

The Chamberlain Magic Show: A Psychological Review of the New Book, *Shattered Love*

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Shattered Love is not about homosexuality or being gay. Neither is it about psychological abuse. Of course, these elements are all part of the Richard Chamberlain story. Rather, this memoir is about a lonely, shy little boy and his failed journey to full manhood. It is about his legitimate needs for masculine intimacy and his distorted attempts to meet those needs.

This book provided a rich source of clinical data about Chamberlain, whose deeply moving struggle for affection, approval and attention seems to be part of an endless journey. The memoir shows us a child who did not fit in a family and was emotionally mismatched to a psychologically abusive father --- a father whose "lethal sneer" made his temperamentally sensitive son feel as if he was being "slashed with a machete."

All of this is clearly recalled by Chamberlain—but with a startling lack of insight. Throughout, he makes no connection between his early gender-identity struggles and his later homosexual attractions.

A Classic Story

Chamberlain's story is not unique. Rather, it is one that is shared by many homosexual men. We see the classic characteristics of the young boy who later self-identifies as homosexual: a temperamental sensitivity, preoccupation with being different, and a compensatory drive towards perfectionism.

Together, these traits set the stage for "The Chamberlain Magic Show," which is a description employed by Chamberlain himself to describe the facade behind which he long hid. This façade—the false self which was required and nurtured by an abusive father—causes confusion in the young boy as he strives to develop a sense of gender and identity.

In this book, we see the classic triadic relationship so common in the histories of homosexual men: a father who is an unappealing identification model to the boy, the poor relationship between mother and father, the frustration and unhappiness of the mother, and the consequent over-identification of the young son with her.

Chaotic Family Relationships, Gender Disturbance

Although there is insufficient information to make an explicit GID (Gender Identity Disorder) diagnosis for Chamberlain in his childhood years, there remains clear evidence of a gender disturbance. Consider the following memory of a shame experience (common in the developmental histories of homosexual men) that he recites:

"...I found a worn pair of toe shoes and a tattered tutu... Imagine the glacial disapproval I received when I ran home, donned tutu and toe shoes, and delightedly danced Swan Lake all over the house. Dad, completely nonplussed, brandished his most lethal sneer. Mom seemed stricken and delivered a freezing version of that 'look that kills.' And Bill [Chamberlain's older brother] just turned away in disgust.

"Their learned beliefs told them that a boy jumping around in a tutu was un-American, unholy, and probably illegal! The message was clear: I was a disgrace to the clan, and was summarily cast out, at least for a time" (p. 152).

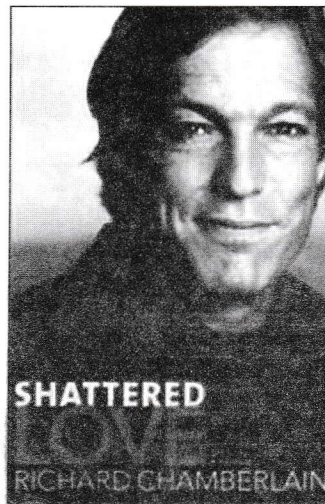
Chamberlain's sense of being different and his preoccupation with the feminine, both of which were forced underground by an oppressive father, re-emerged when he was an adult and he briefly took on the role of "Daphne." The enmeshed connection to his mother seemed to bypass him:

"When finally done up, I thought I looked fairly glamorous in a slightly off-kilter sort of way, and a tad like my mother albeit it a head taller in those heels."

Dressed in this costume, he went with his partner to a restaurant. Chamberlain noted, "I guess he'd never been out on a date with a transvestite" p. 234).

Chaotic family and peer relationships are pervasive as Chamberlain constructs a facade to cover his emerging but fragile sense of self. This false self emerges and re-emerges throughout the memoir.

While Chamberlain presents his story as if it were unique, clinicians who have worked with homosexual men see those same dilemmas and conflicts over and over again in



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— Richard Chamberlain

the childhood histories of homosexual men. Such confusion, left untreated, often leads to homosexual attractions. In fact, as many as 75% of gender-disturbed children go on to label themselves as homosexual or bisexual as adults. Chamberlain fits the pattern perfectly.

Consider his relationship to his father, who he describes as a "periodic alcoholic" (p. 9) whose "...periods of drunkenness were to his children inexplicable, insane and dangerous." (p. 10) He explains:

"Normally, driving alone with Dad was extremely uncomfortable—I could never think of anything to say to this mythic, dark man, and I always felt silently disapproved of."

"Dad was never physically violent; he never hit us or pushed us around. His violence was psychological. When he was drunk, he'd stagger recklessly around the house or slump in his big living room chair, emitting angry vibes that seemed to me like a radiance of pure evil. It was like living with the devil. And he could quell anything remotely like fun and frolic with his famously lethal sneer. That sneer was like being slashed with a machete" (p. 12).

Although Chamberlain acknowledges his father's impact on his childhood and adulthood, he appears to see no connections at all between that paternal maltreatment and his gender-identity confusion and subsequent homosexual orientation. Still, his acknowledgments include the following:

"I can see now that one of the most powerful factors in my emotional block in these situations was my unresolved relationship with my father. Though I was no longer living at home, I was still destructively attached to this man (or rather my inner stories about him). My hatred and fear of Dad were virulent, even though I rarely saw him" (p. 37).

"I projected these feelings onto every producer or director and casting agent I met. I unfairly turned these unsuspecting guys into my father, subconsciously fearing condescending judgments and suppressive sneers, certain that I could never measure up to their expectations (p. 37)."

"The person I've hated most often and intensively is my father...But mostly I experienced Dad as self-aggrandizing, hypocritical, and covertly, but powerfully, suppressive to all of us, including my mother. I felt subdued and powerless around him...Dad somehow managed to keep us all scared. Even after he sobered up and became a revered speaker in AA (claiming to have abandoned his ego and to have taken up residence at the right hand of God), I experience him being sober but otherwise little changed" (p. 199).

"However, just as I was preparing for an all-out war, Dad, a longtime smoker, was enfeebled by emphysema...There

would be no satisfaction in punching a dying man. So it seemed as if I'd be stuck with my angry victimhood forever" (p. 200).

Chamberlain summarized his father's influence as follows:

"Dad's behavior had serious consequences. What father wants to be hated and feared by his children? ...His death in his mid-eighties was a welcome relief from his long illness. I didn't miss him at all, nor as far as I know did Bill" (p. 202).

Chamberlain's rejection of his father and his father's masculinity was a clear memory. He says, "I determined to be as unlike my father as possible" (p. 202). But little did Chamberlain realize that at the same time he rejected his father's influence, he was also rejecting his own male gender identity.

Chamberlain suffered from an existential loneliness—the terrible emptiness often felt by the boy who is detached from an essential part of his own self. He remembered —

"...my older brother Bill, was the handsome vigorous heir apparent. I had always been the oddball; I never fit into the family hierarchy. I was around, but redundant. The eldest son was fulfilling most of his parents dreams—if not scholastically, then in sports and socially with gorgeous girlfriends. He shone with good health and good looks and a penchant for reckless, good fun. His shy little brother didn't hold a lot of promise" (p. 59).

God as the (Genderless) Father Figure

As he continued to search for a sense of spiritual identity, Chamberlain pursued a long series of spiritual gurus and therapeutic mentors, and for a period of time, LSD. He seems forever looking for that lost parental figure, and refers to some of the men he meets as surrogate fathers. Chamberlain speaks of those "shadowy reasons beyond my understanding" which tormented him for years. He sought out various spiritual gurus trying to find God, the lost father figure. The astute clinician should clearly have seen the connection between this "unfinished business" and his gender disturbance and subsequent homosexuality.

Instead, Chamberlain projects his early emotional deficits onto his divine creator. "At times," he says, "I felt that God's assembly line carelessly forgot to include parts of my heart and soul" (p. 13). And in a view that is common in other gay memoirs, Chamberlain denies the masculinity of God. He refers to God as "it" (p. 169) (some other gay writers have referred to God as "she").

Chamberlain's relationship to his mother occupied significantly less of his memoir than recollections about his father. He seems to over-identify with her, sharing her victimhood as someone harmed by his father. "Mom silently

Richard Chamberlain Today

suffered a dearth of self-confidence," he says, "exacerbated over the years by her husband's covert suppression, and she had almost no aptitude for self knowledge" (p. 8).

It was clear that it was the women in his early life to whom he felt the closest. "I had a warm relationship with my mother and superb grandmother" (p. 21), he says.

Yet Chamberlain's mother was not able to protect him from his father's psychological assaults, and Chamberlain was not able to protect her from the same assaults. She was relegated to the status of one of the children. She was driven "into a kind of self-protective somnambulism, creating within her a volcano of anger that did not surface until he was dying" (p. 202). Comforting her from this abuse, Chamberlain became a sort of husband to her, empathizing with her pain and distress. Mother and son shared the victim identity against a hostile father.

Upon seeing a picture of the family, Chamberlain's psychologist later responded, "In that family, you never had a chance."

Chamberlain describes his public school experience as follows:

"I refused to learn... I refused to play team sports...It took me ages to learn to read...[I would] feel supremely stupid and alienated from the system and the rest of the kids, most of whom were doing very well whizzing through flash cards and batting those baseballs" (p. 15).

Preoccupation With Being Different; Perfectionism and the False Self

The Chamberlain Magic Show — this "pretending to be perfect"— was, he says, a demanded family trait which caused fear, feelings of unworthiness, and a sense of not belonging. He was frightened of himself, of his gender, and of his masculinity.

According to Chamberlain:

"...contrary to my pretended perfection, most of my life has been ruled in one way or another by fear" (p. 13).

"...fear of inner poverty, unworthiness, inadequacy, and especially fear of not being fully alive, of not fitting in at all" (p. 13).

"My most frightening nemesis was none other than me" (p. 13).

This preoccupation with perfection led him to bow out of a foot race (incurring the wrath of his father) rather than not be first in the competition. "I had no interest in running a race that I could not win" (p. 20). His conclusion was that he was "...a near-perfect nobody" (p. 27).

Now in his late sixties, Chamberlain claims that he has "finally made friends with life" (p. 243). However, the reader is left to wonder if beneath this peace he says he has found, there still remains in the background an unexamined shadow.

Chamberlain describes his once-severed but now restored relationship with his partner Martin as "...personal love relationship that would last twenty-six years and counting" (p. 100). Significantly, Martin's childhood was not so different from Chamberlain's own childhood. His family of origin was a chaotic one, characterized, like Chamberlain's, by a detached relationship to his father. In fact, the detachment was so severe that Martin (who is much younger than Chamberlain and could have been Chamberlain's own son) had left home during his tumultuous early years.

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We sense that there is still a fragile self that is now hiding in open daylight. In fact, Chamberlain seems to have come full circle and, in many ways, has arrived back where he began.

Thus we see him, at age 69, now sadly gazing at a childhood photo which, ironically, provides a possible solution to the dilemmas he faced as a child:

"I came across the resulting sunny photo of myself as a rather lost little blond boy in short pants looking for clover leaves in the grass. As I gazed at this distant image, I immediately felt I could love this kid with all my heart. How I would love to take him in my arms and spend time with him, getting to know who he was, whatever his problems and quirks" (p. 154).

Indeed the existence of such a nurturing father would have made a world of difference. Lacking that masculine identification figure, Chamberlain sexualized the world of masculinity. Sadly, he never reconciled with his father. He thought about it, and was determined to confront his father, but it was too late: his father's illness and death prevented that from happening. Eventually, Chamberlain decided that there is nothing he actually needs to forgive his father for—his father's abusive personality was just a fact of life. Chamberlain finally concludes that "detachment and happiness and love are the best of friends" (p. 222).

Chamberlain is not a victim of just a dysfunctional family. He is also the victim of a society which denies that unmet childhood emotional needs lead to same-gender attractions in adulthood. Thus, his startling lack of insight is, in part, due to a socio-political climate that rapidly endorses all things "gay" with a total absence of critical inquiry. But Chamberlain was not, as he believes, treated badly by the world because of his innate homosexuality. The truth is that his homosexuality evolved from his bad treatment. ■