The Apprenticeship of Being Human

By Graham Scharf

Introduction

As I walked home from my first day of teaching third grade, I couldn't get the words out of my head: "I am a failure." I had never failed before. In competitions, I hadn't always taken home first prize; but I had never failed. I had graduated at the top of my high school class, and had placed among the top 6 in pole vault in my home state for four consecutive years. College was more challenging, but I stayed on the dean's list every semester and graduated *summa cum laude* with a degree in philosophy. After graduation, I had enjoyed recognition in an internal consulting team at a global wealth management firm, and had opportunities to step into a "fast track" leadership development program at the firm.

In 2002, I resigned from the financial services to serve in a failing school in my neighborhood of East Flatbush, Brooklyn as a New York City Teaching Fellow. Eager to prevent educational failure, I now tasted first-hand the failure that was all too familiar to my students. I had nine weeks of graduate school under my belt to prepare me to teach. Yet on day one I had already failed. The students could see that I was "green," and an eight-year-old girl had already out-maneuvered me and undermined my authority. From what I had already learned in the first courses of my master's degree, I knew that failure on day one meant a long, hard year ahead.

My first class was comprised of thirty-two students ranging in age from seven to eleven, two-thirds of whom had not met the grade two year-end performance expectations. In the first week of school, I sat down to read one-on-one with Ari[1]. I knew from looking at his second grade report card that he was behind, so I picked out an easy reader for him. I asked him to begin reading. He looked at me sweetly, but puzzled. I pointed to the word "hi" on the page and asked, "Can you read me this word?" He shook his head. I asked, "Do you know those two letters?" He correctly identified them. Then I asked, "Do you know what they say together?" Again he answered, "No." As his teacher, *I* was expected to bring him to meet or exceed third grade performance measures by the end of the school year. It was going to be a long, hard year indeed.

During the first week of school, I showed my class list to another third grade teacher. She looked truly shocked. "They gave you Karl?!" After two years in the second grade, Karl already had a school-wide reputation in a building that housed nearly 1,700 students spanning pre-kindergarten to eighth grade. Another teacher who had taught at the school for about twenty-five years cautioned me. She said, "I had a student like Karl once. He went on to murder a teacher." Already, by third grade, Karl was on a trajectory toward delinquency, and perhaps even felony.

[1] All student names have been changed.

There were two or three Aris in the class, who were two to three years delayed, and five or six Karls, who were emotionally disturbed. But there were also quiet children like Nicole. At the beginning of third grade she was only a year behind, but was quiet and courteous, and didn't attract any attention to herself – which is perhaps why she hadn't received more help to catch up. There were also bright children like Elisa and Cynthia. Elisa had strong reading and writing skills, asked excellent questions, and was able to focus on a task without being attended. Midway through the year, she and her mom lost their apartment and moved temporarily to a shelter in the Bronx. Elisa commuted well over an hour each way to school on the subway – and continued to learn and grow. Cynthia was already reading and writing fluently in both English and Spanish when she entered third grade. Her parents consistently encouraged and challenged her – even as they engaged in the process of learning English themselves. From this diverse, interesting, challenging group of students I was poised to learn.

Questions, Questions, Questions

As a newcomer to education, I quite naturally began asking questions. Some of my questions were psychological in nature:

- Why were there so many emotionally disturbed students not receiving counseling, therapy, or some sort of help?
- What was their home life?

Other questions focused on issues of sociology:

- How much does early home life of children (the years before they begin schooling) matter for later achievement?
- How did the obvious culture gap between home and school affect communication, collaboration, and learning?

Some of my questions were clearly educational:

- What role did parents and caregivers play in the academic performance of students?
- How could children be three years delayed by third grade?!
- If it was already this bad by third grade, when did the achievement gap first emerge?

Since my wife was training at a medical school in the neighborhood where I taught, I inevitably asked public health questions:

- Why does there appear to be such an overlap among parenting, educational failure, and chronic health issues like obesity and diabetes?
- What common factors of early nurture affect health *and* education?

Finally, there was an economic set of questions:

- What role did my students' economic status have on their learning?
- What factors enable some children in poverty to learn, thrive, and escape from poverty?

These became my multi-disciplinary research questions, which I explored over the next nine years informally through teaching, parenting, parent engagement, educational

entrepreneurship, and community participation; and more formally in the world of published educational and economic research.

The questions of early childhood parenting became even more personal and pressing when I became a father. After three years in the same elementary school, I took a child care leave to be full-time father to my daughter, who was at that time eighteen months old. I quickly discovered that despite having a master's degree in early childhood education, I had yet to learn what to expect and what to do with an eighteen-month-old. If that was true of me, despite my educational and social privilege, what must it be like for the parents of my students, many of whom had received neither positive modeling of parenting nor formal education in child development?

The questions that I was engaging were deeply personal, not only because I was a father and an educator, but because, for the majority of my adult life, I have lived in communities of poverty. For me, it is not an abstract question: *How do we fix those people?* Rather, given the baseline brokenness within which *we* live, what are the most critical factors influencing responsible learning, social contribution and flourishing communities? The questions are not merely for the various academies of psychology, social science, education, public health, and economics. The question was, and is: *How do I love my neighbor as myself?* How can I seek for the children of others – my neighbors – that which I seek for my own children?

In asking this question, I am not merely adding ethics as another discipline in a multi-disciplinary inquiry. Rather, I am saying that this is personal because I'm talking about real people, not just statistics or trends. In the pages to come, I will argue that stories shape us. So it is appropriate at this point to state clearly that I have been (and am being) shaped by the Christian Story. The question, "How do I love my neighbor as myself?" does not arise in a vacuum. It is part of the Story of a community, of which I am a member. It is equally important to avoid the common mistaken assumption that people of different Stories cannot learn from and agree with one another. I trust that my discussion of the power of stories will demonstrate both the centrality of the question of how we love our neighbors *and* the importance of listening to and learning from people who are shaped by different Stories.[2]

The Gap

As I began digging into the professional literature, it became increasingly clear to me that the achievement gap (the difference in performance between children of different cultural groups) is not the only gap. There was and is a gap between the research community and the primary stakeholders in education. Researchers write for one another (which is why peer review is an essential element of the academy), and for the stakeholders in their given field. In education, some of the most important research is directed to policy makers and educators, but rarely is it written for the most influential stakeholders: parents.

This book is an attempt to bridge that gap, to present the most important implications of the contemporary educational and economic research to a broad audience in order to

[2] In chapter 4, *Scripted: The Role of Stories*, I will differentiate between capital-S Stories, which animate our lives, and lower-case-s stories, which are particular stories like *The Billy Goats Gruff*.

quicken educational and social renewal. Parents are, therefore, at the center of my target audience because they are the *chief culture architects* of their families. This little book offers parents a simple metaphor to understand the dynamics of early childhood, and focuses intently on:

1. Four key areas of early child development:
    - Character
    - Competence
    - Creativity
    - Collaboration
2. Three significant environmental factors in healthy development:
    - Love
    - Language
    - Literature
3. Three keys to developing a nurturing home environment:
    - Reflection
    - Resolve
    - Repetition

Parents are also the core of my target audience because of the nature of human influence. Influence increases with nearness of relationship, durability of relationship, and level of responsibility. Consequently, each person has the greatest influence within his or her own household. Some people, such as a principal or city council member, *also* have significant influence at the community level. Still fewer, such as the United States Secretary of Education, have influence at a societal level. Since *every* person exerts tremendous influence within their closest and most durable relationships, I am deliberately addressing each group within their sphere of influence, small or large.

However, parents are not my only intended audience. All parents live within a community composed of people who *can* support or hinder their role; family, friends, neighbors, educators, and doctors top the list. Those communities exist in a broader society of individuals and institutions who can empower or disempower parents, including (but certainly not limited to) policy makers, administrators, and lobbyists.

So I have deliberately avoided writing a "parenting book." You may not have children, or be remotely interested in educational research. However, *everyone* is a neighbor and has neighbors. There is no one who is not a part of the web of relationships that compose neighborhoods, communities, and society. Consequently no one is untouched by the dynamics of early childhood parenting *and* no one is entirely without influence. Rather, as the subtitle of the book states, this is *Why Early Childhood Parenting Matters to Everyone*. Unpacking why early childhood parenting matters and what each sphere of influence can do is the task of this book.

For the many courageous individuals and organizations who already understand and embody this conviction, *The Apprenticeship of Being Human* is a simple explanation for non-experts of why what they do is so important to the fabric of society. I want the Early Intervention Specialist and Parent Educator to be able to hand this little book to a friend and say, "*This* is why I get out of bed every morning passionate about what I do."[3] I want ridiculously talented parents who have stepped away from lucrative careers to invest in their children as full-time parents to be able to say, "This is why what I'm doing is not foolish, but truly serves my children, our community, and society." I want economists like Art Rolnick, former Director of Research at the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, and philanthropists like J.B. Pritzker, founder of New World Ventures and president of the Pritzker Foundation, to be able to say, "*This* is why I invest so much of my time, passion, and wealth in early childhood initiatives." It is a book about parenting, but not just for parents.

My aim is to change the way we think in order to catalyze change in action at every level: family, community and society. Carter G. Woodson, considered the father of Black History, boldly declared, "If you can control a man's thinking, you don't have to worry about his actions. If you can determine what a man thinks you do not have worry about what he will do." I am convinced that changing (not controlling!) the way we think about early childhood parenting on a societal, community and family level can have a profound effect on our daily practices, and therefore on the health of our families, communities and society. Furthermore, the heart of my argument is that in the earliest years of life, parents (or those who act in their stead) "control" their children's thinking by establishing boundaries and providing opportunities for their children. Indeed, children are apprentices to their parents as they learn to participate in the craft that we call human culture.

In my own experience, there is no escape from this claim. My children imitate me and my wife – sometimes to our embarrassment. Likewise, the parents of my students had a singular effect on their children, for good or for ill. For example, my student Mitch wasn't raised by his mom. She was strung out on drugs, and he bore the marks of in utero drug abuse. Mitch's grandmother adopted him and took an active stake in his education. She told me up front that Mitch was a crack baby, but that she wasn't going to let that ruin his life. If he had any trouble academically or socially, she wanted me to put a note in his homework folder that very day so that she could know and address it. Mitch had a lot against him as a black boy, developmentally affected by his mom's drug habit, abandoned by both his parents, and stuck in a large class of struggling students. Yet he had one thing going for him: a grandmother-turned-mother who loved him deeply and was unwaveringly committed to him. The good news for Mitch is that despite all of the challenges in his life, loving parental involvement is the single best predictor of any child's educational achievement. To celebrate,

[3] This is a deliberately "little" book. Much more could helpfully be said on the subject than I attempt in these pages. My purpose here is a 'manifesto,' a terse (and hopefully memorable) presentation of the importance of early childhood parenting, with a simple call to action.

cultivate, and inspire that loving involvement in parents, foster parents, adoptive parents, caregivers and those who surround them is the aim of this little book.

So it is appropriate at this point to thank and honor my wife, Rebecca. She is the embodiment of loving, nurturing commitment to our children. Throughout her medical training as a developmental pediatrician, there was never any question that our children came before her vocation. Our daughters see in her that meaningful vocational and social contribution, vital and important as they are, are secondary to the enormous influence she exerts in her most primary relationships in our family. It is my hope that this book will inspire other parents to recognize the unparalleled influence they have on their children, particularly in the earliest years of life.

As I look back on my own childhood, I am deeply grateful for my own parents. In particular, I am thankful for the ways that they sowed stories into our family life. I remember my mother reading volumes aloud in the car as we took road trips that could span seven states in two days. I recall our morning routine of breakfast, reading, and prayer which shaped the way that I experience the world. Our lively conversations around the dinner table each evening have embedded in me a desire to cultivate that kind of lively family culture. These are, among others, the things that I remember, and now attempt to imitate. Yet I am aware that there is far more, below the surface, that I do not consciously recall, which is just as important in forming my habits and loves. For all of this love, I am grateful.

I am indebted to many wise parents (and at least one astute not-yet-parent) who took time to read and critique this book before its publication. Noah Blumenthal, whose books are well worth reading, saved me from writing a book that no one would read. Keith Zafren, founder of the Great Dads Project, directed me in the rudiments of rhetoric. Chris Upham exercised his talents as an analytic philosopher in helping me to avoid philosophical gaffes. Chris Esposito Bernard, Sandy Davis, Jeff Burkett, Cindy Mahlberg, James Marroquin, Daniel Bartholomew, Alex Forrester, and my father, Greg Scharf, all offered valuable critique at various stages in the writing process. They have helped me in refining the content of the book, addressing my audience, and learning the art of rhetoric. It is my hope that this book will at least in some measure honor their help and wisdom.

Chapter 1

Apprenticeship

Every morning when I leave my home in Harlem, I pick up trash that others have thrown on the sidewalk and in the flowers that my seven-year-old daughter, Elisabeth, planted with me. On one of these occasions, my daughter asked me, "Daddy, why do people throw their trash in front of our house?" After some reflection, I answered, "Because their parents didn't teach them not to."

Is it really that simple? Am I just oversimplifying in order to provide an answer that my seven-year-old can understand? Consider another example: One day on the bus, we watched a girl about nine years of age discard her half-eaten hot dog on the floor of the city bus. Her mother said nothing. Her silence spoke volumes in condoning her child's behavior. In his book, *Culture Making*, Andy Crouch describes the dynamic of how parents set the horizons of possibility for their children: "In one family's culture it is 'impossible' for people who love each other to argue with one another; in another family's culture it is 'impossible' for people who love each other *not* to argue with one another." Family culture has the power to communicate whether throwing your food on the floor is acceptable, or unacceptable. The initiation of a child into that family culture *is* apprenticeship.

There was a time when, in many cultures, apprenticeship was the primary mode of training in a craft or skill. Young people apprenticed themselves to masters (often their own parents), whether of a trade like ironwork, or an art like sculpting. Although apprenticeship is less prevalent today as a manner of formal vocational training, it remains the primary mechanism by which children learn to participate in human relationships, and affects virtually every aspect of personal and public life – including the flowerbed in front of my house and the city bus on which we travel.

Early childhood is the apprenticeship of being human. Like the apprenticeship of an artist, it is composed of both explicit instruction and ongoing interaction and imitation within personal relationships. Just as an apprentice in an art or trade learns techniques that are essential to the mastery of that art or trade, so children learn techniques of participation in the craft of human culture. However, the apprenticeship of being human is also a

markedly different from the mastery of an art or trade in that the 'craft of life' spans all other crafts. Someone can know a particular craft (such as writing), do it well, and still be a rotten member of the human race. This is because to know how to make something or do some particular thing well is not the same as knowing how to live well in all aspects. The apprenticeship of being human is learning the 'craft of life.' It is the context in which we learn to acquire other skills, and how to use those skills well – or poorly.

The disproportionate influence of these early years lies in the fact that apprenticeship occurs constantly in children's most primary relationships during a period of unparalleled brain growth. Early experiences, in turn, have a lifelong impact on a child's character, competence, creativity, health and ability to collaborate. Consequently, this is not a parenting book that encourages parents to employ a novel or effective technique. Rather, it is an exploration of the dynamics of human development and their implications for nurturing virtuous children and flourishing societies. The question is not whether we will embrace a particular parenting method, but whether we will recognize that we are already mentors with little apprentices watching and learning from our every word and action. Then, with that recognition, we can wield our influence wisely and well.

The dynamics of apprenticeship are, perhaps, most evident in the acquisition of language. If you venture to a kindergarten classroom in Staten Island, one of the first things you are likely to notice (unless you're a Staten Islander) is the dialect of the children. Although it is just a twenty-five minute ferry ride from Manhattan, this island has its own distinct accent and dialect. Why? Children in Staten Island are just like children everywhere else: they acquire language in the context of their most primary relationships as an essential part of learning to speak. It is learned in part by direct instruction, "It is pronounced *this* way . . .", but the vast majority is learned implicitly and continually by interaction and imitation. The acquisition of accent and dialect in early childhood is the language dimension of apprenticeship. It happens to everyone, everywhere; it can't be avoided.[4] In much the same way, claiming that early childhood doesn't establish a child's horizons of possibility is like a Staten Islander claiming, "I don't have an accent!"

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[4] My argument is that parenting matters in ALL levels and sectors of society, not just among the poor. Indeed, in Appendix 1 *Underlying Classism?* I argue that those who think that parenting just matters for the poor are naïve and classist.