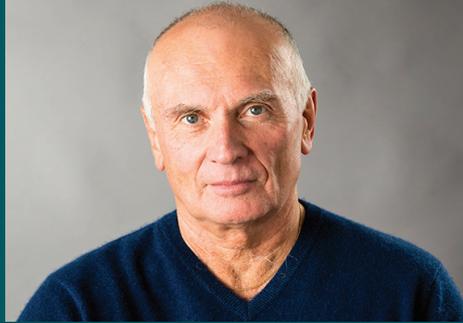


Deliverance for the Lost Child

by Dr. Paul Dunion, Transformational Faculty Member



Personal power, fulfillment and emotional maturation greatly depend upon being able to identify and bring care to the childhood roles we occupied in our families of origin. No family is without stress and when exasperated, easily becomes a source of complex trauma for the children. Conditions such as mental illness, physical illness, addiction, and parental unavailability can lead to traumatic incidents of physical abuse, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse. Each child in the family finds his or her way into a particular role designed to express love for the parents and a mooring for safety. The more a child feels the family being out of control, the more a child will rigidly cling to one role.

I have worked with numerous folks who took on the role of Lost Child. Each time, I felt challenged, intrigued, and privileged to be invited into a healing relationship with them. Unlike other clients whose work is to find their way back to their inner worlds, Lost Children are needing help to make their way out of their inner worlds. Their challenge will be to find their place in the outer world of relationships, education, and occupation.

The Lost Child mandate for loving and safety is to withdraw into their inner worlds. Their psychological imperative is to remain unobtrusive, committed to being compliant, and non-disruptive. They maintain their cloaked family profile by remaining quiet and sequestered in their rooms and other private areas where there is minimum family traffic. The Lost Children with whom I've worked, have been introverted. The innate propensity for introversion is excellent compost for the construction of this family role. The child is already quite comfortable dwelling in the inner landscape. All that

needs to happen is to upgrade time and energy spent in the interior world. Let's look more closely at some of the strengths of this role.

- **Comfort with solitude.** Lost children know how to enjoy time alone. They easily learn how to entertain themselves, finding comfort in their own company.
- **Inner resources.** They often develop their imaginations, intellects, and creative potentials as these endeavors don't threaten the scaffolding of the role.
- **Spiritual potential.** Sharon Wegscheider Cruse points out, "The quiet and isolation, the active fantasy life, the very emptiness that offers no competing relationships or satisfactions to which he has become attached – these are all circumstances that have been recognized throughout human history as conducive to spiritual growth." (*Another Chance*, p. 134)

Let's look more closely at some of the liabilities of this role when lived rigidly.

- **Excessive anonymity.** Adults who took on this role in their families of origin run a risk of continuing to live from some degree of invisibility. They often don't know what it means to feel heard, understood and accepted. Loneliness easily can feel like a normal way to live.
- **A lost voice.** Lost Children easily discover that speaking is the quickest way to violate their anonymity. As

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introverts, they already feel at home being frugal with the use of language. All that's needed is speaking even less, with safety and loving not being challenged. As adulthood emerges, it can be easy to become self-righteous about the alleged proper way to speak. Their verbal inhibition can take on an alleged civility. They scrutinize those indulging in free expression as holding an inordinate amount of entitlement. While working with James, a 52-year-old producing custom-built furniture, I discovered how important it can be for a Lost Child to remain voiceless. In one of our sessions, I was having difficulty hearing him and made several pleas for him to speak up. His chin dropped toward his chest and with his tone remaining singular, he said, just above a whisper, "I can't project. It will hurt my head and my eyes will feel strained." I realized that James' psyche had successfully recruited his body for some somatic assistance to secure a much-needed muted voice.

- **Emotional estrangement.** Emotional well-being depends upon being able to feel, identify and express emotions while being heard and accepted by a trusted listener. Lost Children deem being favorably heard as either impossible or dangerous. They employ two strategies to cope with their emotions. The first is repression where the emotions are relegated to the unconscious. The second is dissociation with emotions being translated into ideas and opinions, allowing for the vulnerability of their emotions to attain some measure of protection.
- **Social awkwardness.** When isolation is at the core of how we live, we're not quite sure what will happen when we interact with others. Being puzzled about what to say and do, accompanied by self-doubt haunts social interaction. Lost Children often become caregivers in response to confusion about giving and receiving. They decide that they can't go wrong by simply giving a lot. However, becoming a delivery system often leads to resentment and emptiness.
- **Impairment of genuine belonging.** Nothing calls for transparency more than genuine belonging. Such relational deepening calls for clarity about feelings, emotional needs, and the expression of desire. Genuine belonging happens as Lost Children are seen, greeted, and welcomed, with their uniqueness being celebrated. The Lost Child will need to dismantle old

ways of self-care and caring for others, learning viable replacements.

- **Potential may remain hidden.** Lost Children keep so much of themselves hidden, including their gifts and talents. They easily forget they possess them. Or they create beliefs that help keep their strengths sequestered. Recently, I mentioned to a very bright young woman, still held in the role of Lost Child, that I wanted to acknowledge the sharpness of her insight and perception. She quickly responded, "Thank you, but I simply don't have the verbal skills to accurately reflect my ideas and intuitions". My heart sank as I imagined her gifts remaining cloistered, blocked from being birthed in the world.

A reparative path for the Lost Child

- **Education.** I have found it very beneficial for adult Lost Children to receive information about the impact their childhood role has had upon their lives. An important reminder is how anonymity supported the need for safety and how loving was designed to prevent the Lost Child from burdening others with their needs. It is also helpful to clarify the distinction between their role and their core identity, and how influential the role can be in adulthood, issuing several significant losses.
- **Supporting Grief.** Lost Children will need support to explore the losses, which excessive withdrawal generates regarding numerous aspects of their lives - including relationships, self-concept, personal empowerment, education, and occupation.
- **Learning about boundaries.** It can be extremely helpful for the adult Lost Child to understand that anonymity has been employed as a primitive boundary aimed at supplying safety. I typically suggest that anonymity can be saved and used with intention, rather than an automatic form of protection. Lost Children can have control over invisibility rather than invisibility having control over them. The key is to add to their repertoire of boundaries. The first addition is simply saying "no" and "yes" authentically. The second boundary is letting go of what is out of their control. The challenge here is to access enough discernment to determine what is actually out of their control. Remaining mindful that the ego enjoys imagining that its power is limitless. As they practice saying "yes" and "no" honestly and

letting go of what is out of their control, they'll find that those folks being impacted by their boundaries will likely not be pleased by the boundaries. Their boundaries may frustrate others from meeting some need or desire. Their resiliency to hold the boundary in the face of another's frustration or disapproval is another form of boundary. Boundary setting takes practice and remains a worthwhile life-long endeavor.

- **Building self-trust.** When a defense like anonymity is employed rigidly and unconsciously, it's difficult for Lost Children to know whether they are acting in their best interest or being ruled by an attachment to invisibility. Getting clear about this distinction calls for the development of self-trust. Trust for themselves is building when they are committed to knowing their own truths. This happens as they increasingly let themselves be aware of how they feel emotionally, as well as their desires, beliefs, and values. A critical element of their truth will be their evaluation of how much anonymity they are currently employing, and how much they really need. Self-trust is also enhanced as they commit to treat themselves kindly, which happens as they increasingly interrupt disparaging judgments about how they behave. Kindness is also enacted as they eat, rest, play and work in ways that are fulfilling and sustainable.
- **Building trust for others.** Trusting others can be more challenging for the Lost Child because it can easily lead to being more visible. A key is to remember that as a child, visibility got magically loaded with some awful stuff. The alleged nefarious outcomes included excessive vulnerability, loss of safety, and a violation of loving others. It will be important to get help unpacking the disproportionate heavy weight distributed to being visible. As that process evolves, Lost Children need to develop the capacity to be discerning regarding who to trust. Trusting others also depends upon holding the belief that the other will tell them the truth and treat them kindly. There are two caveats; the first is that they do not offer trust because someone is cute or charismatic, they must earn the trust. Secondly, they must be willing to grow a capacity to receive the acts of kindness bestowed upon them.
- **A safe emotional place.** Lost Children need to take

the delicate matter of emotional safety seriously. They have little or no experience being empathically and compassionately witnessed. Subsequently, they need to create a kind of covenant with a therapist, clergy person, coach, friend, or family member to show their emotions. It must be a place where they can trust that it's safe to make themselves visible as emotional beings.

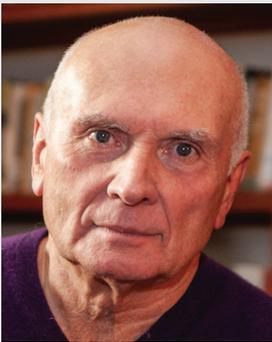
- **Apprenticing to love.** The Lost Child is asked to take on a task that is fitting for all of us - being an apprentice to love. Reorganizing love cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally for the Lost Child means significantly downsizing the mandate, "I will love you by not burdening you with my presence." Before addressing how love will live when offered to lovers, self-love must be prioritized. The starting place for this love of self is simply committing to acknowledge and meet personal needs for food, rest, play, comfort, and support from others. Then, slowly focusing on addressing loving others. The initial shift sounds like, "I will do my best to be present," "I will be authentic," "I will be accountable for my behavior," "I will ask for what I need," "I will listen," and "I will encourage you any need to influence." Stepping into the above directions can be an immense shift for Lost Children and advance them further into the mystery of love.
- **A healing welcome.** It is extremely beneficial for Lost Children to understand what their psychological wounding is asking for: first and foremost, not to store it in some forgotten closet in the psyche. It's just too easy for Lost Children to view their wounds as extremely burdensome to others and serving no meaningful relational agenda. Gradually, they can learn to welcome their injury as simply an expression of their humanity and not some unfortunate aberration. When that happens, there can be a deep understanding that the power of the wound or lack of, does not lie with what was inflicted. Rather, their relationship with the wound determines how potent it will be. A compassionate welcome accompanied by curiosity regarding what the wound is asking for, remains a robust source of healing. This is best accomplished by working with practitioners who offer this kind of welcome to their own wounds. Healing receives significant inspiration as Lost Children accept their wounds

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and are willing to learn from them. Then, while being compassionately witnessed by another, come to know what it means to be found.

Although Lost Child was not my primary role in my family of origin, I did attach to it with some tenacity. I look at my professional life, working alone for 35 years in a basement office, and being very comfortable with the withdrawal. I personally know the work of learning to feel hurt without pulling in and away for a substantial amount of time. I know the

pull toward the worlds of imagination and intuition, as these worlds have brought substance to my writing. However, I also know the urge driving me to sanitize reality, clinging to some purified and idyllic version. I am deeply grateful for the mentors who affirmed my dream while calling me back to the messiness of my corporeal experience. Because of their help, my dreams are less of a substitute for reality as they offer more meaning and fervor to my lived experience.



PAUL DUNION, Mobius Transformational Faculty, Senior Expert, and track leader at the Next Practice Institute, earned his Doctoral degree in Counseling and Consulting Psychology from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and his M.A. in Philosophy from the University of Connecticut. He taught Philosophy for thirteen years at the University of Connecticut and Three Rivers Community College.

He has been in private practice for the past thirty-seven years. As a holistic psychological healer, employing an existential modality as well as a somatic approach to treating trauma, Paul is trained in EMDR and is a graduate of the Somatic Experiencing Institute.

From its early beginnings, Paul represented the State of Connecticut at the national gatherings of the mytho-poetic men's movement, sponsored by Wingspan. As the founder of Boys to Men, he created a mentoring community for teenage boys. He is the co-founder of COMEGA (Connecticut Gathering of Men), having served over 6,000 men since 1992, which continues to offer biannual retreats. In 2013, Paul established the Croton Mystery School and designed its curriculum with a focus on teaching students how to make peace with life's mystery and unpredictability. He has offered over 200 workshops on topics related to Human Potential. Currently, Paul offers supervision for younger psychotherapists.

Paul has published six books: *Seekers – Finding Our Way Home* (2016); *Dare to Grow-Up – Become Who You Are Meant to Be* (2016); *Path of the Novice Mystic – Maintaining a Beginner's Heart and Mind* (2013); *Shadow Marriage – A Descent into Intimacy* (2006); *Temptation in the House of the Lord* (2004); and his latest offering *Wisdom – Apprenticing to the Unknown and Befriending Fate* (2021).



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