

## HOW TO GROW A CHILD: Before the Beginning

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The former article: “How to grow a Child: Where to Begin?” attempted to focus us on our manifestation of our curiosity-the question. In a phone conversation of 1982 with Bernard Lonergan he asked me what I was working on and I replied: “The child’s question.” He said: “That’s the genesis of it all.” My growing respect of his reputation for extreme refinement of the inner life encouraged me. Twenty-three years later I find myself still wondering around a child’s wonder, not so much out of personal respect, but more so out of a growing appreciation for the meaning Lonergan attempted to communicate to a very young listener. In this article we will wonder around the “genesis of it all” in an effort to provide some sense of the origin and function of this basic and natural dynamic. This effort, and any headway we might make, should broaden out our experience of the inner self and provide more concrete insight into the need for an evolution in empiricism<sup>1</sup> and in education in general.

“Before the Beginning” intimates something prior to the question and that is what I wish to get at in this brief article. *But what we are trying to get at is something different. Where does the ‘Why?’ come from? What does it reveal or represent? Already we had occasion to speak of the psychological tension that had its release in the joy of discovery. It is that tension, that drive, that desire to understand, that constitutes the primordial ‘Why?’ Name it what you please-alertness of mind, intellectual curiosity, the spirit of inquiry, active intelligence, the drive to know. Under any name, it remains the same, and is, I trust, very familiar to you.*<sup>2</sup> Was Lonergan perhaps a bit presumptuous in stating that this drive is “very familiar to you”? If some of my students over the past twenty years found it familiar few found it relevant to their education and I can admit no more in my early years. Whatever relevance I have gleaned has come slowly and my moments of private reflection have oscillated around raising a family, surviving

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<sup>1</sup> See my article “The Evolution of Empiricism” at this website: <http://users.eastlink.ca/~roberthenman/>

<sup>2</sup> Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, CWL 3, University of Toronto Press, 1992, p. 34.

contemporary culture, and my own adventures and misadventures. In some way this experience of ‘gleaning’ manifests the personal and natural way of us all. To acknowledge that we have questions, or are a quest is one thing. To become that quested-reach, as is the child, is probably quite beyond our adult living-at least in these times.<sup>3</sup> I suspect Lonergan’s use of the term appropriation was understood by many as an almost mechanistic event. I find it more of a gradual becoming that never quite gets there. That experience relates more to my notion that ‘nobody survives childhood’ during this axial period. I shall take up the healing of adults in later articles but I suspect many will not enjoy my growing solution to a twisted age in history.<sup>4</sup>

This foray sets the stage and context for our discussion of the origins of our curiosity-our questions. Lonergan’s words push us towards, well maybe, noticing that we are a desire to understand. I want to focus first on just the desire. Are we a desire? Can you imagine someone asking you at a party ‘Who are you?’ or ‘What do you do?’ and you reply ‘I am desire.’ or ‘I do desiring.’ as opposed to designing! Notice the eccentricity of such a response and yet it is, or might be for you, extremely existential. To say you are desire is one thing, to ‘be’ desire, to live it, is an extreme objectification of our withinness. And yet, in our living, we do manifest a desire for many things. A discussion of the object of our desire is for the latter part of this article, let us stay with desire for now. Prior to our question is our natural spontaneous desire for something. Lonergan speaks of it as a ‘pure’ desire. Pure depicts a meaning of detachment, no ulterior motives. I observe this most in children when they ask with all that they are: ‘Mommy, what’s that?’ In some way, their chemistry and psyche are with that question. Their desire is pure. It is full-bodied. You might try and recall when you asked a question with that embodiment. It seems to be much more the child’s experience than we as adults. Why is that so? As much as this question leans more towards problems it may help in developing an appreciation for our desire and the child’s natural ‘eccentricity’. I recall my son, at the age of six, asking me one night: “Dad, why are there only two kinds of people?” It took me a brief moment to realize he was asking about gender. My bias

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<sup>3</sup> Philip McShane: *A Brief History of Tongue*, Axial Press, Halifax, 1998. See the Editor’s Introduction for a discussion of ‘these times’ in terms of an axial period in history.

<sup>4</sup> If I hold that ‘no one survives childhood’, and I am optimistic for the long term in history, surviving adulthood is still a challenge even after decent therapy. The more in tune one is with oneself, the more repugnant a culture can appear and survival can become an eccentric solitude even in the streets.

thought of white, yellow, and black so I thought of three kinds of people. The question was a youthful way of asking about procreation and I found it quite creative, but more so, he meant it. It was not a passing whim. He was quite serious and I stumbled through trying not to provide the standard answers. He was quite ‘serious’. What do I mean? His question manifested a pure desire. He did not have to pass a quiz. He was not going to be marked on how well he understood my answer. He trusted me not to steer him in a wrong direction. There was to be no external reward for getting the correct answer. He had become aware of difference and wondered why. The reward was the inner satisfaction of meeting the desire. That inner satisfaction is the resolution of the desire. Such desire can be twisted by mistaken notions of ‘How to Grow a Child’. If this desire is pure and natural to the child, do we want to keep it alive, do we want to grow it, cultivate it? It has become more than obvious to me that we must first develop an appreciation for our own desire before we can decide whether it is worth keeping alive. I have little doubt of this need in each of us. But my degree of certainty has come only after years of reflection and teaching in a culture that cultivates the unexamined life.

Let us say you come to the awareness that you are desire, does that necessitate you cultivating this desire and keeping it alive? It is worth reflecting on this to perhaps grasp further insight into how to grow a child. If we ignore this desire or stifle it what do we become? Well, we might answer, ‘Look around’.<sup>5</sup> But our ‘looking’ may have faded and what we experience in others “out there” is what we have become. So we fit in quite well and that experience can become a dis-eased comfortability. We are all a bit neurotic but at least we are in it together! I do not think it is too difficult to imagine what faded desire would bring about since in fact it is so much a part of contemporary culture. Would we prefer that our natural dynamic be a faded state of ‘being’? Then no one would have to cultivate anything and growing or educating a child would be a useless activity and have no meaning. It might be worth reflecting on that in light of our present ‘state of being’. If our desire is unknown, what is the present meaning of parenting and educating? What are we up to? What are our motivations? Besides ‘looking around’ we could also reflect on our own desire and perhaps recall those times when our desire was

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<sup>5</sup> Our culture has created the faded state. See Philip McShane, *Wealth of Self and Wealth of Nations*, Exposition Press, NY, 1975, Epilogue: “Being and Loneliness”, p. 101 ff.

alive and well and when it was not. What did those two different "states of being" provide in the way of disposition, temperament, feeling towards living, towards others?

I would like to think it obvious that the presence of our desire and its cultivation be not only a natural dynamic but a wholesome dynamic that is desired in itself. What do you think? Are my questions for reflection driving you towards some appreciation for my subtitle: "Before the Beginning?" We are desire, but that can only become true for you and I if we stop in the presence of self and our sensibility and notice the distinction between our awareness of sense as extension and awareness of self as extended.<sup>6</sup> What is this extending of you and I? It is not just a presence to the world of physical sense but also a presence to oneself providing the possibility of some self-understanding. So, before all questions there is desire and our questions manifest that desire.

Let us now take up the object of that desire. Our natural desire would seem to be for understanding such as my son's question about two kinds of people. By natural I mean that the desire for understanding is motivated just by that and not some ulterior motive as I mentioned above. But why understanding? Why not some other object and we do have those? We sometimes desire rest or sleep or food or fun. Those desires are not for understanding. But notice that those desires are not questions. We may ask how will I get rest or food or fun but the actual desire in such instances is for rest, food, or fun! When our desire is expressed in questions, it is directed towards understanding. If our desire is cultivated and kept natural, without ulterior motives, then understanding remains the object of our desire and our questions. This brings in the issue of education. How to keep the natural desire alive and focussed on its natural objective is the topic of the next article<sup>7</sup> Notice again that the desire for understanding is even prior to the question. The question manifests this natural desire. The function of education is not just to grow in understanding of our sensibility but also to grow our questedness and our self-understanding. The two grow hand in hand. Einstein was once asked to what he attributed his genius. He replied that he was not a genius but that he had the same question throughout his whole life. He desired to understand the universe in one unified field theory. That question provided him with the energy and potential to make a fair

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<sup>6</sup> McShane, *A Brief History of Tongue*, p. 144.

<sup>7</sup> This is the topic for my next article: "How to grow a Child: After the Beginning" I will say more on distractions and neurosis in later articles through reflections on healing adults.

contribution to the understanding of the physical universe. So, he did not attribute his contribution to understanding. He attributed it to his question, his desire to understand something. It would be quite a different world if our questedness were cultivated in each of us without ulterior motives. A bit utopian?<sup>8</sup> Yes, perhaps, but not a desire to be tossed aside.

I am attempting to come at this experience of desire from as many directions as possible to heighten our awareness of it and its importance in growing a child. In the end, we must do it on our own. So, I offered a puzzle at the end of my last article on the child. Did you stay with it? That ‘staying-with’ is an important feature of our topic. If you did stay with it until you ‘got it’ then you have first, data to reflect on, and secondly, it manifests some respect for your own dynamism. If you found it difficult to stay with it or shunned the exercise off as not worth your time then you might ask yourself why you decided to neglect yourself. For our secondary question was to reflect on you doing the puzzle. To neglect that process is to neglect yourself. Now to overcome the notion that I am judging you is to acknowledge that it is our culture, our education, our parenting, our way to not overly cultivate our questedness. It is not an intentional neglect. It is ‘simply’<sup>9</sup> not part of our time. It is hopefully a future activity and all one can do now is begin where we are within the context of our faded quest. Acknowledging that much is a powerful degree of honesty that opens up the possibility of further advancement.

So, how did you do with the puzzle and your self-puzzling? I will offer a further clue.

<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>1</b>			
<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>0</b>

The same law of distribution is in play in this puzzle as in the other one. Does it help you? Again, recall our secondary motivation: to reflect on our curiosity. Are you curious? Why? Does it help you to be curious in solving this puzzle? Are you curious about yourself as a puzzler?

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<sup>8</sup> It is interesting perhaps, that when we make a statement about the possibilities of self-understanding that it rings utopian to one’s ears. It would merely be a way of living that is in a process towards liveability, a deeper humanization of communal living. I have no doubt that misadventures will still be part of life, but the probabilities of a higher state of living might be increased.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Simply’ may be a poor choice of term, but something that has become all too factual for me can only be stated with such ‘factuality’.

If you got the insight to the puzzle what did that ‘do’ for you? This relates to the object of our desire. What did the insight do? Did it release the questedness in you? Did the ‘mild’ tension that often can accompany a question dissipate? Did you experience some joy when you “got” it? Notice that these questions are not about the content of your insight, but about the character of your insight-of insight itself. Are these new types of questions for you?<sup>10</sup> If you did not get the insight are you still puzzled about it? Are you able to stop and become aware of your own puzzling? Are you perhaps even agitated and even this experience is revelatory about the function of insight.<sup>11</sup>

Hopefully you may now have some ‘sense’ of this experience of yourself that I am calling desire. But what does this have to do with growing a child? This is the topic for the next article but it may be worth touching on this question briefly at this time. Any self-understanding we might grasp is also an understanding of others. The premise is that we all have certain foundational dynamics that are the same. Are we not all a desire for something at some time? Do we all not have questions at sometime? And do we not all seek insights? Because these acts of consciousness are present in all of us methods in education, parenting, and counselling can be developed that will work for people. Why: because the methods are rooted in that central foundational human self, common to us all. What is basic is our desire and that desire, intellectually, is expressed in questions. The emotionally disturbed, chemically imbalanced, and psychotic person has the same dynamics but these types of disturbances will diminish the potential of these dynamics or may at least shift the motivations of these dynamics in manners that are not developmental but only serve to increase the neurotic state.<sup>12</sup> So, one can desire to understand a child or one can desire to understand how to get revenge on one’s abusive father. The intellectual dynamics are the same, but the motive of our desire and the object of our understanding are quite different. The first may lead to a more liveable life for

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<sup>10</sup> I am writing for those not versed in the writings of Bernard Lonergan or in the science of interiority. I would recommend the writings of Philip McShane as exceptional in terms of providing direction for those who are what I call ‘secondary’ beginners of which I am one. I am writing more for those who teach children and in some way may have an advantage in that these are ‘new’ questions for them and they may have been spared from the study of philosophy. See [www.pmcshane.ca](http://www.pmcshane.ca) for articles and books by Philip McShane.

<sup>11</sup> See my article “Resilience and Stress in Education” listed on this same website.

<sup>12</sup> *Insight*: Chapter 6, sections 2.7.1 to 2.7.3 on insight and scotosis. See also my “Judgment, Reality, and Dissociative Consciousness” *Method: Journal of Lonergan Studies*, Vol. 18, # 2, Fall 2000 pp. 179 ff.

some, the latter may not only lead to violence and pain but also to an expansion of the diseased state.

In coming to some appreciation of our desire we are acknowledging a central and potential dynamic that is you and I. The infant child is dynamically alive if they have survived the multiple possibilities of DNA, the womb, and birthing. Will they survive us, our culture? Our next article takes up the challenge of how we might keep the infant 'alive'.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> See my article *Obedience and Self-Creation* on this website for a discussion of cultivating our self-creative dynamics. It is more than relevant to parenting and education.