

A WHOLE GOSPEL FOR A WHOLE CHILD

I asked Anders what, at six, he knows about God. “Well,” he said, “I know that God is loving. That’s all I know for sure so far.”

Joy Neal, Anders’s mom

Krista Tippett, award-winning public radio host, begins all of her interviews with this question: “What is the spirituality of your childhood?” Whatever the subject of the interview, she has determined this to be the most revealing question that will provoke her guests to share of themselves with her audience. The spiritual landscape of our childhood harbors our deepest desires. It is where our vibrant imagination plays with the meaning of being human, which determines much of who we become in adulthood.

In my early childhood, my family was nonreligious. All I had available to me were some Chinese folklore picture books that described hell as eighteen levels of torture, depicted in graphic detail, which helped develop an existential angst in me. Enter the Christian missionaries who founded the school for missionary children that I was sent to. There I discovered a way to escape the tragic fate of eternal conscious torment. At the age of twelve I prayed what they called the “sinner’s prayer” to secure my place with Jesus in heaven, thereby temporarily easing my anxiety about the afterlife. Little did I know, that comfort came with spiritual baggage that kept me fractured for the rest of my childhood, and it has taken me the better part of my adult life to this point to try to piece myself back together.

The fire-and-brimstone salvation I was taught created a separation of our bodies and our souls, our right-now life and our afterlife. According to this split gospel, our bodies are a temporary vessel for the soul, which would be fetched back up to heaven when we meet our earthly demise. Alongside this incomplete gospel came authoritarian teachings that promoted literal readings of the Bible, hierarchies of control that kept women in submission to men, and a stance of fear toward liberals, science, people of different sexual orientations, other races, and other religions.

In high school I attended a short-term mission trip to Nepal, a nation ravaged by extreme poverty. I was still the same thoughtful, anxious kid, the one who contemplated the infinite future at six years old,

so when I encountered the jarring reality of poverty, I asked that essential question that would later develop into a full-blown passion for social justice: *Why?* Why was I born into privilege and these people were born into poverty? It isn't fair! But I buried that curiosity about why within me because my spiritual environment taught me that while compassion for the poor was important, compassion for poor souls was more urgent.

It was a thin theology inadequate to express the realities I was experiencing. I remember meeting a woman who looked ancient, her skin wrinkled in a thousand folds, dark from a lifetime of labor in the sun. But she was only in her forties, and according to the average life expectancy for Nepalese at the time, she would die within a decade. As we, a group of wide-eyed youth, sang worship songs that spoke of salvation for our souls but not our bodies, I heard the silence of God. It was as if God had nothing to say about the life withering away from the Nepalese woman's overworked body.

At the Christian college I attended in the Midwest, I was part of a tiny minority of Asians in a sea of white students. At the time, I was grateful to be in a community of people who shared my faith and values. I believed we were equal members as brothers and sisters in Christ, working together for God's kingdom. Only later did I realize how much I had to minimize my own culture and experience of being Asian on a white campus. I later learned this was part of a process called "assimilation." I felt my race in my body as I moved about in the world, but this too was absent from conversations in my spiritual upbringing.

I have a trans brother, which means for our entire childhood I believed I had a sister because he was born in a female body and was raised as a girl. When he eventually embraced his trans identity and decided to undergo sex reassignment surgery, our family met with extreme resistance from our faith community. My brother was reprimanded for changing God's good, original design for his body. For me, this was a dramatic summary of the way my childhood religion sent conflicting messages regarding our bodies, which is that God and the gospel are mostly unconcerned with our bodies—except when it comes to matters of sex.

As I emerged into young adulthood to discover additional inconvenient truths, like global warming, and looked outward to the large-scale problems of global poverty and the war on terror, I was awakened to the truth that what we do in the present has consequences for God's creation here and now, as well as for our children and their children. At the same time, I had another awakening.

As I reflected on my own lived reality in my biologically female body, Asian olive skin, and within a patriarchal and white-supremacist system, I began to understand that for the gospel (which means "good news") to be truly good news for the world, it has to be concerned not just about spirituality but also about our bodies, our minds, and our politics. If the good news is to be good, it has to be good not just for

a small demographic slice of the population but for people of all religions, ethnicities, sexual orientations, gender identities, economic status, and ages.

It felt like I had lived the first half of my life skimming the surface of all that my faith promised but failed to deliver. As I peeled away the layers, I discovered the possibility that a fuller faith could address what lies beneath: the richness of what the gospel has to say about our bodies, minds, and spirits and the ways they intertwine to make us an integral whole.

I became passionate about learning the political teachings within Christian tradition. I began to understand how Jesus challenged the power structures of his day with courage and to recognize that there was no separation of the spiritual and the political in his life. This kind of faith, I thought, had potential to be transformative for me and for the communities I inhabit—it could lead to real change, authentic growth, and a more just world.

I don't want my kids to have to live that fractured spirituality. I want to offer them the whole gospel, the good news that they can embrace an integrated view of themselves and engage authentically and fully with the world. But this is new territory for me personally, as a parent, and for the world, as human civilization is only beginning to recognize the need to offer children full autonomy.

THE EVOLUTION OF PARENTING

In the introduction, I said that parenting is largely instinctual. What I mean is that we are prone to repeat the patterns in which we were raised. As humans, we internalize the language and attitudes of our upbringing so that it becomes part of who we are. We are largely unaware of its presence, like the air we breathe—it just is. We mistake our natural parenting responses to be a universal instinct, somehow biologically wired to our being, when in reality parenting is extremely diverse and fluid.

I had my first baby in California, and my mother flew from Taiwan to be with me for the first month postpartum. It is a traditional Chinese ritual for the mother to take care of her daughter by helping out with the baby and feeding the new mother an assortment of Chinese herbal medicines to help with recovery. In that whirlwind month, I was receiving both the advice of Western pediatricians and my mother's wisdom from her own child-rearing days. The realms of advice were polar opposite. Lay the baby to sleep on her back in a crib away from your room, the doctors recommended. Strap the baby on you with a cloth and she can sleep while you cook, my mother quipped. Faced with conflicting information, I seriously questioned the idea of a maternal instinct: I honestly didn't know what was best for my baby.

Not only do parenting customs vary from night to day across cultures; they also vary significantly through time. Almost every modern parenting sensibility we have has developed only in very recent

human history. Historians tell us that if you reach far back into early civilizations—appallingly—parents across the globe killed their young. And this wasn't done by savage men but by biological mothers who labored for their babies. Historian Lloyd deMause estimates that “millions of infant deaths can be attributed directly or indirectly to maternal tactics to mitigate the high cost of rearing them.”¹ That's right, if any parental instinct is universal, it was infanticide. Although infanticide still occurs in some pockets of our world today, we have moved well beyond accepting violent brutalization of children as good parenting practice.

Clearly, parenting styles have evolved and progressed over the generations. Western historians date the ideal of a nurturing mother to the eighteenth century.² Since then, although parenting has become less vicious, dominion over children's autonomy continue to reign, albeit via subtler methods. Infanticide and abandonment morphed into severe corporal punishment in homes and schools, with the aim of controlling children. In the Industrial Age, children became cogs in the machine and child labor became accepted practice. Children were still treated as subhuman, and sex abuse was rampant. It wasn't until 1959 that the United Nations adopted the Declaration of the Rights of the Child, eleven years after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, taking political steps to protect children from economic or sexual exploitation.³

In the past few decades, parenting styles have continued to evolve to be more kind to children, but physical violations of children's bodily autonomy have proven hard to overcome, and emotional and spiritual manipulation of children has taken root in insidious ways to keep adult power over children. Children can exist and have rights now, but they must be good compliant boys and girls, with parenting methods aimed at that goal.

Today, in the Information Age, the speed with which parenting styles progress has increased. We are at the cusp of a changeover to viewing children as full physical, emotional, and spiritual agents. It is becoming more clear that our job as parents isn't to shape our children into people who conveniently situate themselves in our world, but to afford them the liberty to grow into who they are. We are climbing the uphill battle to switch from an *authoritarian* to an *authoritative* mode of parenting.

Although parenting is instinctual and we are prone to repeat the patterns from which we are raised, the good news is that when we step back and view the larger picture of parenting history, we are not beholden to a biological mandate. We can evolve and push against harmful practices of the past and usher in a more beautiful vision of how to parent our children.

¹ Robin Grille, *Parenting for a Peaceful World* (Avalon Beach, Australia: Vox Cordis Press, 2013), 19.

² Grille, *Parenting for a Peaceful World*, 21.

³ Grille, *Parenting for a Peaceful World*, 72.

GOOD NEWS FOR THE CHILDREN

In the Christian fundamentalist parenting paradigm I grew up in, parents are tasked to bring up godly children via a top-down hierarchy. Armed with divine directives, parents act as agents of God to rule over children. Under this model, Scripture is used to justify spanking children into submission and physically coercing them into right behavior. This type of fundamentalism fails to create intrinsic motivations to do good and offers very little emotional validation because emotions are not to be trusted. A forced spiritual identity comes with a prescriptive list of behaviors with which the child must comply in order to fit the role of the good, godly kid. Add to that community expectations as external motivation for a child's moral behavior. None of this is good news for the child.

For those like me who see the way they were raised or their faith tradition as bringing harm to a child's personhood, what we are seeing in these years of parenting is this: a call to subvert the paradigm. Instead of the top-down hierarchy, we sow a foundation of love, connection, and justice toward children so that in their tender growing up years they can put down deep roots of physical security, emotional self-identity, and spiritual grounding to sustain a lifetime of living good and living well.

Our jobs as parents aren't to prescribe the kinds of fruit our children will grow but to be diligent in watering the roots of justice, letting each of their unique seeds germinate into their dynamic selves. Because of the inherent vulnerabilities of children, in order to topple hierarchy, we must be intentional in equalizing power dynamics between the adult and the child. This stands in stark contrast to an authoritarian parenting mindset, which fears a child who has power and control, believing children who have too much power will somehow drive themselves into being chaotic creatures and undermine parental authority.

Authoritarian parents seize control over their child and ensure power remains with the adult. This mistakenly assumes that respect is coerced instead of earned. On the contrary, the more we attempt to equalize power dynamics between us and our children, the more they gain the confidence and skills to navigate a give-and-take relationship with the parent. When we earn their trust, our influence over them is far greater than whatever values we impose on them, because they have been given the autonomy to choose it out of their own free will. Giving our power away, ironically, ends up bolstering our position of parental influence over our children's lives as we engage in mutual understanding and learning from one another. Our children raise us as much as we are raising them.

DISMANTLING OUR BLIND SPOTS

I have two children. When they were babies, one of them rarely cried, slept through the night, and ate well. The other required two night wakings to feed, fussed throughout the day, and was a picky eater. Conventional parenting vocabulary would have me call one child a “good” baby and the other a “bad” baby, or, to be less crass, an “easy” baby and a “difficult” baby. Thankfully, when they were little, I was introduced to the writing of Dr. Sears, a pediatrician and expert on attachment parenting, whose book *The Fussy Baby Book* taught me these terms instead: *low need* and *high need*.⁴ The baby wasn’t bad, I learned; he simply had needs he deserved to have met, and he wasn’t going to let me get away with not tending to them. The way we speak matters, and it brings about a shift in a parent’s attitude from feeling unlucky for having been given a “bad” baby to realizing that this baby is better at demanding the attention all babies need. Not only did this help me lessen resentment toward my high-need child; it also helped me become more intentional in tending to my other child’s needs. I realized she still needed my attention; she just didn’t demand it.

Unsurprisingly, my high-need baby grew to be a highly sensitive toddler. He took his time speaking, but even before he was verbal, he would do or babble adorable things that elicited joyful delight from the adults around him. But we noticed that he would often startle at laughter that was directed at him, and often a tantrum would soon follow. Before he had the words to say, he was trying to tell us, “I don’t like you laughing at me.” Because of his needs, I began to become aware of how often adults respond to young children’s antics with laughter. We do it because it’s fun (for us) and such laughter is acceptable among adults, but we don’t stop to consider how it affects the child. Certainly, some children perhaps aren’t aware of being the subject of laughter, or even if they are, they do not mind. But what I appreciate about highly sensitive children, like my son, is that they boost the signal that something isn’t quite right. They reveal the blind spots we may have as adults who have inherent power over children or the ways we do not treat children justly.

Would we laugh boisterously at other adults who said something when they weren’t trying to be funny? Would we laugh even more when they objected to our laughing at them? That would be incredibly condescending, and yet this is what we do to children. Becoming aware of this reminds me that there are many ways we have yet to extend full equality and dignity to children in our world. We assume their concerns are not as legitimate as ours when we are in adult settings; we make jokes about how much alcohol we ingest just to take care of them all day long; we talk about them in front of them as if their opinions don’t matter; we hit them; we manipulate them with our emotions; we punish them for being every bit as human as we are, just because we have the privilege of stature, resources, and experience.

⁴ William Sears and Martha Sears, *The Fussy Baby Book* (New York: Little, Brown, 1996).

Inevitably, when I bring up the injustice we commit against children, adults object. They either dismiss it as no big deal, or they assert the parent's right to have their needs met. And certainly, as mothers still bear a disproportionate burden of child-rearing in society, their physical and mental exhaustion in parenting requires catharsis and, more importantly, systemic support. But we must ensure that liberating women does not add to the oppression of children. The process of helping everyone rise may be complicated and imperfect, but we have to strive for equality for all and nothing less. The nature of privilege is that we've internalized it to be normal, and the only way to dismantle it is to be open to having our blind spots exposed.

This is the good work of parenting: to listen to the voices of the children telling us when we are being unjust; to avoid waiting until their woundedness follows them into adulthood before breaking the cycle. We are children as well, in adult versions, who bear the hurt of being treated as "less than" when we were children. As child development experts have continued discovering what is best for the child, we have the tools, the means, and the understanding to do better. Parenting forward is imagining what isn't reality yet and striving for it, daring to believe it's possible for both the parent's needs and the child's needs to be fully met, and for equality and justice to finally be available to all children.