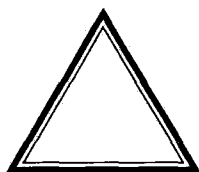


JEALOUSY • HILDEGARD BAUMGART

JEALOUSY

EXPERIENCES AND SOLUTIONS



HILDEGARD BAUMGART

Translated by
Manfred and Evelyn Jacobson

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This book is dedicated to two people
who were often in my thoughts.

As a jealous person, I suffer fourfold: because I am jealous, because I reproach myself for my jealousy, because I fear that my jealousy is hurting the other, because I allow myself to be enslaved by a banality: I suffer from being excluded, from being aggressive, from being crazy, and from being common.

—Roland Barthes
Fragments d'un discours amoureux

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And finally, the important last part of this book could not have been written without the willingness of about forty former clients to participate in follow-up sessions. Almost all of them unhesitatingly agreed to undergo the strain involved in confronting old pains. I have learned much from them and hope to be able to transmit to my readers some of what I have learned.

March 1985

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INTRODUCTION: MY CASES AND MY OWN CASE

Therapists who work with couples often have to deal with jealousy—this seems self-evident. But when my colleagues and I tried to locate past cases that would substantiate this statement, we had to think long and hard, leaf through old files, and search our memories to come up with something. It seems, therefore, that jealousy is not as prevalent a central theme in marriage counseling as is usually assumed, especially by those suffering from jealousy themselves. Counselors also seem to view it as an integral part of a larger context, rather than as an isolated phenomenon. My book, however, will deal primarily with this emotion, about which we cannot assert even that it is only an emotion. Yet this project could not have succeeded without such simplifications, even though I occasionally found them troublesome.

The experiences treated in this book, as the discussions with colleagues alluded to above suggest, could not simply have been culled from the everyday experiences of a counseling center. Rather they have, to a large extent, derived from my own preoccupation with the theme. Thus most of the catamnyses (follow-up sessions with former clients) that I could use came about because of my own efforts; that is, a relatively large number of people have been in touch with me in the last few years, after I appeared on radio shows and wrote an article for a newspaper, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. Strangely enough, an exceptionally large number of conflicts involving jealousy have “coincidentally” wound up as part of my caseload in the four years since I started work on the book. This is in spite of the fact that appointments in our center are made by the secretaries in such a way that there is almost no possibility of assigning patients according to the nature of their problems, before the first direct contact between counselor and client. No one, except my closest friends and colleagues, knew anything about my project. Therefore, no new clients could have had recourse to special information (for example, that people in Neuperlach are especially preoccupied with jealousy).

When I think about what led me to work more intensely with this fascinating topic, a combination of personal and professional reasons comes to mind. I was working with a certain couple, in whom I rediscovered many of the things that had pained and pleased me in a past “triadic” relationship of my own. I also noticed that there were some elements of my own jealousy, dating back several decades, that I had still not understood and therefore not yet worked through. This kind of overlapping of one’s own with another’s experiences, which occurs frequently, poses for the therapist the danger of a lack of demarcation. It is very easy to abuse the power that is all too readily ceded to the facilitator in a crisis. One kind of abuse is for the counselor to have the clients try something that he could not or did not dare try. Acting in this way, the counselor, consciously or unconsciously, becomes the director of a production that holds an element of suspense primarily for the counselor. The clients do not experience their own catharsis in this production, but rather the one that the counselor wishes them to experience. The counselor’s proper task, however (as I see it, in any case), is to promote the vivacity of the clients, while working with them to eliminate torpidity. This will allow them to learn to move again, but dancing to their own tune and not a counselor’s. It is inconceivable that one’s efforts will be successful if one does not recognize one’s own torpidity and try to transform it into new mobility.

But instead, one often falls into a trap that is a variant of the repetition compulsion that characterizes all psychological disturbances. Even the counselor described above, in trying out the transference game, is hardly likely to escape from the prison of his own unactualized possibilities. At best, he will only see the vivid reflection of what could have happened in his own life, in all probability as an ephemeral play and not as a genuine solution to a problem that is not his own, in spite of all similarities.

I did not want to treat my jealousy, and that of my clients, in this way. Rather, I preferred to see and sense more clearly through reflection, remembrance, and thoughtful anticipation: I am here, and the people over there are the clients.

It would now seem appropriate for me to recount my own experiences, their pre- and post-history, and the course of the related treatment. In attempting this, however, I come up against an insurmountable obstacle that implicitly stands in the way of a book about jealousy: the question of discretion, which is more difficult to deal with in presenting cases of jealousy than in other cases. It has become relatively easy nowadays to write about depressions, phobias, compulsions, and even schizophrenia: some clients readily give their permission, some even think it interesting or useful, to have their story published somewhere. Even in our allegedly liberal age, writing about triangular relationships, betrayal, real or imagined infidelity, even reconciliation and self-control, is still problematic if the participants are rec-

ognizable. My own story is not only my own, but also that of several others. Therefore, I do not think I have the right to recount their experiences and emotions, since they would be seen primarily from my point of view. Without case histories, however, a book about jealousy is inconceivable. I was, therefore, compelled to modify my own experiences as well as my case histories, so that the individuals involved could not be identified. This will probably lead some clients to think they recognize themselves in these case histories, when they actually have nothing to do with them. As much as I would regret this, it would also be gratifying, because my purpose is to delineate that which recurs frequently, rather than to concentrate on isolated instances. Consequently, one of my goals would be achieved if as many people as possible were to see themselves in these examples. Moreover, I omitted some actual details that, had they been included, would have struck the reader as being badly conceived inventions. Jealous individuals often have notions that no dramatist or novelist could afford to use.

To circumvent the problem of maintaining anonymity, it occurred to me to use literary examples, as well as to modify the external circumstances as is common in psychological reports. In this regard, jealousy has a distinct advantage over other themes because no relational conflict has occupied writers, storytellers, and the amazed audience as consistently as the eternal triangle. Writers usually follow plot lines to their conclusion, while in real life these lines often become blurred. Stories, therefore, because they are only “fiction,” are not worse but often better for our purposes than authentic, contemporary cases. *The Kreutzer Sonata* by Tolstoy (the Russian count whom Lenin characterized as the only peasant in Russian literature) illustrates this beautifully. In this novella, Tolstoy wove all that he suffered on account of the decadent bourgeois/aristocratic culture of the nineteenth century, and all his yearning for a true love, which even the people could no longer exemplify for him, into a powerful metaphor of jealous passion. The result was so obstinate, so one-sided, so incisive, and so true in its exaggeration, as reality, even Tolstoy’s own, never could be.

Another source of “harmless” material to which I often had recourse is case histories previously published by physicians, counselors, analysts, and family therapists. However, it seems to me that the innumerable reports in the daily press of murders, injuries, arson, accidents, suicides—personal dramas associated with jealousy—are hardly useful. Except for their purely anecdotal content, they contain no information, and one can only speculate about the nature and significance of the backgrounds. The little that one does learn about the life histories, the social and family environment of the jealous individuals involved, actually tends conspicuously to support the hypotheses of those researching jealousy. Since I had, however, already suffered from not being able to give more detailed information about my own cases because

of the aforementioned reasons, I did not, on top of that, want to document my theme with contexts that could not be tested to determine whether they existed only in my imagination.

In what follows, I will outline some of the questions I often confronted, using actual counseling sessions as a point of departure. It should be mentioned parenthetically that additional problems emerged as a consequence of deeper immersion in the topic. Many of these seemed to me difficult to solve or could only be solved in certain single instances. The connection to my self and my own history will be established here without indefensible indiscretions.

A couple, referred by a colleague, is waiting for me in the waiting room of the center. The colleague had time only for an intake interview and considered the convergence of the woman's jealousy and suicidal fantasies too dangerous to put the clients on his waiting list. He had seen only the woman, who was "sent by her husband." While arranging an appointment by telephone, I try to make clear the necessity of an interview with both of them. The wife does not think her husband would accompany her; he would not want to talk. I insist, but leave open the possibility that the wife could come to the appointment by herself. I would hold the hour open for the couple, even if he did not wish to accompany her.

I do not know what to expect, which is usual in such cases. The fear of painful confrontation often leads the partner making the appointment to project his or her own inclination to reject joint counseling onto the other person. But since I myself am convinced that it is very advantageous for them to come together and not individually, especially for the first session, I seem to be very persuasive. To my delight, they do arrive together.

I already know things about the couple that please me: I like the husband's occupation—he is a cabinetmaker and takes evening courses in art history. My colleague tells me that the wife seems to waver between feeling that her children are still completely dependent on her, and not wanting to lose contact with her profession as a physical therapist. Both spouses are in their early thirties. The three children are still small, and the spacing between them is similar to that of my own. I always have the feeling that it is more difficult to raise children today than it was during my time. On the other hand, I refuse to be convinced when someone says of the third, or fourth, or whatever, child, "It was just an accident" (in the age of the pill, IUDs, and the ready availability of abortion!). I assume at the outset that couples with several children, to put it in general terms, are fulfilling a need for more life. I have reserves of sympathy for such families because, for me, the time spent with my small children was a very beautiful experience, if not always easy, and I still somewhat regret its passing.

It is naturally a warning sign that the wife is thinking of killing herself, but this doesn't automatically alarm me. I have often found that such desires to stop living only mean that there is *something* that should finally stop. What is necessary is to discover what should "stop." I know from experience how far one can distance oneself from suicidal fantasies. I am also firmly convinced that basically no one, really no one, actually wants to destroy life. To be sure, it seems to me almost strange when people maintain they have never thought of suicide. I find that unbelievable, or perhaps a sign of a lack of imagination, simply because it is so easy to do (and because in West Germany there are annually about as many suicides as traffic fatalities).

Naturally, it does not seem at all surprising to me that the husband could have a love relationship outside marriage—my colleague wasn't certain whether the relationship existed only in the wife's imagination. But it was also not a cause for alarm. The reality of multiple partners, divorces, and the pressure to perform sexually is just as incalculable for a marriage counselor as the less spectacular, but still frequently experienced, reality of fidelity, which unfortunately is just not that common in happy marriages. Several times during our marriage, my husband and I have fallen deeply in love with others, but we get along well and enjoy living together, before as well as after these experiences. Therefore, the fear of being alone, of divorce and its irrevocable effects on the children, and so forth, is not automatically for me a necessary concomitant of such an experience. Obviously there is pain, however.

To return to my clients: as they walk ahead of me down the long corridor to my office, I have the feeling that they are well matched. I believe that it bodes well for the treatment of jealousy if the partners can agree to come together. This decision shows that they are still talking to each other, perhaps still want to live together, and that probably there are not too many secrets between them. These two even tell their story together, taking turns—entirely contrary to the expectations that the wife had communicated over the telephone. It has occurred to the wife that her husband's sexual behavior is now different. In what way "different?" Just different. She goes on: sometimes more distanced, sometimes more passionate than before; once he even cried during the night. At this, the wife became uneasy—he had never acted that way before. She tried to talk to him, but he became more and more withdrawn. In our three-way conversation, he also gives the impression of being more reserved than she, more formal, worried. She, on the other hand, is lively, articulate, and gestures gracefully while speaking.

And the story continued in this way: her questioning became a kind of obsession, she could no longer stop. Just tell me what's the matter—I can

tell something is wrong—is it another woman? “But at first that wasn’t even it,” the client says, “I was such a fool! You can’t imagine how long it took me just to suspect! My husband and I—we were such a team . . .” Did the husband also look at his marriage in this way? Actually yes, he says, until now; when they met, he also knew right away: “That’s the one for me!” And even though she was sexually very attractive to him, he respected her sensitivity (one of the reasons for which was a near-rape by a friend of her divorced mother) and waited several months before attempting to kiss her. This made her think highly of him—she was finally desired as a person and “not only for her body”—and it was exactly his patience and reserve that won her heart, and that now “make her blood boil.”

He, for his part, was fascinated by her warmth, liveliness, and vivacity. He had grown up in the shadow of the chronic illness of a cool and disciplined mother, whose husband had deserted her just because of this illness. She forced her son prematurely to play the role of an understanding, sympathetic, “head of household,” responsible for organizing the externals of their life. His mother had died while he was still an apprentice. She had suffered greatly because she could only afford to have her son trained as an artisan, instead of being able to provide him with a university education.

The husband felt that the first ten years of the marriage had been very happy. Finally warmth, finally life—the three children!—finally a woman who, after getting something from him, gave him something in return. “We didn’t need to talk much, we knew everything about each other.” And now this change . . .

The wife, because of her strict moral upbringing, was accustomed to blame herself first when trying to determine who was responsible for unpleasant changes. Therefore, she wanted her husband to tell her what she should do differently. His response was, Nothing—no, really nothing—I don’t know—for once just leave me be! When it occurred to her that another woman could be responsible, he denied it so vehemently, that once again she could not do anything but think, “I’m crazy.” But then she once unexpectedly picked him up from an art history class that he attends because of his interest in antiques and their restoration. She came upon him in animated conversation with a young woman. “I knew right away—that’s her!” She ran away without her husband’s having seen her, got in the car, desperately drove out into the night, naturally driving too fast—and only broke out in tears after she stopped, with the brakes screeching, right in front of the bridge abutment into which she had wanted to crash. What had stopped her? “I don’t know—I only thought of the children later . . .” Meanwhile, the husband had already called the police. When she

finally arrived home exhausted, he bellowed at her, shook her; her upper arms are bruised because he grabs her so desperately—and then they make love and both say, with some embarrassment, that it was especially good.

Has this dangerously conflicted situation made them realize how much they belong together? Yes, naturally, says the husband. The wife hesitates. She says that, in some way, she felt loved by her husband, for the first time, “only for her body.” When they made love on that occasion, he had talked to her just as he had talked to “the girl,” but the most tenderness he demonstrated was occasionally to kiss her eyelid. But if I have understood you correctly, you still enjoyed sleeping with him on this horrifying night? Yes, says the wife, that’s right; and this is what really confuses her now.

At this point, I myself feel anxious and uncertain. Successful sexuality in such an extreme situation is no measure of the dependability of the relationship at issue. Even the sexuality of so-called normal people too often involves elements of risk, danger, even enmity, not only of love, tenderness, and happy regression. Indeed, the experience demonstrates the ability of both partners to risk letting go. Jealousy does not always lead to denial on the part of the jealous individual, but rather sometimes leads directly to excesses of devotion. My main uncertainty does not consist primarily in not knowing how the two relate to each other, but rather very specifically in the question, Was the wife correct in her intuition? Or did she unconsciously use “the girl” to represent, in crystalline form as it were, all the elements of the disturbed relationship: if she were not there, would everything be fine again? Jealous individuals *always* sense something that is really there, but they often exaggerate its importance. I am also concerned that the wife could develop an obsession with this projection, which would then probably be difficult to dissipate.

But the husband says quietly, “The girl means a lot to me—my wife has again understood me correctly.” The wife breaks into desperate tears. For fourteen days—since she has known about “it”—she has been pushing, literally day and night, to find out what “really” is going on between her husband and the young woman from the art history class. He says, It’s nothing sexual. Then what? Just talk, About what—probably about him and the girl? . . . Yes, about that, says the husband, but not only that. Then about what? He can’t exactly say. There must be something sexual between them? No . . . and so forth. Or another litany: she’s done so much for him; at the altar he promised to remain true to her. He says, “I’m not unfaithful.” How can he maintain this? Because he wants to stay with her . . . Or another approach: Is it her fault? In what way was he dissatisfied? Not at all, nowhere, he says, not even in bed. It just happened . . . And why did he always claim that there was no other woman involved? Because her persistent questioning was getting on his

nerves. And because nothing sexual was involved. Is it now against the law to like other people?

What is my stance to be, vis-à-vis two such partners? After they have made so much progress in telling the story and attaining some insight, I deeply share their sense of being bogged down, their sense of the apparent hopelessness of the situation. At first, I was on the wife's side—I could understand her despair very well, also her going to pieces, her not wanting to believe, her deep anger at such a completely unexpected injury; it is, however, difficult for me to categorize the "guilt" of her husband in the same way as she does. Had the wife, as often happens in counseling, asked, "Would you have felt different in my place?" I would certainly have felt the need to be completely honest, completely "myself," and to reply in this manner: Probably today I would feel somewhat different but at times in the past I would have felt the same. Today I can tolerate seeing or only knowing that my husband is intensely preoccupied with other women. I can even tolerate his saying that they are important to him, without too much anxiety and often even with understanding and approval. There is a great danger, therefore, that I will pose as the model and standard for the couple. There is the consequent danger that I will find myself in a situation in which these questions will arise: whether this or that is right or wrong; or how I would have done some particular thing; or whether it is in any case desirable to do such a thing; or, perhaps, how I would feel if it were really true that sexuality . . . and whatever other personal questions of this sort may arise. Therefore, in order to avoid such a deviation from the therapeutic norm which, at least as far as "the world out there" is concerned, is supposed to be oriented towards the clients, the only possible answer for me would be, "I don't know how I would act in your situation—it is after all *yours*, and I would like to understand it; and I hope that I can do that."

I could also understand that, after something like this has happened, a wife at least wants to talk about it. At first I thought that the husband was too unwilling, if not even obdurate, vis-à-vis his wife. When it became obvious that he had submitted to his wife's persistent interrogation for two weeks, rarely losing his patience, I could hardly figure him out. At the same time, she was constantly "freaked out": she was screaming, breaking dishes, always on the telephone with girlfriends, and told the children that Daddy no longer loved Mommy. Does he have such a bad conscience that he believes he has to put up with this? Had he perhaps lied about not sleeping with his girlfriend? Suicide attempts are understandably very frightening—maybe the husband wants to spare his wife by not burdening her with the whole truth? Even I feel it would be wrong to continue digging for the facts. For one thing, I tend to believe the husband;

for another, the strain experienced by the clients simply in talking about the situation is already as much as they can bear. Were I to continue prodding, I would also inevitably wind up in a position parallel to the wife's, that is, I would be allying myself with her and attempting to force her husband into the role of sinner.

What role should I play in this stalemated situation? I feel as if each of them has grabbed me by a hand and is trying to pull me towards them. This can lead to nothing but immobility—not a good feeling, but one that is common in marriage counseling. I realize that there is something I would like to know, and this helps me let go of the symbolical hands and step back from the couple: Was the marriage that the two of them have been talking about really as happy as they have described it to me and to each other? I take a relatively daring leap. First I ask the wife if she can remember what it is like to be in love; then whether, perhaps, she had not found another man attractive or even important during her marriage. I don't think this is an unreasonable question, because I had already established the extent to which I am able to empathize with her suffering. I also want to see if she can cope with such a question. If either member of the couple is too sensitive and can't "share" the counselor with the spouse; if the jealousy, in this instance the wife's, is also directed at the "other woman" who is present (namely me); then the prospects for joint counseling are not very good. Perhaps then we would have to examine and work more closely on fear and mistrust in individual sessions.

As a consequence of my question, however, the scene changes completely. The wife's tears dry up with astonishing speed; the husband sits up; they look at each other for a while without speaking. Then the husband says, quietly but somewhat pointedly, "You'd better answer that yourself." The wife responds that it isn't as important as all that, and besides, there's a big difference between her flirting and his serious relationship. "And when you sit on other men's laps and even neck with them in front of me?" That was during the carnival season, she says—he says that, as far as he can remember, it was during the summer! She responds, well yes, but there was a carnival-like atmosphere. The husband retorts, that's no excuse for embarrassing him in front of the whole world. The wife's answer does not sound very logical, "My God, I always have to worry about other people! The kids all day long, and then you in the evening."

At this point, I would like to digress in order to fill in some background information. The husband had never flirted, and the couple's fun-loving friends sometimes teased him because of this. It is news to the wife that her participation in this teasing hurt him deeply. Why didn't he ever say anything? It wouldn't have done any good, he says, she would just have