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Feature Articles

Tony Soprano and "The Vertical Split"

by Jeffrey Stern, PhD

In his recent book *The Psychology of the Sopranos*, Glen Gabbard discusses Tony Soprano in terms of Kohut's idea of the "vertical split" (Gabbard, 36). Gabbard describes Tony as, on the one hand, a devoted and loving father - if not exactly such a husband - and on the other, a ruthless mafia boss, capable of violence, even murder, at the drop of a hat. An episode that seems to him to exemplify this division within Tony is one called *College* (1st Season, #5) in which Tony drives his daughter, Meadow, to Maine to look at schools that interest her. After her interview at Bates College Tony runs into a former colleague who ratted out members of his mob family and was given a new identity under the Federal Witness Protection Program. Leaving Meadow to hang out with undergraduate girls she meets at a bar at Colby College, Tony tails his enemy home to assure himself he's got the right man. Despite the fact that his adversary has a wife and a young daughter and has been out of Tony's life for twelve years, Tony has no qualms about killing him. Gabbard's point here is that maintaining the vertical split is necessary for Tony to function effectively within his contradictory worlds so that the competing elements of his personality remain unintegrated rather than exposing him to "conflict, anxiety and psychic pain" (Gabbard, 37).

This view of the split is certainly true as far as it goes, but it leaves out an important element of the way being split functions for Tony. In his books, *The Problem of Perversion*, *Being of Two Minds*, and *Errant Selves: A Casebook of Misbehavior*, Arnold Goldberg and his colleagues argue that the vertical split protects the self from unendurably depressive affects by making it possible for one to engage in exciting forms of misbehavior whenever a threat of the depressive affect occurs. From this perspective, what Tony is doing by immersing himself in a sudden, yet suddenly all-consuming quest for vengeance - even as Meadow is being interviewed in the Colby admissions office - is attempting to obliterate the sad feelings that are inexorably linked to the occasion that has brought father and daughter together, namely the imminent departure of Meadow from the family.

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For Tony, Meadow's departure is a devastating prospect, although largely unacknowledged, because it's not easy for him to bear sorrow. "Fuh-get-about-it" is the credo by which he lives when it comes to dealing with painful emotions. Forgetting, however, isn't always possible, as Tony learns when it turns out that the panic attacks he suffers are psychogenic in nature and force him into psychotherapy. Once there, he discovers his symptoms represent the return of memories and feelings he has tried unsuccessfully to repress. In one of his sessions he confesses to Dr. Melfi that he has been greatly, if somewhat inexplicably, saddened by the departure of some ducks that have been residing in his pool over the summer. Dr. Melfi realizes that Tony is saddened because the ducks are a family, and evoke his sorrow over the failure of his own family to cohere when he was a child.

Tony's sudden obsession with the need to track down and execute his old colleague is more than a matter of business, or even of his particular sort of business ethics, although it surely is both of these. Crucially, however, it is his means of warding off depression. By immersing himself in a quest that involves stalking his old adversary, plotting his ambush, and finally murdering him with his bare hands Tony replaces the unutterable sadness that shadows the idea of Meadow's flight from the nest with the excitement of pursuit, danger, violence and vengeance.

In a similar episode during the third season, Tony becomes enraged at Ralfie Siforetto for setting fire to the barn that stabled the racehorse they co-owned so that Ralfie could get the insurance money on the fallen animal. Tony idealizes the beautiful mare as courageously devoted to bringing him glory. Perhaps she symbolizes the sort of mother he wishes he'd had but, for whatever reason, the loss of her saddens Tony inconsolably. Rather than grieve, however, Tony becomes enraged and kills Ralphie with his bare hands, just as he has the traitor in Maine. Tony does this despite the fact that he has just refused to allow his capos to harm Ralphie on another, unrelated matter because Ralphie is a "made man" and killing him would be bad for business since it would invite reprisals. In the face of unendurable affect, however, Tony impulsively and dangerously misbehaves, even by his own generous standards.

More than merely dividing the dual aspects of his nature so that he can function effectively in his contradictory worlds, the vertical split allows Tony to use behavior that's acceptable in one reality to protect him from the affects that may be generated in the other. It is precisely the way in which the twain within Tony's personality do indeed meet that makes him so interesting to us because this split aspect of Tony is so much like ourselves.

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