

Chapter 11: Life, Simply

Well, that was a little dark.

I said that I wanted to strengthen our faith in love. We've done this backward, starting with the challenges and hazards of loving: boredom, dependency and trauma. We've touched on answers to some of the more difficult problems people have encountered in practicing love. While cautionary, I hope that we are left with a sense that there are ways out of even the most difficult spiritual circumstances.

So, with that behind us, let's take a quick look at an “ideal” picture of growing up.

Throughout our lives, we are offered various opportunities to discover and expand our talents. In almost every case, the richest of those opportunities arise through the investment of love and power by an authority. Those authorities take many forms: parents, employers, and friends whose talents supplement ours.

Our discussion here is not going to be a deep one. We will focus on the spiritual aspects of the process. There is obviously a connection with the physical and psychological aspects of development, and every parent should draw upon the insight and experience of specialists in those fields. Favaro's “Smart Parenting” [5] focuses on practical parenting skills for the childhood years. Cozolino's “The Neuroscience of Human Relationships” [3] surveys the challenges of growing into a functional adult.

One of the surprises I had when reading the second book was discovering hidden parallels to the development of the Vedantic Chakras. Before we had neuroscience and psychology, humanity used religion to transmit across the generations our wisdom regarding the development of personality. That wisdom was set aside for years because the scientists had told us that spirituality was impossible.

Having recognized that it is possible to reconcile science and spirituality, our goal here is to reclaim the spiritual dimensions of parenting. There are certain problems in parenting that we cannot overcome unless we recognize that our difficulties arise from the struggle to shape spirit.

Favaro dedicates his book “to all the people that produce, manage and maintain the world's most precious natural resource.” A just society cannot exist unless it creates well-adjusted personalities. People with complex personalities often struggle with internal tension. When those tensions break out into open spiritual warfare, everyone around them suffers.

I believe that dealing with those tensions – whether they manifest as drug abuse, gang activity or apathy – is critical if humanity is to survive the coming age of declining resources. As was proven by the Hull House experience in the early 1900's, those that have the courage to undertake that work must live in close proximity to their charges. Rather than seeking to marginalize the good among us, we should celebrate their courage.

Infancy

Ah, to be a baby again: suckling at mother's breast, ruling the universe carefully maintained by our parents, and focusing attention at our leisure on the things that seem most important and interesting to us!

Really, parents, we don't have a clue!

Infancy is an opportunity to open new territory in our souls, or to clean up mess inherited from the past. Almost every spirit is born with prior history. When we manifest again as an infant, we obviously are unable to exercise all of the skills we had in our prior lives. The patterns presented by our parents have a chance to take root and prepare us to prosper in the culture we will occupy as an adult.

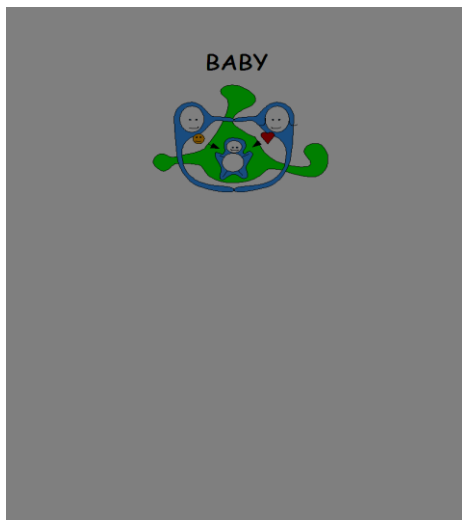


Illustration 18

We rely upon our parents to protect us as we do this work. (Illustration 18) This is shown symbolically as a safe space formed by the encircling of our parents' bubbles around us.

The picture indicates that sustaining this space is equally the responsibility of the mother and of the father. This is inconsistent with common cultural practice. However, the adaptation of the infant's spirit to its culture requires contact with both masculine and feminine personalities. Both parents should be alert for traits that don't seem to fit the culture they inhabit, and invest time and energy in helping the infant moderate those impulses.

Of course, when a truly mature spirit is born to immature parents, the opposite can also occur. The infant can moderate the impulses of its parents.

When an infant has something truly horrific to exorcise from its spirit, we might understand that it wouldn't want to impose its burden on its parents. It might choose a pattern of rapid entries and exits, attempting to achieve some distance from the harmful influence it is trying to shed. The parent that invests as much love as possible in the itinerant infant performs a great spiritual service, not the least part of which is recognizing when to let him or her go. Heroic efforts to keep the infant alive could actually interfere with the process of spiritual healing.

This is not a decision that can be made by anyone but the parents. Hopefully, the love they share with their child establishes a bond through which they can clearly understand its purposes.

Of course, for the normal infant, this is a joyful and exhilarating time! They've a whole world to explore, if only they could figure out how to operate their down-grade machinery!

Childhood

Once the child is capable of recounting a day's events, parents can sensibly open their protective cocoon to expand the universe of authority. (Illustration 19) School, worship and sports are

common activities approved by the parent, but not entirely under their supervision. The first two deepen our connection to culture; the third cements the connection between body and soul begun in infancy.

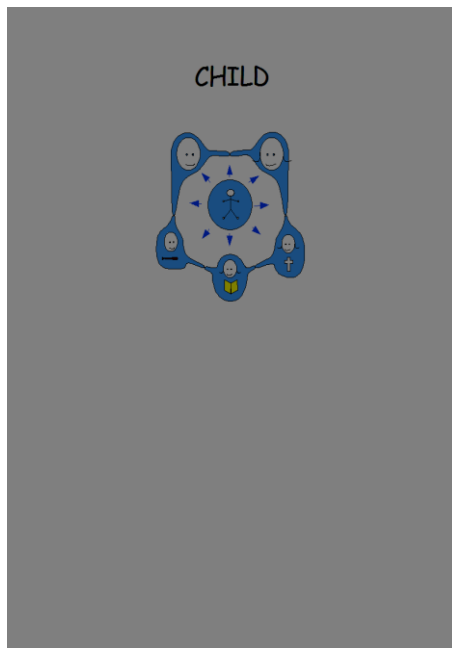


Illustration 19

The goal of this period in life is to grow and learn. Children should discover that their sense of power increases almost daily. If not, one of the authorities should be asking “Why?”

Mothers and fathers have historically played different roles. These grew out of the need for maternal intimacy, and the economic role of men. These reflect biological and financial realities, however, not the spiritual needs of the children. These might best be understood as supporting the child's self-esteem through mothering, and encouraging her growth through the example, discipline and criticism of fathering.

In modern suburbia, the error made by some parents is to focus on avoiding trauma, rather than expanding capacity. One commentator noted that during his childhood, if a parent showed up at the neighborhood baseball game, the kids would have been mortified. In the modern era, parents have their fingers in almost everything their child does.

Modern media, with its capacity to project national events into our daily lives, certainly fosters this parental insecurity. The root cause, however, is our failure to develop the higher senses that love opens to us. Mothers and fathers that establish a deep bond with their children can feel trouble coming, and guide their children along a safer path.

For those that wander through life without a greater purpose, childhood is a golden age.

Teenagers

The teenage years are dramatic. The developing personality is ready to test parental boundaries. The drama arises because parents are still legally, financially and morally accountable for the conduct of their children. Parents and children are enmeshed in a dance of trust.

We have all witnessed the consequences when the dance becomes a struggle for control. Parents that will not let their children go allow them only one choice to attain independence: violent rebellion. When I have witnessed this struggle, the parents are almost always conflicted. They are burdened with doubt, and searching for a different path. Universally, their goals are the same as parents that manage the transition without rebellion: to prepare their child for a transition to successful independence.

In managing expectations, both parents and youth should realize that the struggle for control is only the first in a life-long process of negotiation with people in power. It is unequal, as many such struggles are. If properly handled, though, the youth can arrive at independence with a deep appreciation of the difference between control and authority.

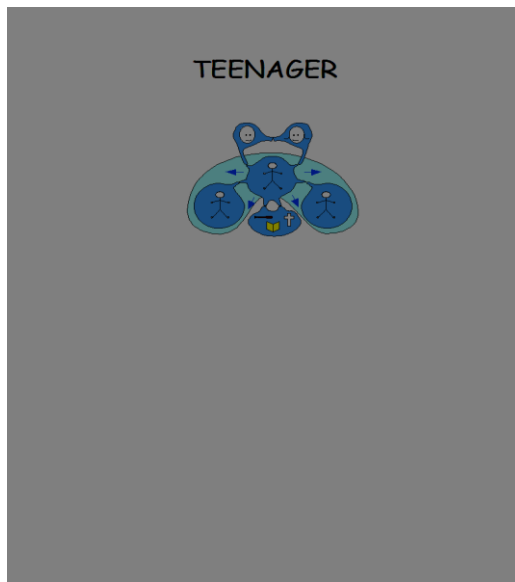


Illustration 20

We are being led, by this discussion, into a model of the teen years as a learning process. Contrary to school, the learning environment is unstructured, and defined largely by the choices made by the teen. Mistakes will be made, but as in school, those mistakes are mitigated by communication. If the teen communicates with those accepted as authorities, they can prepare him with an appreciation of the risks involved in the choices he is making, and armor him with strategies for escape when danger arises.

From childhood, the teen should have received three strengths: belief in her self-worth, an appreciation of the power and value of cooperation, and the pattern of self-discipline developed through relationships of authority.

Illustration 20 shows a subtle shift in the relationship between the teen and authorities. In childhood, non-parental authorities are essentially parental proxies. In the teen years, those relationships should be transferred to the control of the youth. This shift broadens the youth's appreciation of patterns of power, and so helps to strengthen her appreciation and commitment to authority.

The teen years are also an opportunity for the parent to broaden their perspectives. Many of us can re-examine the patterns our parents gave us for managing authority. We also gain insight into the problems and opportunities our behavior has created for our children. Finally, when we are blessed to participate in the life of a youth committed to the work of social healing, we can support their involvement with children not as fortunate in their circumstances, and help them to develop the skills to lead their peers towards a better future.

Let me emphasize that last point: danger is a symptom of social disease. If diseases are to be healed, they must be studied. We can't protect the healer from all danger.

The pattern I have offered others, and am pursuing with my own children, is fairly simple. Establish and maintain clear lines of communication. Discover where you agree and disagree on right and wrong. Let your child experience the consequences of their choices, and ask them afterwards how the experience went. Once you have agreed upon the consequences of their choices (whether good or bad), try and broaden the scope of your ethical agreement.

And be open to the possibility that you may find yourself agreeing with them! I always told my children: "Look, this is the best decision I can make. I may be wrong, and if you find that to be true, you can do differently with your children."

I had a friend whose daughter, in her junior year in high-school, began hiding from him. He would drive around after school, trying to hunt her down, and stand out on her friends' driveways

until she came out. Her grades dropped from A's and B's to near failing. We sat down after playing tennis one day, and I shared my perspective on raising my step-son. A year later, she was a straight-A student, and was set to attend a major university that Fall.

We can't control the decisions our teens make, but we can try to be reliable partners and guides as they work to establish independence.

Independence

Until we establish economic independence, our development is defined by social convention and the influence of our parents. After independence, we are free to choose, but we enter business and social relationships that greatly complicate the influences we must manage.

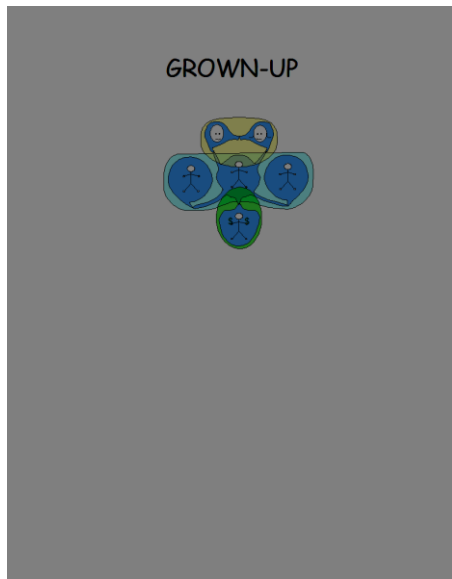


Illustration 21

In our illustration of infancy, we indicated the psychic gifts offered by parents to a baby. These gifts were offered unconditionally. Upon independence, we find that almost every spiritual exchange involves a negotiation through which each party seeks to maximize the benefits received. The result is often conflict across our relationships (Illustration 21).

Among those benefits are the continuing need for gratification (classically provided by mom) and motivation (often from dad). We can begin preparing ourselves for parenthood by practicing those arts on our friends, but in fact we will continue to need those gifts as long as we live. One way of recognizing a true friendship is when we participate in that practice without any expectation of return. The middle band in the figure represents that fellowship.

At this stage in life, our principal challenges are sex and money. Both are over-rated, but present serious spiritual dangers.

Money is simply a means of storing power. It has the great benefit of expanding our free will. If the farmer doesn't like what is on offer at the market, he can sell his goods and take the money to the department store tomorrow.

The danger of money is that it can come to stand between us and reality. If we want a new car, we don't need to understand how the car is made – we simply get a price quote from the auto dealer. Protected behind the facade of a price, the manufacturer can engage in predatory environmental and employment practices. We ourselves may engage in similar practices when managing our employees. We offer them a wage and expect them to produce marketable products and services for us. If they succeed, does it matter whether morale is good or poor?

The dangers of money expand enormously in a service economy, where value is a perception in the mind of the buyer. People providing financial services are particularly vulnerable. When

money is made by moving money around, concrete accountability is hard to find. The price of a service may be driven largely by the provider's personal financial goals.

When we fall prey to money's numbing effects, the best antidote is to spend time with people less fortunate than us. This is not simply an altruistic impulse. Money knows no loyalty. The farther it is from people that know how to create value, the weaker are its effects. The classic case is the “poor little rich kid” that spends her life being pursued by people who want to play with her money. The syndrome is so severe that rather than leaving it to their children, many among the wealthy are giving their money away and transferring business management to qualified professionals. By limiting inheritance to a financial seed, parents protect their children from blatant exploitation, and motivate them to seek out and expand a community of creative partners. If they succeed in establishing a productive partnership, there are of course means other than inheritance to transfer control of a family business to the next generation.

Simply put, the principal danger of money is that it separates us from the reality we share with our peers. By focusing our attention on acquiring money, we are in fact hiding from those that would love us.

Sex is a tawdry substitute for romantic love. I wrote a poem called “Yearnings” seven years ago, which began:

*The Earth at night dances with the Moon
Cadence and rhythm, their persons speaking
of Love with Power, Purpose and Strength,
Fluttering towards kindred recognitions.*

With one interpretation being:

*When you find yourself
Moving in the same circles,
Creating success for yourselves and others,
Then you will know you have found your man.*

Nature provides us with strong psychological incentives to engage in sex. That impulse is validated in entertainment and advertising. Unfortunately, when we ignore the social component of romantic partnership, our genitals become big handles that can be used to drag our energy wherever a manipulator wants it to go. The only advice I have found effective is to “keep it in your heart”. It is, after all, your blood that is moved during arousal, and your heart rules that essence.

Most of us don't get through independence without making a mistake. If we manage to preserve our free will, we may spend the rest of our lives trying to clean up the mess made in our personality.

Adulthood

For most of us, adulthood is an age-based social convention that corresponds closely with

independence. Beyond independence, however, there is the possibility of achieving balance between the competing demands life places on us, and alignment of those demands with our own talents and motivations. While that may sound like an unattainable ambition, I prefer to call that stage in life “adulthood”. (Illustration 22)

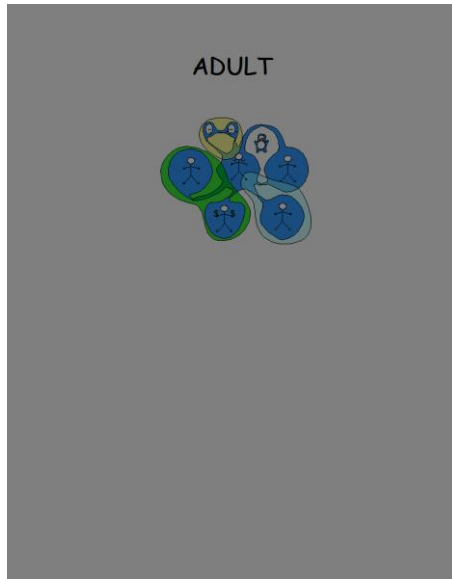


Illustration 22

Adults have the capacity to reach spiritually through those they seek to influence, using other people in their lives as proxies. Of course, our children and friends may not be as powerful as we are, and certainly not as powerful as the people seeking to influence us. When someone “speaks” through a child (an experience I have had only too frequently over the last decade), they create an opening that anybody can drive a truck through. That is evil.

One of the skills we develop in adulthood, then, is the ability to recognize dissonant internal voices, and to push them out of our relationships before they are corrupted. This requires, more than anything else, a clear and focused sense of purpose.

It is here that we find the origin of the Mosaic admonition to “honor thy parents”. The overlapping concerns of adulthood are hard to manage. A child has no right to decry his parents' failures, even when they impact her own ambitions. Worse, the expression of disrespect becomes a spiritual wedge that can be used to undermine a parent's resolution.

Here in adulthood, though, is also where true power lies. It is the power to organize internally energy garnered from many sources, and to bring it to bear in each moment to maintain social balance. In those interlocking relationships forms a cohesive whole that makes it very difficult to attack our sense of personal well-being. Because that sense of security is what we all seek, more often than not adults discover less mature individuals falling in with their purpose.