

## DIFFICULT PARENTING TRUTHS!

I've preached about parenting several times in my 42 year career, especially when our children were younger, but now that they're grown and have children of their own, it seems prudent to revisit the theme, perhaps from a more mature perspective. And why not do it on Mother's Day? And whether or not you're a parent, you were parented, plus if you're an active San Dieguitan, you will surely mingle with children and youth as members of this beloved community. Moreover, there are insights here, I hope, that are relevant to any and all intimacies.

Having a child in the house is like living with a Zen master: it requires constant attention, patience, and selflessness. There exist plenty of books and classes around to enlighten us, even parents around with whom to commiserate or rejoice, yet parenting still remains the single most humbling vocation we adults will ever shoulder.

Most of us as fathers and mothers are able to deliver some meaning and some love, as well as some roots and some wings to our offspring. We can be *good enough* in every sense of that phrase. Psychologist Bruno Bettelheim, who had a checkered career himself as a father, said: "There are no perfect parents and no perfect children, but every parent can be good enough." I believe that, don't you?

Now on to some difficult truths, lessons rarely found in parenting manuals, because they aren't easy to either say or hear...but hopefully useful lessons for us all.

First, although there's a resurgence of interest in being a parent today, let's admit it, parenting isn't for everybody. Some adults simply don't feel sufficiently comfortable around children to have their own. Others enjoy children but don't need their own. Look

at the number of non-parent adults who work with our own San Dieguito children and do a dynamite job, starting with our beloved Alison Crotty.

Parenting is merely *one* way to shape society and definitely needs to be a chosen not a pressured path. No one is a better human being just because they have children.

Second, parenting simply can't be accomplished alone or even as a couple, but requires the active support of an extended family, neighbors, friends, and religious community. It takes an entire congregation, an entire village, an entire world to assist in our parenting. No question about it. Our Religious Exploration program here at San Dieguito is an intentional, comprehensive, intergenerational operation. I can't emphasize too strongly that every one of you adults is yoked to these children and they, in turn, are yoked to us.

A third hard-won lesson that arrives as a blow to some parental egos is the realization that there are other adults around in our lives who can relate to our own children exceptionally well, even do and be some things we parents can't do and be. It would be wise for all parents to make something like the following pledge upon their child's birth:

*We celebrate and welcome the new life that has come into ours. One of the lessons, you, our beloved child, will need to learn is about sharing and we, your parents, need to learn this lesson, too. There are those around us who are entitled, nay invited, to be involved as you grow and change, and we need to feel secure enough to share you with them. Our parenting role in your world is distinct and irreplaceable, and remembering that can make our sharing you with others easier.*

Think of parenting in this way. A good home provides the protection of sturdy walls and a sheltering roof. But windows and doors are also essential. Through windows our children glimpse a larger world and through doors come neighbors, friends, and

strangers into their lives, full of instruction—sometimes good, sometimes bad, just like we parents deliver.

Furthermore, we parents are related to our kids—be they natural, adopted, or step children—but we aren't ultimately responsible for them. Related to, but not responsible for—note the difference. Some of us parents mistakenly wish to grab the basic credit or blame for how our kids turn out without allowing them to shoulder the bulk of their own credit or blame. We play a critical role in our children's formation, but they possess their own singular identity. The desire to re-create the self through ones child can prove to be a devastating parental blindspot.

That's why during Unitarian Universalist child celebrations we often read Kahlil Gibran's declaration of independence, reminding both parent and child to take it seriously:

*Your children are not your children. 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...*

If we Unitarian Universalists truly believe in the inherent worth and dignity, hence the autonomy, of every individual, children can't be exempt from this fundamental principle. The attitude we parents need to develop toward our children is what the Buddhists call creative detachment. We aren't the ultimate determiners of our children's destinies. They are.

What it comes down to is our being free enough to proclaim the following: "We have created a life, now let the child have it. Let her decide what she wants to do with the life we gave her." You see, our children have inalienable rights to become what they are capable and desirous of becoming, no matter how different from us or our blueprints.

That's a fair and manageable request, most parents would reply. And it works just fine as long as our child's choices resemble our own. But when our son or daughter decides to espouse values and engage in behaviors different from, even antithetical to, ours, seemingly wasting their talents and time not to mention our energies and money... then do we have sufficient respect of their personhood to allow them to forge ahead or do we panic into self-serving interventions?

Unquestionably, our bedrock UU principle of the inherent worth and dignity of everyone is most sorely and regularly tested with our very own offspring!

As vehemently as I disagree with the disastrous message and methods of the *Heaven's Gate* cult, I was impressed back then with one of the mother's attitudes toward her seemingly wayward, certainly absent, son. He was an angry 19-year-old when he stumbled upon a cult meeting in a park near their Los Gatos, California home.

David disappeared soon afterward, and for 21 years his mother tried to track him down, eventually organizing parent support groups for that very purpose. Finally, after seeing him twice during the intervening years, she accepted David's choice and even became proud that he had become a certified computer network engineer.

Instead of ultimately rejecting him, she accepted her son and his choice as lovingly as she could, uttering when interviewed after his death: "It's been, I'd say, 21 agonizing years of losing my son, and it doesn't end, *yet* David led a fairly dedicated, fruitful life in the cult. How many parents can say the same?"

A fifth challenging parental truth has to do with loving our children equally. And when we don't, we either fail to admit it or we take ourselves to the woodshed. One way out of this quandary is to state: "I love my children differently rather than equally." We

usually (not always) love all our children and invariably from beginning to end. But love is not enough. Truly gratifying parenthood also demands some liking and enjoying of our children, and let's face it, that can vary markedly from child to child.

Whereas we take for granted that adults mesh with some adults and bomb out with others, we expect equal levels of enjoyability with respect to our parent-child bonds. But the fact is that certain children are simply, on the whole, more enjoyable than others due to personality-resemblance or relational rhythm or whatever. Some parents and children just go together well, and others don't. And we parents need to make peace with that reality!

Surely, comparisons are odious, and I don't recommend telling certain of our children that we enjoy them more or less than the others, although, it's seldom a secret to anybody. Yet it's liberating for parents to know that we aren't lousy parent-people, just because we love our children differently and enjoy them unequally. And, of course, the same goes for children's attitudes toward and treatment of their respective parents. That's for sure.

As long as we're swimming the murky, doleful waters of parenting, let me take us one fathom deeper. Most parenting manuals announce that in parent-child conflicts, everyone can win, and furthermore, that resentments will eventually melt away in due time. That's certainly our prayerful hope, but let's not turn unduly romantic.

In the Egyptian Coptic version of the New Testament, there resides a disturbing passage where Jesus declares that "no one can enter the realm of heaven until they have dealt both with their love and hate toward their parents." That's pretty strong counsel, coming from one of the evolved peace-makers of history. But it's true and furnishes

spiritual wisdom, since too many sons and daughters remain trapped all their days, because they simply can't voice and vent their sincerely-felt ambivalent feelings toward their parents.

Well, I'm here to announce something most of us know: given the right conditions, counseling, timing, and lots of good fortune, healing can occur. Hence, no parent-child relationship can ever be totally written off, for memories of love and possibilities of hope live on, and they should. I personally heed the Hindu wisdom in all my interpersonal bonds, namely, "don't ever throw anyone out of your heart!" Faith, hope, and love have certainly sustained our family through some dismal, depressing days and propelled us toward moments of healing.

But, and here's a big but: we humans live with profound sorrows and irreconcilable breaks everywhere in our existence, including our families. To scapegoat or second-guess either ourselves or our children merely aggravates the anguish. The harsh reality remains that not all parent-child bonds have happy beginnings, middles, or endings. The key, then, is to live with ambivalence and, when possible, to diminish any lingering bitterness or resentment, instead of acting out or stuffing our shadow emotions.

There's another lesson that's been particularly emancipating for me as a parent. I have a cartoon that shows a father holding his child over his knee and spanking him. It reads: "First, I'd like to destroy a ridiculous myth...this isn't going to hurt me more than it hurts you!" Now, I don't believe in corporal punishment nor did I ever practice it. But there's a deeper myth at work here, a pervasive one in our parenting culture. The myth says: "I'm doing this for your own good, for your own benefit, my child!"

Come on: let's come clean and clear about why we parents *usually* do something. The reality is that you and I truthfully parent according to what we perceive to be good for ourselves as father and mothers. It's presumptuous to claim full knowledge of what's good for our children, especially when they mature to decision-making age. Check it out: so much of what we say our children need is actually either what we need them to get or what we need to give.

The prevalent attitude is that the parents' job is raise their children to be happy and responsible humans. I agree with the responsible part but neither the happy nor the raise part. As my friend said to her 17 year-old son recently: "Lee, by the way, you're not always going to be happy, so get used to it. Rather I want you, in good and bad times, to go to Lee, to be the best version of yourself possible." That's the healthy and responsible thing to do.

And as for raising, we parents don't raise children. We raise flags, blinds, arms, and corn but not humans. Oh, to be sure, we prepare an environment and we train ourselves as parents but children ultimately shape themselves, interacting within and beyond our created contexts. They may choose to be happy and responsible or not, and finally by their own standards.

In the last analysis then, our best parenting gift to our children is basically our own best moral and spiritual example, our own authenticity. It reminds me of a wonderful story. A teacher in Seattle, recently asked her class of third graders how many thought there would be a nuclear war. All of the children except one raised their hands. The teacher was startled, but she was even more astonished that one child held out against all

the others. So she asked, “Why don’t you agree, Carrie?” And the little girl answered, “Because my Dad goes to a meeting every Tuesday night, so that they won’t be any war.”

We are catalysts, we are milieu-shapers, we are major contributors to our children’s tomorrows, but we aren’t the final determiners of our children’s future. Such a belief grants parents far too much and children far too little power.

So, admit it, my friends: you and I parent primarily from and for ourselves. Sure, there’s communication with and feedback from our children. But I can only act on the basis of what feels right to me as a father being with each of my children. A mundane yet daily example. If I want a hug from one of my children, then I need to go after it rather than beg or barter for it. This is my guideline: “give and ye shall often receive, wait to receive and ye shall often resent.”

Certainly it’s a delight when our children respond to my gifts of love. It’s a thrill when they reciprocate and initiate too. But their response can’t be predicted, promised or programmed. There are no guarantees in life as in parenting, only opportunities. So, I’ve learned to seize them.

I’ve always tried to beat my children to the draw, to give them some undivided attention as frequently as I could before they stood up and clamored for it. Not for their sake really, but for my own. And all too soon, we learn, don’t we, that we parents covet the presence of our children more than they need ours.

I want to close with a story that reveals that the real joy and power in parenting comes from mutuality. A boy and his mother were walking along a road when they came across a large stone. The boy said to his mother, “Do you think if I use all my strength, I

can move this rock?” His mother answered, “yes, if you use all your strength, my son, I’m sure you can do it.”

The boy began to push the rock. Exerting himself as much as he could, he pushed and pushed. The rock barely budged. Discouraged, he said to his mother, “You were wrong, Mom, I can’t do it.” His mother placed her arm around the boy’s shoulder and said, “No, my son. You didn’t use all your strength, you didn’t ask *me* to help.”

You see, we parents and children desperately need one another to accomplish all we might *and* all we must along life’s rocky pathway. We need the best version of one another to make it through to the other side!

A hearty and holy Mother’s Day to one and all!

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