

DON'T BLAME YOUR PARENTS

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The unsuccessful, the unhappy at various periods in history have blamed their plight on numerous things -- fate, the gods, demons, innate cussedness, or heredity. Today it is the fashion to hold one's parents accountable for every flaw, from plain laziness to mental illness: "I can't save money because my parents never taught me economy." "I'm a hypochondriac because my mother fussed so much about my health when I was little." "In childhood I wasn't permitted to think for myself."

A woman I know actually blamed her parents for her unattractive appearance. Asked why she didn't wave her hair, powder her nose, or occasionally get a new hat, she answered plaintively, "When I was a child Mother always told me I wasn't good looking." It did not occur to her that as an adult it was up to her, and nobody else, to make the most of her looks.

The current notion is that little children are emotionally fragile, that you can wreck a child's whole future by loving him too little or too much, by teaching him the facts of life too late or too soon, by being too strict or too indulgent. Such half-baked misinterpretations of the importance of the formative years ignore the fact that most human beings are blessed with an inner strength. Actually, the average child is as tough psychologically as he is physically. Just as the body repels germs and viruses, so the mind has similar immunities and resistances to the unwise or unkind doing of parents.

History is full of examples of men and women who had unhappy childhoods and yet made a success of their lives. John Stuart Mill became a great philosopher and led a harmonious married life despite a father who never praised him, never allowed him to associate with other children, and relentlessly forced him to study night after night. Beethoven's ne'er-do-well father drove and exploited him shamelessly. Florence Nightingale's parents hemmed her in by all the restrictions that went with Victorian gentility and bitterly opposed her going into nursing.

Ordinary mortals likewise have the capacity to build worthwhile lives despite a past full of psychological handicaps. I do not deny that "parental rejection" or "over-domination" may genuinely handicap some individuals. But a human being is not a machine that once set rolling in the wrong direction is unable to change its course. The essence of maturity or "adjustment" is to make the most of yourself with whatever you have, which includes your physique, your mental endowments, your social opportunities, and your parents.

Almost daily in my practice I see patients who blame their failure to meet life on their parents instead of on themselves. A fearful, immature spinster wept that she "couldn't leave Mother." Yet her mother told me: "Doctor, I wish to goodness you'd help her, so that she'd go and get married." Nothing tied this woman to her mother's apron strings but knots of her own making.

"No wonder I'm the way I am," a seriously depressed man said to me. "Look!" He pulled from his pocket a yellowed newspaper clipping that told of his parents' double suicide twenty years before. He admitted that he had carried the clipping all those years. The heart of his problem was not the shocking memory but his compulsion to dwell on it.

Contrary to popular notion, mental illness or neuroticism is not caused by an event but by the way a person reacts to it. A disturbing incident is only the match which sets off the firecracker; it's the gunpowder within the cracker which actually causes the explosion. It is good old-fashioned character -- a compound of inherited tendencies and our ability to tolerate disappointments -- that determines whether we withstand childhood tragedies or whether they down us all our lives.

If it were true that what happens during childhood fixes us once and for all, everybody would be neurotic. Certain events in childhood are genuinely upsetting, among them weaning and a new baby in the family. But the normal individual outgrows his baby shoes.

The great majority of normal, healthy-minded youngsters manage, without special help, to cope matter-of-factly with their parents' antics. Just try to spoil a child who has such innate common sense that he doesn't need or want to be spoiled! Or try to dominate the average three-year-old. Children who do not have the neurotic need to be dependent will not be dominated. Maybe they react with tantrums. Maybe they argue. Maybe they are sullenly silent. But whatever the technique for maintaining their integrity, "Mom-ism" won't and can't wreck them.

The psychiatrist's job does not consist -- as many of my patients think -- of breaking apart a person's past so that he can lay his failings, weaknesses, and peculiarities right at his parents' door. All that a psychiatrist can do is to lead the patient to face the truth about his own wish to be dominated or sheltered or what not, and help him take a stand by himself. Once that point is reached, his past life matters very little. As Dr. Franz Alexander, a distinguished Chicago psychoanalyst put it, "The patient is suffering not so much from memories as from the incapacity to deal with the actual problems of the moment."

A single experience in adult life can so change human beings that it is sheer nonsense to maintain that their natures were immutably determined years before by what their parents said or did to them. A short illness turned St. Francis of Assisi from a frivolous, extravagant young man into a devout ascetic. Gay young blades marry and become serious and responsible husbands; gadabout young wives turn into settled stay-at-homes after the birth of a baby. The human organism is a going, changing concern, with the motives of the present its propelling force.

Too many of us with shortcomings are interested in asking, "How did it start?" Too few ask themselves, "Why do I keep it up"? A person must first make the frank self-admission, "I am worrisome -- or thriftless, or hypochondriac, or irresponsible -- because it suits some purpose of my own to be that way."

The cliché, "There are no problem children, only problem parents", is as extreme and fallacious a swing of the pendulum as the idea that all children were imps of Satan. Even a little child can be responsible for his own bad upbringing, for it takes two to make an emotional bargain. When a father is too authoritarian it may well be that he is so because the child craves being bossed. When a mother prolongs treating Junior like a baby it may be because she responds to his own need for protection. Children are not mere lumps of clay which adults mold. In the parent-child relationship, as in marriage, one personality modifies and plays upon another.

Parents can set the stage for the drama of their children's lives. They can supply inspiring or uninspiring examples of conduct, which will influence basic mental, physical, and spiritual growth. But acceptance or rejection of the background they give is a matter of the child's individual character.