

Don't Blame Your Parents

It's high time we stopped using our parents as scapegoats for the messes we make of our lives.

By Dr. Vincent T. Lathbury

It is a popular delusion that whatever disasters we make of our lives, our parents are ultimately to blame. The young delinquent, the alcoholic, the homosexual and all the people who cannot hold jobs or stay married or maintain friendships or even face the normal problems of life—these maladjusted people point to their parents as the architects of their failure. The concept is preposterous. In more than twenty-five years of medical practice, I have seldom heard people give parents credit for their success; why are parents brought forward only when a failure must be explained?

The answer is simple. Most people are content to blame their parents for their own failings and wrecked lives because, having found a scapegoat, no action to correct their lives is necessary. But it is not a psychiatrist's job to pamper his patients; he does not want them daydreaming their way through life like sleepy drivers on a turnpike. He must make them face reality and, where necessary, take corrective steps. Pointing the finger of blame is a negative action. The fruitful reconstruction of a life comes only when a patient is willing to work to rid himself of his neuroses.

The Lady Who Couldn't Hold a Job

Not long ago a woman was explaining to me her inability to hold a job. I remarked that this seemed odd, because she was a graduate of several good schools and had received considerable technical training.

"Oh, no, it's not odd at all," she said. "My parents never expected me to work, and for that reason I never expected to either." She obviously felt that this explanation was unassailable.

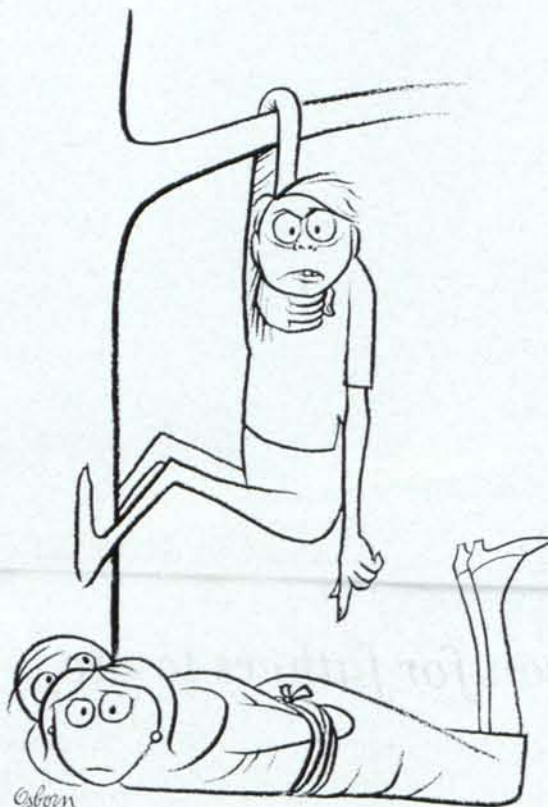
"What of it?" I pressed her. "The fact remains that you are over twenty-one, your physical health is good, you are intelligent and you have sound training. Why don't you change your expectations and get a job? It's as simple as that."

The woman's expression was a combination of anger, hurt feelings and astonishment. It was plain that she felt I had stabbed her in the back. Here was a psychoanalyst so ignorant of the basic concepts of his profession, that he failed to grasp the fact that the fault was her parents'; therefore there was nothing she should or could do about it.

It strikes me as particularly ironic and dangerous that a technique designed to help emotionally crippled persons to a happier and more effective life is perverted into a philosophy of indolence.

Are parents the great villains they have been painted? In most cases they most definitely are not. All parents make mistakes with their children. There is no such thing as the perfect parent, but most of

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them do the best they can. Usually their mistakes are those of misunderstanding, rather than of conscious intent. I know of no parents who say to themselves, "Things are dull tonight, so let's beat up the kids."

George Bernard Shaw once remarked, "Never strike a child in cold blood," and W. C. Fields topped it with the observation that, "Any man who hates children can't be all bad." But in spite of these wry comments, it is a fact that most parents give their children a great deal of love and protect them fiercely.

It is sometimes necessary to warn parents against becoming too conscious of psychological implications in their relationships with their children. It is best for a parent to relax and be himself, thus avoiding the most serious mistake he can make. Parenthood today is pervaded by an overpowering feeling of guilt. Tensions, dreams, jealousies and disappointments all combine to rob parenthood of its natural pleasure and to create a disturbing climate for the child.

There is reason to suspect that all children are unhappy to some extent, because the child is a victim of fear, uncertainty, unresolved conflicts, rages, frustrations, jealousy and anxieties of every kind. Yet most people emerge from the state of childhood with their productive capabilities functioning normally, even though others cling to infantile thoughts and actions. Since the childhood of one group is seldom more

unhappy than that of the other, some other factor must be at work. The seed does not explain the flower.

We live today in a restless period where there is little time to establish responsibility, especially our own responsibility. Our political and sociological structures have been established to "do things" for us, to relieve us of responsibility. We want to be cared for, and we want to be secure in the knowledge that our emotional malfunctioning is not of our own making.

While no sinister motivation lies in the modern concept of socialistic paternalism, with all its split-level generosity and wall-to-wall emotional harmony, the fact is that we are being offered a mirage, because responsibility cannot be abdicated. Yet the temptation to blame our parents or society or the Government for our own failures is almost irresistible.

A popular comedian, talking about marriage, exhorts the men in his audience to get married. "Every man needs a wife," he thunders, "because a lot of things go wrong that can't be blamed on the Government." It doesn't really matter where the blame falls, as long as it falls on someone else.

Because psychoanalysis insists on the importance of parental influence, some who have failed to grasp the whole meaning of psychoanalytical theory see it as offering a release from responsibility. In their view psychoanalysis is not an aid to the maturing process, but an inducement to remain in a state of permanent childhood. A child is comparatively helpless and almost wholly dependent upon his parents. No child can escape parental influence, so to blame one's parents might be acceptable for a child. For an intelligent adult to adopt the same position is ridiculous.

One of the oddities of this situation is that garbled versions of psychoanalytical theory are being used to bolster the myth of parental responsibility. A patient told me the other day, "I can't help the way I am because my parents made me that way." He then went on to explain that psychoanalysis had determined that parents were to blame for emotional disturbances. The implication here is unmistakable: To expect a person to cope with his faults and failings is to attack science—or worse, to display an irreverent attitude in the temple.

Genesis of a Misconception

To a certain extent psychiatrists themselves have helped to nourish the theory of parental responsibility by urging patients—at an intermediary stage in treatment—to realize the inadvertent effect their parents may have had upon them. This realization, which helps lessen feelings of guilt, often takes the form of "blaming" parents. At an early stage of emotional growth this treatment is perfectly proper, but the patient should eventually accept responsibility for himself as he is, and as he would like to be.

It must also be remembered that people are apt to carry over into adulthood the patterns of adjustment

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SPEAKING OUT

they made as children. We can see that even very bad adjustments may have been the best that a helpless child could make. On the other hand, an adult, with his knowledge, experience and general ability to make sensible decisions, is *not* a helpless victim of his parents and the environment they created. To be blunt, if an adult does not like the way he feels his parents have made him, then he should make himself over in a more acceptable image; and if he isn't willing to make the necessary effort, then he should cease blaming his parents.

What logic is there in blaming parents for not doing something for you as a child when you haven't the intelligence to do it for yourself as an adult? Blaming one's parents may be a way station on the road to maturity, but never more than that.

I once had as a patient an intelligent, personable man in his early thirties who presented himself for treatment on the grounds that he was a "failure." During the course of our discussions I learned that, although he was bright and possessed considerable ability, he had started a number of jobs but finished almost none of them. It appeared that the moment success was within his grasp, he would lose interest in that particular effort and quit. After some treatment he announced a discovery. It was not that he "lost interest," he now informed me, but when he was about to attain success he became tense, anxious and depressed, so that he found it necessary to abandon his project in order to rid himself of this intolerable anxiety.

This struck me as a paradox. A person might become depressed and upset if he faced failure, but why should this apply when he was on the threshold of success?

It developed that this man's father had been strict, tyrannical and overcritical. In spite of the father's protestations ("I have to do these things because they are good for you"), there was evidence that he actually disliked his son. Every time the youngster set out to do something, the father would either angrily forbid the child to continue or hedge the project with so many restrictions that the boy became discouraged and put it aside. Any argument, let alone defiance, was too dangerous to attempt, since the father's anger was easily aroused. Beatings were brutal and frequent.

Thus the child was really helpless. To survive in any sort of equilibrium, he could only suppress his anger and frustration and abandon his undertaking. Eventually this pattern became built into his character. In the course of therapy it emerged that his anger, though suppressed at the time, was even greater than his father's. He recalled that on several occasions the thought had flashed through his mind that he would like to kill his father. These thoughts, wrapped in guilt and fear, were pushed to the back of his mind; but gradually he came to equate any success with the killing of his father.

The importance of this case lies in the fact that, as the realization came to the patient of the vicious role his father had played in his life, the more he began to blame him for his troubles. However, he also came to learn that his father had been the victim of a rough upbringing himself and had been left with considerable psychological scar tissue. In time the patient came to say to himself: "I know that success and the killing of my father are not identical. I am a little boy no longer, my father is unable to injure me, and it

is possible for me to be successful and to enjoy it." While it wasn't easy for him to win free, he did finally succeed.

In this case the father was largely to blame for the patient's inability to function adequately as an adult. Yet the patient, through understanding and great determination, managed to extricate himself from the quicksand of infantile reflex and go on to become a well-integrated and useful person. So it can be seen that, if a person faces the rather grim fact that only he can help himself, the crippling effects of a tragic childhood can be overcome. But he must go beyond the point of blaming his parents, to the realization that his destiny is in his own hands.

Not too long ago a newspaper carried this headline: JUDGE PAROLE KILLER. BLAMES PARENTS. Such a statement is likely to leave a psychiatrist uneasy. Parents can be "blamed" if that is what a jury or a judge wishes to do, but the real point at issue is what the accused is going to do about it. If he is going to explain all of his malfunctioning as a burden imposed upon him by his parents, he will be a total loss to society and perhaps a continuing menace. But if he tosses aside this burden and goes on to better things, the judge might have some basis for being merciful. But blaming parents—whether the judge or the accused does it—is meaningless.

The Proper Use of Insight

If the value of self-understanding, or insight, seems to have been minimized up to this point, a correction should be made. The better that problems are understood, the more easily they are handled. In fact, many problems that seem to have no solution become relatively simple in the light of knowledge. Take, for example, the case of a small child who is frightened by a ghost. No amount of reassurance on the part of the parents will lessen this terror. However, if the parents can induce the child to go up to the ghost, lift the sheet and discover that the ghost is only a member of the family disguised in a sheet, then the problem is understood and the difficulty automatically solved.

In this very simple analogy the child uses his understanding to settle his problem. If, having understood the situation, the child were to continue to scream in terror, then he obviously is seeking to shift the blame for his terror to someone else rather than make any effort in his own behalf. An adult who blames his parents for his emotional problems is doing precisely the same thing.

After more than twenty-five years of medical practice I have concluded that what everyone wants most of all is to be able to feel that he is a real, whole, complete person in his own right. One may credit his parents for his success or blame them for his failure, but neither course is satisfactory. Either view implies that one is not a whole person, but subject to his parents' influence for his existence. The truly mature man can see the errors of his parents without rancor and appreciate their correct and helpful actions without feeling bound to them. The good actions he can regard as a series of channel buoys, using them to guide his own life successfully.

Regardless of how well or badly our parents prepared us for life, the chances are that they did the best they knew how. Although a reversal of the roles is difficult to imagine, remember that parents were once children too. And they weren't perfect ones either.

THE END