

# THE CHILD STATE OF CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE FORMATION OF THE SELF

by Jon Eisman

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For many years, almost from its inception, Hakomi has paid great attention to that unique state of consciousness we call the Inner Child. Though not the only avenue to personal transformation, it is certainly one of the most powerful, and often arises spontaneously regardless of the therapist's intention.

For the most part, the Child has been viewed as a distinct state of being, full of painful memories, wanting attention and help. Sometimes it seems to be at war with the Adult part of the person, while other times the two live closely together in a supportive or protective relationship. Over time, from working with clients and students, parenting, and studying child development and character theory, it has become clear to me that the Inner Child is really a complex system of psychological interactions. In fact, as this article will discuss, the Child is most accurately viewed not as one entity, but as a somewhat disorganized committee whose members believe they have separate and in some ways incompatible needs. This perception of separateness and the competition it creates is one way to understand our personal pain.

## UNITY, ORGANICITY, AND CHILD DEVELOPMENT

On every level, we start out in this world immersed in a state of unity. We share blood, oxygen, food, even physical space with our mothers. Studies have shown that the infant cannot differentiate self from other until several months old. What happens externally is perceived as a personal and internal event. On a spiritual level, nearly every religion speaks of a state of oneness with God or the cosmos from which we enter into our human form.

In this state, the fetus and later the infant are entirely dependent on the outside world being supportive. We need the outside world and those around us to "have it together" for us to survive. In short, we need to live in an environment that, regardless of whatever else happens, continually manifests the unity principle. For the developing child, this means a safe and healthy world and a loving and supportive family.

The goal of child development is individuation, a sense of the self as a unique and defined being, with mastery of the functional skills necessary to participate in and enjoy life. What the child is developing is his or her own uniqueness. In Hakomi terms, the child is striving to attain its organicity.

In short, we come into this world to attain our individualness while needing unity around us to let that happen. This is central to the study of psychology. If that goes well, if we get the love and support and modeling we need to become our possible selves, then we have the best chance to grow up healthy and happy and whole. If, on the other hand, we are surrounded by conflict and harshness and opposition, we may fail to become our full selves and will live part of our lives in a whirl of confusion and pain. Sadly, this is the case for most of us.

Of course, the above is oversimplified and incomplete. The making of the self is an infinitely complex process. Child development and the family situation are two major factors, but many other events, from genetics to nutrition to cultural context to past life experiences, may contribute to who we become. For now, however, let's only consider the psychological events that shape the way we come to organize ourselves.

## CORE KNOWLEDGE

Excluding, then, all non-experiential factors, we seem to enter this world in a state of simple innocence. The unformed self is open and trusting, expecting in a primitive way, to find the support necessary to allow its self-realization. I believe we even possess something I call "core knowledge." Virtually every time I have worked deeply with someone in their Child state of consciousness, I have found a part of the person that has a clear idea of how the world is "supposed" to be for them. From person to person, this knowledge has been the same: we expect an environment based on the unity principle and supportive of simple human rights. Some part of us just knows that we deserve respect, that it's OK to have needs, that we shouldn't be hit, and so on.

As this core knowledge is supported or refuted by our experiences, we develop core beliefs. Experiences that support our self-respect and individuation create positive core beliefs. Experiences that violate us create limiting core beliefs. These beliefs, of course, are exactly what the Hakomi Method pursues.

### IDEAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE NATURAL CHILD

Open and innocent, unquestioningly organizing around this expectation of the world's benevolence and order, we are in a natural and (at least interactively) as yet unformed state. I call this part of the self the Natural Child. It is this little one who sets out on the amazing road towards self-discovery and wholeness.

In a hypothetical and utopian world, this Natural Child would continually be met by educational experiences that would teach her or him how to be in the world, how to relate to feelings, satisfying ways to be with others, etc. Though these experiences would certainly include adversity and conflict, he or she would also have the kind of guidance that would turn such events into positive learning experiences.. The Natural Child would become what I call an Embodied Child, living fully in all of the various bodies: the physical, the mental, the emotional, the spiritual, etc. She would feel herself as an integrated person. He would be at peace with himself and his learning process, focusing on the moment's activity. Eventually, the child would grow to become a Whole Adult. (see chart 1).

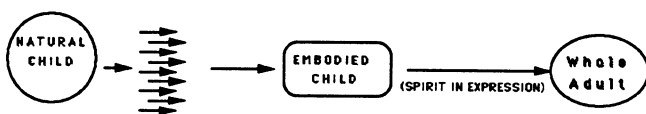


Chart 1

The Whole Adult is what we all aspire to become. Fully mature, the Whole Adult lives according to the principles. He or she is loving and compassionate, accepting, patient, inclusive, supportive, gentle, firm, wise and all the other virtues we hold desirable. The Whole Adult has successfully crossed the wilderness of personal development to become his or her own unique self. If in your heart of hearts you ask yourself what kind of parents you wish you could have had, the perfect parents, you will no doubt come up with some vision of the Whole Adult.

How many people do you know who are like that? How often are you like that? For most of us, though we may very often be with others who show these qualities, and we ourselves may frequently live our lives that way too, it is all too common that we collide with the limits and confusions of ourselves

and those we encounter.

Those of us who have studied to become Hakomi Therapists are well aware of the Whole Adult as an ideal state. To behave in just such a mature fashion, organizing around compassion and wisdom and gentleness, is what we continue to strive for as therapists. Somewhere in our training it becomes obvious that the barrier to our therapeutic effectiveness is not some difficulty in understanding the Method, but rather our own inability to go beyond our limiting beliefs and habits. To paraphrase Shakespeare, "The fault, dear Brutus, lies not in the Method but in our selves..."

There are infinite reasons for our formative experiences tending towards the limiting. Although some parents really are terrible parents, it would be mistaken to point a finger at every mom and dad and blame them for our confusions. For one thing, blame itself may just be part of perpetuating our stuckness. Very likely, our parents' childhood experience was equally confusing. Very few people are ever taught how to parent; it's one totally essential job that's almost always left to amateurs. Working with clients has shown me over and over that a great deal of the unpleasant but formative things that happen to us are done without malice. Often, whatever the results, our families and others were sincerely trying to help us, genuinely believing it would benefit us.

Moreover our parents were, of course, just one part of the picture. The economic climate, the kinds of neighbors we had, the teachers we were given, and a million other interwoven events all helped shape us. We may be justifiably angry that we were treated in unfair and hurtful ways, but more often than not there is really no one culprit on whom to pin our grief.

It is also important to remember that pain is relative. Some events, even though they were not meant to harm us, were painful because they conflicted with our individual needs in a strictly subjective way. Your parents may have been very excited to move to Pittsburgh because of a new job, but for you it meant leaving your best friend.

### THE SPLITTING OF THE SELF

All that being true, the typical cascade of painful childhood events nevertheless teaches us to organize in specific, confused and limited ways. This development of limiting core beliefs is the key to understanding the painful parts of ourselves.

As stated above, as the child goes through supportive experiences, his or her organic sense of self is enhanced and so becomes more integrated and embodied

ied. As the child goes through painful experiences, just the opposite happens. The child learns that the organic self (which led the child into the experience) will not suffice in the quest for satisfaction. This is why the experience is painful. At the deepest level, we are our organic selves, and for that self to seem inadequate leaves us ashamed, confused and afraid. It leaves us in antagonism to our true self. This schism causes the self to feel divided. Instead of an experience of integration and wholeness, easing us toward our goal of individuation, we fall into a world of separation and distrust.

Experientially, the self splits. Instead of feeling like one integrated person, it begins to see itself as a collection of parts, a self by committee, with each member having his or her own agenda and goals. There is enormous conflict among the parts, for each believes its vision of how the world operates is the real one.

Of course, there is no actual splitting of the self. It is just a powerfully etched inner perception. We experience ourself and the world from fluctuating viewpoints. Since these are immature and inconsistent with our organic core, they are unable to resolve themselves into a synthesized whole. Our participation in our lives becomes erratic and unclear.

Each perceived sense of self is a self-contained state of consciousness. Though we can cross over to other related states, whichever one is present and operating in any given moment sees itself as the way things are. Thus, as a person, our sense of "I," of who we are, keeps shifting as our various parts rise and fall in consciousness. We may, for example, be infatuated and excited one moment, when our partner says a certain thing, and crushed and dismal the next when they use a certain tone of voice. As the present experience resonates with the painfully formative events from our past, our various selves manifest and clamor for control. Though their specific natures vary from person to person, these selves fit within a general pattern. (chart 2)

### THE HURT CHILD

The part of the self that must withstand the shock of organic inadequacy becomes what I call the Hurt Child. It is a perception of the self that happens when some hurt we feel as an actual child locks in. The hurt is elevated from an event or accumulated events into a sense of "I am This." As with each other part, it sees the world only from its own perspective. It sees itself as in pain, and the world, or certain aspects or events in the world, as a hurtful place. It is the agonizing counterpart to the Embodied Child.

The Hurt Child is the reservoir of our psychological

suffering. When a present event happens that summons the ghost of some original hurtful experience, the Hurt Child arises and we feel that pain once again, as if the original violation were still happening. Furthermore, we experience ourself in the moment as a woeful being. Since the Hurt Child is a state of consciousness, we don't just feel that we have pain; we feel ourself as "I am pain." The hurt Child is not just something that happened to us, it is a state of being we reside in.

The Hurt Child can develop from a wide range of events and degrees of organic interference. If an event is traumatic enough, then it alone may reshape the self. More often, the self devolves gradually away from organicity towards division as the weight of painful experiences accumulates. The first time our folks broke a promise to us, it was not that important. But 10 or 15 times later, we start to believe it as an inevitable truth. Perhaps we embellish it with our own interpretation (like, "they break them because I'm no good"). Or we extend the truth into a generalization ("you can't depend on anyone").

Our ability to assess the meaning of an experience depends on both our age and the amount of related information we've acquired. Newborns, for example, have no ability to reason things out and very little accumulated data to compare to. Events are experienced immediately in the nervous system, with very little filtering. As a result, much smaller, even seemingly innocuous events (traffic noise, room temperature, aromas, etc.), can trigger deep and lasting trauma and self-misperception.

Wounded and in opposition to the organic self, the Hurt Child lives in a perpetual thunderstorm. The hurt might be fear or sadness or hopelessness, or any combination of painful feelings. Through it all, the self organizes around, "I am hurt, and I will inevitably be hurt again."

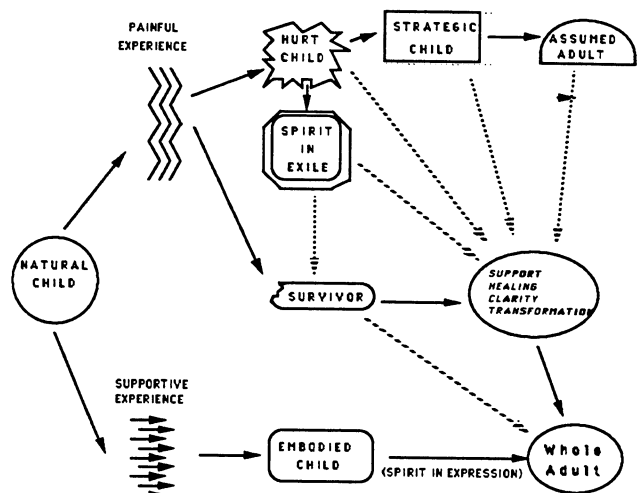


Chart 2

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## THE SPIRIT IN EXILE

At some point the Hurt Child decides that he or she must develop some way to stop this pain. Two things must happen. First, the constant antagonism between itself and the organic core must be relieved. To do this, the organic core must be hidden away. And second, since the organic core will no longer be present to steer the self through life (a task it already proved itself incapable of doing without horrendous damage), the self must develop some new means to escape the pain and return to a path towards satisfaction.

In the struggle between the Hurt Child and the organic self, the Hurt Child must win. This is because the avoidance of pain takes precedence over all else. The defense of the system from violation is more important than the freedom of letting the system do as it naturally wishes. So the organic self, the true spirit of the person, is banished to an unfelt realm. It becomes a Spirit in Exile.

Of course, this is merely the myopic perception of the Hurt Child. There is in fact no real place to which the organic self may be banished. Despite the blinders of perception, the person remains one whole being. It's similar to child hiding his head under the pillow and thinking that because they can't see you, you can't see them.

What actually happens is that the spirit of the person—the spontaneity and will and life force—get repressed. As soon as it attempts to surface, the pain avoidance mechanism shuts it down. Although the Hurt Child makes it as imperceptible to itself as possible, the antagonism, the very thing it was trying to remedy, continues. This reconfirms to the Hurt Child that life will be full of conflict and danger. A positive feedback loop is created, reinforcing the Hurt Child's core beliefs, and perpetuating the felt sense of a divided self.

It is a precept of the organicity principle that the organic self will never cease in its labor to do what is right for itself, to maintain its organic integrity. It is a fascinating paradox that to survive it must redefine itself as Hurt and banish itself for its own good. For remember, there is really only one self, and any actions taken by the person must be generated by this self, regardless of how the person perceives or labels him or herself. The energy and intention to sustain the Hurt Child actually comes from the person's spirit, even though it is in exile! Though ostensibly this may seem foolish, it is the best that the misinformed child can do. Seen this way, our choices deserve praise for their courage and creativity.

Though repressed, the Spirit in Exile maintains its

organic faith in its own validity. It is, in actuality, all but irrepressible. It is a testament to the human spirit that it can survive even under enormous restraints and abuse. In fact, my experience with severely abused clients has proven that short of dying, the spirit will continue to struggle towards selfhood.

Thus, although exiled, the spirit continues to function. Depending on the degree of trauma, the spirit may be only a little in exile, with most of it still guiding the person; or it may leak out only a tiny bit under extraordinary circumstances. Nearly always, when something happens for the person that somehow lessens the hurt, the spirit will return spontaneously. We see this often in therapy. As soon as something occurs to heal and transform a wound, a flood of enthusiasm and life force washes over the person. The spirit returns, at least in part, and there is a great sense of relief and hope.

At the time the organic self makes the choice to banish itself and place the Hurt Child in charge, it is still literally a child. It doesn't really know what's possible; it's flying by the seat of its pants. Expediency is a much bigger factor than wisdom, and the child does the best it can. Such choices become lifeshaping, and as they are reinforced, become deeply ingrained. It is a great tragedy of human development that we must make decisions about our destiny long before we have learned how to, and with only a fraction of the data we need to do it wisely.

## THE STRATEGIC CHILD

From the Hurt Child's perspective, when the spirit is sent into exile, some new means must be arranged to allow for the pursuit of needs and successful participation in life. A strategy for coping must develop. Another aspect of the self is created, the Strategic Child.

Through trial and error and by copying the behaviors of others, the child struggles to find some way of being that stops the pain and supports whatever needs are present. If a particular strategy proves successful, and if it continues to be used according to the dictates of the Hurt Child, then it too will become automatic. Again, age and accumulated data contribute to the sophistication and options of strategy selection.

The job of the Strategic Child is to get things done, to usher the person through life. Actually, it has the same job that the organic self had, but it must now approach that task from a revised perspective. Informed by the Hurt Child as to what causes pain and what doesn't, it must accommodate that data while still trying to fulfill the needs of the whole person.

Again, in choosing between the two, the pain-avoidance must prevail. So it is, for example, that though we may crave contact with others, our Strategic Child keeps us a wallflower at the party. Or we may wish to relax, but we choose instead to revise our article one more time.

Actually, balancing the needs of the Hurt Child and the whole person is an impossible task. The hurt Child needs to *repress* the organic flow, and the whole person wishes to *express* it. The Hurt Child's wishes are based on a very limited, or no longer existent, slice of reality. Unable to respond freely to all of what is happening now, the efforts of the Strategic Child are doomed to failure. It may succeed temporarily, and it may certainly help the self avoid particular kinds of pain. But no action can truly succeed unless it is based on the integrated needs of the organic self and its spontaneous dance with experience. Just as with the Hurt Child, such failure creates a feedback loop in which more pain generates the need for continued strategizing.

We have all kinds of strategies for coping: repression, expression, withdrawal, intimidation, resistance, and so on. They require enormous energy to sustain. And of course, just as with the Hurt Child, the real energy behind the Strategic Child is the organic self. In a similar paradox, the organic self, the Natural Child, must re-shape itself into a limited, isolated and antagonistic form. Always in service to the pain-avoidance needs of the Hurt Child, the Strategic Child will do whatever it has to, even if it violates the needs of the organic self. It is like a starving animal that must eat its own leg to survive.

In this we can see why so many of us so often do things that are not actually good for us or what we truly want. For example, we've all known someone who's been in an unhappy relationship, and yet no amount of urging on our part has gotten them to change. Their involvement is not organic, but strategic, and they will continue to pursue such a course until the Hurt Child's wound is in some way lessened or healed.

### THE ASSUMED ADULT

The child adopts a strategy that works. It might be their only choice (such as withdrawal from felt experience by an infant); something they invent that seems to fit ("If I'm always a good boy then Mommy won't be so sad"); or something they see modeled ("Daddy hits Mommy and she backs down, so having physical power over others is good").

Because the strategy seems to give them more power in the world and appears to solve the pain problem, the child identifies operating this way with being an

adult. This is especially true if they develop the strategy by modeling adult behavior, which happens more and more as the child gets older. In our culture, early developmental strategies, such as withdrawal and overdependency, are readily labeled immature and discouraged as we grow older. Mid and late developmental strategies, however, are often praised for their maturity. Toughing it out through pain, getting all your chores done right away or taking care of your own needs are all appreciated for being very "grown-up." Being reinforced this way, the child associates his or her strategizing with being an adult, and forsakes even further the organic pursuit of wholeness.

Since the circumstances leading to the strategy either continue to happen or typically do not get dealt with, the child keeps and deepens this perspective as he or she gets older. Unless something different happens, they become an adult who is still organizing around old, often forgotten events and perceptions. Instead of becoming a Whole Adult, they are, at least in part, only a chronological adult. Inside, they still see the world from the Hurt Child's perspective. They themselves and the world assume they are an adult, even though they have never fully learned how to be one.

The world is full of Assumed Adults. Most of the world's messes are results of adult decisions being made by people with adult power and status, but Hurt and Strategic Child viewpoints. Anytime we persist in stuck situations, engage in win-lose thinking, physically hurt others and so on, we are in our Assumed Adult. No Whole Adult would behave that way. No Whole Adult would lie to others, or beat his children, or bomb villages.

Again, this is not a cause for blame. No one really wants to participate in the world this way. It's just the pain of the Hurt Child, often buried and unacknowledged, that forces us unwittingly to protect ourselves the only way we know how. Inside every adult mess is a little boy or girl who is confused and struggling desperately to understand a world far bigger than them.

### THE SURVIVOR

While this complex triad of Hurt Child, Strategic Child and Spirit in Exile are struggling towards Assumed Adulthood, another aspect of the Natural Child also emerges from painful experience. Unless the trauma is nearly total, some part of our natural self will emerge from the painful events partly intact. Part of ourself sees itself as Hurt, and another part survives the experience without having to go into exile. Thus, though some later resonant events may shunt us into the split of the Hurt Child, we may at other times continue to feel whole and well-function-

ing. We may do well in our lives for the most part, while sometimes organizing in more limited ways. This is how it is for most of us.

This sense of self as the Survivor is somewhere between the Spirit in Exile and the Embodied self. Somewhat in touch with the organic self, it also knows that some part has been exiled to fuel the Hurt and Strategic selves. We experience this self as aware of our wounds, but not locked into them as the reality of our lives. Often this part functions well on a daily level. And typically, aware of both our wholeness and our hurt, it drives us towards options for change: new relationships; spiritual pursuits; therapy; etc. Not as fully integrated and self-accepting as our possible whole self, and unstable enough to slip into more limited states of being, such as the Hurt Child, our Survivor keeps us swimming after the ship has foundered on the rocks.

The organic self inevitably guides us towards wholeness. The will of the Survivor leads us to heal our wounds. It is the combination of these two that allows for the reorganization of the belief system. If the Hurt Child, Strategic Child and Assumed Adult can all find support, healing, clarity, and updated options for being in the world, then the self has a chance to return to wholeness. Therapy is one way this can happen, but time and new experiences, organic unfoldment, spiritual intervention, and art, to name only a few, can all lead to transformation.

## MYTHOLOGY

We can view the entire process in mythic terms. Think of the Natural Child as a prince or princess, destined someday, after careful learning, to become king or queen of their country. Instead, the land is besieged by an overwhelming force, the power of the prince or princess questioned. For protection, the young royal is sent away to a safe place to live (Spirit in Exile), and the courtpeople, living in fear and in great sadness (Hurt Child), appoint a clever minister to run things. Able to appease the all-powerfuls, the minister (Strategic Child) keeps the land safe, though never allowing the heir to return for fear of disaster. Without knowing it, the real motivation for all remains the love of the land and the hope for a return to the promised destiny. At the same time, the brave and loyal servants (Survivor) who attended the heir continue to find ways, above board or not, to keep the land whole and to have the prince or princess return from exile.

Just such a scenario is found in *Robin Hood*. With Richard off to war, the land is ruled by the weak and troubled Prince John, who uses the Sheriff of Nottingham to accomplish his self-serving wishes. The poor are taxed mercilessly to appease the Prince's selfish

needs. Robin Hood and Maid Marian, loyal to the King, oppose him and seek to return the land to its natural order. Declared an outlaw, Robin must hide in Sherwood Forest, from which he ventures out to help the poor. Eventually, Richard completes his quest and, renewed in strength and purpose, returns home once again to make whole the land.

Though the model and the myth serve as general outlines, they are obviously oversimplified. Very little of our lives happens in such simple and linear fashion. While some experiences are strictly painful for us, most are actually a mix of impressions. Moment by moment, day after day, year after year we keep moving through life shaping and reshaping our selves with incredible intricacy and nuance. In such a forge the infinite variety of persons is shaped.

Furthermore, all of this shaping happens in very specific developmental contexts. At different stages and ages, the child's capacity and learning tasks change, inspiring different needs and functions of being a person. Thus, to understand how someone organizes, we must ask not only what happened, but when, in what stage, and what abilities and skills did the child already possess. The specific stage of development will determine specific kinds of hurt and/or embodiment, and thus specific strategies for dealing with that hurt or wholeness. A particular event experienced at age 2 will create a vastly different nuance of the self than the same event experienced at 4. It is in the interplay of child development and the self's efforts to maintain its integrity that character, both supportive and limiting, is created. We must merge the maps together if we are truly to understand ourselves.

Finally, we need to be clear about the reality of the inner child. Many of us revere our inner child, longing to regain that purity. Others of us fear it, not wanting to be thrown again into that abyss. And yet, it is a myth. There is no inner child, at least not in adults. What there is is an outdated, enormously powerful misperception of the self. Though we may dive deeply into our core self and feel ourselves to be 3 years old, or 10, it is just an illusion. True, we can argue that experience is reality, and that to feel like a child is to be a child. But this is only another part of the illusion. To be a Whole Adult, we must allow the innocence and vitality that was our birthright to evolve into a mature and principled grown-up. We may keep some of the qualities of childhood, the curiosity and excitement and trust, but we must use these in truly adult ways, or we will not become what we are capable of. Maps such as the one presented above can serve as vehicles to free us from our limits, and to help us regain our birthright of wholeness.