



### **Do You Become a Human Vending Machine When Your Buttons are Pushed?**

**Mitchell Milch, LCSW**

Have you ever noticed that we live in an era when it has become fashionable to self-righteously defend the right to behave like vending machines? Now, I imagine that many of you reading this article might take instantaneous exception to anybody who treated you like a vending machine or accused you of regarding someone else as nothing more than an extension of your wishes for immediate gratification. Yet, there are times when we and our loved ones invoke unwritten, unspoken agreements that if one picks a fight, the other when provoked will morph into a vending machine. Once we pay with a dollar's worth of sarcasm, emotional withdrawal or threats and correctly depress the other person's "hot button" the response we want (whether or not we are aware of desiring it or not) drops down, bounces out of the retrieval slot and hits us right between the eyes. And to add insult to injury we, who are having our buttons pushed and being degraded wind up making the degradation a reality by throwing respect and consideration out the window and returning the "vending machine favor." I know. This is not a very flattering mirror to run and stand in front of and ask: "How do I look?" Still, we all with varying degrees of frequency behave this way.

You may never have thought about a vending machine metaphor to describe or understand what happens when two adults regress to feeling and behaving just like small children arguing without an adult referee in the room. Yet, this glass slipper seems to fit all sizes of feet. Our values and ideals that make up our consciences may do an admirable job of checking inconsiderate and disrespectful behaviors when the tide of our emotions is not flooding our rational faculties. However, these checks on impulsivity can get swallowed up by intensely threatening feelings so that we temporarily lose the capacity for insight into our actions and empathy for how our actions affect others until our emotional floodwaters recede. It is so, so easy at times like these to believe with religious fervor that we are innocent victims and the other person started.

We may be victims but, not victims of the infamous “button pusher.” Our “button pusher” so to speak, is nothing more than a trigger that pushes the “play button” for the recall of beliefs, feelings, impulses and fantasies that threaten our self esteem in a moment we become so identified with these threats that we cease to be able to regulate our self esteem. Thus, temporarily, the replay of “You’re an idiot who deserves to be used like a pawn” is not observed as it should be; an illogical and false idea remembered in dialogue with a parent whose words were shaped by their own vulnerabilities and limitations. “No!!” This recollection becomes one that completely defines us as worthless. What we are dealing with are damaging recollections seen through the emotional eyes of our less developed selves. As is the logic of children: If a parent is supposed to love us and know how to love us says hurtful and hateful words then, we as children must be bad and/or defective; unlovable. Thus what we have here is the anatomy of the process by which we victimize ourselves when our buttons are pushed and then, feel justified to retaliate in kind.

In truth, we are all sometime victims of our own limitations, ignorance, lack of motivation and sharpened axes we still grind, which are our responsibilities to manage as much as we may find this to be a bitter pill to swallow. If you want a little dose of how “The Devil Made Me Do It,” is not a ticket to pass go and collect \$200 just take a few hours out and sit in any criminal court in this country and see what happens in cases where threats of domestic violence are retaliated in kind. Both parties are likely to get arrested. “He or she demeaned me just like my father did and pushed my buttons” doesn’t mitigate the plaintiff’s responsibility for retaliatory actions. In most of these cases there are two rules that supersede all others when the combatants are stuck in the heat of the moment. These rules of engagement are certain formulas for regrettable outcomes: Two wrongs make a right, and the best defense is a good offense.

We all fall prey to moments when adult self restraint goes out the window in retaliation for being “the good victim.” Still it’s no accident that if we are likely to “lose it” on a regular basis we probably have found partners that have a mutual need to accommodate us because they too either “lose it” frequently or also have vested interests in being victims. Hopefully, when calmer heads prevail we are able to recognize the error of our ways.

If you want to know all you’ll ever have to know why it is so valuable to offer our children and ourselves time outs when we become nothing more than a feeling or a belief, please reflect on what I have been communicating over the preceding paragraphs. When we lose

the ability to temporarily exercise benevolent authority over ourselves and our children, it is because of the fact that in the heat of the moment we degrade ourselves and our loved ones and replay the story of the consumer and the vending machine.

It only takes one degree of separation between the other person and ourselves, and one degree of separation between our beliefs and feelings, and our self reflective capacities to restore safety, security, peace and serenity to our lives and our relationships. That one degree of separation permits us to remind ourselves that just because someone labels us "X" or we label ourselves "Y" it doesn't make it so. Therefore, none of us deserve the treatment we subject ourselves to. We are never as wonderful or horrible as we sometimes feel or believe about ourselves. The same pertains to others. No one deserves to be put on pedestals at others' expense and no one deserves to be attacked and degraded.

Honor yourselves and your loved ones with regular time outs for self reflection. Most definitely, learn in the heat of the moment to retreat and simply sit and wait for the flood waters of intense emotion to recede before reengaging with a loved one. Once we regain our capacities to make a space to examine what's going on between us and others and what is being reactivated inside ourselves we can then rediscover and appreciate ourselves and others as individuals rich in complexity with intrinsic value that cannot be wiped away. That intrinsic value is part and parcel of the potential to create meaningful changes. Regulating self esteem requires active thinking on our parts. We must remind ourselves that we have over arching value to ourselves and others no matter what might be happening in any particular moment. If we are behave like vending machines more often than not and can't get a handle on what to do to change this pattern then, we owe it to ourselves and our loved ones to give psychotherapy a try. It may be a new lease on life for many of us.