

PARENTING IN THE 21ST CENTURY: Respecting History and Global Culture

© Robert Henman

May, 2005

Halifax, NS.

Parents want answers to their problems of parenting now, and they want the right answers, the ones that will solve their problems. This essay will not offer answers to specific problems.¹ If you would appreciate some insight into what has come to be called the dysfunctionality of our times there may be some assistance in this brief essay. That context can provide hope in the long term as well as a deeper level of acceptance of the disorientation² of communal and family life. That context, coupled with the insights from our former articles on "How to Grow a Child", can also provide the seeds to the long-term solution to much of what is presently experienced in parenting. The next article "Parents Becoming Better Parents" will attempt strategic methods of self-development.

Let us begin with a quote that helps set the stage for our discussion of context. *What I want to communicate in this talk about art is the notion that art is relevant to concrete living, that it is an exploration of the potentialities of concrete living. That exploration is extremely important in our age, when philosophers for at least two centuries, through doctrines on politics, economics, education, and through ever further doctrines, have been trying to remake man, (people)³ and have done not a little to make human life unlivable. The great task that is demanded if we are to make it livable again⁴ is the re-creation of the liberty of the subject, the recognition of the freedom of consciousness⁵.*

¹ Solutions to specific problems require the assistance of the professional in most cases. Unfortunately, as many parents may have found out, even the professional community is tainted with the dysfunctionality of our times and parents are forced to live it out or provide a solution that is not out of love but out of survival.

² Disorientation specifies that our nature is distorted but yet in sync with the cultural decline. Dysfunctionality implies some are not in sync with the cultural decline. No one escapes childhood, some merely better than others.

³ Brackets my own. Original lectures on education given in Cincinnati at the Xavier Institute in 1959.

⁴ The term 'again' presupposes we had livability at one time in history. In some pre-human state perhaps?

⁵ Bernard Lonergan, *Topics in Education*, CWL 10, University of Toronto Press, 1993, p. 232.

I add a further quotation that also may assist in initiating our discussion of context. *Because African communities suffer from underdevelopment, the contemporary type-African is a proto-human whose psycho-social evolution has been arrested at a preliminary stage. Because NATO communities are denatured by overdevelopment, the contemporary type-European is an ex-human who, by overshooting his mark, has regressed into sub0humanity. Having squandered his civilized inheritance, he has lost both motive and aptitude for conducting Africans on to the higher ground he has himself deserted.*⁶

Neither of these quotations offer a very glowing critique of contemporary society. Why is that so? Let us reflect on our discussions of the growing child in order to expand on the dismal forecast of our quotations. In my former articles I have been trying to establish that we are all a natural unrestricted desire for understanding and love. To appreciate that statement is to have carried out some serious interior work over a prolonged period. I might offer the reverse in an attempt to highlight my meaning. Are you an unrestricted desire for hatred and ignorance? I would hope you answered 'NO'. But one's answer must come from that prolonged interior searching and not some ego state. If such a conclusion about what it is to be human is to have any depth of meaning or possibility of reorientation of the self, such a conclusion must emerge from the empirical fact. Either you are such a desire or you are not. Which is it? And if you are not such a desire, then what are you? These are life long questions.

If my meaning of what it is to be human, to be a child, is empirically accurate, and twenty-five years of reflection have convinced me of that fact, then it might be appropriate to reflect on whether our living, our society and the social sciences grow out of that view.⁷ The problems in these areas are systemic in modern culture and they pertain to the unfolding of history. We have not arrived at a point in our own development in which theory and practice emerge out of an interior foundation. Child psychology is not immune to this same dis-ease of our times. Our view of humanity is

⁶ Leonard Barnes, *Africa in Eclipse*, Victor Gollancz, London, 1971, p. 19.

⁷ Philip McShane & Bruce Anderson, *Beyond Establishment Economics: No Thank-You Mankiw* Axial Press, Halifax, NS, 2002 for an analysis of the problems in political economies. Elsewhere McShane has outlined similar deficiencies in the university and the social sciences.

grounded in a naïve realism⁸ and this notion grounds a bias about behaviour and the need to control the human community, and quite often that community is our children.

Parents have often come to me with deep concern about the 'behaviour' of their children, usually their teen-aged children. By the time they get to me they are quite often at 'the end of their rope'. "Please help me?" is their basic cry. Teen-aged children are not only going through the bio-psycho-sexual transition into adulthood but are attempting to come into their own and often resent the imposition of the adult world telling them how to do it⁹. *...the intellectual crisis of adolescence is the period in which adolescents reject the set of precepts and evaluations that were imposed externally through precepts at a time when they were not able to think for themselves. They go through a period of disorientation due to that rejection, and to the need in that period in which they commence to reconstruct for themselves the precepts, the evaluations, the ideals that they really accept, that are theirs. They become themselves. Education has to prepare them to go through this period in which they become their own masters*¹⁰. The resentment is complexified if the child is bringing forward trauma or abuse from earlier childhood. Such complexity can and will often be expressed in anger or repressed rage and all the parent wants is for the child to 'stop' acting that way. Punishment is often imposed, then counselling, perhaps medication, and finally letting go.¹¹ Over time, with proper assistance some will find their way, inner peace, or a manner of living and surviving in a world of disorientation. But just as many will not find their way and live out their disorientation in adult relationships proliferating the dis-ease of a culture that breeds the dis-ease. It is not about blaming individuals for the disturbances. Blame cannot assist in a solution to the problem. Ultimately, the cause is the disorientation and fragmentation in history that I spoke of in the earlier articles. So, when a parent brings a child to me and says: "Help me?" I see, not just a child and parent hurting, but history and the culture coming in on both of them. If the problem were not in history, imbedded in our culture,

⁸ By naïve realism, I mean that research functions on the premise that the real child is the seen child. This mistaken view of empiricism neglects the interiority of the human subject-the data of what it is to be human.

⁹ It is interesting to note that we adults resent being told how to live and somehow we think children do not resent it. They do and they will over time manifest their abhorrence of this experience.

¹⁰ Bernard Lonergan, *Topics in Education*, CWL 10, University of Toronto Press, 1993, p. 101.

¹¹ Success is statistically low in full recovery.

recovery would be easier and problems less common. An example might help. When your car breaks down, the mechanic can fix it. Why? Because 1) she or he understands how it works when it is working properly and 2) the problem is not caused by some external event. Now, if it is external, such as acid rain rusting the metal, then you not only repair the car but you also initiate efforts to cut down on pollution to cut down on acid rain so that the rust does not reoccur. The analogy is that the cultural disorientation of the child is akin to the acid rain rusting the metal in cars. Can we heal the acid rain of cultural disorientation of humanity? Our attempts are the product of an ingenuity matured within the disorientation and out of the disorientation.¹² In other words, if we lack the knowledge that people are a natural desire for understanding and the relational dynamics of our interior life, how can we repair people when they break down? Our solutions will emerge out of ignorance and frustration, and eventually living becomes more about survival.

This brief explanation of child disorientation (and I have not even mentioned adult relationships and the influence they have on children) is hardly cheerful. If you had the cultural professions and institutions behind you it would be more hopeful. Our social sciences and institutions are an outgrowth of the same disorientation within which your child grows. If we can come to some respect for the widespread disorientation we might reach some level of acceptance and tolerance of the child's dilemma. That would be a first step in the right direction. But, what then? You might wonder why children eventually find a home with friends and often involve themselves in alcohol, drugs, or dependent relationships. Well, they are accepted as a person even with those particular dependencies. Is such behaviour a solution to their problems? No, but what else can you do when the world cannot help you develop the interior courage and self-knowledge to help yourself? We tend to offer advice and just as we adults often resent certain forms of advice, so do our children. Certain forms of advice are experienced as rejection of one's behaviour or even of the person; it is difficult to separate the two. We naturally experience behaviour as an extension of the inner self, and so it is. But, is the behaviour an expression of a 'bad' person or a disoriented one? If the disorientation is cultural you

¹² Present studies in sociology rely heavily on statistical research in an effort to revise social policy. Such efforts emerge out of our cultural, personal, and theoretical disorientation and deficiencies.

are trying to change your child and the world is often against you. Change comes from within but it can be initiated or at least encouraged by outer circumstances. I often ask people who come to me for assistance if they want to change. Too often their reply is 'for me' and not from their own desire. Pleasing the counsellor is often a natural defence mechanism of disorientation. We all fear entering the abyss of ourselves, and far too often we love to hear about someone else's abyss. It helps us feel at home in a disoriented world and takes the pressure off of entering our own. Self-change is difficult.

The subtle control of our natural desire for understanding during childhood can and will manifest itself in an abhorrence to any control later in life. When our children begin to express their disorientation or the desire to become themselves, we often experience this as a loss of control of our child. We react. We are feeling controlled by our child's behaviour and we react rather than think.

Now, some of my readers may experience my perspective as one of *laissez-faire*. Leave them alone and they will find their way. Not at all. But, if you impose the solutions of our presently disoriented culture on children you stand the chance of only increasing their personal disorientation and that eventually leads to medication or loss of your relationship with your child. So, tough love put a lot of children into North American streets in the last few decades. Why? It was basically a rejection of people. Can we put ourselves in their shoes and reflect on how we might have reacted if our parents had treated us in a similar fashion? Probably not. Such honesty would take us into our own abyss. That lack of self-understanding is the source of our cultural disorientation. We do not understand ourselves. We do not know ourselves and our culture is at a loss to move us forward out of our self-ignorance. So we are attempting to grow people and we have no idea what we are up to. After more than 25 years of working with children, teachers and parents, reading and thinking about children, reflecting on and raising two children, I have come to the conclusion that what we do not know is far beyond what we do know. But more dangerous is the view, that what little we do know, we believe to be correct. That perspective deepens the disorientation. Perhaps you might think of repainting your car as the solution when the engine is not working well. It is an acknowledgment of our present ignorance that would increase the probabilities of initiating a serious effort into understanding what it means to grow a child and I am convinced that this ignorance

permeates our cultural scene. My former articles attempt to outline such a gap in human knowledge and some of the reasons for that gap.

In attempting to develop a perspective on parenting, a beginning is to admit that we do not know what a child is. Just as the physicist experiences a new 'particle' and her or his first response is 'What is that?', so might we begin with the same; 'What is a child?' That question need emerge from an incarnated curiosity about life, about people, and as I pointed out in former articles, that curiosity must begin with ourselves. What am I? Self-understanding, self-appreciation, can provide us with an understanding of others. The absence of such understanding in our culture leads to the disorientation I have gone to great lengths to outline. The data of understanding the child is first and foremost the data of you. Researchers into child psychology and sociology are not oriented to self-reflection and their views on childhood are products of their own disorientation. Their conclusions are the products of reflection on the data of excessive statistical analysis. They leave themselves out of the study. So, if you wish to understand your child, you may have to enter into your own abyss, enter into the struggle of self-understanding.

But, until then, what will we do with our children if they (and we cannot excuse ourselves in our disorientation) are disorienting home life? Seek help where we can and perhaps out of our own self-appreciation, we might develop more patience and tolerance of our child's disorientation. We will be contributing more to the social science of child understanding than present scientific studies. We will also be better able to assess the advice given by 'professionals' in the field.

Now, for those seeking answers to specific problems, I have let you down and yet, hopefully, I have offered what I stated in the beginning- a perspective on our cultural disorientation. In the end you may find you have to resort to counselling, medication, or let your child go. I believe that three things are necessary in the long term if we are to initiate a healthier climate for the growing of children: 1) that we develop a perspective about history and our cultural disorientation, 2) that we admit we do not know what a child is or how to grow them, and 3) we work at becoming better parents. These three facets are not just for us as parents but also for the entire social scientific community. You and I are the data that will eventually lead to, not only understanding ourselves, but also children, and subsequently how to grow a child. Until we begin that difficult and

most important task, we will suffer the aberrations of history and a world increasingly disoriented by its own disorientation.

This article introduces the notion of perspective in history. What can that do for a parent? Hopefully, it can ease the burden of blame or guilt as well as provide hope for the future. My next article, "Parents Becoming Better Parents," will attempt to outline strategic methods in self-development. All of this need be set against the background of the articles on "How to Grow a Child."¹³

¹³ See my website <http://users.eastlink.ca/~roberthenman/> for the articles mentioned above.