

An Interview with Sonya Dyer

by Jane Engle

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Exactly.

Good. I was born in Wichita, Kansas and grew up with a sense of being loved, particularly from my mother, who was a very affectionate, demonstrative person. My father was less so when we were kids. He became more of that later. My sister, who is three years younger, and I enjoyed a closeness when we were young kids, playing together and sharing family life in many ways.

For the first five years of my life, I had an illness that caused me to become unconscious for a few minutes at a time. This would happen once or twice a week. The doctor said that it might have had something to do with my delivery with forceps. He felt it could be treated with a carefully managed diet of measuring and weighing food and not eating sugar. This required a lot of my mother, but I never remember my mother communicating, poor me, I have to care for you in this way. She simply took it on. Food was a place where she gave expression to her caring. And I felt this. It was a part of that sense of being loved in those earliest years.

I was also greatly loved by my mother's mother who lived about 70 miles away. One of my struggles was that I was her favorite and felt the tension of that in the family. But she always saw all the best things in me. She also was a very spiritual person. She taught Sunday School her whole life, read Scripture every morning at the breakfast table. I have this strong remembrance of that as part of life. Grandmother was also completely deaf which meant she read lips. There was something about having to deal with that limitation in her that I was very good at. My lips always seemed to be easily read or my physical expressions understood. Whatever it was, we communicated readily with each other. We spent quite a bit of time together. And even though the family system would now be called somewhat unhealthy, and my Grandmother was a very

determined, in charge kind of person, now I might say controlling and manipulative, what I received feels like it enhanced me.

From my father's parents in Delaware, there was also a feeling of acceptance. Though there wasn't a high value put on physical, demonstrative affection, there was a strong spiritual thread. My Grandfather was a minister in the Church of the Brethren. These were a simple people living a direct prayer life. When I was around twelve, my Grandfather became ill, and I remember that we made a special trip to Delaware so that he could baptize me.

So in my early family life, there was a lot of love and acceptance. I don't have feelings of rejection or of not being OK. I don't mean that there weren't things I did that perhaps my parents didn't approve of, but as far as my person is concerned, I felt affirmed.

My father was committed to education and to people being who they are and to living out their life with vigor. As an educator, he was always pushing the edge. My mother was probably a lot more concerned with security and stability. Although she too had been a teacher and a basketball coach as a young person, once she moved into marriage, she wanted a secure, solid home life. I think I have these two pieces in me – the part that is settled and the part that pushes the edge.

I can remember that my parents did a pretty good job of accepting each other's differences although there was tension, as there is in any marriage, about my father's not being

around as much as my mother wished. I don't see this as unique because I think this is part of living with another person.

Beginning with high school and into college, I very often had leadership roles – student council, in sports, or teaming up with somebody and doing something different.

Did your mother model that for you?

I don't think so. That was not much her style. My mother modeled how to be in caring with people, drawing people in. At times she probably did that to her own detriment and paid physically and emotionally for being so much of a mediator, internalizing some of the tension, particularly in the family. I was aware of not wanting to go as far as she went in order to protect myself. I wanted to set more limits.

In high school and college, I wasn't one of the "popular" girls, but I usually had a leadership role, did well in school, and had many friends. So I carried that affirmation, self-confidence. In college I was a part of groups attempting to build community. That involved conflict with the dean and the rules. These experiences shaped the ways I have confronted things I disagreed with, the style of advocacy and challenge, which I have.

Your style is really not confrontational.

I think that has come with age. College opened up for me the

fact that being an open, easy person isn't always the only way to be. Sometimes you have to take a stand or question things. In discussions with friends on political subjects, we used to get so intense with each other. That piece is in me and frankly has served me well as it has given me energy toward things. Over time I've found ways to continue having the energy but to give it expression in more useful, less visceral and ego-focused ways.

My style is also experiential. I engage experience, think through how I want this to be or not to be in the future and then have intuited which people I could link with to bring that about. Mine has been an evolutionary, not a goal setting style, allowing things to develop in an organic way.

And the empowering you do with others comes from the way your parents empowered you when you were sick and did not make you feel less than. And that's how you help other people.

Yes, and the empowerment has not come just from my parents but from people I've worked with. Part of empowering people is to include everyone. That definitely came from my family in the beginning. My father was very much of that nature. Working for UNESCO in Paris early after World War II, he would bring home colleagues for dinner. And the Church of the Brethren has an inclusive stance.

I have also had experiences where I have felt bondage and then have found ways to move into freedom. For example, I intuited that the Presbyterian Church when we were in it was not full enough for me. That caused our move to the Church of the

Saviour which was much more challenging. Or I sensed that lay ministry was not all it could be and that led to my work with Jackie in Working From the Heart. We believed that Catholic/Protestant ecumenism could be something more so we helped develop the Ecumenical Dialogue Group Experience. I really trusted that if I were willing to step into a situation that needed change, there was a way to make it better. Freedom and bondage is a good contrast and a life theme.

And that's what makes you so fun loving?

Part of it is being an extrovert because you're out there. Also there is a part of me that really enjoys pleasure. The ways I've experienced pleasure have been related to fun. Whether it's been sports or friendship, it's something about energy. Some of it is sensual energy. I like the visual, touching, and I have a lot of sexual energy which is part of my relationships with people. Whether we would name it or not, it is present. And on the whole, I've been able to keep that reasonably well managed. That, too, is a kind of freedom.

I do have a good sense of humor, but I know it has two edges to it. Sometimes I haven't been as careful about managing that in a way that is not destructive to other people – unbalancing the person or the situation. It's a hard thing to use well. My humor can be very much appreciated and spark people but I know with persons more introverted, it doesn't always roll off the top. It goes somewhere else. So that is something to be aware of.

Claiming time for daily renewal contributes to the fun-loving

spirit. I've known that it's important for me to have some form of quiet time every day. When the kids were little that meant that for an hour every afternoon, they were in their rooms while I was in mine reading or napping but not working. They didn't necessarily need a nap, but they had to be separate from me in a contained way, not just roaming the house. It was a matter of saying I need this kind of time alone. And to this day, the first thing in the morning I go into the office or my room and spend time. It's different every day. This kind of time alone nourishes me but it is necessary to claim it.

When the kids were really babies and I thought I would never be rested again, I finally realized this would not last forever. That's something I've been able to grab hold of through the years – the majority of things have a duration. But that also is a hard part of getting older because a lot of the things that begin to happen to you physically really are going to last. That is one of the big milestones that doesn't feel all that attractive.

I haven't talked about my relationship with Manning. We have had many years to build our relationship since we first became attracted to each other in high school. Attending separate colleges, we kept in close touch but also checked out what other people were like. Manning was so much more introverted than I was – and more so then than he is now, but not the person people thought I might be attracted to. So one of the thoughts I've had about our attraction beyond sexual things and both being good people is that we have given each other a place to engage the intensity of my particular style of personality. Also it has required of me a level of understanding and acceptance that might not have happened if I had married someone else. Also Manning has been very accepting

of me and has fostered me to be about the things I wanted to be about from the earliest times.

In our early marriage I tried to fit into what I thought was his family's pattern of work and marriage. Once I realized this was not a pattern that was mine, I feel that Manning really engaged with me and that we worked with that well. Manning worked with his father and was always dealing with differences in that situation. We had to work with that in our relationship and with the kids. The way Manning and I dealt with our kids was quite different and we had a lot of work to do together. We ended up pretty solid on that, but it was a period of more conflict than other times. Being in these situations gave me a lot of understanding of other people and helped me see that even though you are good solid people and love your kids, there will be differences to handle. This also helped me in some of the pastoring dimensions of my work life and with the Working From the Heart people.

You are also so good at conflict resolution.

That relates to the two parts of me that I described earlier. Part of me is the confronter-here I stand person. Another part is the one who believes there is a way to work things out – a third way. When I'm trying to resolve something, I ask what is the third way? What does it look like? I'm not an either/or person. I feel life is a mix. It's easy to get stuck on it being this or that rather than the mix I think it is. To have a stance that life is a mix has been helpful – it keeps me centered at times. I feel like my experience of life and approach to life has been basically very good. I mean I haven't had a lot of suffering. Of course, there have been times of that, but I haven't been a victim. And these times

have not been a primary theme because of circumstances, genetics, and how I've engaged life. If we had moved a lot or Manning had been gone too much, it could have been different. But we have lived in the same place in the same house for many years. This has given me a very stable center, and I've always felt the dependability of Manning's solidity. However, I also am a person who likes change and newness so I've had to create my frontiers, the areas where I want to be on the edge.

To wrap up, I think Manning and I have always had a lot of affection for one another and a level of demonstrativeness that has fit well with each other. We've received and given in what we both wanted and needed. That makes for not only security but also a warmth of person and an accessibility. Also I think it has to do with sexual energy. This is a comfortable thing between us and he has always been a person to affirm me in offering that warmth beyond our relationship. That is another thing that has fostered some of what we've been talking about.