

SPARE THE ROD, SPOIL THE CHILD?

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I would like to talk today about a social and spiritual challenge and a source of dilemma for many of us: The raising of children. I was fortunate to grow up with relatively decent parents. My parents were apparently raised more harshly. When I was a child, my father would say to me: "If I talked back to my father the way you talk back to me, I would have gotten a whipping."... I learned at a young age that my parents were less strict with me than their parents had been with them; I *felt guilty* when I misbehaved, wondering if I was taking advantage of their kinder nature. Although I was not "abused", I felt the sting of prohibitive philosophies. One that I particularly remember is, "children should be seen and not heard."

Some of us have been *physically or sexually abused* as children. Others of us have been spared this mistreatment. Many of us have been *psychologically abused* by parents, teachers, etc. in a society which does not consistently teach respect for children, their feelings or their rights.

The purpose of today's talk is three fold:

First, to facilitate increased awareness of the damaging effects on children of what Alice Miller, a German psychologist calls "*poisonous pedagogy*." Poisonous pedagogy as Dr. Miller explains, is a philosophy of raising children which is inherently cruel. The parent may not be conscious of this cruelty but the child feels it. The second purpose of this talk is to share with you the thesis that violence in our society, between people and between nations, is significantly influenced by how children are raised. Finally, I will begin to talk about more positive models of child rearing.

How poisonous pedagogy began is beyond the scope of this talk. I will note here that this cruelty was evident in the old testament, exemplified by,-- God's test of "faith" in Abraham by initially asking him to kill his son; -- by the commandment to "honor thy parents" with no corresponding pronouncement to honor thy children ...and by various passages in the new testament such as "Do not withhold discipline from a boy; take the stick to him, and save him from death...", which appears in

Proverbs 23-13.

Dr. Miller traces poisonous pedagogy back to the nineteenth century. I would like to read to you a few quotations from that period:

"Is it not doting when the baby is coddled and pampered in every Way from infancy? "In the family it is usually the weak mothers who follow the philanthropic principle, whereas the father demands unconditional obedience without wasting words. In return, it is the mother who is most often tyrannized by her offspring and the father who enjoys their respect..."

"If willfulness and wickedness are not driven out, it is impossible to give a child a good education."

"A child who is used to obeying his parents will also willingly submit to the laws and rules of reason once he is on his own and his own master, since he is already accustomed not to act in accordance with his own will."

"Ask a child: Do you think you could remain silent for a few hours sometime, without saying a word? Make it pleasurable for him to make the attempt until he eventually passes the test. Afterwards, spare nothing in persuading him that it is an accomplishment to practice such self-control. Repeat the exercise making it more difficult each time, partly by lengthening the period of silence, partly by giving him cause to speak or by depriving him of something."

Punishment need not primarily cause physical pain but can utilize withdrawal of kindness and of expressions of love, depending on the type or frequency of the disobedience. For example, for a more sensitive child who is being quarrelsome, this can mean removing him from his mother's lap, refusal of his father's hand or of the bedtime kiss."

..."a boy should know how the female body is fashioned, and a girl should know how the male body is fashioned; otherwise, they will not receive correct impressions and their curiosity will know no bounds. Both sexes should learn about this in a solemn manner...The sight of a naked corpse evokes solemnity and reflection, and this is the most appropriate mood for a child under such circumstances."

What do these values teach? They teach the superiority of men over women. They teach the suppression of spontaneity. They teach that sexuality is unnatural and dirty. They teach that feelings Portray weakness and should be controlled by an act of will but that willfulness, in turn, should be submissive to authority. They teach that love is given to us only when we fulfill certain behavioral expectations and that failing to do so, we are unworthy of love.

There is no doubt that poisonous pedagogy is painful to the child. In order to understand its lasting effects it is necessary to become acquainted with a psychological term known as the "repetition compulsion." The repetition compulsion is an urge to repeat an emotionally painful past experience in order to master the experience. Probably the most commonly understood repetition compulsion is "*identification with the aggressor*" in which a person pushes away the pain he or she experienced by becoming the seemingly more powerful perpetrator and inflicting that pain on others. This pattern is commonly seen with perpetrators of physical or sexual abuse who are almost always themselves victims. What distinguishes these victims from other victims is that they were unable to share their feelings of victimization with others.

Male victims of abuse are more likely to identify with the aggressor and act out their victimization. The female victim who feels too ashamed to report her traumatic experience to others may stay trapped in a victim role and could suffer from recurrent depression. Those that seek help and learn to express the pain behind their victimization will start on the path to reclaiming their feelings.

There have been individuals that have inflicted such violence on others that they have been looked upon as manifestations of evil itself. Such a person was Adolf Hitler. It is difficult not to despise this man. And yet, an analysis of Hitler's childhood reveals that he was repeatedly the victim of emotional and physical cruelty. We know from biographical accounts that Hitler was often and severely beaten by his father. We also know that Hitler covered up his pain, epitomized by proudly saying to his mother, "father hit me thirty-two times!" Unable to express his feelings of rage towards his parents and having no children of his own to vent this rage upon, Hitler targeted the Jews, who were already established targets of prejudice. His choice of the Jewish people may have also been an unconscious attack against his family because there is evidence that Hitler's paternal grandfather was a Jew.

In 1896, Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, presented a paper to his colleagues which asserted that the origins of neurosis lay in the sexual molestation

of his patients by their parents. This paper, which undermined parents' authority and asserted that they were abusing their children was not favorably received by Freud's colleagues. Soon afterwards, Freud changed his position and claimed that these early recollections of his patients were fantasies. Whether his patients' assertions were reality based or fantasies, Freud helped us to recognize that sexuality begins at birth, which was a step forward; but attributing his patients' reports of abuse to fantasy was a blow to the rights of children. Largely for this reason, reports of sexual abuse were not taken seriously by mental health professionals until about seventeen years ago.

The Department of Social Services (DSS)ⁱ was created in July 1978 to provide services to families and children living in Massachusetts. DSS began operating in 1980. In fiscal year 1983, DSS reported that there were 32,640 reported cases of neglect or abuse of children in Massachusetts. 12,730 of these cases were substantiated. In 1986, substantiated cases of neglect or abuse had risen almost 50% to 18,295 with 49,799 cases reported. In 1989, substantiated cases of neglect or abuse had climbed to 22,532 with 70,713 cases reported. We are not sure what these increases mean. Are more children being abused or neglected or are people becoming more aware of what constitutes abuse and less afraid to speak-up.? ...Anyone can report abuse or neglect. DSS maintains a child at risk hotline which is staffed around the clock.

I have spoken at length about poisonous pedagogy as a damaging philosophy of child rearing which leads to the denial of feelings and subsequent depression or angry acting-out. What then is the right way to raise children? In my practice as a psychotherapist, I see many parents who are very confused about how to raise their children. When they divulge guilt about the mistakes they have made I assist them in realizing that they are not to blame. After all, I say, who taught you? Did you learn in school? Were your parents good role models? Often parents will admit that their parents didn't know how to raise them. Perhaps they were too harsh. In an effort, then, to not make the same mistakes their parents made with them, today's parents sometimes move towards the opposite extreme by not giving their children enough discipline or structure. They do not realize that their children *need* guidance and that they *need* to know when they have done something which is unacceptable. The key here, is *how* the child has behaved. **Loving discipline deems the *behaviors unacceptable*, not the child.**

I have already discussed that the *repetition compulsion* is the urge to repeat a past event in order to master it. One might ask then, if we are internally motivated to resolve conflicts, what prevents us from doing so? I think the answer lies in

realizing that some people do not question their values because they have learned as children that to question what they have been taught would result in the withdrawal of their parents love. Children need their parents love. The child abused by his parents would rather strike out at his peers or other adults than acknowledge how angry he is at his parents and risk the loss of their love. At a young age many of us learn to lie to ourselves. Values and beliefs are taken on without question because we have learned that to question these values means that we are not worthy of what we received. For example, a childhood friend of mine was given music lessons which were quickly withdrawn when he began to talk about becoming a musician; he then became a businessman, which pays better but may not be as fulfilling.

The child who grows up believing that physical and emotional abuse is a normal and inevitable part of childhood will not be able to perceive reality in a humane way. *With the ability to reason weakened and the capacity to feel impaired, this child will not be sensitive as an adult to human suffering.* He or she will not understand the nature of actions which put our world at risk. Because he has been taught to respect authority, he assumes that politicians know what they are doing. He will not feel the impact of human suffering and ask himself why we are putting so much of our energies into war when we are already killing ourselves at a rate of 40,000 children a day.

The inability to understand the *others' point of view*, walk in the other's moccasins, so to speak, is at the root of human conflict. The father disowns the son when his grandson is not circumcised. Abortion opponents, many responding to their religious beliefs, do not stop to consider the pain and human suffering of a child living at the poverty level with parents who are themselves still emotional children. And abortion advocates respond with anger at opponents of abortion, focusing on the potential elimination of their rights to choose rather than on the noble effort to preserve life.

For many people, it is more difficult to acknowledge the pain of the victim if there is not an identifiable perpetrator. The media perpetuates this pattern. Saddam Hussein received more media coverage than thousands of people dying of AIDS. We share in the pain of the victims but only to a certain degree; the evil antagonist loses his life and we are vindicated. This evil isolated entity is dead and we are again safe. We can forget our pain courtesy of our revenge. After the murder of 13-year-old Melissa Benoit of Kingston in 1990 the Boston Sunday Globe reported some quotes from the men in the town such as: "if the guy who did it, if he walks in front of my car, the brakes just might fail."

We read fairy tales with overt cruelty to our children. A wonderful fun filled picture of a big shoe filled with mice greets us and our children as we read: "There was an old lady who lived in a shoe. she had so many children she didn't know what to do. She gave them some broth without any bread, and whipped them all soundly and sent them to bed. Thus, the child learns that the reality of the picture and the reality of the words do not fit together and after a while she stops trying to make sense out of the whole thing. Then there are people who know about the senselessness and cruelty but do not advocate for change because they are still entrapped by feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness originating in their early years. They do not know that to work towards bettering our world can be an intrinsic part of self-esteem and inner happiness.

And yet, the intensity of the pain experienced when we really feel the suffering in our world challenges us to remember that *those whom cause pain are acting out pain they are unable to fully feel.*

Having used most of this talk examining the negative side of child rearing, I will end on a much needed positive note. In 1923, Kahlil Gibran, in his famous book "The Prophet" said:

"Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself. They come through you but not from you. And though they are with you, yet they belong not to you. You may give them your love but not your thoughts. For they have their own thoughts. You may house their bodies but not their souls. For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams. *You may strive to be like them but seek not to make them like you.*"

In 1931 Edward Bach said:

"...there is probably no greater opportunity offered to mankind than this, to be the agent of the physical birth of a soul and to have the care of the young personality during the first few years of its existence on earth. The whole attitude of parents should be to give the little newcomer all the spiritual, mental and physical guidance to the utmost of their ability, ever remembering that the wee one is an individual soul come down to gain his own experience and knowledge in his own way..."

M. Scott Peck in his book "The Road Less Traveled" states that the "tendency to avoid problems and the emotional suffering inherent in them is the primary basis of

all human mental illness." A child raised in health will not be expected to be perfect. She will know what she can change versus what is beyond her control. There will be room for all feelings. Confusion and pain will not overwhelm the spirit but will serve as challenges.

This talk was first delivered in 1994 at the First Universalist Society in Franklin, MA and subsequently at Christ Episcopal Church in Medway, MA

ⁱ Recently the Department of Social Services was renamed and is now known as the Department of Children and families (DCF).