

"The Critical Inter-relationship of Parent and Child in a Modern
Day Confrontation of Wills"

OR

"Life Gets Tedious, Does It Not"

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Children! Name one among us who doesn't love them. Ok, name ten among us who doesn't love them. Children are the sunshine of our lives, the promise of tomorrow, the memories of yesterday, and a persistent pain in the nether regions.

Having never experienced parenthood first hand in any day save the present, I can only speculate as to the comparative ease or difficulty with which the task has been attempted in the past. Surely, the larger, agrarian lower and middle class families of the past were not beset with the seemingly insurmountable problems of today's beleaguered parenting unit.

Planned parenthood had not yet become a familiar "buzz word", yet we know that those large families were planned with great forethought and precision!

I say this for several reasons. First, and most obvious, the male child was needed as a welcome addition to the work force, and the female child as a support mechanism for this force.

Secondly, the lack of accessibility to Salvation Army Thrift Stores and other secondary outlets for pre-owned clothing, established the "hand-me-down" in the favorable economic position of reducing unit cost. A durable pair of bib overalls, (even without an alligator or polo pony at the left breast), could be passed down, and down, and down through a succession of male youngsters, spreading its utility, as well as its material, thinly, but effectively over more units.

I will grant you that this procedure was not without its minor pitfalls. The third or fourth phase user was apt to have more problems with lacerations and superficial injuries of the knee, was certain to be considered irresponsible due to his inability to safely store anything in his pockets, and, if misfortune or happenstance ranked him behind the runt of the family, then ragged cuffs were to be a plague visited on him and his sibling successors.

Feed sacks offered equal utility for the young females, though sometimes not without slight misrepresentation on the part of the matriarch of the family. (I have heard my Aunt Tabitha say that she was over seventeen before she learned that Purina was not a well known Italian designer, and a distant third cousin once confided to me that he thought he had seen several dresses which had been created from feed sacks before they had been completely emptied.)

Nevertheless, the feed sack provided an additional inexpensive method of clothing the small ones. Unfortunately, this same method was not available to the family when it came to providing shoes. (I have, at times, felt that the feed manufacturers overlooked this possibility in choosing not to package their product in various sized oxfords or brogans. In so doing, they could have maintained and strengthened the strategy set out in the domestic prints and stripes of the sacks. It would have been the perfect way for an up and coming manufacturer to gain a firm toehold in the marketplace; but perhaps they were fearful of having their product only "half-soled".)

At any rate, by going barefoot in the summer, and possibly alternating days of school attendance (if and when school was attended), the wear and subsequent expense was minimized. (The alternative of each wearing one shoe and hopping to school was never considered, because as we all know, it was over 5 miles to the schoolhouse, and ten miles back, and uphill both ways. Even for the child of that day, this was a bit too much.)

And so, with a few visits from an itinerant cobbler, and the luck of a warm spring and fall extending the summer, the parent was able to have his offspring shod in an economically effective manner.

Now, assuming that the garden plot remained even reasonably productive, or that the hogs didn't come down with the cholera and the cow go dry simultaneously, the adult principals were well on the way to successful parentage. They had only to add a modicum of love and individual attention, blend in a few oranges and brazil nuts at Christmas time perhaps a handmade toy, or a rubber ball or a doll for the birthday celebration, and they had state-of-the-art child rearing.

Simplistic though it be, the case, then, is stated. The six - eight - ten offspring family was couched in practicality. Even the well known and often evoked law of averages supported the theory. Surely out of eight or ten one or two would turn out alright.

I would suppose that even a higher percentage grew into responsible, well-intentioned adults, were it not for one disturbing fact. Somewhere along the line, the majority forsook

this simple and basic lifestyle. Somehow, amid the austerity and downright common sensibleness of their upbringing, they caught a glimpse of "Paree", and the simplicities of life "down on the farm", began their uncontrollable transformation to present day complexity.

Surely, our forefathers (and foremothers) could not have foreseen the trials and tribulations to which future progenitors most certainly would be subjected. If we temper our judgment with benevolence, perhaps we can forgive each generation individually for some small indulgences. But, in retracing the slow, but certain, steps of this gradual metamorphosis leading from the ideal to the impossible, we see the unmistakable pattern of malice, yes, even of conspiracy against those of us who must attempt to raise the "thoroughly modern Millie and Billy".

Obviously, the present generation of parent has been wronged. No single generation could begin to mire itself so deeply in the marshlands of procreative effort. The stone which began its descent with the first excessive fatherly kindness, now crashes ahead, leveling those who dare offer opposition.

Perhaps that excess was a small rag doll or a real baseball, or just a half day respite from weeding the tobacco patch, but as surely as you and I breathe, that kindness found our Achilles heel, the chink in our future armor, if you will, and signalled our defeat.

The wisdom of the author of this verse was lost on those who preceded us.

"Speak gruffly to your little boy,
And beat him when he sneezes,
He only does it to annoy,
Because he knows it teases".

Oh, if only this creed could have been adopted nationwide, the "sins of the fathers might not have been visited on the sons." And now we suffer, unable to reverse the trend, because once the indulgence in offspring began, there was no turning back.

If only one generation could have had the fortitude to say, "By heaven, my kids are not going to have it nearly as good as I did", all this could have been averted. But no one said that, and the pressures of providing moved from the realm of necessity to that of indulgence.

As the movement spread, the parent became apprehensive of the large family, fearing his inability to keep pace with peer parent pressures. This reduction in family size, accordingly diluted the captive work force, thereby lowering yields and profits.

This in turn drove families from the farms to the cities, which only further compounded the problem. Now, parents were working for those very devils which were undermining them, mass-producing toy manufacturers, clothiers who undertook to adorn the child in undersized adult garb, publishers bent on filling those little heads with unheard of desires, schools which would educate them, and even worse, bring them together in daily convention, confectioners who assured the success of a veritable magnitude of dentists, and the automobile producers, who circled like vultures waiting to turn those little heads as they grew larger.

Yes, many factors have joined to speed this evolutionary process to its present, deplorable state. After much thought

and research, I have determined the major social changes which have contributed to this revved-up evolution. In the interest of brevity and clarity, I have reduced the number to four, which in combination, must clearly bear the major portion of blame. They are:

1. Passage of child labor law.
2. The disappearance of the one room schoolhouse and the misconceived theory in education that "bigger is better".
3. The advent of mass communication.
4. The demise of the livery stable and its successor, the automotive service station, as social gathering places.

I realize that these four changes are readily apparent as to their evolutionary contribution, but, please, allow me to plead my case in more definite examples.

There should be no question regarding the effect of child labor laws on today's parent. Had we been able to keep those little rascals slaving away on the farms and in the factories, we would have been able to stem the early trickles of what has become a tidal wave. But, an idle mind is the devil's playground and, give the devil his due, he must not have missed even one opportunity.

All that time, when kids could have been putting in those 12 to 16 hour days, was instead spent thinking, and begging and conniving, and plotting to overthrow the parental power structure. Oh, the plot was subtle in the beginning, but it worked its way with unbridled speed through wagons and doll houses, Daisy air guns and bows and arrows, footballs and baseballs, model trains and miniature steam engines, taking each new generation by surprise.

Truly, those pioneering legislators who precluded the gainful employment of these idle minds have proven to be turn-coats in the parent-child conflict.

When the one room schoolhouse gave way to "bigger and better" facilities and methods, our children began to learn too much.

Now I'm certainly not against education, but too much of a good thing can be dangerous. I'll be the first to admit that having our children well-versed in the three "R"'s would have served our purpose nicely. To perform the tasks which should have been assigned to them all these years, they would have needed to read instructions, add up their weekly hours, and sign their time cards.

So who needs more education or bigger schools? Before you answer, consider this. The larger the school the more chance for collusion exists among the little buggers. It is here that they learn not only of things academic, but of \$47.00 designer jeans, \$65.00 athletic shoes, \$30.00 rock concerts, \$2000.00 computers, and of automobiles which rival our homes in price.

It is here, too, that they become involved in extra-curricular activities; athletics, band, chorus, drama and all those subversive activities which visit misery on the parent. Now, you throw in the ever present impact of radio, television, movies, records, tapes, catalogs, magazines, posters, etc. and the problem becomes full-blown.

The dialogue of today's parent-child confrontation defies belief. Consider this.

"Hey Dad, baseball season is almost here and I'm going to need a new bat this year."

"Well OK son, we'll go down to the store and pick one out."

Interlude! During which the cost of the upcoming acquisition is increased at the rate of \$1.27 per gallon of gasoline burned.

"Over here Dad, here's the one I need!"

Why this bat is made of aluminum, Son. (Its purchaser had best be made of steel, too! It takes a tough man to pay \$65.00 for a baseball bat.)

"But Dad, its just what I need, and besides, everybody has one."

"Well Son, I don't know. Perhaps if the prime rate goes down a bit."

OK Dad, but don't blame me if I don't make the all-star team this year."

Or maybe this every day conversation would strike a responsive chord.

"Oh, Daddy, I have the most wonderful news. The band has been invited to go to Tokyo for the Incense Bowl parade."

"Wonderful, little Mary, when is it."

"Next New Year's Day. That means we have over four months to get our \$3,100.00 turned in."

"Well, let's see Mary, if Mom takes a second job, and if we take a second mortgage on the house, and maybe Mom and I and little brother can sell blood once a week, and if Uncle Mort passes on before then, perhaps we can make it."

In the past, should dame fortune have favored the union with boys rather than girls, those so favored could chuckle behind their backs at their peers who had to bear up under the greater financial strain of raising females. What with a need for prom dresses and an inbred concern with fashion and its frequent and fickle changes, and all the other excessive costs attendant to the rearing of girls, the male child was a bargain economically.

But, even those chuckles have ceased in the face of \$90.00 tuxedo rentals, \$20.00 hair styles, and the questionable ethics of orthodontists who claim to be able to straighten the teeth of the male child as well as the female.

Not a staid, conservative black tuxedo, mind you, but one of white, gray, lavender, green, or purple material, garish in style, and sure to be out of garish style by the time the next big event rolls around. Not a simple, inexpensive cropping of hair to keep it from impeding the vision or soiling the shirt collar, but a useless styling of the hair which does no more than make the child appear to fit in with his peers. And good, sound, straight teeth only serve to enable the son or daughter to consume more meat, so expensive when compared to oatmeal or gravies.

How I yearn for those early days of productive child labor, or even a return to a more palatable period of the evolution, when children were only accorded a part of their parents time and meager resources. But, I fear, there is no turning back.

How long has it been since you've seen a wooden baseball bat tacked and taped to repair the damage of some prodigious blow, or a kid's football with adhesive tape covering the seams at both ends to prevent the bladder from escaping its leather confines. Young girls no longer play with dolls of conservative nature, choosing instead to immerse themselves in the hollow headed world of the Barbie doll. (Honestly now, haven't you ever wondered about the moral mind-set of a doll that looks so unblemished, unwholesome, and unhomely?) And we mustn't forget the newcomer to the kiddie world, the Cabbage Patch doll, which is downright vulgar on the basis of price alone.

We seek only the best for our children, but "best" seems to be always defined by someone else. Yet, I still long for the day when they were to be seen and not heard, when they took an old cold tater and waited, when they slept four to a bed crossways, and at a time when they were still ambulatory.

How many kids do you see driving 15 year old rattletraps? The term has even fallen from the language. The automobiles of our teenagers are sleek and stylish, tuned to a fine edge, and replete with options which only a jaded mind could create. They fire the pride of our children and drive the parent to financial ruin.

Can we recover in time to save ourselves in this day of reckoning. I think not! The demise of the livery stable and its successor, the automotive service station, took from us our last defensible stronghold. Lest you fail to grasp this reasoning, allow me to explain.

Parents need desperately and urgently to regain the respect and loyalty of their offspring. The Duke of Windsor once observed, upon visiting the United States, that he was "astounded by how well the American parent obeyed his children." But there was, believe it or not, a time when parents were respected and considered more than a meal ticket or a two-worker dream factory.

Of course, in the days before personal deficit financing became an accepted way of life, before we endeavored first and foremost to fill the child's every waking moment with educational and recreational pursuits, before the wonders of the space age become commonplace, the young ones felt privileged to accompany the parent to almost any destination. And among the grandest of those destinations was the neighborhood service station. How could a child fail to respect and admire a father who would allow him this brief moment of revelry.

The child sensed how important his father was, because everyone knew him, some even calling him "Mister", and all hastened to do his bidding. They pumped gasoline, checked oil levels, scrubbed windshields, whisk broomed interiors, aired tires, and prior to father's departure, expressed appreciation for his visit. The child observed in awe.

Then there were the visits when it was necessary to elevate the vehicle on the lift, in order to perform what the child knew could be only the most complicated procedures. Father and mechanic would stand beneath or, if cautious, to the side of the vehicle and gesture and point and speak in hushed tones, much as a physician and family head might discuss the care of a loved one. The child could only observe and wonder what secret and well-conceived plan had been dictated, but he knew without doubt

that his father had taken the bull by the horns, and stood firm in the face of adversity. Kids had to respect that. Following this activity father had the option, usually exercised if the behavior of the child warranted, to award the child six cents which would purchase a soft drink from the cooler and a penny's worth of salted Spanish peanuts from a rather suspect looking glass globe. Then came the finale. Father would join the other men present in partaking of a Coca-Cola, but before they began, each would wager the price of the drink on the hope that his bottle carried a more distant point of origin than his opponent. The times when Father proved a winner simply increased the awe and respect which the child held for him.

In fact, each visit served to raise Dad's stature. He was a take-charge type of man, well known and well respected, and he was able to command the loyalty of his children.

But don't be fooled into thinking that this option is open to the present day parent. It is not!

Children don't have the time for such mundane activities. They're home making out shopping lists, or banging on computers, or in the midst of a 10 year development program leading to Olympic competition, or surreptitiously plotting for the Student Council to overthrow the present middle school administration. I tell you, they're too smart, too sophisticated, too shrewd for their parents good. They've progressed to the point of being able to manipulate the parent almost at will.

Lets look for a moment at what few options do exist for us to attempt an escape from the manipulative force exerted by the child. If we were able to extricate ourselves gracefully, perhaps we could again command our posts effectively.

Here is where the dilemma takes on personal characteristics. The proper course would depend on the child and what they do not know or cannot do. In my case, I might attempt to compete in an Iron Man Triathlon competition. That would force the boy to respect me. (It would also force my life insurance carrier to pay off, which would benefit only two-thirds of my family.) I don't consider that a viable option.

On the other hand, maybe winning next year's Nobel Peace Prize in Physics would do it. If only I didn't have a PTO meeting on the scheduled night of awards.

Perhaps, if I were elected governor next time, then I could obtain tickets to U.K. basketball games. But no, that smacks of bribery.

Truly, I am at a loss, and I'm sure the majority of us will agree. There is little, if anything, the parent can do. There are child labor laws, distasteful though they be. Education, or perhaps I should say school attendance, is mandatory by law. All forms of mass communications betray us in exposing the child to all manner of useful information, and today's service stations are only a shadow of a former proud endeavor. Hell, cars can't be repaired today anyway, and I haven't seen a coke bottle with the name of a city on it in years.

No, we'll never regain our children's respect. There are no avenues open to us. Our only consolation is that today's child is tomorrow's parent and, barring the coming of Judgment Day, they'll have to pay the piper tomorrow, with interest, for today's dance.

I sincerely hope you've not been offended by the brevity of this discourse. There were numerous expansive avenues I could have taken, but I promised my son I'd be home early tonight. We're taking the family car out for refueling. Might even have a big orange while we're there.