"ENTERING THE DEVELOPMENTAL SPIRAL
THE WORK OF MICHAEL F. BASCH APPLIED TO
CLINICAL SOCIAL WORK

Miriam A. Elson, MA

ABSTRACT:
Entering the developmental spiral through affect attunement reactivates and revitalizes the thrust to continue development when it has been fixated, distorted or derailed. Achieving affect attunement is a vital dimension of the healing process. Basch describes how affect stimulates and controls the ordering and pattern matching function of the brain, motivating behavior and relationships. These theories are examined in selected vignettes illustrating the manner in which we seek to free individuals from stalemate in relationships, destructive behavior or depressive states.

I do not recall how old I was or what it was that had so aroused my fury, but angry I was, stamping my foot and still not expressing the full force of my rage.

Almost overpowered by the intensity of my sense of injury, but not near tears which would destroy my dignity, I heard my mother’s gentle voice through my shouts, “That’s not my Miriam.” I drew in a sharp breath, and then, enfolded in her arms, I began to weep. But I wept because indeed I was very angry and if that was not her Miriam, whose Miriam was I? And what did I do with the angry, scolding Miriam still very much a part of me?

At various times in the weeks following this incident, I witnessed my parents’ anger, my older sister’s anger, my younger brother’s anger. When was it alright for me to be angry? I concluded that parents, older sisters and apparently brothers could be angry, but “that was not my Miriam.”

I use this incident to suggest the manner in which structuralization occurs, in this instance disavowal of those feelings normally attached to a given set of circumstances. Over time, from general expectations of
those around me, I became the accommodating member of the family, unprotesting and generally accepting of circumstances. Such structuralization may be individually and socially useful, but it may also impede the full use of one’s talents and skills.

Disavowal is only one of the miscarriages of affective development which Michael Basch describes in his discussion of the manner in which we, as healers, enter the developmental spiral of individuals who seek our help, or who are mandated for such intervention, in order to free them from disabling restrictions. He has provided us with a systematic discussion of the development of affect (1976; 1983a) and has described the process of achieving affect attunement. I shall describe how these theoretical formulations increase our understanding of the manner in which the therapist as new selfobject in the present enters the developmental spiral. Through case material I shall highlight the process whereby affect attunement is brought into play, permitting understanding and interpretation as aids in structuralizations of new modes of behavior and freer access to satisfying relationships.

In Basch’s writings two themes emerge: the pattern matching, ordering process of the brain, and the developmental line of affect. I shall discuss his views on affect development first, since he points out that pattern matching is controlled or derailed in defensive distortion by the individual’s experience of failure in affect attunement by one’s selfobjects.

Basch states that psychotherapy is about communication and failures in communication. He replaces Freud’s concept that the underlying motivation of all behavior is the discharge of instinct with the striving for order, competence and self-esteem. Although Freud suggested that psychic energy is responsible for the intensity of thought, Basch attributes intensity to the force of information in the form of affect, feeling, emotion, empathy. Instead of Freud’s mental apparatus composed of imaginary agencies such as ego and id, Basch points to pattern matching, feedback and decision-making functions of the brain. He does not belittle Freud’s discoveries, brilliant and courageous but bound by the state of knowledge of his time. Since Freud’s death over fifty years ago, Basch points out that there has been enormous development in the fields of infant observation, perceptual, cognitive and affective psychology; neurobiology and scientific philosophy; as well as from new sciences such as cybernetics, systems theory and information theory (Basch, 1988, p. 14-15).

This has therefore permitted us to move beyond the concept of affect as merely expressions of sexuality or aggression, instincts which Freud had postulated were responsible for all psychologically determined behavior.