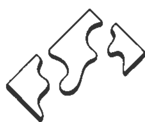

Living with Children

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In our investigations, we wish to understand what it is like to live with children. By defining our subject as this, we immediately limit it in important ways. There are some questions we will not ask. For example, we will not begin by asking "What is a child?" for that would involve "looking at" children and generating a descriptive list, based on, say, our previous and present observations, and those of the "child experts." And we believe there is a hidden yet powerful misunderstanding in such a question because, in a sense, by themselves children do not exist. They only exist *for* and *in relation to* someone else—parents, teachers, each other.

How can one ever say what a child is? One may be able to speak of one's own childhood and say, "When I was a child, I was like this . . ." and go on *ad nauseam*. But one's parents and friends would tell quite a different story! Or one may observe hundreds of children, even in diverse cultures, and find trends and tendencies in persons of a certain age. But when, even with such acquired erudition, one stands before Johnny Kilshaw, what makes it possible to say one "knows" him? One's descriptive list of "What a child is" is only partially helpful. For to know Johnny Kilshaw you have to live with him, and then he becomes a part of you and you a part of him, and the line between Johnny and you becomes shrouded in an ever deepening mystery. So we would rather begin by acknowledging the mystery than by confidently waving a compendium of words about "What a child is."

We are, then, not concerned "about children" *per se*. Neither will we address the question "What is an adult?" (or parent, or teacher) for the same reasons. Our interest is in what happens *between* them; in that which makes it possible to say they are "living together." And for the sake of convenience, we will concentrate our research on the experience of parents. For a parent, what gives living with children its living sense? And here we are not talking about cardiac palpitation although we would not deny its part in the whole story.

Our approach is phenomenological. We recognize that this leaves us open to charges of arrogance and presumption for we insist that when people talk about their experiences we cannot simply take their statements at face value. This is not to say we regard their statements as unimportant. Quite the contrary. They are so important that every word must be weighed and considered with the ut-

most seriousness in order that what lies behind the words may be understood. For we believe that words are like icons: they speak of "something else," to use Panofsky's term. It is this we seek to understand. We seek the Word, the Logos, which can make definitive sense of the words.

And so in our research, when we converse with parents about experiences with their children, we have to be very careful, tentative, cautious, ever-listening for nuances that can help to make sense of the total array. We have to try to listen with "propositionless ears" that we might hear what it is that is really being proposed.

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When Keith witnessed the birth of his first child, he described the experience as "Incredible!" which means, of course, it was beyond belief. Before his child, he had his beliefs, his certitudes, his confidences. But with the coming of his child, something happened to them. If the birth of a child is beyond belief, it is not the child that is "incredible" but one's previous credulities. To have a child is to have one's certainties brought to judgment, relativized in the truest sense of the word. As former rock singer Arda put it, "as soon as you have a kid, all your values change."

Ken and Wendy, who claimed not to be religious, said: "When Andrea came into the world, it was the closest thing to a miracle we had ever experienced." Wendy is a nurse and Ken a young business executive, and both were trained to understand life. When Andrea was born, she was on schedule, fulfilling reliably the prediction of a nine-month gestation. But even though she was expected, she was, in a strange sense, unexpected: "It was 'beyond' all our wildest expectations."

Jim said of Brian's birth: "I didn't know whether to be happy or scared." He was happy because he sensed his manhood, his virility, somehow fulfilled; as did his wife Linda of her womanhood. Jim passed out cigars to his buddies at work, and Linda was so proud when friends came to offer congratulations. So they were happy—full, more complete. "It was wonderful," they said. Wonder-full. We understand the second part of the word, a sense of the fullness of life. But "Wonder?" It speaks of the known, of the evident, of what is manifest—but only as a hint. Behind the face that is seen lies the life unseen, the other side of the world's wholeness, the world yet to be revealed. Studies of new parents reveal how often they look into the eyes of their newborn. It is as if to seek an answer to a question: "Are you what I see?" And the answer comes back as both a "Yes" and a "No." What is in one's arms is what is known, tangible ("I took prenatal classes so I could handle Laura's birth better," said John), accountable, manageable, deeply satisfying to one's creative nature.

But what is in one's arms is also unknown, intangible, unaccountable, and deeply disturbing because the fulfillment of one's own creative nature has brought about another such a one that now presents itself as separate and autonomous in its own right and, therefore, in some sense unknowable. So when we give birth to a child we feel wonderful but also full of wonder for we know that we have begun a course whose future we cannot know, except in part.

Our children are a part of us but also apart from us. Mona put it so well: "Every once in a while I see my son across the room and I think, 'My God, he's just like his father.' At those times I am filled with dread, but also relief. His father was a heavy drinker who ran off when Stephen was born. But then I realize that Stephen is not his father." We can be *like* our fathers, but never our fathers. A child, says Erny, "incarnates powers which do not come out of the family reservoir."

A child arrives as both an answer and a question. Tom and Mary, devout Christians, had been praying for a child for many years. When Mark came, he came as "an answer to prayer." So they gave thanks to Christ and made a solemn promise to bring Mark up to a Christian life. But things did not go well. Mark seemed terribly willful, wouldn't do as he was told, and, now in his teens, is "rude" to the mother and father who conceived him and brought him to life. He came as an answer to prayer, but now there are more questions than answers. Indeed, the answer has become *nothing but* a series of questions: "What's gone wrong? We've tried everything. We're at our wits' end. What are we to do about him?" One thing is clear: Mark will be Mark, and in being so, Tom and Mary will be left with more questions, not only about the answer to their prayers, but also about Tom and Mary.

When a child is born, his parents become as children. Margaret says she "loves children" because they are so "wide-eyed, curious, and full of life." She sees her son David crawling around the house, going into cupboards, pulling out pots and pans, examining old shoes, and stuffing things into his mouth, and she "marvels" at his curiosity. Yet, his very curiosity engages her own. She spends hours just watching him. "What makes him like that?" When he's in another room, out of her presence, she wonders "what he's up to?" When she and John conceived David, they gave him life. Now he gives them life. In his presence they are as children, wide-eyed and curious. They "cannot imagine life without him." If David died, so, in a sense, would Margaret and John. As he lives, so do they.

Bill and Linda say that Cameron's arrival has brought a new sense of wholeness to their marriage. In fact, only now do they feel "really married." They'd had a marriage license for over two years and shared the same name. But only in having Cameron did the singu-

larity of their own shared name take on meaning. "We really feel together now." Without a child, marriage as "one flesh" is not realizable. Without Cameron, Bill could still be Bill, and Linda, Linda. But Cameron's existence is the physical manifestation of Bill *and* Linda, and so in his presence they feel a new oneness.

So the child comes as one who makes two one, a reconciler, which is a recurring theme in mythology. But he also comes as a judge, his power to unite being the obverse of his power to divide. Marcia and Walter were "going through a rough patch" in their marriage. They thought "perhaps a child would help bring us closer together." But when responding to Jimmy's cries in the night, they found themselves interpreting the cries differently. At the slightest whimper, Marcia wanted to pick the child up, coddle it, feed it, play with it, comfort it, be with it. Walter, a rugged individualist, thought such practice would "spoil" the child. He wanted Jimmy to learn to be a "real Man," to learn to "make it on his own," to learn that "crying will get you nowhere." So, while the child presents itself as the same to both, that sameness brings to awareness the differences deep within each. The cries in the night come in the same tonality, the same volume, and at the same frequency to both, but they evoke a different response in each. Although it is the same sound, Marcia and Walter hear different sounds, and in responding differently they see manifest the differences between themselves. And so the cries of a child come as a question, the answers to which can either unite or divide.

Michael and Janet, married for six years, "chose" not to have children and "planned" accordingly. Michael, deeply reflective by nature, somewhat unhappy as a child himself and "not at all optimistic" about the world generally, couldn't see any justification for bringing another child into the picture. But one evening, while visiting friends who had just had a baby, Janet took the child in her arms. As Michael watched from across the room, "something happened" to him. Now they are expecting their first child.

For a child to be possible at all, something has to happen to our plans, our arrangements, our life-responses, our sense of what it means to choose, our sense of Yes and No. To choose to have a child is to choose to relinquish one's power of choice, or at least to have one's understanding of it radically transformed. Children and choices do not go together well for to have a child requires only one possible response, without equivocation: Yes. No "No" or "Maybe." For children to be possible at all, only a Yes will do. Child equals Yes. But if a child is not possible without a Yes, how is a Yes possible? A child makes it possible. A man looks at a child in a woman's arms and says—in spite of himself, in spite of his pessimism, his power of reflection, his plans—he looks at a child and says: "Yes!" Child equals Yes. Yes equals child. No "ifs," "ands" or "buts." And so

George could say when he saw his wife in labor, "I felt I was being carried by something unstoppable." The verb is passive. A child puts a man's sense of himself into a secondary position, which is why Francis Bacon could define children as "Impediments to great enterprises." He thought his enterprises were great and was, therefore, childless. If we think our enterprises are great—our schools, for example—there is no room for children. To say No to a child is to say Yes to oneself, and vice versa. But we must be careful about our meanings.

When Jane was a year and a half old, her mother wondered seriously if Jane was in fact her child, for they seemed continuously "at odds" with one another. Indeed, Jill, her mother, phoned the hospital for verification of the birth records. The word that they were correct precipitated an "identity crisis" for Jill. At root, crisis (Greek *krisis*) means "separation." For Jill this separation centered on a disbelief that what could issue from her own belly could, in truth, be so unutterably alien. But the hospital records confirmed no mistake had been made. So the *fact* of the differences between mother and daughter became a question of the *meaning* of the differences. At first, being "at odds" meant "mistake." But when the clinical files removed that as a possibility, "at odds" could only mean one thing, "no mistake." As Jill put it: "I suddenly realized that this was a little personality all on its own." The crisis had fulfilled its meaning: separation. So to be a child requires a primal sundering, a decisive moment (in origin, to "decide" means "to cut off") which marks an end, but also a beginning.

Without doubt, for the child it is a beginning, but no less so for the parent. The birth of the child marks too the birth of the adult, for the umbilical cut brings to awareness that what is indeed one's flesh and blood is also, in deed, absolutely "other." But the child's complete "otherness" illuminates one's own. In seeing that "otherness," one sees coincidentally what is not-other. One sees oneself. And so, Jung is able to say: "It is only separation, detachment, and agonizing confrontation through opposition, that produce consciousness and insight," which is why in Hindu introspection, for example, the subject of cognition has always been equated with the subject of ontology, and why, in acknowledging Jane's "otherness," Jill felt strangely reconciled to her, strangely whole.

What are we to make of this? We set out to recover the "lived sense" of having children, and we find ourselves weaving a story of life. But what is the essence of the story? What is it that makes having a child and living with it from day to day different from any other of life's experiences? Certainly we might call it a primal experience. It is one experience, if not the only one, that transcends all cultural and economic boundaries. Indeed, our people spoke often of this. Mona, poverty-stricken most of her life, really enjoyed being in hospital

alongside "the lady in the next bed with her diamond rings and silk dressing gown. When Stephen was born, I knew I was just like her."

But when all is said and done, perhaps we have answered the question which at first we rejected: "What is a child?" But now the question itself has a different meaning. By his very presence, a child brings us to our senses by asking what we have done in creating him, and what we are going to do now that he is among us. Our respondents understood this very well. For one, it meant "never being absolutely sure of anything again." Another remarked: "All my previous dreams and plans, my career—all these things don't seem so important anymore." What has happened? We have lost control of ourselves. Our child issues from a deliberate act, but his presence represents something beyond deliberation. For now there is more to life than what we knew, and it is mysterious. The child comes as a stranger, but a stranger that we ourselves have created. What makes a child so strange is that he is so familiar. After all, we made him. He is our flesh and blood. That is why his otherness is so incomprehensible. He takes us by surprise. "Never," says van den Berg, "has the child been more misunderstood than since the advent of child psychology." Because the aim of its effort is to understand him more completely, to contain him, to control him, it misses the point. He is always beyond our understanding because he is beyond us.

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