



The Difference Between Irresponsible Exercises Of And Responsible Exercises Of Parental Authority: A Few Respectful Degrees Of Separation

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As a social worker I assess the mental health treatment needs of adults who get caught in the revolving door to a state criminal justice system in New England. In piecing together the histories of these clients I speak with their parents when these opportunities arise. What is often the case during these interviews is that these parents plead ignorance when it comes to how events in the lives of their families impacted their children. Clearly, these parents were either unwilling and/or unable to empathize and build bridges to their children's rich inner worlds. This is why these parents remain at a loss to chronicle the emotional histories of their grown children. These interviews have been instructive in teaching me how these parents lost control of their kids when they were old enough to survive outside the home.

The desire to please their parents in order to receive valuable nurturance was extinguished early on. Their children may have paid lip service to them but, for all intents and purposes by age 14 or so most of these kids stopped listening to their parents altogether. By that time, as they probably saw it, they had nothing left to lose. These victims of parental indifference and abuse were soon primed to demand reparations from an unsuspecting community that was about to pay dearly for what these children felt robbed of growing up. One doesn't behave in respectful ways as an adult when fed a steady diet of disrespect as a child.

As implied previously, the abdication and/or abuse of parental authority is an incubator for the development of antisocial traits. The antidote to the behavioral viruses these traits spawn is a parenting philosophy built on a bedrock of benevolent authority. Benevolent authority is put into action as consistent and continuous dialogues with our children where we actively listen to and clarify what we hear, reflect back our understanding of what we hear and respond respectfully in our roles as leaders and teachers. This way, our respect

and love for our children as separate people comes across loud and clear. Collectively, these interpersonal skills form a diplomatic initiative that opens negotiations to obtain our children's cooperation through motivational strategies designed to get them on board with our vision for raising them. "We" stay in charge no matter how humbly we wear the title, "boss."

This interactive and dynamic process requires a flexible vision. It is rooted in forging an alliance so that we can use our influence to leverage agreements. In truth, it is about as democratic an arrangement as The US Government in their foreign policy negotiations with third world countries who depend on our foreign aid to preserve their sovereignty. Benevolent parents not unlike benevolent superpowers, speak softly and carry a "big carrot." To flaunt superior power is tantamount to baiting an inferior foe into a guerilla conflict. As parents we want allies of our children, not adversaries. Once we turn parenting into a battle of wills we may win some battles but, we will ultimately lose the war with enduring negative consequences.

It is my contention that we as parents must share authority with our children without abdicating the right to make the final decisions. This goal can be accomplished within the context of relationships that honor our children's needs to keep their self respect and dignity intact. If we treat our children as subjects rather than objects more times than not, we will in turn be accorded roles of co-collaborators and editors of our children's story lines as they creatively unfold. To be kept outside the loop so to speak and have this precedent continue into adolescence sets the stage for losing our kids to the streets. I have heard countless times from clients in a million different ways how: "No one has the right to tell me what to do!"

To exercise benevolent authority it is imperative to frame childhood resistance to parental authority as efforts at self definition and not a referendum on the parent's unworthiness of respect. If you're over 40 and/or were raised in a foreign culture, it's easy to have learned that "good children" are seen and only heard when addressed and, to regard willful behavior as signs of "badness" or "inadequacy."

Single parents tend to be most vulnerable to misinterpreting such reactions as they more often than not feel over worked, neglected and unappreciated. If you are a single parent and take seriously the time and energy devoted to raising your children then, "I don't have

time to care for my needs is not a bumper sticker you can afford to have adorning your car. The price of doing so is to blame your children for the self inflicted wounds you suffered early on when they are being developmentally and age appropriately self centered, inconsiderate, demanding ingrates. It's never their job to take care of you even if they are the least bit willing and able to do.

My parenting philosophy, borrowed from many sources is based on teaching children to feel entitled to ask for and negotiate their needs, to learn that the satisfaction of their needs may require patience, perseverance and resourcefulness over time. When we fail to care adequately for ourselves it can be unbearably painful to listen to our children ask for the sky and then, unrealistic that we praise them for doing so. We all know how to shame and guilt our children into silence but, this is a victory we and they pay for down the road. It's difficult to take children to places we have never been before. So, make it a priority to learn to care for your needs so that you will find the intestinal fortitude to cope constructively with their resistance to unpopular but, important decisions that you know from experience are in their best interests.

Below is an example of the conditions that shape the process by which a normally benevolent single parent loses empathy for her children. Joan Taylor will tread on thin ice with her kids because fatigue breaks down her defenses and her resultant helplessness draws her into emotional time warp. Joan momentarily relives moments in time when as a child she felt wounded by her parents' empathic failures. She becomes driven by aggressive demands for reparations and uses self righteous rationalizations to retaliate for grievances collected years ago. In this emotional space Joan's children become unwitting and reluctant actors on the stage of Joan's morality play. Lost in her own emotional blindness Joan both abdicates and abuses her parental authority. Her children are the real victims and react accordingly.

These are unavoidable normal occurrences. The frequency with which they occur is a yardstick of our emotional courage and commitment to our children. It is also a measure of our capacities to learn about how our past haunts us, make changes to reduce our vulnerabilities to such memories and grow beyond being wounded by them. Children are very resilient to a point. How we deal with such challenges to grow in our emotional intelligence will affect our children one way or another in the long run.

In the example below the results are predictable. As events unfold inside Joan that shape regrettable behaviors, please notice the opportunities Joan has to gently regain control of the parental reins. Let's see what happens. It's the end of a long three day weekend. Joan Taylor, a single parent of two children, Amy age 9 and Jason age 6 feels as worn out as the frayed dish towel she holds as the last dinner dishes are washed and placed in the drainer. The kids are parked in front of the television and Joan wryly remarks to herself that the dish towel becomes an extension of her right arm by the end of her weekend with the kids. Joan observes herself and momentarily ponders with puzzlement why she rigidly pushes herself so unnecessarily to wash every last dish after each meal before she moves on to the next activity. She resents the helplessness such compulsiveness engenders.

This is a painful moment for Joan. Joan's quasi dictatorial relationship to herself is no accident as both of her parents were quite the taskmasters. She envies and resents her children who are relaxing in front of the television set understandably unfazed by their own obliviousness to neglected chores. They are kids still growing in their capacities to retain and follow instructions and lack the strategies adults use to compensate for temporary memory losses.

Joan's understandable weariness with her role as a single parent grows more palpable as fatigue overtakes her. She becomes filled with guilt and self recriminations in reaction to feeling burdened by her children's dependency needs. Joan's preservation of her identity as a "good mother" requires conscious energy she can't muster to dispute irrational beliefs she hits herself over the head with.

The stage is set for her to play the "blame game" as it's too painful for her to acknowledge that she is the author of her own misery. All Joan needs now is a flimsy pretext to complete her transformation from responsible parent to self centered, victimized child. This process is completely invisible to her tired children who are zoned out watching television and predictably oblivious to their mother's incipient Dr. Jekyll to Mr. Hyde transformation.

Meanwhile, despite their mother's request they have not packed their suitcases or cleaned up their room in preparation to return to their father's home for the school week. Joan's fleeting insight that she is reliving something that may create problems for her evaporates quickly. Instead of calling her own time out to retreat to her bedroom to reflect on and process what's going on inside of her, Joan's self righteous anger becomes a moral

justification to identify with her drill sergeant father and give her kids a dose of his medicine. Joan doesn't know what's driving her in the moment and doesn't want to know because she wants to gratify her vengeful desires and wouldn't permit herself to do so if she stopped long enough about what was driving her. Joan will pay in spades as her regression to childhood will leave her depressed the rest of the evening after the kids depart.

Joan barges into Amy and Jason's bedroom after a perfunctory knock and demands that they turn off the television and pack their bags. Joan's emotional blindness leads to the misinterpretation that her children's passivity means they don't respect her. In truth, this becomes a self fulfilling prophecy only because of the disrespectful manner she approaches her children. These kids unlike their mother who feels very guilty about acknowledging what she regards to be unsavory thoughts and feelings, are very comfortable in their self centeredness and ask in unison with obvious annoyance: "Why are you being so mean? We didn't do anything. Can't we watch the end of this show. It's over in 15 minutes?" Joan is so angry at herself because she knows they are right and yet, her actions that follow reflect that she's still battling parental ghosts her children now stand in for.

For Joan, Amy and Jason remain confused inside her head with her parents who she still regards as having been unnecessarily punitive and, at the same time passive; leaving her feeling overwhelmed with personal responsibility and both shame and guilt ridden for rejecting personal responsibility as she does now. Joan holds unrealistic expectations that her kids will volunteer to help her get ready to leave. They might have but, it is still Joan's responsibility to enlist their cooperation with tact, consideration, authority and diplomacy. Joan ensures that they behave in a manner that is pleasing to her as she wants them to help her mimic the interactions between her self and her parents from decades ago.

At first, Amy and Jason refuse to budge and do their chores. What we witness here is the domestic equivalent of management and labor locking horns at the bargaining table. Then, Joan starts yelling and uses fear and intimidation to force her kids to submit. This is an empty victory as what Joan models she certainly doesn't want her kids to learn in relating to themselves and others. In addition, Amy and Jason are temporarily abandoned as Joan loses empathy with her kids. Their safety and security are ignored.

The moral of the story is that much of the disobedience of our children can be avoided. The buck must stop with us. It's our responsibility to model self respect, relate to our children with respect and consideration for their dependency needs, learning styles, strengths and weaknesses, talents, and to be sensitive and responsive to their difficulties functioning when in crises or just stressed out from their own daily grinds. We must be comfortable asking politely for what we want from them, make sensible and realistic requests we can explain, listen to their responses, negotiate mutually agreeable solutions when possible and, enforce decisions with unwavering resolve, compassion and kindness when negotiations breakdown. If we do we will perform the most important service to ourselves, our children and mankind; to groom generations of leaders equipped to tackle the great social problems of the world. Enjoy this most important and meaningful mission!

Tell Me Anything But Don't Tell Me To Stop Training(More On Addictive Relationships)

Here you come with your signature limp and stifled grimace of pain. Your stark look of disappointment suggests that ice, anti-inflammatory drugs and electro stimulation therapy have collectively done little to alleviate your demoralizing leg pains. Your doctor, the reluctant physician, knows what's coming next and how he would like to respond. However, fidelity to his Hippocratic Oath will not permit a surrender to the impulse to run and hide underneath his desk. The first imploring words out of your mouth are: "Doc, I've been training for six months to run/bike/swim/ a PR in this upcoming race. I'm soooooo close to reaching my goal. I can't stop training now. You've gotta help me."

Meanwhile, you are walking on your injured leg as if it is a poorly fitted prosthesis. Common sense dictates that you wave the white flag of frustration and disappointment, ask for a hug and then, drown your sorrows in a few pints of Ben & Jerry's ice cream until you can accept a few weeks of enforced idleness. Maybe then you will seize the rare opportunity to start reading those books you never found the time to pick up. Maybe perhaps, you'll even learn to play that instrument your parents returned decades ago when you threw it at your brother in a moment of sibling rivalry.

Between the expletives you are probably muttering: "This guy is clueless. He doesn't understand how hard I have worked to get to this point." Your "clueless author" would ask you to consider that if there wasn't some part of you that didn't want to get off the "training treadmill" then, you wouldn't be where you are right now. Furthermore, you wouldn't now

be looking to turn your physician into a “bad guy” when he plays Devil’s Advocate and asks you: “Would you like to rest for two weeks now or be laid up for six months later?” If being stuck between a rock and a hard place be your worst nightmare please keep in mind that whatever you hope to achieve in performing at your best may not in truth be all that it’s all cracked up to be in your fantasy life.

Your physician has already figured out after the third or fourth go around with you that he is wasting his breath asking you to consider the probable consequences of abusing your body and how you would feel if such a scenario was played out to its natural and debilitating conclusion. It’s amazing how deaf we can be when we don’t want to listen to what we most need to hear. Why even recommend non weight bearing aerobics when your physician knows that to belabor the point is to risk losing you as a patient. So, how is a health care provider to deal with patients like us when we feel in our hearts that a world without pumping endorphins is like a world without sunshine?

I’m thinking specifically about the injuries sustained by those of us who believe that “more training is better,” “too much training is never enough,” and that “less is more” is reserved for lazy underachievers. By training on the edge we repudiate the time honored notions of rest and recovery. Without them, our bodies break down instead of adapting to training stress, and instead of reaping improved levels of performance, our performances diminish over time and/or we get sick and injured. So, why then do we cut off our noses to spite our faces?

The answers are many and they are not mutually exclusive. Principally, owing in part to how our personalities develop we have varying degrees of trust in processes we can’t exercise omnipotent control over, i.e. creativity, emotions and the body’s performance improvements that require rest and recovery. “Doing” is valued and “being” is not. We may move so urgently toward our desired goals so as not even to question why we are in such a rush. Then, whether we are aware of it or not, we may rebel against the internal pressures to do, do, and do more by over indulging in passive pleasures such as eating, and drinking to turn of the compulsive power switch until the rooster crows the next morning. Then, it’s back off to the races.

Some of my clients describe themselves as “slaves” to their jobs, hobbies and athletic outlets without recognizing the poignant implications of this metaphor. We may kick and

scream at the suggestion that we “shut it down” for awhile. Seldom if ever do we reflect on the evidence that such dramatic refrains as: “No pain, no gain,” may be nothing more than a defense mechanism against guilt provoking wishes to “take it easy.” In truth we may be begging for firm, benevolent paternal responses from folks like our trusted physicians such as: “I don’t want to see you in my office again unless, you stay off the roads, your bikes, etc., for ____ days.

Many of us are unaware that we may harbor fears that if we do not crack the proverbial whips daily we may never muster the motivation to train again. Such self doubts may originate in childhood with well meaning parents who unwittingly transmit through words and actions: “If I weren’t here to push you, you wouldn’t get anything done.” Others may have learned early in life that one is not entitled to enjoy any aspect of one’s life if one does not pay first with a “pound of flesh.”

If you are a workaholic on and off the athletic field it may be time to ask yourself why it is that my things to do list is perpetually filled with things to do and the unfinished business keeps me running even when the business isn’t urgent or important? Maybe, it’s time to consider that “less may be more” and will result in better performances, greater enjoyment and more time to nurture multiple sources of self esteem. We may underestimate our abilities to trust the messages our inner voices communicate to us. Our bodies speak volumes. Start listening!