale in five hundred employees if she inflicts tantrum-like castigations on subordinates in the presence of their peers.

Since Ms. Tillman had indicated her readiness to talk about her fierce independence, and because the timing and sequence of mental-emotional events is as central to understanding the mind as physical events are to diagnosing and treating the body, I asked, "Has something happened recently that has made you especially aware of the trouble your drive for 'fierce independence' causes you?"

She winced. "That question has occurred to me for some time, but this morning it hit me like a sledgehammer. I had to rearrange my office to make room for a new filing cabinet, and when Nancy, my secretary, saw me start to move my heavy oak desk, she came to help me, and, without thinking, I reflexively told her, 'No, I'll do it,' and then I couldn't move the desk, and I strained my back trying. You may have noticed me leaning to the left when I came in here today. It's really hurting, but I didn't mention it because, and this is for the same reason we're talking about, an independent person doesn't let herself sound like a needy whiner."

"Say more about wanting not to sound like a 'needy whiner'?" "I asked.

She curled her lips as though she had a foul taste in her mouth.

"People who whine make me so sick I feel like I want to vomit," she said.

"Are you saying, then, that letting Nancy help you not strain your back would make you a needy whiner?"

"It's the same thing, it's admitting you're weak and helpless, and I dread that; I'd rather die first. I'll do *any-*

*thing* to be independent.”

Emotions are as basic to our mind as heartbeats are to our body and are present in our earliest days, even though we usually have little conscious memory of them. Our earliest experiences, even in infancy, of powerful feelings that create conflict and problems become particularly important when we later try to understand our perception of those feelings. Knowing the history of Ms. Tillman’s weak and helpless feelings was critical to understanding her imperative to be strong and independent.

“What comes to mind from the past about feeling weak and helpless?” I asked.

She looked at me for a moment then glanced out the window, distracted by the rapid movements of one squirrel chasing another up the large oak tree near the window. After a moment, she turned back with a slight smile. “I’d rather think about those squirrels, but I guess that wouldn’t get me anywhere.

“I usually don’t let myself think about feeling weak and helpless. I’ve tried to be strong and independent as long as I can remember. I never let anyone help me or tell me what to do unless I’ve already decided I want them to. It’s had advantages, too, because a lot of people, like other kids when I was growing up, admire me and compliment me, and look to me as their leader. I remember those times most, but, when I let myself think about it, I have the feeling that the way I insist on being so independent puts a lot of people off, and they don’t take to me as friendly as I wish they would. Then I think that whatever I get from being independent may not be worth it. I usually don’t remember those times, and I would have forgotten about turning down Nancy’s help and how I got this back pain, except that I can’t ignore it so easily since this work has made me more aware of what I’m doing.”

As she changed her position she winced again. I sensed that her expression reflected her awareness of how people are put off by her “fierce independence” as much as it did her back pain.

“You put people not taking friendly to you together

with not telling me about the back pain,” I said.

“They’re the same. When people hurt me or avoid me, it’s like I’m on the outside looking in, like a weak, whining child pressing her face against the window, pleading to let me inside where everything important is happening, and that’s how I would look if I whined to you about my back hurting. You’d think I was weak.”

“Can you say more about ‘pleading for someone to let you in?’” “I asked.

Her eyes filled with tears.

“You asked me the same kind of question a few minutes ago, and I didn’t know what to say, but maybe I can now,” she said, struggling to speak as she cried. “The memory that flashed through my mind for just a second, and then I couldn’t get back for a moment, was of when I was five, and my mother was in the hospital after she’d been in a car accident.” Ms. Tillman closed her eyes for a moment. “I desperately wanted to see her because I was afraid she was gone forever, but the hospital people wouldn’t let me, because they said I was too little, and that I would have to be six before I could go in. I felt so scared and helpless I was frantic, and I cried and cried, but they wouldn’t let me in. My father let me talk with her on the phone, but that only helped a little because I wasn’t really sure it was her or where she was.”

She covered her eyes with her hands, and cried several moments without speaking.

While she was crying, I heard my next patient - a man who felt especially wronged and devalued if he were kept waiting - open and close the waiting room door, and when I checked the clock I saw that Ms. Tillman’s and my time was already up. I did not mention my observation, though, until her crying had subsided, by when she too had become aware we would have to stop. She wiped her tears, stood, and said, “I’ll see you next time.” I nodded and she left.

The next session she arrived thirty minutes late, upset and agitated, and immediately, while still standing, said, “I’m so sorry to have kept you waiting. I had a crisis with a customer, and I had no choice but to take care of it right

away. And then I was flustered and worried about being late, so I got away without my cell phone and couldn't call you, and I figured it would delay us even more to stop at a pay phone. I really apologize; this kind of thing doesn't happen very often."

"But when it does, we have to take care of first things first," I responded, "and it looks like this was one of those times."

She sat and took a few moments to compose herself. "In spite of this flap today, though, things seem to have stabilized and are going better at work, but I want to pick up where we left off last time. I told you about what happened when Mother was in the hospital, but I didn't get a chance to tell you about the other thing I thought of when you asked me about being weak and helpless."

She stopped talking, looked out the window, and crossed her arms across her chest as though to help hold back tears.

"It was my brother, Kyle. In one way I love him, but I hate him for what he did to me."

"What he did to you?" I asked.

As she looked at the floor, her jaw muscles tightened.

"Starting when I was six and he was eleven, he sexually molested me, and I was too little to fight him off," she replied with a voice that almost shook with anger. "At first he tickled my ribs until I couldn't breathe, and then he put his hand between my legs. Once he tried to put his penis in my mouth, but I got so sick and vomited he didn't try to do that again. I was so scared I didn't know what do. He was so much bigger than I was, and he would force me to lie still while he put his hands all over my body."

She became still, then clasped her hands over her mouth, as though trying not to vomit, and her face went absolutely white.

"What did you think of just then?" I asked gently.

Tears poured from her eyes, and her whole body began to shake. She cried for several minutes, the silence broken only by her gasping for breath. When her breathing became

more regular, she reached for some tissues to dry her face, and I waited for her to continue.

"I remembered," she whispered, "other times when he tried to do that."

I asked, "It's too upsetting to talk about what you remembered?"

She closed her eyes tightly, and nodded. After a few moments, she opened her eyes and said, "He tried to put his penis in my mouth other times, and I fought him off, but I got so sick when I think of it, the memory goes away."

Tears ran down her cheeks, but she continued her story as she wiped them with a tissue.

"I begged Mother to make him stop, but she must not have understood me or didn't believe me because he kept doing it. I never did know whether she told him to stop. I was too helpless to make him quit until I was almost twelve and got to be strong enough to fight him off myself. Being weak felt so terrible I swore I'd never let anyone treat me that way again. But it wasn't just being vulnerable, I felt humiliated and degraded; my friend's brothers didn't do things like that to them. I think I learned the meaning of independence before I could even say the word, because I knew I'd never let anyone make me feel that way again."

Still crying, she paused and stared in the direction of the tree just beyond the window.

"What are you thinking?" I asked.

Sniffing, she answered, "I didn't tell you this a few minutes ago because it all happened so fast, but when I saw those two squirrels, I thought for just a moment how I hated the big male for chasing the scared little girl, and I felt so sorry for her because she was too helpless to protect herself."

Ms. Tillman's perception of the squirrels' behavior so closely followed the memories she had been describing, I asked, "What about what you just said?"

"I know what I just said, I heard myself as I said it. There actually was no big or little one, those squirrels were about the same size, and I couldn't tell you whether either was a male or female. But it seemed so natural to think that



way, that the one chasing the other was a big male bully, and the one running for its life was a frightened little girl who couldn't protect herself. That's how I felt around Kyle until he went away to college."

She looked at her watch, and, somewhat alarmed, said, "Oh my God, we've run out of time again. I'm awful sorry about being late, although this time I'm not just apologizing to you, I'm sorry for myself for having missed the time. There's always so much more to say."

Ms. Tillman had expressed vividly the helplessness a small child feels in an adult world, especially when faced with emotional trauma perpetrated by bigger people, and how these feelings become profoundly etched into and preserved in one's timeless subconscious mind. Her whole life she had been fearing vulnerability as if the conditions of her actual weakness as a small child still existed and would continue forever with the same intensity she felt when she first experienced the trauma.

To cope with these feelings, she had developed the defense of "fierce independence," a mechanism that made her feel strong and beyond the hurt and harm of others.

While little Portia's emotional survival as a small child relied on developing extreme independence and dominion over others, Ms. Tillman as an adult no longer actually needed these outmoded mechanisms; rather, they defeated her goals. Because she now was neither physically small nor emotionally immature, the bases of her original dreads of extreme helplessness and vulnerability no longer existed; as a strong, grown woman she could protect herself physically and tolerate her painful emotions.

A crucial step in Ms. Tillman's mastery of her feelings occurred when she allowed herself to become consciously aware of how she had used her fierce drive for independence to dominate others in order to protect herself from her dread of vulnerability and helplessness.

She began the next session while walking through the office door. "I've been anxious to get here and follow up what we talked about last time. When I saw my own feelings in a couple of playful squirrels, I recognized how

these feelings have been in me my whole life, and then I got to wondering why I've been so much more harsh this past year."

"Can you wonder out loud?" I asked.

She continued as she sat down. "I think it has something to do with Alex."

"What about Alex," I asked.

"She came here from another company a year ago. Even though I respect and like her in some ways, I've bitterly resented her ever since she got here. I felt hurt and betrayed by the Board when they chose her to be CEO instead of me, although I think the Board members were influenced mostly by the previous CEO who'd recommended Alex. I know this wasn't Alex's fault, but I've been angry with her ever since she came, especially when she gives me orders and quotas. I deserved that position, not her," she said, slamming her fist on the arm of her chair.

"You felt helpless and betrayed by the Board the same way you did when the hospital authorities wouldn't let you in to see your mother and when Kyle abused you," I said with a question in my voice.

"Finding this out about myself doesn't come as a surprise. I've always sensed I had these feelings, I've just never really talked about them or tried to work them out. Other people apparently have seen this in me for a long time. Friends at work, who knew me before Alex came, have asked me, 'What's happened to you since Alex got here?' Even Alex asked me, 'I've heard you were such a pleasant person before I came, have I done something I don't know about, or do I rub you the wrong way?' I couldn't answer her, of course, in part because I didn't really know myself, and I certainly didn't realize how much it showed."

Aware of her anger toward Alex and the Board, but no longer consumed by it, Ms. Tillman's tone and manner were forthright, free of rage and tears.

Then she became silent and looked into space.

"Can you think out loud?" I asked.

She remained quiet for several moments. "The more

we talk about how independent and aggressive I've been since Alex came, the more I'm aware of something else I do - you'd probably call it a 'defense mechanism' - that keeps me from feeling vulnerable and degraded. I said before how much I've resented Alex for getting the job I wanted, but I didn't say why it was so critical. I'm sure everyone has their own reason for being ambitious, but mine seems more specific than most people's." She crossed her arms, then crossed her legs, with one ankle resting on the other knee. "Now that I know why being independent is so important to me, I recall that by the time I was five or six I thought that big people, like my parents and the hospital director, and then Kyle, had so much power no one could hurt them or make them do things, and I decided right then that I wanted to be big and powerful as quick as I could. I had thought for a couple of years before Rhoda, the previous CEO, left that I would get her job, so it really hit me hard when they gave the job to Alex."

"It felt like the sooner you could be big and powerful, the sooner you could be protected from feeling helpless and vulnerable?" I asked.

"Yes, and I guess it blinded me to the facts of reaching high places: you have to have training and experience, and you have to be a known quantity. Alex was forty-eight at the time she got the CEO job, and I was only thirty-five. She'd had thirteen more years in corporate work than I'd had, and people knew her and what she could do. I'd thought she got there because Rhoda influenced the Board, but later I learned that wasn't true. The Board had known about Alex and her work a long time. I had been with the company only a couple of years, and that was nothing compared to Alex, she'd been in the software business with another company for ten years. I've already succeeded well, and I'm sure I'll do even better in the future, but I think now that no success, no matter how and when it came, would have been enough to soften the blows of hurts and disappointments."

She uncrossed her arms and legs, leaned forward, and pointed at me. "One thing is for sure though, I can see

now I really don't need to be 'ferociously independent' any more." She smiled.

The several months of work that culminated in this insight were the most trying during her pursuit of self-knowledge, but its painstaking, step-by-step emotional debridement of her fear of helpless vulnerability had allowed her to relinquish her self-destructive mechanism of ferocious independence. By exposing herself to this dreaded feeling within the session, where she felt safe and had no actual need for her illusory power, she discovered she could bear the dread, and, in doing so, eliminated not only the dread's mystery and power but her need for excessive independence as well.

She found that, in the end, the threatening feeling was, though powerful, simply a fearsome childhood emotion that had persisted into her adulthood where it no longer applied, an emotion that made her feel as if she were still a helpless five year old forcibly restricted from seeing her mother, or a vulnerable six year old forced into sexual submission by a sadistic older brother, conditions that had not existed for almost twenty-five years. With these discoveries she came to know, emotionally, as well as intellectually, that she no longer had to fear the helpless and humiliating subjugation that had caused her "fierce independence."

Intellectual awareness of subconscious emotions is necessary for emotional debridement and repair. But intellectual awareness alone is not sufficient: it must be accompanied by knowing intimately, and wishing to change, one's troublesome emotions. Emotional growth usually comes naturally as one gains self-knowledge, particularly for strongly motivated people like Ms. Tillman. Without this incentive to change one's troublesome emotions, intellectual awareness of subconscious thoughts and feelings, including the insights of writers and poets, renders such awareness no more useful for making emotional change than are abstract platitudes.

The third step of Ms. Tillman's emotional debridement - extending the growth and use of already well-functioning, properly employed strengths - came easily for her, as it

does most people. Strongly motivated by her company's ultimatum and her own good judgment, she willingly relinquished her excessively aggressive behaviors and replaced them with her real capacities for even-tempered tact and personal persuasion, abilities that had already played a major role in her business and personal success.

Ms. Tillman had ready access to subordinates and superiors who were, unknowingly, willing and eager in the normal work day to test her tender spots, and she used those opportunities to take several steps in achieving mastery over her internal saboteurs. She dealt with her aggravation toward others by deliberately behaving maturely, then bringing her reflexive anger to our work where she could learn how her mind had caused it, while regularly reminding herself that her highest priority was not to bash offenders with her destructive urges, but to achieve her prized life goals.

By then her dreaded feelings had either dissipated completely or were lessened to such a degree she rarely thought of them.

Three years to the month after Ms. Tillman's almost ruinous tirade against her employees, her CEO took a position with a larger company, and, before leaving, recommended Ms. Tillman to succeed her. Ms. Tillman's employees respected and no longer feared her, and the Board members admired her work and did not question her stability. The Board of Directors immediately asked Ms. Tillman to be the new CEO, and she accepted.