

The Spirit of Rebels and Sweethearts: Reflections on the Work of Emily Ruppert

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Abstract

This article offers an exploration and expansion of Emily Ruppert's (2017) article "Rebels and Sweethearts," which appears in this issue of the *Transactional Analysis Journal*. The author describes some examples from his own personal and professional experiences of this theory in practice. He also explores more fully what Ruppert described as the *Spirit* with a focus on the different challenges that Rebels and Sweethearts face in expressing freedom of the Spirit.

Keywords

Rebel, Sweetheart, Spirit, adaptive styles, defense systems, games, script, belonging, aspiration, freedom

Emily Ruppert was a living example of her own description of the *Spirit*, in her words "the liveliness and healthy exploratory energy of the self" (Ruppert, 2017, p. 187). I do not know whether she would have agreed with the further thoughts I express here about the Spirit, but I am sure that she would have supported my creative impulse in developing this theme and searching for truth.

I was privileged to be a member of a psychotherapy group that Emily led for many years. In addition to teaching us about the deep, rigorous analysis of transactions and relationships, she was, without a doubt, one of those "creative spirits who open the windows to truth and joy" (Ruppert, 2017, p. 193). She taught and inspired us to have the courage to explore and face our own defenses. She helped group members explore, in the moment, the manifestations of our personal games and life scripts in the detailed analysis and experience of our transactions with each other and with her. I also vividly remember her role playing our patterns of defense and game positions so that we could engage in what was usually a robust and emotional dialogue with those parts of our own psyche. Rebels would be encouraged to surrender and Sweethearts to stop hiding and come out into the open.

Emily gave me a copy of "Rebels and Sweethearts" around 20 years ago, and I have taught the material many times. Trainees and supervisees have invariably found the concepts helpful not only in their clinical work but also in their own self-inquiry, and over the years I have continued to find new layers to the ideas both personally and professionally. The paper has acted as one of the many guides in my meditation practice and provided a transactional analysis psychotherapeutic

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perspective on a path of self-inquiry. This path highlights the challenges of the individual in our fears of engulfment and abandonment and our search to find a way home to a true experience of belonging and freedom (Wells, 2012).

In the final paragraph of her article, Emily (Ruppert, 2017) wrote that the “client’s resistance is valuable because it is the best guide to the process that she or he requires for opening up and healing old wounds” (p. 192). In my own self-inquiry, as well as in my work with others, I have come to understand the truth of Emily’s assertion and to see that the layers of defense and resistance are potential openings not only to the old wounds but also to the Spirit. They are also openings to what Berne (1968) described as *physis* (p. 89) and aspiration (Berne, 1972, pp. 128-132). As Clarkson (1992) wrote, “Physis is the all-powerful force for both physical growing and aging and for mental/emotional change, which is characterized as that which gives us life (our spirit, so to speak)” (p. 203.)

Meditation and Self-Inquiry

In the fundamental meditation practice of sitting and simply being with what is, everything is faced and accepted. For example, we might fully accept that our defensive styles are the mechanisms that we have used to get by in life. They began, as Emily taught, as creative solutions to a problem. With the open acceptance of these adaptive styles, we loosen our identification with them and may also begin to inquire into who we truly are: Am I my defense patterns or adaptive styles? If not, what is my true nature, my essence or spirit? We inquire into what we are through knowing what we are not (in Christianity *negation*, in Hinduism *neti neti*).

As Emily (Ruppert, 2017) wrote, the Spirit is “never truly possessed” (p. 187). This resistance not only opens up old wounds but points to what was never wounded and never possessed as exemplified in the film version of *Jane Eyre* (Brenman, Young, & Mellor, 1997). In one of the final scenes, Mr. Rochester tells Jane to look elsewhere because, being blind and disabled, he cannot support her. In response and in expressing her love for who he is, she replies, “You are not your wounds.” This phrase draws a potentially liberating distinction between the person and his or her wounds. Psychological wounds include the stories we tell ourselves about them (script) and the patterns of defense that we create around them.

It is not a problem that we have defensive patterns, but it is that we so often identify with them and, as such, enact them in our lives and relationships. Having identified with the wound and the pattern of defense protecting it, these become the script narrative that, as we know, can inform the vast majority of our transactions, thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and decisions. Adler (1912/1921) called this our “guiding fiction” (p. 27). When we loosen our identification with these patterns, they also potentially become our unique keys to freedom.

Face the Nightmare and Wake Up

The cure for pain is in the pain.
(Rumi as cited in Barks, 2006, p. 404)

As a therapist, Emily modeled courage and persistence. She knew that both Rebels and Sweethearts have their own deep fears to be faced. She knew that the route to freedom is through and not around those fears. Emily also realized that at the heart of our defense systems is our own personal nightmare. This is usually a version of a fear of abandonment or engulfment and usually the terror of a loss: a loss of belonging or a loss of freedom.

The nightmares and associated challenges are different for the Rebel and the Sweetheart. With a deep fear of rejection at the heart of the narrative, the Sweetheart is willing to give up his or her freedom and individuality in order to belong and not risk abandonment by the other, the group, or the

community. As Emily said, such individuals must not show how much they care. The Rebel, on the other hand, is deeply afraid of acknowledging, let alone expressing, his or her vulnerability and needs and will never give up his or her freedom in order to belong.

Emily was acutely aware that our defense systems (or *adaptive styles*, as she called them) are formed at an age when the issue was survival, sanity, or safety. She observed that these defenses were often crystallized around the decision “never again.” Whether we are Rebels or Sweethearts, we have decided that we will never again risk our version of the nightmare.

For example, one of my clients, Mary, had as her version of “never again” her early decision that she was never going to be like her mother, whom she saw as passive, powerless, and depressed, a Sweetheart whose passive conformity seemed to keep her stuck in depression. Mary’s father, although manically depressed and much more of a Rebel, was a better role model. Mary was highly successful, fiercely independent, and generally felt in control. Her crises tended to involve times when she was presented with challenges that she could not control. Mary explored a spiritual path through therapy, yoga, and meditation and found teachings that encouraged letting go and acceptance. Then, within a short space of time, she suffered two heart attacks that were seriously life threatening. In a therapy session after that there was this interchange (M = Mary, T = therapist):

- M: I understand about letting go, and my body is clearly facing me with my powerlessness over life and death, but I just can’t actually surrender to what’s happening.
- T: Maybe your decision to never be like your mother gets in the way. Surrender then for you equals passivity and powerlessness. “Never” means “never.” It’s nonnegotiable.
- M: Yes, it seems to go totally against all I’ve stood for. I can’t control this. I’m faced with being between a rock and a hard place. There’s no way out of this using my old system. I understand all the teachings about acceptance and letting go, but knowing it is not enough. I just can’t face the fear and vulnerability. Turns out I am a great wuss underneath the independent bullshit!
- T: Maybe your “never” meant not ever facing your deepest fear of a sort of giving up, of letting go of your hard-won independence, of merging into the other, of a sort of nonexistence. I imagine the not knowing associated with this is hugely challenging for you.
- M: Yes, it’s excruciating!

Our decisions and defensive patterns are, understandably, limiting; they rule out whole realms of possibilities. We draw a boundary circle around the patterns of thinking, feeling, and behavior we call *ego states*. In Mary’s case, life was encouraging her to leave the security of this boundary for the unknown. The Spirit is not limited and not fixed. As Cornell (2010) wrote in his musings on how Berne might have developed his theories had he lived longer, “Berne was speaking to the liberating forces waiting within the individual’s psyche available to challenge the demands of script and adaptation” (p. 250).

Over the previous few years, Mary had been finding a spiritual practice of welcoming and accepting that was both challenging and liberating. Her defensive adaptations were dissolving, and she was courageously facing up to her personal nightmare. Life (and death) were reminding her of her own powerlessness, and her old defensive system would not work with what was beyond her control. The Rebel’s determination to remain independent was exposed as “bullshit.” How can we ever be truly independent of others and the world of which we are a part? Every time we breathe in we are potentially reminded of our dependence on the world around us.

At that point, the Rebel will need to surrender the lifelong fight and begin to welcome the feared layer beneath. For the Rebel, this is the seemingly passive, vulnerable Sweetheart, the “wuss” that the person was determined never to expose again. But the practice of welcoming includes welcoming this potential exposure because it confronts us with the very thing we fear the most and contains our own unique key to freedom.

Every single thing is seen in the light of this welcoming, appears and disappears within it. As a result, things attain their full significance and harmony reestablishes itself. This welcoming is an alert awareness, uninhabited by the past. It allows whatever presents itself to unfold in and point to the welcoming, without being limited by the ego or deformed by memory. (Klein, 1989, p. 26)

When we fully welcome what life brings us, we can embrace our nightmare, take responsibility for our ways of getting through life, and even celebrate the creativity in our coping styles while ultimately relinquishing the identification with our patterns of behavior, thinking, and feeling. In my experience, this relinquishing opens the door to “the liberating forces” that Cornell (2010) described when writing about Berne’s philosophy.

Waking Up to the Spirit

Paradoxically, fully embracing our wounds and defensive styles reveals to us what was never wounded, never possessed, and never needed defending. We claim full responsibility for our own styles but no longer fully identify with those as who we are. A suit of armor that we have worn for decades may start to feel like our identity, but it is never who we truly are. A script that guided our lives since the earliest unconscious life plans were made may seem real and appears confirmed by the games that we play.

Emily’s work and writing showed a passion for getting through defenses to the Spirit. She paid close attention to the way games and script indicators would play out between group members in the present moment. The repetitious nature of the game confronted us over and over with what was unresolved as it knocked on the door of consciousness. It revealed our own particular nightmare and hidden within it clues about the ending of our unique search for belonging and freedom.

In this way, we can also welcome the game because it shows us the intensity of our original fear and, at the same time, a potential release from it—maybe the most significant advantage of games. The release only comes with a deeper knowing of the lived experience. As I have found, insight is not enough; the deeper knowing usually only comes from revisiting our fears and our personal version of hell. As Gangaji (2012) wrote, “For the purposes of deep inquiry and investigation, it is in the inner realms of hell that we discover the most essential truths” (p. 118).

The Sweetheart’s games and rackets appear to protect against abandonment. Sweetheart individuals need to know and experience that their own unique voice is welcome and that difference is to be celebrated just as it is in the natural world: The daffodil does not need to pretend to be the rose; they both have their roots in the same earth and are fundamentally (as is everything in the universe) made of the same material. It is only the formative experiences of early attachments that lay down in the body and mind a script narrative that sows the seeds of a search for what seems lost. These early attachment patterns and deep fears of abandonment and/or engulfment usually lead to what may be a lifelong attempt to ward off the nightmare, although they also offer an opportunity for the liberating forces of the Spirit to be revealed behind the defense.

I think Emily wanted to convey that hidden in our personal searches and related nightmares are the clues to aspiration and creativity. Paradoxically, we are already what we are looking for and may discover that there is no need to search for what we are. As Sweethearts we already belong, and as Rebels are already free.

You have been fearful of being absorbed
in the ground, or drawn up by the air
Now your waterbead lets go
and drops into the ocean, where it came from
This giving up is not a repenting
It is a deep honoring of yourself.
(Rumi as cited in Barks, 2006, p. 62)

Emily encouraged her clients to, psychologically speaking, put their hands in the fire and face the original fear. Only then could we really know that the fire was an illusion and that the fear of annihilation by engulfment or abandonment was a mirage. The Rebel was then encouraged to join the group and to stop running, and the Sweetheart was encouraged to risk being different and stop hiding.

My personal opportunity to stop hiding is still vividly etched in my memory. I was exquisitely and excruciatingly presented with my own personal hell in a group that Emily led. I had felt compelled to speak about an unconscious process in the group that a new member had pointed out to me. His insight was shocking, as often occurs when we see something familiar in a completely new way. Having begun to see the process in action, I could no longer not see it. Emily's encouragement of emotional honesty and telling the truth was an additional motivating force. In a strange way, I did not feel that I had any choice.

This particular truth took me face-to-face with my own worst nightmare: that I would be excluded from the group/community. Emily had always encouraged me to stop hiding: "Of course you needed to hide that your mother was German and that you were half German in London in the early 1950s, but you don't need to hide from us," she would say. The challenge could not have been more perfect because my new view of the unconscious processes that were operating was inevitably going to challenge the group's dynamics (including Emily), specifically, how we managed inclusion and exclusion (also a major issue in my German history).

As expected, after I shared my observations, several group members were angry at me. In the mostly heated conversation that ensued, Emily said, "I hate the language of group dynamics." My worst fear and potential nightmare had arrived. My "language" had been exposed and was not welcome, I was different, I had suddenly gone from insider to outsider, and I might not belong anymore. In my mind, the group could now banish me with the leader's approval. I had set something in motion that was, as far as I was concerned, now running out of control. The need for control for both Sweetheart and Rebel is a highly significant aspect of maintaining the defense. I would never in those days have thought of myself as controlling, but I can now see that in myself and others, particularly when under threat and when the underlying fear surfaces.

I had absolutely no idea what would happen next. There was no format for this, no rules to fit into. In fact, the group had a tough and honest session as we freely explored what had been exposed. As a Sweetheart, I learned that I did not need to hide to belong, that is, I did not need to continually, chameleon like, find ways of fitting in. I discovered that I could challenge my peers and even the leader with passion, anger, and love. The truth, as Emily would say, was more important than belonging at any cost.

In the group, and elsewhere in life, I subsequently found I rarely needed to be constantly vigilant in order to protect myself from the fear of exposure. I no longer needed the radar that I had used in almost every social situation in order to tune into the rules so I could follow them. I learned that as a Sweetheart, I needed to step out of my comfort zone. Emily (Ruppert, 2017) put it like this: "The Sweetheart at this point needs to express the outrage and may need to allow the hidden Rebel to come forth as a vigilante for justice on his or her own behalf" (p. 191). For me this involved moving out of the safety of adaptation and pleasing others in an attempt to avoid exposing my inner Rebel, which I feared as explosive, dangerous, and unpredictable.

The actions of the inner Rebel usually lead to a huge risk of abandonment by the group, so the Sweetheart relies on adaptation to maintain safety rather than seeking independence. This is illustrated well in the following case example.

A supervisee's client recently left the therapy room and started to disappear down the wrong corridor. As she returned sheepishly past her therapist, she said "You didn't see that!" On exploring this transaction in their next meeting, the client said that she did not want her therapist to think that she was not making progress. They explored her lifelong pattern of allowing herself to be defined by others and her desperation to avoid humiliation, rejection, and being different. But, as Emily (Ruppert, 2017) wrote, "Humility is not the same as humiliation" (p. 191).

The parallel for the supervisee (a trainee) was that he was keen to be a good therapist and do things right. In the supervision group we discussed times when doing the right thing would not necessarily involve following the rules or going along with authority and the majority. The trainee then spoke of the dangers of not following the rules, such as being responsible for a crash on the motorway or allowing the hidden Rebel to break loose. He could see how the therapy with this client could become overly comfortable, with each of them in their roles, a sort of painting by numbers or dancing by following ready-made footprints on the floor. Each of them as Sweethearts would fear the potential explosiveness and unpredictability of their own inner Rebel and thereby deny themselves access to their Spirit. The door to the Spirit is only accessible through facing the fear and the nightmare. For Sweethearts, this is their potential explosiveness and for Rebels their vulnerability.

Not surprisingly, we bring our adaptations to our spiritual path too. My experience in the group and afterward enabled me to open up to the liberating forces that Berne described, free from the need to conform (or rebel). On the spiritual path, Sweethearts tend to be drawn to more formal religions or religious communities. There is a comfort in following the doctrine and security in the hierarchy and knowing who's who. There is a clear path to adhere to and clear guidelines as to how to fit in. There is a flock to belong to and a shepherd to follow. For Sweethearts, fear of abandonment results in a tendency to follow blindly and not risk true freedom or allow themselves (their hearts) to be exposed. The spiritual challenge for Sweethearts is the same as it is on the personal level. True intimacy and the path of the Spirit involve complete openness to the unknown. Roles and defenses dissolve and unravel. The fear of abandonment will surface and needs to be faced. At that point there is nothing to belong to, no rules to follow.

Interestingly, not knowing is a huge challenge for Rebels too because it reveals the shame of vulnerability. As Emily (Ruppert, 2017) wrote, "Not knowing everything in advance" (p. 190) feels shameful to the Rebel. The Rebel is less likely to be drawn to religion or religious communities and tends to have a very different relationship with religion in general. Belonging to a congregation or following a path potentially stimulates fear in the Rebel, a fear of engulfment and the loss of individuality and independence. On a spiritual path, the challenge for the Rebel is to submit to a power greater than himself or herself, which is likely to stimulate memories of early relationships to authority in which trust was lost.

What Do We Mean by the Spirit?

"The liveliness and healthy exploratory energy of the self" is spontaneous but respects and responds "with reverent regard to other living things as well" (Ruppert, 2017, p. 187). Here Emily described the Spirit as an energy. Perhaps because our language is so limited in this area, we use many words in our attempts to describe this energy. Some of these have already been used by Berne, Emily, and others: aspiration (Berne, 1972, pp. 128-132), physis (Berne, 1968, p. 89), joy, truth, freedom, union/belonging, love, peace, stillness, silence, space, and beyond mind/ego. We might start by acknowledging the limitations of our language. To talk about the Spirit is to talk about something beyond language and not a thing.

Because the Spirit is beyond mind and the personal, it can only be glimpsed, and, as Emily (Ruppert, 2017) wrote, "caught in the flash of an eye" (p. 187). It cannot be known because it is the knower, not witnessed because it is the witness. Perhaps the Spirit is only revealed in those alchemical moments when humiliation dissolves into humility, when the primal fear is faced and the defense allowed to break down, when the nightmare is looked full in the face and seen to be a dream, when the mask of script and defended self is set down. In other words, it is only through a deep examination of who we have taken ourselves to be and a relinquishing of this false self that the windows to the Spirit are opened.

Adaptive styles and defense systems are simply masks and roles that obscure the Spirit. These styles are reactive and as such can never be free. As Emily pointed out to her client, you can win

many minor battles this way but ultimately lose the war. Like Sisyphus, we can roll the boulder up the hill countless times but remain in our personal hell.

Emily (Ruppert, 2017) talked about the creative freedom of the Spirit but also the need for a “reverent regard . . . [for] other living things” (p. 187). In my view, she was perhaps referring to how the word *freedom* is so often misused and misunderstood in Western cultures. We are not free to shout “Fire!” in a crowded theater (as Oliver Wendell Holmes said in 1919) or to write what we like in our “free” press, regardless of others. Doing so would lead to ignoring the reverent regard that Emily described. That is freedom without responsibility.

Freedom threatens to degenerate into mere arbitrariness
unless it is lived in terms of responsibility.
I like to say that the Statue of Liberty on the East Coast
should be supplemented by a Statue of Responsibility on the West Coast.
(Frankl, 1970, p. 49)

The concept of individual freedom assumes a separateness and independence from the world around us. This notion perpetuates the idea for Rebels that they do not need others. Getting away from and trying to stay separate from are futile attempts to be free of imagined confinement. Rebels need to know that their essential freedom cannot be engulfed or obliterated. Nelson Mandela (1994) did not need to escape from Robben Island to be free; his Spirit could not be incarcerated or possessed and neither can ours.

Caught in Illusion

Returning to Adler’s concept of the guiding fiction of our script narrative, we might also say that both Rebels and Sweethearts are caught in their own illusions. The belonging that the Sweetheart seeks in this way is not a true belonging nor is the freedom that the Rebel so fiercely protects a real freedom. “Each primary adaptation limits the freedom to have a life that is not dominated by the ghosts of the past” (Ruppert, 2017, p. 188).

Emily taught that we are, potentially, haunted and possessed by these ghosts but also, most importantly, that the Spirit cannot be possessed. So when we truly look our ghosts in the eye and feel the full intensity of that possession, we also, paradoxically, know the freedom that cannot be possessed. If our mouths were made of salt, we could not know the taste of salt.

One of Emily’s legacies was to support people’s courage in facing and embracing their layers of defense. We often fear that the layer beneath our primary defense is really our true self. Only by going through the layers do we realize the illusion of that mirage and that our true self lies beyond both layers in the being that existed prior to all the conditioning.

In my experience, abandonment/engulfment fears are massive obstructions to what is eventually needed on the spiritual path. For example, a fear of engulfment means that surrendering to a greater power is the Rebel’s worst nightmare, what Emily called the need to surrender. The desire to never again be forced to “give up the fight” is a powerful block to letting go. For the Rebel, surrender is the worst nightmare, so surrendering to God or a greater power involves a void that is unthinkable. As the poet Rilke wrote:

When we win it is with small things,
And the triumph makes us small.
What is extraordinary and eternal
Does not want to be bent by us.
(Rilke, 1907/1981, p. 105)

Perhaps as therapists we can welcome disillusionment and inquire into what is left when the illusion falls away. Who or what was there before the adaptations and the conditioning? What was there before the story of us? The problem is not that we have conditioning but that we identify with it and thereby ignore the source of our being and life.

Into the Stillness: Beyond Fear and Adaptation

In her article, Emily's (Ruppert, 2017) focus was on those aspects of the Spirit that are dynamic and creative. Her emphasis as a therapist was on those features as the personal characteristics of the individual, although, in my experience, her work in groups engendered a sense of community and of something greater than the individual members. Mystics over the centuries have pointed to what lies beyond the individual, that is, to the universal as expressed, for example, in the Taoist writings of Wu Hsin from nearly 2,500 years ago: "Identification with the personal localizes. It is a contraction, a smallness. When this is dropped, one expands to encompass the entire cosmos" (as cited in Melvyn, 2011, Kindle location 3460).

The decision "never again" leaves both Rebels and Sweethearts in a mode of defense and fear that requires almost constant vigilance (certainly in relationships) and thus creates tension and a sense of separateness from each other and from the universal. Psychotherapy, mindfulness, and meditation potentially offer a contemplative space in which our fears and tensions can be observed and shared and thereby naturally dissolved. Dissolving the tension and anxious vigilance on the individual level reveals a fundamental universal peacefulness and stillness that is our constant background and source of being.

At the source of the longest river
The voice of the hidden waterfall
And the children in the apple tree
Not known, because not looked for
But heard, half heard in the stillness
Between two waves of the sea
Quick now, here, always—
A condition of complete simplicity
(Costing not less than everything).
(Eliot, 1936/1963, p. 223)

I asked a colleague, a young Chinese Buddhist nun named Jin Ho, how she saw her work teaching meditation to psychiatric patients on an acute psychiatric ward. She said simply, "I sit in my stillness and invite people into theirs." To sit in our stillness as therapists requires that we have faced our deepest fears, our personal version of hell, so that we know the intimate detail of our defense patterns and can thus be present without fear or expectation. This is a sort of absent presence, an absence of the personal. This means being someone who already knows that he or she belongs and is free, with nothing left to defend or search for. The old patterns and adaptive styles remain but are now like distant echoes of a battle once fought.

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