Sick

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Sick, I went with my son, then two years old, to the drugstore in the village where we had a weekend house. It so happened that this particular drug store was part of one of the several drugstore chains that around this time were accused of aggressively lobbying their customers to switch from cheaper versions of drugs that their doctors had prescribed to more expensive ones that were not necessarily as effective. As I recall, for these lobbying efforts the drug stores were being paid by drug companies, and in some cases customers' prescriptions were being changed without the customers' or their doctors' prior approval. But let us proceed as if such matters were beside the point.

At this store, as in most stores to which young children are taken, certain products—little games, candies, brightly colored packages of stickers, cards featuring pictures of animals—were displayed at the eye and hand levels of young children. As I was waiting for my prescription to be filled, Jonah, as many a child will, began pulling some of these products off the shelves. The chance of his making a mess was good, as was the possibility of his damaging some of the packaging. And as the store was hoping he would, Jonah asked if we might buy some of these seemingly so attractive things.

American parents have stock phrases for rejecting such requests—"You don't really want that"; "Put that back where you found it." We also have principles and cautionary sayings: a child should not make a mess of things that do not belong to him; "You break it, you bought it." We also give in to our children's demands. Not always, perhaps just on those days when the child is particularly charming or cranky or sick, or when we are sick or in a

hurry or ebullient or distracted. We buy the bauble or candy. "I'll buy you this one, but that's it." The store has its sale—at times more than one.

The combination of American mores with stores' relentless solicitation of children can make going shopping with young children annoying, both for the parents and for other shoppers who must listen to and be delayed by the parents and children's squabbling. And there is the energy consumed in trying to control one's child, the reminder that one's financial resources have their limits. When one relents and buys something one did not want to buy, there is first the additional expense, and then the additional annoyance when one sees that one's child is at best temporarily mollified. As a rule the item is so unengaging, the candy so unnourishing, that the child is almost immediately hungry again, wanting to buy more.

Sick, it occurred to me that day in the drug store that I had no obligation to a store that was trying to use my child to badger me into spending money I did not want to spend on products I did not want to buy—forcing my child and me into conflict. Rather than consuming my energy trying to restrain my son from making a mess of the store and such of its products as he could reach, I could hope—against hope—that if he really went wild his behavior would encourage this store and perhaps others like it to stop trying to seduce little children. Would this were a reasonable response to contemporary commercial savagery.

B of course such thinking is more entertaining than anything else. However annoying or absurd a situation may be, most of us try to behave and get our children to behave like the other "nice" people around us do. We are anxious to fit in and to help our children fit in, to feel part of a community and perhaps even to gain status within it. Beyond conforming or ladder-climbing, beyond the sake of appearances more generally, we may not see any other sense or goodness in behaving the way our fellow citizens behave. We may feel that many of our fellow citizens have confused custom and "good behavior" with virtue or some larger moral truth. But again, we understand that if we and our children do not follow the rules, we may get a bad reputation, be scorned or simply ignored.

One exception must be noted, however, and to note it I will temporarily slip back to ancient Greece and the word *ὕβρις* (hubris). According to the classicist Cedric Whitman, the word originally meant assault and battery, and it never quite lost the overtones of physical violence, even when, during the classical period, the word came to be used to

describe the arrogance of the rich and mighty. The classicist Kenneth Dover writes that the term came to be applied

> to any kind of behavior in which one treats other people just as one pleases, with an arrogant confidence that one will escape paying any penalty for violating their rights and disobeying any law or moral rule accepted by society, whether or not such a law or rule is regarded as resting ultimately on divine sanctions.

In the United States, not all but some hubristic people ("sociopaths" is a current word) become rich and powerful in part through ignoring community standards and treating other people as simply means to their personal ends. Subsequently such people may seek to rehabilitate their reputations by donating to charity a portion of their brazenly gotten gains, and gossip about these individuals' brazenness also becomes one of the ways that their status is recognized and valued. To be rich or powerful is not to have to play by the rules; to be blatantly not playing by the rules suggests power or wealth. Or, to elaborate on what the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor has said in regards to our political system, an ambitious American does not seek to be a part of the system, either as a ruler or as a subject. He or she seeks to manipulate the system for his or her own ends, and thus to feel and appear superior to the many lesser souls who do participate and are manipulated.

If, however, those of us who are not so hubristic or rich, those of us of the dwindling middle and burgeoning lower classes, if we let our children treat stores' merchandise in the same uncaring manner that stores treat us, be we adults or children, the chances are good that we will find ourselves scorned by other members of our communities. (Interestingly, the scorn might be for acting in an inferior, not "well brought up" manner, or for acting uppity, as if we were richer, more powerful, more well-born than we are.)

As regards the small town in which I found myself sick and shopping—an old farming town that was now a bit of a suburb and a bit of a weekend retreat—it might have been only the longtime big-city residents, the weekend-retreaters such as myself, who would even consider letting one of their children run amok in a store. In a big city, should a store or group of people find one's behavior objectionable, there is always another store or group a few blocks away, and there is little chance that people at the next locations will have heard about one's behavior elsewhere. But in a small town most everybody hears about most everything out of the ordinary that anyone else has done, and gossips are also busy inventing things to snicker about. (My big-city workplace is at least equally catty, and for much the

same reason: little people scrambling to feel a little superior or to raise themselves a rung or two, or a seeming rung or two, above others.)

A parent has a great, if not entirely fulfillable responsibility to prepare his child to survive as well as possible in the social, professional, commercial and psychological jungles in which he will find himself. And learning must be done step-by-step. Even if a child is ready intellectually to understand a complex moral argument, if he lacks a sufficient foundation of experience it will simply be an academic concept, hard to take seriously or retain.

In *The Education* Henry Adams recalls how as a young man he asked the veteran New York politician Thurlow Weed if he thought that no politician could be trusted. "Mr. Weed hesitated for a moment," Adams writes, "then said in his mild manner:—'I never advise a young man to begin by thinking so.'"

May each parent decide for himself at what age his child is ready to move on from "Put that back where you found it" to "Americans think that if you are not going to buy an item you should put it back where you found it", or, "The store has suckered you into grabbing that item, now do you want to let it sucker us into giving them money for it?" Or, "If you think anyone may have seen you break that item and you want to fit in, it may make sense for you now to make a show of telling some member of the store staff what you did and that you want to pay for the item."

Or perhaps the task is much more straightforward: devote all one's efforts to ensuring that one's children have sufficient wealth, power and lack of empathy so that the rules do not apply to them. I would be sad if Jonah did not learn to recognize others—and hardly just humans, all beings, animal, vegetable and mineral—as ends in themselves. But I am not so sick as to fail to see that the world is dominated by the hubristic, their thieving drug-store chains included. I think he has some special gifts, my son. May one of them be finding a way to survive, even thrive.

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