



‘As with fairy tales, you used to ask me to tell you the famous studies over and over’

Psychology graduate Melanthe Grand interviews her mother, Chartered Psychologist and novelist Voula Grand

My mother, Voula Grand, is a Chartered Psychologist and novelist. Her professional practice focuses on the development of leaders in global corporations. She has 30 years’ experience working with teams and individuals using a range of psychological techniques to enhance performance. Voula has been a member of the British Psychological Society since her student days and is now an Associate Fellow.

Her first novel, *Honor’s Shadow*, about the psychology of betrayal and revenge, was published by Karnac in 2011. Voula is one of the authors of the BPS Book of the Year *The Psychology Book* published by DK in 2013. She writes a blog discussing aspects of writing and psychology. She is also mother to my 28-year-old brother Thibault, and three adult stepchildren,

I studied psychology at the University of York and am now studying for an MA in integrative child psychotherapy at the Institute of Arts in Therapy and Education. I have an interest in the application of the arts for children with special needs, and I write a blog about my relationship with one boy with autism. I work part-time for my mother’s company as an assistant psychologist.

Our editor is working on a feature ‘growing up with a psychologist’. If you are the child of a psychologist, with a view on how this may have affected your upbringing, he would like to hear from you. Or perhaps as a psychologist you are aware of how that knowledge is affecting your own parenting? E-mail jon.sutton@bps.org.uk

Here, I interview my mother about the impact that the study and practice of psychology has had on her life, in mothering, business and writing.

When you look back on being a mother, how do you think your knowledge of psychology had an effect on your parenting?

I studied social psychology at LSE, back in the early eighties. I was fascinated by Ainsworth’s work on attachment and the Strange Situation studies. At the time, that was very new material; now, it’s being applied in all sorts of interesting ways. When I went back to work after Thibault was born in 1986, I had to arrange childcare. Because of the attachment studies, I was keen that my brand new baby should have a third attachment figure in his life, especially as he didn’t have a grandmother. So I chose a childminder; then, when you came along, we had a nanny. I believed then, and still believe now, that this is the best option for secure attachment. Though you told me recently, from your studies, that a child only needs a ‘good enough mother’ a third of the time, so maybe I was overly cautious back then. But we had an amazing nanny, Alice who stayed with us for 15 years, having two children of her own along the way. Alice was very talented, and loved you two as though you were her own. She still does. I also appreciated how skilled she was with me. Some mothers may feel some envy towards their nanny, but Alice was exceptionally sensitive to this, and deferred to me as your mother. She and I became like sisters. For you two, as long as I, Dad or Alice were there, you were

happy and loved. I will be grateful to her for her contribution to your upbringing for ever.

And in the years that we were growing up, how do you think you differed to mothers who weren’t also psychologists?

My mother was a reading addict, and reading stories was a lovely part of my relationship with her. Instinctively, I read to you and Thibault from the very beginning, all the traditional fairy tales as well as the modern stories. *The Hungry Caterpillar* was a favourite. As you got older, and during long drives to our holiday home in France, I started to tell you about Zimbardo’s prison, Harlow’s monkeys, Milgram’s shock experiment. As you had done with the fairy tales, you both used to ask me to tell you the famous psychological studies over and over again, you were fascinated. So I think you both grew up very psychologically minded.

Every birthday, I would give you a development theme for the year. When you were six, I suggested you develop your ‘ignoring skills’ when you were going through a hard time with your brother. I know you think that was a mistake. Maybe that was me applying some business psychology to my mothering – they were almost like yearly appraisals.

I remember you used to talk to us about Greek mythology and philosophy as well as psychology. There was a strong emphasis on talking openly in our family. How did you go about cultivating this?

I was raised in a Greek community in Wales, and my dad used to tell me stories about the Greek gods. As a small child I believed his story that we were directly descended from the gods of Olympus, and that was why we had blue eyes and fair hair. I still treasure a book of Greek myths that my father won as a school prize. I was very keen that we communicated very openly as a family, though I'm not sure where that desire came from. I remember when you were little Thibault giving you some world-weary advice: 'Don't ask Mum any questions about sex, because she will answer them.'

I wanted us to be able to speak freely about anything that we would want to, especially the most difficult things. When Thibault went into the army in 2003 and served three tours of duty, I was very keen to be able to listen to him in a way that would be helpful. So I learned about PTSD and how to help veterans after experiences in war zones. He had a very difficult tour in Afghanistan in the summer of 2009. When he came back, I hope it helped that he could talk to me about his experiences, and I didn't react with shock or horror, that I could listen and accept such very extreme events.

I knew I wanted to raise you both to be hopeful, optimistic and resilient – what parent wouldn't – and you are, but maybe you were just born that way.

I also remember you encouraging us to follow whatever path it was that we wanted, and I suppose looking up to you when I was younger, you were a very good example of doing this – writing a novel, for example. Do you think your knowledge of psychology has an influence on this?

My mother wasn't a psychologist, she was an artist. She was great at encouraging me and my siblings to pursue our hobbies and interests. That seems to me to be a core parental responsibility, and looking back I can see that I was always alert to what you both enjoyed and were drawn to. I suppose it is a psychological thing, but for me it was a mother thing. Thibault was focused on an Army career from a very young age, and I didn't discourage him (even though I wanted to). Your early ambition was to be an art teacher, but when I went to Thibault's school to do a careers talk on psychology, you came with me. It was after that you said that you wanted to go into psychology. Now here you are combining psychology and art in psychotherapy using the arts. Psychology has been a passion in my life and it has been a great joy to share that with you.

I was so inspired after that talk, and being so excited for a career in it. How did you start your career in psychology?

My career in psychology had very unconventional beginnings. I left home after O-levels at 17 and worked for 10 years in a variety of business environments. I decided to go to university when I was 27. As I hadn't done A-levels, I did the very first access course in the UK – the Fresh Horizons course at the City Lit in London. I wanted to study English literature, so that I could become a novelist. But a fellow student brought back the syllabus for social psychology at LSE and I changed my mind, applied and got a place to study there. Standing on the steps of LSE at the start of my degree programme was one of the most proud and thrilling moments of my life.

And after your degree?

Because of my work experience, and having grown up in a business family, I never doubted that I would work in business. I started work as an assessment psychologist in the early 1990s. Back then, executive coaching was just beginning as a mechanism for executive education, and I was fascinated. I started my own practice, Grand Shearman Consulting, in 1991, to coach individuals and teams. Through that work I became intrigued by the power of human emotions to help or hinder people's development, so I became deeply interested in the explosion of research on emotional intelligence work that started around that time.

How do you apply psychology to businesses now?

Now I describe myself as a leadership expert. One of the projects I am involved with at the moment, with one of my colleagues, is a comprehensive, in-depth leadership programme, REAL: Resilient, Energised and Authentic Leadership. Resilient leadership is a hot topic at the moment, as corporate life is now tougher than I've ever known it, mainly because of the challenges of global economics. I work with individuals and teams still, focusing on the deeper dynamics that underlie work performance and success.

What theories do you draw on for your work?

The corporate world is very interested in the new field of positive psychology developed by Martin Seligman, and I have trained in some of his methods. Identifying strengths, focusing on what you are good at, developing resilient

thinking skills, all these form a solid foundation for optimal performance of corporate executives.

I am fascinated by the new findings coming out of neuroscience, and how such insights can be applied to leadership. I also draw on psychodynamics – in particular how we unconsciously project family dynamics on to the work 'family' to re-create familiar patterns of relating in our working relationships.

I have never been wedded to one theoretical perspective. I like to choose what is appropriate for each individual or team. Change is generally hard and slow, so it's important to seek out ways that might be faster and easier for any given individual. The answer will differ widely from one person to another, so it is important to have an extensive tool kit. As the saying goes: 'if all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail'.

Having said all that, I am a Jungian at heart. I love his work, particularly on dreams. Jung is very poetic in the way that he expresses things, and I find his writings profoundly moving. My first novel, *Honor's Shadow*, drew upon his theories of the shadow personality. I love his comment on the task of mid-life – to turn the self inside out, and show the shadow to the light.

And how have you applied this psychology background to your novel writing?

I always had the ambition to write novels, from a very early age. On my 50th birthday, I decided I should shut up about it or get on with it. So I got on with it and enrolled on an MA in creative writing at Birkbeck. As a result of my life and work experience, I will never run out of material for fiction. I like to write about psychological topics: in the end, all writers are trying to be psychologists. A book of fiction is psychology in action.

I like to write about dilemmas rather than problems. A dilemma has two (or more) choices and neither is perfect; so choosing the least bad is the challenge, and this is where my interest lies.

Finally what is your favourite book?

The Fifth Child by Doris Lessing, because it explains one of the worst dilemmas I can think of – what to do when a family is disturbed by the birth of a child with extreme special needs.

I *Voula's professional website: www.grandshearman.com; writer's site and blog: www.voulagrand.com Melanthe's blog can be found at <https://mysonnydays.wordpress.com>*