

HOW TO RAISE A SPIRITUALLY HEALTHY HUMAN

Isaiah 29:13, Acts 2:17-18

May 18th, 2008

My daughter, Victoria, was offended by my sermon two weeks ago. I said something in that sermon that wasn't fair or true. In talking about how we pass our theological baggage onto our children, I said, "That's the way it is with abuse. The abused child grows up to abuse their own children." Victoria, who was abused by her birth parents, was upset by that assertion. As she pointed out, it doesn't have to be that way.

She's right. I should have said, "Abused children often grow up to abuse their own children." That, unfortunately, is statistically true, but it isn't inevitable. We can break the cycle, be it physical, emotional, sexual, or even theological abuse. We don't have to do to our children what was done to us. It may be difficult, but we don't have to pass the sins of the parents to the third and fourth generation.

Of course, it would be much easier if we bore our children at the age of forty-five. Whether an evolutionary imperative or a divine plan, you have to question the wisdom of twelve year olds being able to bear children. Children raising children is usually disastrous. Angie and I had our first child when we were twenty – a fact that becomes more frightening to me the older I get. Ironically, when our daughter was born it was illegal in the state of Illinois for either of us to drink an alcoholic beverage. It was not illegal for us to have complete responsibility for the care and nurture of another human life.

Thinking back, I worry about the damage we inflicted on our oldest daughter. We didn't know what we were doing. So we often resorted to doing what had been done to us. My father pinched me, so I pinched my daughter. My parents had taught me violent Bible stories, so I taught her violent Bible stories. I was raised to fear God and hell, so I transferred this fear to her. When I think about such things, I'm glad the Bible says, "Love covers a multitude of sins." I do know Angie and I loved that little baby as much as was humanly possible.

But sometimes I wish I could go back and do it over again. Knowing what I know now, I would raise my children differently. Having matured, I don't plan to do or say to my grandchildren what I did and said to my children. I want to combine love and wisdom.

This morning, I want to explore how to raise a spiritually healthy human. And I want to suggest this isn't a sermon solely for parents. If you're a grandparent, you have a second chance to raise children. You can learn from your mistakes. If you have no children, you still have a responsibility. All of us have contact with children and all of us have the potential to harm or to help. If it takes a

village to raise a child, the whole village needs to know how to do this well. Even if you're a child, this sermon is for you. You need to know what is appropriate childrearing and what is not. As a society, we need to move beyond good touch/bad touch and begin teaching our children good adult behavior/bad adult behavior.

I've mentioned before how an adult friend of my parents once heard me singing and offhandedly said, "If I had a voice like yours, I wouldn't sing." As a child, I assumed his statement was appropriate and acceptable. Convinced of his wisdom, I didn't sing for years. Looking back, I wish I'd been taught that certain adult behavior was inappropriate. I wish I'd known how to challenge it. I didn't know the proper response to a bad touch. I didn't tell my parent's friend "no" and report what happened to another adult. All of which brings me to my first rule for raising a spiritually healthy human – do no harm.

If that sounds familiar, it should. The dictate to "do no harm" comes from the Hippocratic Oath. Three thousand years ago, Hippocrates, the father of medicine, suggested the first commitment of every physician is to do no harm. The goal of a physician is to restore the patient to health as gently and painlessly as possible.

Sometimes I wish we have a similar oath for parents, pastors, and religious educators. Several years ago, a mother wrote me upset about the "grace" books and their message of universal salvation. She wrote of our responsibility to save our children from hell by any means possible. Worried that her children would die before they were saved, she had fed them a constant diet of stories about the tortures of hell. She admitted her children were often frightened by her descriptions, but felt that the end justified the means. She defended her actions by quoting Jesus – "It's better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell."

I'm glad this woman isn't a doctor. I can imagine her philosophy. If you came to her with a scratch on your leg, she'd amputate and explain that it was better that you lose your leg than risk gangrene.

While I expect none of us would go to the extremes of this woman, I worry we don't always remember to do no harm. Indeed, the popularity of parenting adages like, "This is going to hurt me more than it hurts you," and "This is for you're your own good" suggests many parents think harming their children is justifiable.

Theologically, a commitment to do no harm calls into question many religious practices. We shouldn't teach our children Biblical stories intended for adults or stories that we don't fully understand or accept. We should avoid theology that teaches our children they are born sinful and deserving of the fires of hell. Destroying your child's self-esteem or giving them nightmares is not good

parenting. We should abandon any attempts to frighten or shame them into believing or accepting our religious beliefs. Which brings me to the second rule for raising a spiritually healthy human – do not compel belief.

Sadly, neither Judaism and Christianity abide by this rule. The Bible is full of injunctions requiring us to compel our children to accept and adopt our religious beliefs. Those who don't are to be shunned, if not killed. Christianity has responded to this requirement by indoctrinating children into the faith as early and aggressively as possible.

My wife, Angie, remembers being encouraged to go to an altar and give her life to Jesus at the age of eight. Though she wasn't punished for resisting this duty, she knew that her rebellion deeply disappointed her parents and the church. Children who went to the altar and gave their lives to Jesus were rewarded with the community's approval, with baptism, and with leather bound Bibles. Children like Angie ended up on the prayer list.

In fairness, many parents – convinced that their unsaved children are in danger of hell – have felt tremendous pressure to compel their children to believe. We become obsessed with having our children say the words that assure their salvation. Unfortunately, by pressuring our children to assent to beliefs beyond their understanding, we predispose them to understand religion as a matter of words.

This was God's complaint according to Isaiah. God said, "These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up of rules taught my men." Ironically, the religion of my childhood celebrating exactly what God found offensive. We were taught confessing Jesus as Lord with our lips was all that was necessary to satisfy God.

Christianity has often confused assent with belief. Most children will easily give their assent to religious beliefs. They are not mature enough to question or challenge what adults insist to be true. They are easily manipulated into saying and doing what we want them to say and do. But we do them a great disservice to count their assent as belief. Belief is always a matter of the heart.

Islam and Buddhism understand this far better than Judaism and Christianity. The Quran says, "Let there be no compulsion in religion." (2:27) Buddha said, "Do not accept what you hear by report, do not accept tradition, do not accept a statement because it is found in a book, nor because it is in accord with your belief, nor because it is a saying of your teacher. Be lamps unto yourselves." Jesus came close to this when he said, "The Kingdom of God does not come with careful observation, nor will people say, "Here it is" or "There it is" because the Kingdom of God is within you." (Luke 17:20-21)

Sadly, this is another of those statements of Jesus that has been largely ignored. When it comes to children and teenagers, the Church has been more than willing to say “Here it is” or “There it is.” We haven’t seemed confident that our children could look within themselves and find reasons to believe. Which brings me to the third rule for raising a spiritually healthy human – encourage exploration while resisting intervention.

This may be the most difficult rule for most adults to obey. Many adults think their role is to anticipate and answer every child’s question. Many of us believe adulthood gives us the right and responsibility to intervene whenever we like in the lives of children. We treat children as possessions instead of as persons.

I don’t think we do this out of selfishness as much as out of fear. We worry that they may ask the wrong questions, accept different answers, choose new paths, and explore places where we were afraid to go.

I remember my fear when my son, Zachary, announced he was an atheist. My fear was not that he would be cast into hell. I’d left that belief behind years before. I was afraid because he was traveling in a direction I’d never traveled, asking questions to which I had no answer, and exploring a life of which I had no experience. He was leaving me behind.

This is why it is so difficult for parents and adults to encourage children to explore, to resist intervening when they approach places we’ve never trod. Deep down, we realize this exploration always involves separation. It’s tempting to demand they follow in our footsteps. But, if we wish our children to be spiritually healthy, we must love them enough to allow them to be persons and not merely extensions of ourselves.

Kahlil Gibran says it well:

*Your children are not your children.
They are sons and daughters of Life’s longing for itself.
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.
You may house their bodies, but not their souls.
For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.
You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you.
For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.*

Which brings me to the fourth rule in raising a spiritually healthy human – we must trust the truth.

This is central to Quaker conviction. We believe children are not born sinful and separated from God. We believe there is that of God in every child, in every person, that this inner light is what draws us to God and to goodness. The task of parents, adults, and of the Church is to point children to the light within, to encourage them to find and trust the truth.

The other night I was playing with my nieces, Madeline and Olivia. Don't ask me why, but they wanted me to be a dragon and chase them around the house. So I tied a blanket around my neck for a tail and chased them from room to room. When I caught them, I would pretend to eat them and say, "You're delicious." They would laugh hysterically.

Eventually, Madeline wanted to be the dragon. I tied the blanket around her neck and she quickly caught Olivia and bit her. Olivia didn't laugh, she screamed. When I finally calmed Olivia down, I spoke to Madeline. I didn't pinch her or tell her "we don't bite." That's what I would have done when I was twenty. Instead, I asked her a question, "Madeline, how would you feel if Olivia had bit you?"

She said, "I would be sad."

I asked, "Do you think biting is good?"

She said, "No"

Then without my asking, she turned to Olivia and said, "I'm sorry."

Isn't this what Jesus was recommending when he taught us to do unto others what we would have them to do unto us? Doesn't the Golden Rule suggest that there is something deep within each of us which knows what is good and healthy, and that if we seek within ourselves, we will know how to act? If we are tainted by original sin, looking within is a big mistake. But, if the truth is within us, we must seek and trust it. Which brings me to my fifth and final rule for raising a spiritually healthy human – we must be willing to be taught by them.

There is no point in allowing our children to explore if we are unwilling to trust the truth they find.

I've mentioned before that one of pivotal moments in my shifting opinion about homosexuality happened at the dinner table when our children were young. Angie and I were talking about the debate within the church over gay marriage. We did so without realizing our daughter was paying attention. At a lull in the conversation, she looked up from eating her peas and said, "I don't think God cares who people love as long as they love somebody."

My daughter's words forced me to rethink my position. Eventually, I concluded she was right. When it came to homosexuality, God didn't care. When I wrote about that event in the first grace book, I worried what my father would think. Though he would never have mistreated a gay person, he'd long held that homosexuality was sinful. What would he think when he read that his son and granddaughter thought differently.

The Christmas following the publication of the book, I had a chance to find out. One morning, before everyone else was awake, my father and I sat in the kitchen and talked. I nervously asked him what he thought of my acceptance of homosexuality. He said, "I've done a lot of thinking about what you've written. I even spent a day at the university library reading all the most recent research on homosexuality. And I think I've been wrong."

Friends, I can't tell how wonderful that moment was for me. After all the years of my father teaching me, he had finally allowed me to teach him. Perhaps that gift was more important than all the others. Maybe this is what Jesus meant when he said "we'd do greater things than he." The best parents and teachers expect their children to exceed them.

It's interesting to me, that in the book of Acts, Peter describes what he considers to be signs of the coming of God's kingdom. He quotes the prophet Joel,

*In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
Your young men will see visions.
Your old men will dream dreams.*

I think what Peter describes is what happened with my father, my daughter and me. I believed my daughter's prophecy. My father listened to my vision. He and I allowed our children to explore without our intervention, to seek and find the truth, to proclaim a new way of being, to envision a better world. In so doing, we were experiencing the coming of God's kingdom.

For two thousand years, the Church has been waiting for the reign of God to begin. Perhaps that revolution can only happen when we resolve to quit harming our children and compelling them to believe what we've believed. Only then will they be free to become spiritually healthy persons and lead us into a brave, new world.