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Childhood: The Unexplored Source of Knowledge

by Alice Miller

Probably ever since civilization began, people have been debating about how Evil came into the world and what we can do to combat it. There has always been a diffuse intuitive conviction that the seeds of Evil are to be sought in childhood, but the ruling tendency has been to imagine it as something congenital, the manifestation of innate destructive instincts best transformed into goodness, decency, and nobility of character by a liberal dose of corporal punishment.

This is a position that is still frequently championed. Today, no one seriously believes that the Devil has a hand in things, smuggling some changeling into the cradle and forcing us to employ strict upbringing methods to batter this diabolical offspring into submission. But from some quarters we do hear the serious contention that there are such things as genes that predispose certain individuals to delinquency. The quest for these rogue genes has inspired many a respectable research project, even though the hypotheses behind it fly in the face of a number of proven facts. Advocates of the “congenital evil” theory would, for example, have to explain why, 30 to 40 years before the Third Reich reared its ugly head, there was such a sudden spate of children with “bad genes” ready at a later date to do Hitler’s bidding with such alacrity.

Sufficient scientific evidence has been marshaled to refute the notion that some people are just “born bad.” This absurd myth, encountered in almost all cultures, has been effectively exploded. It is dead, but it refuses to lie down. We know today that the brain we are born with is not the finished product it was once thought to be. The structuring of the brain depends very much on experiences gone through in the first hours, days and weeks of a person’s life. The stimulus indispensable for developing the capacity for empathy, say, is the experience of loving care. In the absence of such care, when a child is forced to grow up neglected, emotionally starved, and subjected to physical cruelty, he or she will forfeit this innate capacity.

Of course we do not arrive in this world as a clean slate. Every new baby comes with a history of its own, the history of the nine months between conception and birth. In addition, children have the genetic blue-print they inherit from their parents. These factors may determine what kind of a temperament a child will have, what inclinations, gifts, pre-

dispositions. But character depends crucially upon whether a person is given love, protection, tenderness and understanding in the early formative years or exposed to rejection, coldness, indifference, cruelty. The number of children committing murders is on the increase, and very many of them were born to adolescent, drug-dependent mothers. Extreme neglect, lack of attachment, and traumatization are the rule in such cases.

In the last few years, neuro-biologists have further established that traumatized and neglected children display severe lesions affecting anything up to 30% of those areas of the brain that control our emotions. Severe traumas inflicted on infants lead to an increase in the release of stress hormones that destroy the existing, newly formed neurons and their interconnections.

More than anyone else, the credit for recognizing the immense import of these discoveries for our understanding of infant development and the delayed effects of traumas and neglect must go to neurologist and child psychiatrist Dr. Bruce D. Perry. His studies confirm what I described in my book *For Your Own Good* 20 years ago as a result of observing my patients and studying educational literature. In that work I quoted extensively from the manuals of what I have called the poisonous pedagogy with their insistence on the importance of drumming the principles of obedience and cleanliness into babies in the very first days and weeks of their existence. Studying this literature helped me to understand what made it possible for individuals such as Adolf Eichmann to function like killer robots without even the slightest stirrings of compunction. The people who turned into Hitler's willing executioners had accounts to settle that dated back to their earliest days. They were people who had never been given the opportunity for an adequate response to the extreme cruelty inflicted on them in infancy. Their latent destructive potential was not the product of some Freudian "death drive" but the early suppression of natural reactions.

The fact that the monstrous advice about "good" parenting disseminated by self-styled educationalists in Germany around 1860 went into as many as 40 editions led me to conclude that most parents had read them and did indeed act - in good faith - on the recommendations set out there. They beat their children from the outset because they had been told this was the way to make decent members of society out of them. 40 years later, the children thus treated did the same with their children. They didn't know any better. Born 30 to 40 years before the Holocaust, those traumatized children later became Hitler's adherents, adulators, and henchmen. In my view, it was the direct result of their early drilling. The cruelty they experienced turned them into emotional cripples incapable of developing any kind of empathy for the sufferings of others. At the same time it made them into people living with a time-bomb, unconsciously waiting for an opportunity of venting on others the rage pent up inside them. Hitler gave them the legal scapegoat they needed to acting out their early feelings and their thirst for vengeance.

The latest discoveries about the human brain might have been expected to bring about a

radical change in our thinking about children and the way we treat them. But as we know only too well, old habits die hard. It takes at least two generations for young parents to free themselves of the burden of inherited “wisdom” and stop beating their own children, two generations until it has become impossible to give one’s child a slap “inadvertently”, two generations before the weight of newly acquired knowledge gets in the way of the hand raised to deal the “unthinking” blow.

Alongside the habits stored in our bodies and favoring misguided behavior, there are also a host of opinions still passionately advocated by experts although they are demonstrably false. One of these is the belief that in the long run the effects of corporal punishment are salutary rather than detrimental. Such opinions can only be espoused by completely ignoring the childhood factor and its effects on the later development of individuals. As the experts in question inherited these opinions from their parents when they were children themselves, their belief in them prevails over all the weight of scientific evidence pointing to the contrary.

These thoughts, which I have set out in much greater detail in my latest book *Paths of Life*, will perhaps suffice to suggest the immense significance I ascribe to the experiences undergone by infants in the first days, weeks and months of their lives to explain their later behavior. In no way do I wish to assert that later influences are completely ineffectual. On the contrary. For a traumatized or neglected child it is of crucial importance to encounter what I call a “helping” or a “knowing witness” in its immediate circle. But such witnesses can only really help if they are aware of the consequences of early deprivations and do not play them down. It is in disseminating the information required by such potential knowing witnesses that I see my prime mission.

For a long time, the significance of the first few months of life for the later adult was a neglected subject even among psychologists. In several of my books I have tried to cast some light on this area by discussing the biographies of dictators like Hitler, Stalin, Ceausescu and Mao and demonstrating how they unconsciously reenacted their childhood situation on the political stage. Here, however, I want to turn my attention away from history and the past and train my gaze on our present practice. My conviction is that in numerous areas of practical life we could be more productive if we paid the childhood factor greater heed than is customarily the case. Here are some examples.

The area in which the willful neglect of the childhood factor is most apparent is, so it seems to me, the penal system. Statistics tell us that 90% of the prisoners in American jails were abused in childhood. This figure is astonishingly high if we bear in mind the denial and repression factor. Probably the real figure is closer to a full 100%. A sheltered and respected child does not turn criminal. But most delinquents deny the sufferings they went through as a child. Despite that, we still have this high - and highly eloquent - figure. Unfortunately little has been done to integrate this knowledge into the way prisons are

organized and run. Outwardly, of course, today's prisons and penitentiaries have little in common with the grim fortresses of the 19th century. But one thing has stayed much the same: questions like what made an individual prisoner a criminal in the first place, what features of his early life set him off in that direction, and what he could do to avoid falling into the same trap over and over again are very rarely posed. In order to answer these questions himself, the prisoner would have to be encouraged to talk, write and think about his life as a child and share these facts with others in a structured group setting.

In my latest book I report on a program of this nature in Canada. Thanks to group work, a number of fathers who had sexually abused their daughters understood for the first time that their actions were criminal. Of crucial importance for them was that they were able to talk about their childhood to other people they trusted. That way they learned to grasp how they had automatically passed on something they had experienced themselves without realizing it.

We are accustomed not to say anything about the things we have suffered in childhood and frequently, instead of saying anything, we act blindly instead. But it was precisely the opportunity for talking about these things that released these prisoners from their blindness, gave them access to heightened awareness and protected them from acting out. Programs like these are unfortunately still very much the exception. The only other one I know of is at a prison in Arizona where violent criminals can talk about their childhood and with the help of the group learn to decipher the covert meaning in their life histories. I have seen video recordings of these group sessions and I was impressed by the change in the facial expressions of these men after therapy. Proceeding in this way regularly would probably save a great deal of the taxpayer's money; programs like these are not expensive to organize and the danger of relapse is significantly diminished. It is thus doubly surprising that they have not found their way into most prisons.

A similar lack of interest is discernible on the political stage. The more the danger of nationalism threatens our world, the more frequently we must reckon with the emergence of unpredictable dictators. Dictators are simply a subgroup of people exposed to serious physical and mental jeopardy during childhood. They invest all their innate energies and talents in making sure that they are never placed in that kind of helpless position again. They frequently develop a maniac hatred for one particular group in society (Jews, intellectuals, ethnic groups) who for them represent, vicariously and symbolically, their former persecutors and whom they feel they must overcome if not eradicate at all costs if they want to survive. They expend all their military power on protecting themselves from a danger that has long since ceased to exist except in their imaginations and are all but inaccessible to logical arguments in connection with that danger. Thus in order to achieve any kind of constructive and productive communication with them we would need to know a great deal about the childhood of these people and the dynamics of childhood in general.

Unhappily this is normally not the case and it is hard to find anyone who would be prepared to act upon the results of such an inquiry. The tendency is to trust the destructive measures of direct confrontation rather than the productive fruits of direct communication. But it is not enough to know that we are dealing with dangerous individuals who ought to be “taken out of circulation” before they can kill other people, or to know that the ethnic group in question only has a symbolic significance for the dictator. The point is to understand the motives behind his maniac actions on the basis of his life history and not to play his game, not to be maneuvered into the role of persecutor, thus playing along with the role assigned to us in the dictator’s own personal reenactment or scenario. Threats and the use of destructive weaponry can set off paradoxical reactions in individuals laboring under a legacy of serious humiliation. They help dictators to cement their hardened positions, to exploit the lack of contacts to cover their tracks even more effectively, and to profit from the image of the persecuted victim.

There are many areas where concern with early childhood can represent a liberation from age-old blind alleys. One of these is school. Here the findings of the neuro-biologists have yet to be given any real credence. Many teachers cannot imagine a school system without punishment and penalization. But we know beyond doubt that punishment has at best a short-term “positive” effect. In the long run, the exertion of force merely serves to reinforce aggressive behavior on the part of children and adolescents. If children from a background of domestic violence have to devote all their attention to averting danger, they will hardly be able to concentrate on the subject matter they are being taught. They may well expend a great deal of effort on observing the teacher so as to be prepared for the physical “correction” that they feel, fatalistically, to be inevitable. In reality as they see it, they can hardly afford to develop an interest in what their teachers are trying to tell them. Yet more blows, yet more punishment are hardly likely to allay this effect; on the other hand, understanding for these children’s fears could quite literally “move mountains.” But the teacher must never play down the reality of the abused child if he or she really wants to help. And helping instead of punishing would be to the advantage of the teacher and his role as an instructor. But teachers who have themselves grown up with punishment favor punishment in the face of all the logic that militates against it because they have learned at a very early stage to believe in its efficacy. Neither in their own childhood nor during their training as teachers have they had the opportunity to develop a sensibility for the sufferings of children.

We come across the same phenomenon in the field of legislation. As long as we are unaware of the degree to which the right to human dignity has been denied us in our own childhood, it is anything but easy to truly concede that right to our children, however sincerely we may wish to do so. Frequently we believe we are acting in the interests of the children and fail to realize that we may be doing the very opposite, simply because we have learned to be unfeeling in this respect at such an early stage that the effects of this

inculcation are stronger than all the things we learn later. We can see this from an actual instance of present-day legislation. Only a short while ago, 1997, the German Parliament expressly conceded natural parents the right to physical correction. This right is only denied to non-blood relatives: teachers, foster-parents, guardians etc. So we see that the majority of the parliamentarians (4/5) are firmly convinced that in certain cases corporal punishment meted out by the parents can have a salutary effect. The argument persistently advanced for this was that physical force should not be prohibited because this phenomenon could be drawn upon to acquaint children with the dangers lying in wait for them on the roads, thus helping them to learn to protect themselves.

But the only thing a beaten child will learn is to fear its parents, not to be careful on the roads. This way, children will also learn to play down their own pain and feel guilty. Being subjected to physical attacks they are defenseless to fend off merely instill in them a “gut” conviction that children obviously merit neither protection nor respect. This false message is then stored in the children’s bodies as information and will influence their view of the world and their later attitude to their own children. Such children will be unable to defend their right to human dignity, unable to recognize physical pain as a danger signal and act accordingly. Even their immune system may be affected. In the absence of other persons to model their behavior on, without knowing or at least helping witnesses, these children will see the language of violence and hypocrisy as the only really effective means of communication. Naturally enough, they will avail themselves of that language themselves when they grow up because adults will normally elect to keep suppressed feelings of powerlessness in a state of suppression. Unfortunately, many of us defend the old system of care-giving with all the energy and conviction we can muster. This may be the reason behind this astounding decision to vote against a ban on corporal punishment.

This universal denial of sufferings most of us have been through also leads to a situation where even in cases of mass murder hardly anyone takes any real interest in the origins and causes of such bottomless hatred. All kinds of factors are examined with great care but no one ever asks where and how the perpetrators of such acts acquired these models of violence. We live in a society which regards hatred as innate, that is to say God-given. It is a society that refuses to see that we keep on producing hatred by inculcating models of violence into our children, behavior patterns that can prove stronger than anything they may learn at a later stage. There is a widespread tendency to blame all kinds of uncongenial things on the education system but education to violence begins much earlier and there is nothing that schools can do about those cases where a child has grown up devoid of an empathic home environment, without anyone prepared to relate and sympathize with his or her distress.

Equally surprising is the lack of interest shown by biographers about the initial, all-important imprint left on people by the treatment given them in their early years. With the

exception of psychohistorians, hardly any biographer has delved into the childhood of political leaders, individuals whose sometimes fateful decisions can mean life or death, happiness or horror for millions of people. In all the thousands of books about Hitler or Stalin hardly any mention is made of the tell-tale details of their childhood. And where mention is made of them, lack of psychological knowledge leads to their being played down and denied any crucial significance. But there is much to learn from these facts. We can see this more clearly from two contrasting examples: Stalin and Gorbachev.

Stalin was the only child of an alcoholic who beat him soundly every day and a mother who never protected him, was beaten herself and usually stayed away from home. Like Hitler's mother she had already lost three children when her son was born. Joseph, the only surviving child, never knew with any certainty whether his father might not decide to kill him at the next opportunity. When he grew up, his suppressed panic fear was transformed into paranoia, the maniac conviction that everyone else was out to kill him. That was why in the 1930s he had millions of people slaughtered or put into concentration camps. The impression one has is that when all is said and done the all-powerful and idolized dictator was nothing other than a helpless child still fighting a hopeless battle against the overwhelming threat of a brutal father. In the trials orchestrated against thinkers and writers Stalin was perhaps trying to prevent his own father from killing the little boy he once was. Naturally he had no knowledge of this. If he had, it might have saved millions of lives.

A very different picture is presented by the Gorbachev family, where there was no tradition of child-maltreatment but instead a tradition of respect for the child and his needs. The consequences can be observed from the behavior displayed by the adult Gorbachev. He has given ample evidence of qualities hardly any other living statesman has demonstrated to the same degree: the courage to look facts in the face and to seek flexible solutions, respect for others, give-and-take in dialog situations, absence of hypocrisy, a complete absence of grandeur in the conduct of his personal life. He has never been driven by blind self-assertion to make absurd decisions. Both his parents and his grandparents (the latter looked after him during the war years) appear to have been people with an unusual capacity for love and affection. The unanimous verdict on Gorbachev's father, who died in 1976, is that he was a lovable, modest man, amicable and peaceable in his dealings with others, a man who was never heard to raise his voice. The mother is described as sturdy, sincere and cheerful. Even after her son had become a prominent personality, she went on living modestly and happily in her small farmhouse. Gorbachev's childhood also supplies further proof that even severest penury will have no adverse effect on the character of a child as long as that child's personal integrity is not damaged by hypocrisy, cruelty, abuse, corporal punishment, and psychological humiliation. Stalin's regime of terror, the horrors of war, the brutal occupation of his country, immense poverty, crippling physical labor – all these things were part and parcel of Gorbachev's youth. But a child can survive all that

unscathed as long as the emotional atmosphere prevailing at home provides protection and security. One incident may serve to illustrate the atmosphere I am referring to. At the end of the war Mikhail Gorbachev was unable to attend school for 3 months because he had no shoes to wear. When his father was told of this (he was wounded and had been committed to a field hospital) he wrote to his wife saying that she must at all costs ensure that Mischa could go back to school because he was such an avid scholar. The mother sold the last of her sheep for 1,500 rubles and bought her son a pair of military boots. His grandfather procured a warm coat for him and at the request of his grandson another one for a friend of his.

Protection and respect for the needs of a child – this is surely something we ought to be able to take for granted. But it is far from being the case. We live in a world peopled by individuals who have grown up deprived of their rights, deprived of respect. As adults they then attempt to regain those rights by force (blackmail, threats, the use of weapons). As Gorbachev's childhood is apparently much more the exception than the rule, the society we live in continues to turn a blind eye to the facts of child abuse in all its forms. Thousands of professors at hundreds of universities teach all manner of subjects, but there is not one single university chair for research into child abuse and cruelty to children. How strange, when we recall that the majority of the people living on this earth are victims of precisely that kind of treatment! It is entirely conceivable that the world as we know it might come to an end as a result of the consequence of those ubiquitous violations of human dignity. At all events, it is high time that we investigated the regularities discernible behind each and every individual case.

As a priority commitment for the next decade, the United Nations Organization has declared its allegiance to the idea and implementation of Education for Peace. This cannot be achieved by fine words alone. We need to set an example to our children as the people who will decide what the next generation will look like, and show them that coexistence and communication without violence is actually possible. There are an ever greater number of parents who are capable of doing so and who are aware of the far-reaching implications of their own behavior. Many of them agree that physical force against children should be banned by law.

This verified and firmly established knowledge cannot but spread, albeit gradually, in the millennium to come, even though at present the number of people who have understood what is at stake is small. But if this group succeeds in getting physical correction banned by law – as has already happened in nine European countries – then the next generation will grow up without spanking and beating, and that means growing up free of a legacy that can only set them off on a course that is fateful indeed. It is realistic to hope that this fact will lead to an increase in the number of knowing witnesses and hence to a swift change in general mentality.

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