

Getting Over Your Parents

The School of Life

I.

Introduction

What is a parent like?

Because the word ‘parent’ is a generic one, when we use it, we frequently give the impression that all parents are, in a sense, roughly the same. There exists a hugely powerful and singular image in the collective mind of what a ‘mum’ or ‘dad’ might be like. These job titles may alter over time, but at any given point, they can be counted upon to release a coherent set of associations. A mum will be kind, patient, sometimes a little fussy (in the name of love) and – broadly – adoring and adorable. A dad will be strong, decisive, sometimes a bit silly (in a very forgivable way) and – characteristically – protective and worldly. These collective fantasies particularly come to the fore around celebrations like Father’s Day and Mother’s Day, and they may crop up, too, when we mention to a colleague that we’re off home for the weekend and a picture drops into their mind of what those who live there might be like.

We don’t need to be believers in a traditional vision of the family to be, where it counts, bound to a very particular ideology of what constitutes a mum or a dad.

And yet, of course, in reality, parents come in all forms – many of them very different indeed to what the postcards or posters might suppose. A parent is simply any human who has had the

wit to find someone else with whom to reproduce, which means that the category includes its fair share of deeply outlandish and implausible figures: rogues, swindlers, hysterics, double-dealers, murderers, and fanatics. There is nothing whatsoever about the process of reproduction that promises to straighten out the knots of human nature into anything more manageable or edifying.

This feels like an insult

Modern psychotherapy is united on one point: our problems often require us to engage with our childhoods. This can feel profoundly offensive. How insulting to be told that our childhoods could matter inordinately to our adult lives: our temperament, our chances of happiness, our sexuality, our levels of anxiety and our self-esteem. Particularly if our childhoods were difficult, we want more than anything to get away from their dark, centrifugal energy and to imagine ourselves as free agents, able to determine our futures without impediment. How dispiriting to be asked to believe that who we are was substantially determined by external factors before we reached the age of reason and, moreover, that if we are to have any hope of helping ourselves, we must undertake painful and lengthy efforts to understand the past in fine-grained detail.

Why think once more (perhaps for the hundredth time, but from a slightly new angle) about a mother's self-righteousness or a father's cruelty? Can we not be done with these meddlesome characters once and for all?

It's clear why we might want to take out our annoyance on psychotherapy itself. Has this discipline not seen how broad and interesting the world is? How many grand and strange things are in it? Hasn't it soared over the Western Desert of Australia or wandered the stately corridors of palaces and national libraries? Why does it so badly want us to return to, and circle, the messy, claustrophobic start?

We understand. To take on the past, we don't need to be driven by a preternatural enthusiasm for self-exploration and we don't need to be self-pitying or furious with parents who were only trying to do their best. All that is required is a weary, dutiful realisation that the principal way to overcome our history is to address it. We must remember not out of nostalgia, but in order to be able to forget, once and for all. This should be a process of exorcism, not an homage.

Could it matter so much?

Our unwillingness to look back may not only have to do with boredom or frustration, however – it can also be a symptom of sheer incredulity that childhood might matter so much. Could this period be so critical? Could events in those short years have such an outsize influence on everything that comes after? Are children really so impressionable and so easily marked?

The short answer to all such enquiries is a weary, regretful but resounding yes. The human mind between the ages of 1 and 10 is dauntingly receptive. It is infinitely attuned to its environment, which means that our whole identity can be shaped decisively and near-permanently by our young experiences. A somewhat cold, forbidding father or an erratic mother really may be all that is required to breed an elevated degree of anxiety or self-hatred that colours the next eight decades. This susceptibility has been present throughout history, but only now are we beginning to notice it and give it due attention; every era had its share of childhood-damaged people, it's just that no one bothered to find out why the fishmonger was so sad, the merchant fell into rages or the knight was impotent – just as no one bothered to investigate what might pollute water or how germs could spread. We are, finally, becoming a little more careful about causes and effects – and so it's only logical that

greater sensitivity should have spread to our assessments of our beginnings.

In insisting on the importance of our early years, it can be helpful to consider the acquisition of language. Without us having any memory of the phenomenon, we all learnt tens of thousands of words and millions of their combinations between the ages of 0 and 5. While we were innocently going about our business – doing cartwheels in the garden, drawing fish at the kitchen table, eating biscuits in front of the TV – a part of our minds was picking up and assembling, with extraordinary ingenuity, entire dictionaries of terminologies, declensions, verb endings, gerunds and subordinate clauses. Without us having any clue how it all happened, we became expert grammarians, far surpassing our mightiest computers in dexterity.

We should imagine that something rather similar was going on in the psychological sphere: we were acquiring an extensive command of emotional language. We were learning about trust, communication, esteem, kindness, cruelty, shame, anger, empathy, selfishness and responsibility. And we didn't realise that this was happening any more than we realised that we were learning to speak. We were simply going about the ordinary business of childhood while being emotionally imprinted in a most permanent and comprehensive way by the people around us.

We now spare little time to think about how relative our emotional language might be, just as we seldom reflect on the arbitrariness of speaking English or French rather than Sentinelese or Pirahã. We overlook that there are people for whom love is *mohabbat* (Hindi), or who bid each other goodnight with *hyvää yötä* (Finnish) or *wǎn'ān* (Cantonese). Or, to shift register, people who don't feel depressed every time they succeed, or worry that any sexual encounter might end in shame.

And finally, as with standard language, with time, we stand to realise how appallingly hard it can be to learn a new and different language; what a struggle we have ahead of us when we no longer want to speak in our allocated tongue – a tongue of anxiety, self-hatred, contempt or cynicism – and seek to try and express ourselves instead in tones of trust, calm and kindness. This is a challenge no easier than for an English speaker to attempt to become rapidly fluent in Korean or Icelandic.

The defenceless impressionability of a child

To accept the importance of childhood, we need above all to take on board and inwardly feel the desperate impressionability and vulnerability of a 2-year-old child.

Notice, first, their scale. Their fingers are implausibly tiny, their wrists even more so. A modest bump to the head or three centimetres of water could finish them off.

Notice, too, how out of control they are. Saliva dribbles from their mouth, their head bobs drunkenly when they are weary, they fall asleep in supermarkets or on the laps of near strangers.

They are wholly, terrifyingly, trusting. They lack all defences. They take everything at face value. They'll follow you wherever you want to take them. You can tell them strange stories about who lives in the house next door, why the trees look the way they do or what sort of a human being you are. And they'll believe you.

They have no place from which to judge anything independently. They can't tell if Mummy is as nice as she claims, they simply know that she has supernatural powers and understands how to drive a car and make lumps of dough rise miraculously into cakes in the oven. They won't be able to determine whether Daddy's actions are reasonable or kind until another decade has passed.

This vulnerability is both touching and – when one remembers how damaged certain adults are – appalling. One can do anything with little people. Tell them you are their friend and

then burn their hand, give them a lolly and then separate them from their parents, whisper to them late at night that no one must ever know about what just happened and ruin them for life. It sounds highly disturbing, and it is.

We were those children once. We aren't any longer. We know the ways of the world now; we're tall and our voices carry. We can think freely. But the distortions of those years have a habit of remaining embedded within our minds for a long time, beneath a substratum of maturity, without us ever really knowing. We owe it to ourselves to take a very patient look at what might have happened to us before we knew who we were.

What is a good parent?

We can afford to sound appropriately stern and forbidding; there really are such things as good and bad parents, just as there are good and bad pilots or good and bad brain surgeons. Of course, in some areas there are shades of grey – and there can always be touching reasons why people fail, with confessions proffered that console and cheer – but we shouldn't lose sight of a few categorical measures of decency.

Firstly, and most importantly, a competent parent is someone who is inordinately pleased that their child has come into the

world and who never ceases to remind themselves or their offspring of that fact – in direct and indirect ways, at small and large moments, pretty much every day. There is no risk of spoiling someone in this way: spoilt people are those who were denied love, not those who were regularly bathed in its calming waters. It's no easy matter to make it through adult life, and boundless early enthusiasm fortifies us for the back-breaking journey ahead. So long as we have tasted love for long enough at the start, we stand never to lose hope entirely in the tumultuous periods that follow. Love will be our finest protector against despair.

Secondly, a good parent is attuned to their child: they listen – very closely indeed – to what the small person is trying to say. This means getting down on their knees and calmly paying attention to messages that may sometimes sound extremely strange or frustrating. Maybe the child is saying that they are very sad, even though it's their birthday and the parent has gone to enormous trouble with their presents. Maybe they are saying that they are angry with their teacher, even if education is, in principle, very important and the school was difficult to get into. Maybe they are explaining that they are fed up with their granny, though of course she means well and she's our mother, too. Children are filled with complicated emotions that often have no place in the average adult's assessment of

what is 'normal', let alone convenient. Good parents suspend judgement and check their certainties. There is no danger of encouraging entitlement by doing so. People who cause a fuss don't generally do so because they have been listened to a lot; they scream and shout (and later may take drugs or rob shops) because their smaller, younger messages were never heard.

A good parent is, furthermore, not so fragile that they constantly need to be obeyed. They can take being called names sometimes; they long ago lost their pride. They sufficiently understand the unfairness of life not to mind being someone on whom a child, especially a teenage one, occasionally offloads their disappointments at the misery of everything. They don't need to instil terror; they have the self-confidence to be ignored or overlooked brusquely when a child's development requires it.

A good parent isn't envious of their children. They are strong enough to allow them to have a better life than they did.

Good parents are not sadists: they never derive relief from making a child miserable. They don't feel any cleverer themselves by telling a child that they're an idiot, or more in control by monitoring the child's every move. They don't want to pass on their sadness and regret – and they don't think it's

a good idea to make someone very unhappy because someone else made them miserable long ago.

They are sufficiently on top of their own issues to be able to warn their children about them. They make it easy for their child to work out what the family problems are – and to move on from them. They don't insist on their normality and then set their child the challenge of determining where they've been lied to. They don't inject their poison into anyone; their jealousy, terror, ambition or disappointment remain matters for them alone.

They don't need excessive attention from their children. They don't demand admiration – and certainly not gratitude. They have enough of an audience elsewhere.

They know how to be calm and even boring, too. They absorb the excitements and terrors of a child without adding to them. They show up, day after day, and act with reliable dullness; of course they have their own drama going on beneath the surface, it's just that no child wants to think of their parent as overly complicated or three-dimensional. A good parent doesn't mind being, in a benign sense, a caricature.

A good parent knows how to play – their imaginations are free. The doll can be a princess, the sofa could be a ship and dinner

might be pushed back by half an hour without peril. They're solid enough inside not to need to impose rigidity on the world. Sometimes, they can allow themselves to be very silly.

They know about boundaries. The game was hilarious for a long time, but now it's the moment to wind down, to put the paints away, to get back to work or to go up to bed. A good parent doesn't mind being hated for a time in the name of honouring reality.

Around a good parent, a child is, at the same time, allowed to utter 'no' in response to certain matters, with sufficient autonomy to disagree. The child may not always have a say, but they should invariably have a voice.

Finally, a good parent is tender: of course a teddy's lost eye doesn't matter in the broad run of things, but a child's world is small, and minor things loom large in it. Good parents therefore have the patience to respond to their child's minor crises and delights from a sure sense that maturity will emerge through precisely targeted indulgence.

Here is a small table summarising the themes under discussion. Think back to your past and give your carers a score out of ten to measure how things went. It isn't unfair or mean to hold people

to account in the privacy of our own minds. We don't need a score of 120 to be robust adults, but if things were to drop much below sixty, there might be grounds for a good deal of sorrow – and necessary reflection.

My parent ...	Score out of ten
made me feel deeply loved and wanted	
was often highly attuned to what I actually felt	
was able to tolerate a degree of innocent disobedience	
was authentically happy about my success	
lacked sadistic impulses	
avoided imposing too many of their own issues on me	
didn't demand to be admired	
wasn't too exciting	
knew how to play	
had boundaries	
tolerated dissent	
took an interest in my 'small' joys and pains	