A is for Parenting

By William Eaton

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Dedicated to my friend Masha, who is studying child development. A conversation with her about the importance of a child's first few years pushed me to finally move this text from the bowels of my computer to cyberspace.

A Sunday evening in a largely empty New York restaurant, a young waitress (not Masha) and I entered into conversation. She was Russian, I spoke some Russian; this was the point of connection.

A few tables away, two women my age were dining. Somehow they became part of the waitress and my conversation, and a question came to be posed in English: What should this young woman do with her life?

That is, we 60-year-olds seized grotesquely on the idea, or fantasy, that with age comes wisdom, the wisdom of experience. One of the women went first. She in her life had made money. (My guess was that she was a stock broker, financial planner, insurance saleswoman—something like that.) Her fellow diner was an artist. One of them had money; the other art. But what they both had was love for what they did. This was what was important, the young woman was solemnly told.

Under my breath I whispered to the waitress my favorite Russian saying: "Жизнь не поле перейти." Life is not crossing a field. I did not believe a word this older woman was saying. She was substituting some truism (e.g. do what you love) for all of her own life's ups and downs, the lies, disappointments, emptiness and moments of ecstasy or calm.

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At some point I interrupted her speech and engaged in a kind of witnessing, in the Christian sense. As another might say "His name is Jesus," I, more long-winded, said:

> You know what I would say? I would say that what matters, perhaps all that matters, is the relationship you have with your parents—or, perhaps, your primary caregivers—when you are very young. If those people, those relationships give you a sense of security, self-confidence; if they help you learn how to play and to be comfortably alone—it doesn't matter your social class or subsequent occupation. You live a charmed life. Among other things, you will go on meeting and getting close to people like your parents, people with whom you can feel secure and confident, and with whom you can have fun and comfortably co-exist. Absent this, basically you're screwed.

A hush fell over the little group. Thoughts turned inward, uneasily. In a sense, mine was a very harsh message. As if our lives are, in a sense, over before they have hardly begun. The die is cast. My Puritan ancestors had an idea that either a person enjoyed God's grace or he did not. You might do good works as a way of proving to yourself and your neighbors that you were one of the elect, but your election (or defeat) preceded any such actions and was entirely independent of them.

A week or so later, I recalled this odd "conversation" (or preaching contest?). A friend and I had gone to see a documentary about the Black Panthers. As the movie recalled, the Panthers had a "Ten-Point Program." For example:

> We want decent housing, fit for shelter of human beings.
>
> We want education for our people that exposes the true nature of this decadent American society. We want education that teaches us our true history and our role in the present-day society.
>
> We want an immediate end to POLICE BRUTALITY and MURDER of black people.
>
> We want land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice and peace.

This and other aspects of the movie led me to ask my friend (a health-care professional) what her program for improving the world would be. "Universal health-care" was the first item that came to her mind.

I (a seventeenth-century Congregational minister?) recalled my largely-empty-restaurant conversation and said that, if I indeed believed the little speech I had made (and I do indeed believe it), then, it seemed to me, a great deal of the focus of the government and society should be on parenting and on the very first years of children's lives (before kindergarten). We should focus particularly on the very first months and years.

Of course, even for those who might agree with me, I have hardly simplified matters. Debates could rage about what leads young children to feel secure and confident and to learn how to play and be comfortably alone. In the next few paragraphs I am going to present a few of my ideas, ideas in which I believe strongly, but I also know that other people will have other, contrasting and still very good ideas. And the present piece is about simplifying, even oversimplifying: identifying a one thing that might matter above all. It is understood that this is, among other things, an absurd diversion while life goes on and carries our fears, confusion and joys in its train.

An African-American acquaintance posted on Facebook a good-parenting poster from an organization that seeks to promote good parenting. A handsome, trim-bearded African-American man is speaking with an African American boy who seems to be looking at him with uncertainty, even fear. The text:

> My son asked, "Dad, how did you know how to be a great dad when your dad wasn't?" I replied, "I gave you what I longed for."

This is nice and certainly fits with the kind of father I am, but, to my mind, this relates more to how, say, having alcoholic parents can lead some children, not to get beyond alcoholism or addiction, but to become teetotalers. From my perspective, being a good parent requires, first and foremost, having and giving the time and energy—the enormous amount of time and energy—required for being a good parent. Many people have jobs (and commutes) or career ambitions that keep them from being able to be good parents. And many parents these days are single parents, and this, to my mind, poses any number of problems, not the least of which is that it often reduces the parenting time and energy available for the children.

When it comes to parenting, I have some very traditional values, to include being against day care for very young children (infants). Day care cannot provide infants the level of security they need. One way of putting this view is that I think a child should emerge from her mother's womb into a warm, womb-like world in which her needs for warmth and security are continually met (be this by the biological mother and father or by one or two others). Of course this world cannot last, and should not and will not. But this is the best preparation for thriving in the "real world"—or in the rest of the real world.

A line from a Russian: The gulag, that you can survive, but not human beings. (That is, your neighbors are more of a threat than the cold and lack of food.) In my utopia of well-parented people, would there be no gulags, no vicious humans? Perhaps, in a utopia. But what I am here focused on is a (likely never-ending) interim stage during which —amid strife, uncertainty and occasionally worse—children and adults will greatly benefit from self-confidence and resourcefulness, from being able to enter into supportive, nurturing relationships, from being able to be content alone and joyous with others.

It may seem that I am proposing that very young children should be coddled, and, yes, this is one, if limited way of stating what I am proposing. Personal experience has taught me to agree with those experts who say that one can only develop a sense of autonomy and self-confidence if one has in one's earliest years been able to be absolutely and comfortably dependent. During our first months we need to feel completely, eternally cared for—enjoying food, shelter and the luxury of untroubled sleep whenever we want it, and being held and played with in all sorts of ways. An infant needs to have all her or his possible demands met and not to be asked to respond to any others' demands—e.g. the emotional demands of needy or simply worn-out parents.

For a time my mother worked with the child-development expert Selma Fraiberg, and my mother was herself a devotee of D.W. Winnicott's ideas about parenting and child development. There is a sense in which, in raising my son and in watching the children and parents with whom he and I have come in contact, I have taken the intellectual theories my mother passed along in conversation and via books, and I have tested them. Among other things, this process has also led me to share another of my mother's views: children do not learn to play on their own; they are taught how to play by parents or siblings who enjoy playing. And so, too, children learn little from their parents' commandments and a tremendous amount from how their parents behave. Children are taught to speak well by parents who speak well to them, and taught to read by parents who themselves are readers, and to eat well and enjoy physical activities, . . . Children are taught "critical thinking" not in school but by parents who are themselves critical thinkers, etc. (And critical thinking, by the way, is not the same as complaining about the horrors and stupidity one has read about in the *New York Times* or heard about on National Public Radio.)

And again—and not only is there irony here; we are slipping away from parents modeling behavior for their children—children are "taught" autonomy by parents who have the time, energy, inclination and perhaps the courage to allow their children, in the children's youth, to feel completely comfortable with their neediness and dependence. There is a sense in which having children is, necessarily, a selfish act. The child in no way asks to be born. But once the child is conceived, the parents have to immediately and completely reorient themselves for some number of years, allowing the child to begin life completely selfishly, without a thought or care for anyone else, for his parents first and foremost.

Is this easy for the parents? No, of course it isn't! But this is the job. And, Puritan that I am —aging Puritan wallowing self-indulgently in the putative wisdom of experience—I am willing to say that if an adult is not up to this job, he or she should not have children.

I have written elsewhere about how parenting is a great gift to the parents. It is one of the richest activities that human beings are able to engage in. This provides a simple way to summarize my theories and a way of identifying good parents. Good parents are most likely to be found among those people who, first, feel that parenting is one of the richest activities

that human beings are able to engage in. And, secondly—the essential point—this feeling alone does not make a good parent. A parent has to enjoy the psychic organization and necessary economic and social circumstances (by which I do *not* mean a lot of money or advanced degrees) to follow this feeling, and he has to indeed follow it, allowing parenting to be the richest activity that he, or she, indeed engages in. These days, how many people (celebrities and politicians included) say all sorts of wonderful things about parenting and about their feelings about having children—as if these statements could substitute for spending time with their children or, say, for putting away their cellphones when they were with their children. (The wealthy, generous and influential art collector Peggy Guggenheim, who was born 1898 and seems herself to have done much more for art than she did for her children, was once asked if her own mother had been a good mother. No, she said, but in those days there were no good mothers.)

Again I must stress that this piece oversimplifies. For example, parenting may be the most striking example of a particular kind of phenomenon. You cannot know well how you are going to feel about parenting or what kind of a parent you are going to be until you are in over your head, parenting for dear life. The women who suffer from post-partum depression, for instance, do not know in advance that this something to which they might be susceptible. And how many stories have I heard of people whose spouses had to talk them into becoming parents, and perhaps these people resisted because they were afraid of what having a child might do to their thriving relationship with their spouse, and then—the child born—the resistant were overjoyed. And indeed the marital couple was in trouble because the resistant found caring for and loving the child so much more wonderful and fulfilling than the adult-to-adult relationship had been.

Already this text is much longer than I had planned, and I note that when Plato got started on this subject (in *The Republic*), he ended up writing several hundred pages. And, though I am a great admirer and reader of Plato's dialogues, I must also say that Plato's contribution to the raising of secure, confident children, well in touch with fun and play—it is somewhere between negative and non-existent. (Rousseau, yet more long winded, has proved more influential.)

Before signing off, I would add several basic questions to the list of those that might be discussed. One is: Could a society full of such fortunate, reasonably contented people long survive? We might think of the Tahitians, whose lives were (according to legend) a never-ending dream, until the rapacious Westerners showed up, infecting all they touched with Western fantasies and diseases, destroying the local economy, turning the young women into prostitutes. To ward off predators, I am proposing, a society may need to be aggressive and even perversely so (and even if this aggression leads to the society's inevitable collapse).

Even in the present United States, there are some nominally well-adjusted people, but these people's lives are overrun by those we have come to call "sociopaths"—people with a tremendous capacity for and interest in treating other people (and animals, plants, rocks, etc.) as inferior beings or as objects—things to be exploited and fleeced. Such "sociopaths" (who may also be entrepreneurs, ceo's, investment bankers, et al.) did not benefit from good parenting and are far from secure and content. They have a tremendous need to deny the humanity of, and thus to deny comfort to, other human beings. But this is what drives these "sociopaths" to impose themselves (and to do the dirty work demanded by capital).

And a compulsive writer can hardly ignore the role that "bad" parenting seems to have played in the development of the arts. Would a world of well-parented children be a world without art? No, but it might be a world without a particular kind of genius, with what I will call "driven genius."

I began with a grouping of 60-year-olds, myself included, who had seized grotesquely on the idea that with age comes wisdom, and from there this piece moved to a diverting but not un-absurd activity: stating one's grand priorities, what "I" would do were I the zookeeper. While I would not lose track of the grotesque and absurd aspects of such an exercise, nor would I lose track either of the value of good parenting, nor of the richness and pleasures of the activity.

Credits & Links

Image: Agnolo di Cosimo, named Bronzino, *Sacra Famiglia*, ("The Holy Family with the young St John"), Panciatichi Madonna, c. 1540, Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi.

The line about the gulag is quoted by Svetlana Alexievitch in her *Vremia second hand (konets krasnovo tcheloveka)*, published in Moscow in 2013. The book has yet to be translated into English; it is oral histories of people who lived in Soviet Russia and through *perestroika*.

The material about and from Peggy Guggenheim comes from *Peggy Guggenheim: Art Addict*, a 2015 documentary film directed by Lisa Immordino Vreeland. I do not have the exact quotation.

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