

PARENTS BECOMING BETTER PARENTS:

Strategies of Self-Development

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July, 2005

The former article, "Parenting in the 21st Century" presented the cultural context within which we all parent. That article touched on larger issues in a theoretic tone. This article is directed towards the average reader. Although its method is empirical it does not push towards systematic insights. That is a task for future articles on the structure of developing a theory of parenting. The task of this article is to offer strategies towards transforming ourselves into instances of hope for the future as well as hope for us as parents who may be struggling with parenting.¹ There is a point of distinction here that I believe is worth acknowledging. Are you struggling with your child or are you struggling with parenting? They may appear at a first glance to be one and the same issue but much of what we struggle with is our own personality, our own ability or inability to parent, to tolerate, to accept, much of what happens in human living. The attributes of tolerance, acceptance, loving, and understanding need to be coupled with an understanding of what a child is. What are we growing and how do we do it?²

To tolerate or accept the actions of others, especially our children, may be frightening to parents. That response to our children's actions may manifest a fear or concern of what their children will do and how it will affect the child's future and our own lives as parents. That concern is valid. It is a risk. Unfortunately, the opposite approach of non-acceptance or intolerance may be experienced by children as rejection and may threaten the relationship or their behaviour may escalate in ways unimaginable. If we think of tolerance and acceptance as a context for parenting which is filled in with parenting skills,³ the hoped-for outcomes have a higher probability of success. In this article I will attempt to outline some strategic methods of self-development that I believe

¹ The provision of a context for parenting outlined in the article "Parenting in the 21st Century" is an attempt to ease self-burden and put that energy into new beginnings.

² See former articles on this website on "How to Grow a Child"

³ Skills in line with good parenting have a higher probability of flowing from self-acceptance and tolerance.

will help parents become better parents.⁴ In the conclusion I will offer a few suggestions on communal collaboration.

This section of this article is a type of self-homework.⁵ It would be worthwhile to have pen and paper in hand. Take your time and write down your responses to the various questions as you go along. Let us first reflect on the notion of tolerance. What is it? and how can we come to some understanding of this experience? Recall the last time you were tolerant of someone's actions that affected you personally. Recall why that action affected you and why you decided to tolerate that action. In tolerating that action what were you out to achieve? Or, were you perhaps dealing with a fear of expressing your opinion? What did your tolerance do for the other person? What did it do for you? Now reflect back again and just be with that experience of tolerance. What is it? That is a difficult question. Is it in some way an understanding of that person that you offered that you felt they needed at that time in their life? Did you make an intelligent decision in tolerating that person's action(s)? Why? What were your other options? What might have been the consequences of your other options?

So, just what is this experience we call tolerance? Are you able to at least, at this stage, say something about your experience of tolerance? In order to understand such an experience it is necessary to acknowledge the affect that tolerance has had on your relations with your friends, and your children. How does tolerance function in a relationship? Does it add or take away from that relationship?

Work with these questions⁶ from time to time in an effort to come to some understanding of the experience of tolerance. What can an understanding of the experience of tolerance do for us? It deepens and broadens the experience and ability to love and understand ourselves and others. This development is more than a prerequisite

⁴ I have 'raised' (That is an odd term.) two children. I prefer to think now of this 'raising' as more of a participation in their own 'becoming'. My participation is only as good as the depth of my self-understanding or self-love. That was a lesson learned about the time my children were leaving home.

⁵ This exercise may appear subjective or unscientific to the researcher in child or family studies. Whether you are experiencing stress or tolerance, you are experiencing, and since tolerance cannot be 'seen' in others, you have no choice but to sample your own experience of tolerance if you desire to get some understanding of that particular dynamic in the human person. The problem of objectivity is discussed in my article on "The Evolution of Empiricism" on this website.

⁶ Note the use of questions as a beginning in self-appreciation. It mirrors the child's beginning in language. They ask questions first seeking understanding. It relates to our natural desire for understanding. Questions are not an expression of ignorance; they are an expression of a desire to understand. That distinction is important in a culture that parades definitions and one-word (nominalism) answers to very complex issues.

for living in times when our culture manifests very little of this attribute towards the difficulties of living in a society unknowingly dedicated to the disorientation of the human spirit.

Let us reverse the situation. When was the last time someone tolerated you and your actions or comments? You might follow through this line of reflection using the same questions above for our first exercise.⁷

As you may notice this process can take some time and you might feel a lack of patience for doing it wondering what this has to do with becoming a better parent. An understanding of the complexity of human relationships is no less easier than struggling away with any of the natural sciences, in fact I would say that you and I are far more complex than the quantum particles and yet we leave parenting, one of the more important experiences of human living, to the haphazard unfolding of growing up in a family and culture of disorientation⁸. Patience is part of this development.

You can over the months and years⁹ ahead use this above process inserting the terms patience, acceptance, understanding, listening, advising, encouraging, cajoling, cultivating, and you can probably add more.

Our next exercise is to recall your responses, as an adolescent, to those who parented you. Were they tolerant? Were they judgmental? Were they patient? Did they listen and nurture? How did you respond to their method of parenting? How did you feel about their parenting at that time? How do you feel about it now? There are many variables in play concerning the way you were parented: 1) your parent's upbringing, 2) the person you were becoming,¹⁰ 3) your relationship with your parents, 4) your social world, and 5) the disorientation of our present culture to mention only a few. Are we getting some grasp of the complexity of growing children and parenting through these exercises? Are we also developing some appreciation for the patience and work required

⁷ This manifests a shift in self-understanding more directly than the former exercise.

⁸ If the culture were not so disoriented, it could be part of the natural growing within a family.

⁹ Achieving a refined expression of these experiences is a lifetime exercise, especially within the context of our cultural malaise. Our own childhood and the current cultural pressure against self-development make the process doubly difficult.

¹⁰ Think of this 'becoming' within the context of my articles on "Resilience and Education" and "A Spirituality of Obedience". See also Lonergan's *Topics in Education*, CWL 10, University Press of America, 1993, p. 100-102.

in order to move towards some self-understanding, some self-development, leading to becoming better people,¹¹ better parents.

These exercises are designed to help us understand the role of tolerance and acceptance in relationships, more specifically parenting. Because our culture is disoriented and continues to disorient human nature there is the need to respect the disorientation of children and ourselves. If children experience acceptance and tolerance they will be more inclined to share their life concerns, fears, aspirations, struggles, and joys with their parents. If they experience judgment or rejection they will seek other avenues of expression and places of acceptance. Parents will find out after the fact what is happening in their children's lives.¹²

It is also worth reflecting on whether your parent's parenting; your schooling, and your community ever encouraged or cultivated any of these traits in you as you grew. Individuals may have said to you "You should be more tolerant." Or "Why are you not more tolerant?" or "Be more tolerant." This form of dialogue does not cultivate or encourage tolerance. They are experienced usually as judgmental. What is required is the experience of tolerance within one's own consciousness, an appreciation of its value, and then one is more apt to provide the same for others. So, just what is tolerance? Well, when was the last time you experienced tolerance? Have you ever experienced tolerance? This process provides only the empirical base for an understanding of tolerance. To understand just what tolerance is would be a much more difficult task requiring the working out of the functional relations between tolerance and human psychological growth. That task lies on the level of a systematic science¹³. For our purposes we begin with the experience. You might think of what tolerance does to you when you experience

¹¹ I equate better people with better parents and because I can put this in print does not imply that I have made great leaps and bounds in my own efforts. There is the transitional period of self-appreciating one's own inadequacy and after 25 years in this area of work I still often find myself in that zone. Sincere development and personal change are slow but they are, and can be, the result of prolonged efforts at self-reflection (not navel-gazing). I have worked at converting my own self-appreciation into a methodological approach to self-understanding. The roots of that conversion lie in the writings of Bernard Lonergan and Philip McShane. See former articles for references to their works.

¹² Trust is grounded in self-acceptance and acceptance of others within the context of mystery. We may not always understand.

¹³ I am presently working on the structure of a systematic theory of parenting within the context of our cultural malaise in order to provide the possibility of a reorientation in academic pursuits on the topic. It would be a long-term project for a group of collaborators dedicated to an extreme realism that transcends the worship of naïve realism-the seen child as the real child. See my articles on "How to Grow a Child" for more on this topic.

it from others. Does the experience of tolerance generate other psychic experiences within you such as self-acceptance? Think of your actions towards children as providing the impetus for the child's development to occur. You might think of it as an experience of psychic liberation for the child.

There is the need to respect that since these traits of loving and understanding are not overly cultivated in our culture (although you may have been lucky enough to have grown with parents who did or met a teacher or relative or friend who accepted you for who you are) you are in some odd way cultivating yourself towards moving outside the culture.¹⁴ You may also notice that in working on these 'little' exercises that you expose, become aware of, inhibitions in your own personality. This is common in a culture where few if any survive childhood. Further development then may require some assistance or advice from someone specialized in that area. Not to despair, we do what we can with whom and what we are. We live and move within the realm of potentiality. Coherence is a fleeting realm of human ability and within a disoriented culture that 'fleeting' can often be quite elusive-for everyone.

Because coherence can often be a fleeting realm,¹⁵ I offer the following possibilities to support parents in their efforts of becoming better parents. It provides a forum for the personal efforts outlined above. In the first place, it is worth acknowledging our own capacities that emerge out of our potentiality. We have experiences, we are curious about experiences, we can judge and make decisions, and we love our children.¹⁶ These are all capacities for growth, for self-development, for self-understanding, for becoming better parents. Children also have capacities, to experience, to gain insights, to decide, to laugh, to play, to learn, to love. We all have similar capacities, emerging out of our natural and unrestricted desire to love and understand, to live towards coherency. As we all share these same potentialities and quite often the same issues of parenting it might

¹⁴ My method of introspection is not designed to put blame or cause on any individual. This self-development will and can overflow into every aspect of one's living. Because parenting can become such a focal part of one's life it is appropriate to apply this exercise to its performance.

¹⁵ The structure of intellect is a reach for coherency. See "Resilience and Education" this website.

¹⁶ It often occurs that adults do not love their children. This is an extreme result of the cultural dis-ease of our times. Such instances need be viewed within the context of either personal human illness or the generic illness of our planet. Tolerance in such cases need often be expressed in such cases in the form of intervention. We view physical abuse as abhorrent but the resulting scars of the psyche are what make it abuse. Unfortunately, psychic scars are quite often much more difficult to notice.

be worth considering the following option: to overcome the fear of expressing our struggles and concerns as parents. This need be understood not just as naming the struggles with our children, but more so, in sharing the struggles with our self-growth. By the time parents often seek help the situation has escalated to the point where assistance is either very difficult or almost impossible. I believe if parents were to gather to express their issues, their efforts, not only in parenting but also self-development, some progress could be possible at least on the local scene. These could also be opportunities to share their reflections on the exercises outlined above. This would keep the dynamic potentiality moving forward. It is not a therapeutic dumping ground. An occasional cathartic expression is to be expected but should that become a dominant theme development could become inhibited. If we become better parents might not our children become better parents or at least the probabilities may be increased and hope is provided in the long term as well as the immediate.

The strategies of self-development proposed in this article do need to be carried out within the following four contexts. 1) an admission that we do not understand what a child is, 2) that we do not understand how to grow people, 3) that our cultural scene is an inhibition to our efforts, and 4) these are our children and it is our community, let us participate in their creation. Parents becoming better parents is about self-understanding and self-development. If the revision of social policy¹⁷ was rooted in these aspects as well as an appreciation for the interiority of the human person the possibility of life becoming more liveable might be increased. We cannot force the psyche to develop. It's nature and desire is liberation and we have yet to appreciate the pace at which it unfolds. How can we cultivate liberation without incurring chaos? Before social policy can be effective we must change ourselves. That struggle of beginning to appreciate self-change is a prior commitment foundational to the development of any social policy or parenting. In that self-appreciation lie the seeds of a glimpse of your own desire for liberation and the

¹⁷ I have surveyed numerous texts over the past few weeks on parenting and most focus on the revision of social policy or methods in parenting. What they all miss in common is an empirical turn to the subject, to themselves as the data of child and parent studies. I teach part time in a department of Family Studies in a small university and statistical research, both qualitative and quantitative, dominates the methodological scene. The researcher leaves his or herself out of the study creating an alienation of the researcher, which is offered as a view of objectivity. The data of child or family studies is the interiority of the person not the results of event-counting.

freedom from the need to control. Cultivating liberation and control express quite different views on 1) what a child is, and 2) how to grow a child.

Why did I chose and focus on tolerance and acceptance for this article on parenting? In earlier articles I spoke of the child as a desire for love and understanding and I asked my readers to ask if they too were such a desire. This description of the human person points to my appreciation that we all desire to be loved and understood. This implies a response from others. If we are in fact this desire, this central dynamic, then our behaviour flows out of this dynamic. If this dynamic becomes disoriented our central desire for life is filtered through the damage. A desire for love and understanding calls for a response of tolerance and acceptance. When that desire is filtered or crippled the call for tolerance and acceptance is increased¹⁸. We tend to often go the other way and find it difficult to remain tolerant and accepting. The situation then often escalates, as the desire to be loved and understood is not met.¹⁹

I have attributed the experiences of tolerance and acceptance as expressions of loving and understanding another person and these experiences also pertain to us. Do you tolerate and accept yourself in your potentiality? More of our self-understanding at work here. In defence of my focus on tolerance and acceptance a few thoughts on punishment are perhaps in order. I do not believe punishment contributes anything to the liberation or self-development of the human psyche. It is an expression of a lack of understanding, our disoriented inadequacy. In other words, we are inadequate, we are potentially good parents. If that inadequacy, that potentiality, is disoriented, we resort to control, to punishment. Children, even you and I, will respond in various manners to punishment. We, they, may conform out of fear or "If I do what they want, I'll eventually get what I want." or they may conform for admiration or praise.

Some children will continue to 'react' even if punished because they experience the punishment as judgment or control. Punishment is not a cultivation of our natural desire for love and understanding. Now you might think I am imagining some utopian view of society where we tolerate everything. It is about self-discovery. Do you like to be

¹⁸ Such increase leads to the attachment problems or separation anxiety often present in personality disorders.

¹⁹ The person responds by seeking to have this unmet desire met in manners that only escalate the desire to be loved into a 'need' to be loved. Hence the neurosis begins.

controlled or punished even though you have made mistakes?²⁰ I leave the answer and its concomitant 'feelings' for your reflection. In support of this the following example might help. If your car breaks down and you become angry and break your windshield with a stone, is your situation helped? You are punishing your car, but in the end you are punishing yourself. Your problems have been increased. The car does not have a desire to 'be'. It does not respond to the punishment or anger. It just takes 'it'.

If a child is disoriented by the culture and is struggling to be, which is their basic dynamic, and the child is punished for trying to be, punishment will add further to the disorientation and further inhibit repair. The child's desire to 'be' does not just take 'it'. The child experiences our response and integrates that experience into its psychic performance expressing the new integration in ways that manifest a feeling of rejection.

Some years ago I was watching a documentary on a tribal community in South America. A mother was grinding corn in a bowl. Her child, perhaps 2 or 3 years of age, walked up and reached in the bowl with its hand in an effort to get some of the corn. The mother very gently moved her arm to the child's chest and slowly moved the child back until it fell slowly backwards to the ground. The child got up 3 more times and made an attempt to get the corn. Each time the mother reacted in exactly the same manner, never looking at the child or showing any change of facial expression. After the 4th effort the child stood, stared at the corn, and then wandered off. The mother appeared to respect the child's desire for the corn and eventually the child accepted the mother's actions, not as a rejection, but more so as okay, no corn. No emotional reactions appeared to be evoked on either side. The mother made no attempt to change the child's mind through emotional reaction or abrupt reactions. The child changed its own mind. That is an experience of tribal consciousness, one that has become fragmented over time. It would seem to be helpful to be tolerant of a disorientation that we do not understand and are at a loss to immediately resolve. The mother's response manifested a respect for the child's desire even though it was in conflict with her work. You might say she showed more respect for the child than the corn.

²⁰ The only intelligent and compassionate alternative to punishment would seem to be self-understanding, self-development, and perhaps as Aristotle attempted to view life, a comic tragedy. We do occasionally need to look at the overall muddle of human living. Its coherency is most often inadequate. What can one do with that when we are not trying to solve the problems? The role of art and communal 'partying' I suspect are very relevant here.

This article has been an attempt to outline a method of self-knowledge through an awareness of various experiences related to loving ourselves and others. Self-acceptance and self-love are very difficult to appropriate.²¹ The self-appreciation and appreciation of others that slowly emerges from those efforts have more than far-reaching implications for parenting. Our next article attempts to outline the structure for developing a theory of parenting. I shall be writing to those involved in the theoretic enterprise.²²

²¹ There is the fear of entering into our own abyss. Fear is the psychic experience of the chemical base of a feeling that is seeking integration. I often tell people who come to me for counselling that feelings are marshmallows disguised as bullets. They will not kill you, but you feel as if they will. Such feelings are disarmed by feeling them.

²² As the academy is delinquent on the issue of the proper data of child studies I would hope that the notion of theoretic would not deter anyone from making an effort at understanding. Patience is a key and an appreciation that serious understanding is naturally slow in coming. Part of the leap from common sense to theory encompasses that very appreciation.