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Parenting – The Irrational Vocation

By Sam Vaknin, Ph.D.

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There are some grounds to assume that a cognitive dissonance is involved in feeling that children are more a satisfaction than a nuisance. Why do people bother with parenting? It is time consuming, exhausting, strains otherwise pleasurable and tranquil relationships to their limits. Still, humanity keeps at it: breeding.

It is the easiest to resort to Nature. After all, all living species breed and most of them parent. We are, all taken into consideration, animals and, therefore, subject to the same instinctive behaviour patterns. There is no point in looking for a reason: survival itself (whether of the gene pool or, on a higher level, of the species) is at stake. Breeding is a transport mechanism: handing the precious cargo of genetics down generations of "organic containers".

But this is a reductionist view, which both ignores epistemological and emotional realities - and is tautological, thereby explaining something in terms of itself. Calling something by a different name or describing the mechanisms involved in minute detail does not an explanation make.

First hypothesis: we bring children to the world in order to "circumvent" death. We attain immortality (genetically and psychologically - though in both cases it is imaginary) by propagating our genetic material through the medium of our offspring.

This is a highly dubious claim. Any analysis, however shallow, will reveal its weaknesses. Our genetic material gets diluted beyond reconstruction with time. It constitutes 50% of the first generation, 25% of the second and so on. If this were the paramount concern - incest should have been the norm, being a behaviour better able to preserve a specific set of genes (especially today, when genetic screening can effectively guard against the birth of defective babies). Moreover, progeny is a dubious way of perpetuating one's self. No one remembers one's great great grandfathers. One's memory is better preserved by intellectual feats or architectural monuments. The latter are much better conduits than children and grandchildren.

Parenting – The Irrational Vocation

Still, this indoctrinated misconception is so strong that a baby boom characterizes post war periods. Having been existentially threatened, people multiply in the vain belief that they thus best protect their genetic heritage and fixate their memory.

In the better-educated, higher income, low infant mortality part of the world - the number of children has decreased dramatically - but those who still bring them to the world do so partly because they believe in these factually erroneous assumptions.

Second hypothesis: we bring children to the world in order to preserve the cohesiveness of the family nucleus. This claim can more plausibly be reversed: the cohesiveness of the social cell of the family encourages bringing children to the world. In both cases, if true, we would have expected more children to be born into stable families (ante or post facto) than into abnormal or dysfunctional ones. The facts absolutely contradict this expectation: more children are born to single parent families

(between one third and one half of them) and to other "abnormal" (non-traditional) families than to the mother-father classic configuration. Dysfunctional families have more children than any other type of family arrangement. Children are an abject failure at preserving family cohesiveness. It would seem that the number of children, or even their very existence, is not correlated to the stability of the family. Under special circumstances, (Narcissistic parents, working mothers) they may even be a destabilizing factor.

Hypothesis number three: children are mostly born unwanted. They are the results of accidents and mishaps, wrong fertility planning, wrong decisions and misguided turns of events. The more sex people engage in and the less preventive measures they adopt - the greater the likelihood of having a child. While this might be factually true (family planning is all but defunct in most parts of the world), it neglects the simple fact that people want children and love them. Children are still economic assets in many parts of the world. They plough fields and do menial jobs very effectively. This still does not begin to explain the attachment between parents and their offspring and the grief experienced by parents when children die or are sick. It seems that people derive enormous emotional fulfilment from being parents. This is true even when the children were unwanted in the first place or are the results of lacking planning and sexual accidents. That children ARE the results of sexual ignorance, bad timing, the vigorousness of the sexual drive (higher frequency of sexual encounters) - can be proven using birth statistics among teenagers, the less educated and the young (ages 20 to 30).

People derive great happiness, fulfilment and satisfaction from their children. Is not this, in itself, a sufficient explanation? The pleasure principle seems to be at work: people have children because it gives them great pleasure. Children are sources of emotional sustenance. As parents grow old, they become sources of economic support, as well. Unfortunately, these assertions are not sustained by the facts. Increasing mobility breaks families apart at an early stage. Children become ever more dependent on the economic reserves of their parents (during their studies and the formation of a new family). It is not uncommon today for a child to live with and off his parents until the age of 30. Increasing individualism leaves parents to cope with the empty nest syndrome. Communication between parents and children has rarefied in the 20th century.

It is possible to think of children as habit forming (see: "The Habit of Identity"). In this hypothesis,

Parenting – The Irrational Vocation

parents - especially mothers - form a habit. Nine months of pregnancy and a host of social reactions condition the parents. They get used to the presence of an "abstract" baby. It is a case of a getting used to a concept. This is not very convincing. Entertaining a notion, a concept, a thought, an idea, a mental image, or a symbol very rarely leads to the formation of a habit. Moreover, the living baby is very different to its pre-natal image. It cries, it soils, it smells, it severely disrupts the lives of its parents. It is much easier to reject it than to transform it to a habit. Moreover, a child is a bad emotional investment. So many things can and do go wrong with it as it grows. So many expectations and dreams are frustrated. The child leaves home and rarely reciprocates. The emotional "returns" on an investment in a child are rarely commensurate with the magnitude of the investment.

This is not to say that people do NOT derive pleasure and fulfilment from their offspring. This is undeniable. Yet, it is neither in the economic nor in the mature emotional arenas. To have children seems to be a purely Narcissistic drive, a part of the pursuit of Narcissistic supply.

For further elaboration, please refer to: "Malignant Self Love - Narcissism Revisited" and the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) sections.

We are all Narcissists, to a greater or lesser degree. A Narcissist is a person who projects a (false)

image to the people around him. He then proceeds to define himself by this very image reflected back at him. Thus, he regards people as mere instruments, helpful in his Sisyphean attempt at self-definition. Their attention is crucial because it augments his weak ego and defines its boundaries. The Narcissist feeds off their admiration, adoration and approval and these help him to maintain a grandiose (fantastic and delusional) sense of self. As the personality matures, Narcissism is replaced with the ability to empathize and to love. The energy (libido) initially directed at loving one's (false) self is redirected at more multidimensional, less idealized "targets": others. This edifice of maturity seems to crumble at the sight of one's offspring. The baby evokes in the parent the most primordial drives, a regression to infancy, protective, animalistic instincts, the desire to merge with the newborn and a sense of terror generated by such a desire (a fear of vanishing and of being assimilated). The parent relives his infancy and childhood through the agency of the baby. The newborn provides the parent with endless, unconditional and unbounded Narcissistic supply. This is euphemistically known as love - but it is really a form of symbiotic dependence, at least in the beginning of the relationship. Such narcissistic supply is addictive even to the more balanced, more mature, more psychodynamically stable of parents.

It enhances the parent's self-confidence, self esteem and buttresses his self image. It fast becomes indispensable, especially in the emotionally vulnerable position in which the parent finds himself. This vulnerability is a result of the reawakening and reconstruction of all the conflicts and unsolved complexes that the parent had with his own parents.

If explanation is true, the following should also hold true:

The higher the self confidence, the self esteem, the self worth, the clearer and more realistic the self image of the potential parent - the less children he will have (the Principle of the Conservation of the Ego boundaries)

Parenting – The Irrational Vocation

The more sources of readily available Narcissistic supply - the less children are needed (the substitutability of Narcissistic sources of supply)

Sure enough, both predictions are validated by reality. The higher the education and the income of adults - the fewer children they tend to have. People with a higher education and with a greater income are more likely to have a more established sense of self worth. Children become counter-productive: not only is their Narcissistic input (supply) unnecessary, they can also hinder further progress.

Having children is not a survival or genetically oriented imperative. Had this been the case, the number of children would have risen together with free income. Yet, exactly the reverse is happening: the more children people can economically afford - the fewer they have. The more educated they are (=the more they know about the world and about themselves), the less they seek to procreate. The more advanced the civilization, the more efforts it invests into preventing the birth of children: contraceptives, family planning, abortions. These all are typical of affluent, well educated societies.

And the more Narcissistic supply can be derived from other sources - the less do people resort to making children and to other procreative activities (such as sex). Freud described the mechanism of sublimation: the sex drive, the Eros (libido), can be "converted", "sublimated" into other activities. All the sublimatory channels and activities are Narcissistic in character: politics, art. They all provide what children do: narcissistic supply. They make children redundant. It is not by coincidence that people famous for their creativity tend to have less children than the average (most of them, none at all). They

are Narcissistically self sufficient, they do not need children.

This seems to be the key to our determination to have children:

To experience the unconditional love that we received from our mothers, this intoxicating feeling of being loved without caveats, for what we are, with no limits, reservations, or calculations. This is the most powerful, crystallized source of Narcissistic supply. It nourishes our self-love, self worth and self-confidence. It infuses us with feelings of omnipotence and omniscience. In these, and other respects, it is a return to infancy.

Appendix

Question:

Is there a "typical" relationship between the Narcissist and his family?

Answer:

We are all members of a few families in our lifetime: the one that we are born to and the one(s) that we create. We all transfer hurts, attitudes, fears, hopes and desires - a whole emotional baggage - from the former to the latter. The narcissist is no exception.

The narcissist has a dichotomous view of humanity: humans are either Sources of Narcissistic Supply (and, then, idealised and over-valued) or do not fulfil this function (and, therefore, are valueless, devalued). The narcissist gets all the love that he needs from himself. From the outside he needs approval, affirmation, admiration, adoration, attention - in other words, externalised Ego boundary functions. He does not require - nor does he seek - his parents' or his siblings' love, or to be loved by his children. He casts them as the audience in the theatre of his inflated grandiosity. He wishes to impress them, shock them, threaten them, infuse them with awe, inspire them, attract their attention, subjugate them, or manipulate them. He emulates and simulates an entire range of emotions and employs every means to achieve these effects. He lies (narcissists are pathological liars - their very self is a false one). He plays the pitiful, or, its opposite, the resilient and reliable. He stuns and shines with outstanding intellectual, or physical (or anything else appreciated by the members of the family) capacities and achievements. When confronted with (young) siblings or with his own children, the narcissist is likely to undergo three reactive phases:

At first, he perceives his offspring as a threat to his Narcissistic Supply Sources (his turf, the Pathological Narcissistic Space). He does his best to belittle them, hurt (also physically) and humiliate them and then, when these reactions prove ineffective or counter productive, he retreats into an imaginary world of omnipotence. A period of emotional absence and detachment ensues. The narcissist indulges himself in daydreaming, delusions of grandeur, planning of future coups, nostalgia and hurt (the Lost Paradise Syndrome). The narcissist reacts this way to the birth of his children or to the introduction of new centres of attention to the family cell (even a new pet!).

Whatever the narcissist perceives to be his competition for scarce Narcissistic Supply is relegated to the role of the enemy. Where no legitimacy exists for the uninhibited expression of the aggression and hostility aroused by this predicament - the narcissist prefers to stay away. He disconnects, detaches himself emotionally, becomes cold and disinterested, directs transformed anger at his mate or at his parents (the more legitimate targets).

Other narcissists see the opportunity in the "mishap". They seek to manipulate their parents (or their mate) by "taking over" the newcomer. Such narcissists monopolise their siblings or their new-born children. This way, indirectly, the narcissist basks in the attention directed at the infant. An example: by being closely identified with his offspring, a narcissistic father secures the grateful admiration of the mother ("What an outstanding father he is"). He also assumes part of or all the credit for baby's/sibling's achievements. This is a process of annexation and assimilation of the other, a strategy that the narcissist makes use of in most of his relationships.

As the baby/sibling grows older, the narcissist begins to see their potential to be edifying, reliable and satisfactory Sources of Narcissistic Supply. His attitude, then, is completely transformed. The former threats have now become promising potentials. He cultivates those whom he trusts to be the most rewarding. He encourages them to idolise him, to adore him, to be awed by him, to admire his deeds and capabilities, to learn to blindly trust and obey him, in short to surrender to his charisma and to become submerged in his folies-de-grandeur. These roles - allocated to them explicitly and demandingly or implicitly and perniciously by the narcissist - are best fulfilled by ones whose mind is not fully formed and independent. The older the siblings or offspring, the more they become critical, even judgmental, of the narcissist. They are better able to put into context and perspective his actions,

to question his motives, to anticipate his moves. They refuse to continue to play the mindless pawns in his chess game. They hold grudges against him for what he has done to them in the past, when they were less capable of resistance. They can gauge his true stature, talents and achievements - which, usually, lag far behind the claims that he makes.

This brings the narcissist a full cycle back to the first phase. Again, he perceives his Siblings or sons/daughters as threats. He quickly becomes disillusioned, in one of the spastic devaluation reactions typical of his appraisal of humans around him. He loses all interest, becomes emotionally remote, absent and cold, rejects any effort to communicate with him, citing life pressures and the preciousness and scarceness of his time. He feels burdened, cornered, besieged, suffocated, and claustrophobic. He wants to get away, to abandon his commitments to people who have become totally useless (or even damaging) to him. He does not understand why he has to support them, to suffer their company and he believes himself to have been trapped. He rebels either passively–aggressively (by refusing to act or intentionally sabotaging the relationships) or actively (by being overly critical, aggressive, unpleasant, verbally and psychologically abusive and so on). Slowly - to justify his acts to himself - he gets immersed in conspiracy theories with clear paranoid hues. To his mind, the members of the family conspire against him, seek to belittle or humiliate or subordinate him, do not understand him, stymie his growth. The narcissist usually finally gets what he wants and the family that he has created disintegrates to his great sorrow (due to the loss of the Narcissistic Space) - but also to his great relief and surprise (how could they have let go someone as unique as he?).

This is the cycle: the narcissist feels threatened by arrival of new family members - assimilation of siblings or offspring - obtaining Narcissistic Supply from them - overvaluation of these new sources by the narcissist - as sources grow older and independent, they adopt anti narcissistic behaviours - the narcissist devalues them - the narcissist feels stifled and trapped - the narcissist becomes paranoid - the narcissist rebels and the family disintegrates. This cycle characterises not only the family life of the narcissist. It is to be found in other realms of his life (his career, for instance). At work, the narcissist, initially, feels threatened (no one knows him, he is a nobody). Then, he develops a circle of admirers, cronies and friends which he "nurtures and cultivates" in order to obtain Narcissistic Supply from them. He overvalues them (they are the brightest, the most loyal, with the biggest chances to climb the corporate ladder and other superlatives).

But following some anti–narcissistic behaviours on their part (a critical remark, a disagreement, a refusal, however polite, all constitute such behaviours) - the narcissist devalues all these previously over–valued individuals. Now they are stupid, lack ambition, skills and talents, common (the worst expletive in the narcissist's vocabulary), with an unspectacular career ahead of them. The narcissist feels that he is misallocating his resources (for instance, his time). He feels besieged and suffocated. He rebels and erupts in a series of self–defeating and self–destructive behaviours, which lead to the disintegration of his life.

Doomed to build and ruin, attach and detach, appreciate and depreciate, the narcissist is predictable in his Death Wish. What sets him apart from other suicidal types is that his wish is granted to him in small, tormenting doses throughout his anguished life.

Sam Vaknin is the author of "Malignant Self Love – Narcissism Revisited" and the editor of mental

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His web site:

Frequently asked questions regarding narcissism:

Narcissistic Personality Disorder on Suite101:

Parenting Is Tough – Make It Easy

By Nadia Alvino

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Raising children and being a good parent is tough, you need every bit of information that you can find to help you develop effective parenting techniques and to make parenting easier. You need a resource that contains parenting tips and advice that will help develop your parenting skills. I have produced a practical, high quality, professionally edited ebook titled " Parenting is Tough ! " that contains all the expert parenting advice that you will need to develop effective parenting skills. This ebook outlines many helpful parenting tips that will enable you to raise good, happy, confident and resilient kids. This easy to read ebook will teach you how to bond with your children and how together you can create a loving, happy relationship that will get stronger and stronger as your children become teenagers, young adults and then as they become parents themselves. More info on this ebook is available at: www.goodhappykids.com

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