

ARE CHILDREN ANGELS, DEVILS OR CLAY?

Working With Human Nature

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Somehow we're going to try to capture hundreds of years of history and terribly important ideas in relatively few minutes. I suspect some of you came to this session because you thought that, based on the title, I must be crazy. It is an odd title. Let me introduce this by telling you a story.

Nancy, my wife, and I went to a conference in North Carolina, USA and at that conference I was to do an extended training on parenting. During a break, Nancy and I sat at the edge of a little lake and around the lake was a walking trail, complete with bridges and it was truly lovely. While we were sitting there feeding the ducks, along came a mother with a child in a stroller and a little boy about 5 or 6 years old who was running out ahead of her.

This little boy was fascinated by the ducks and so as he came around on this trail he would start to chase the ducks. He wanted to make friends with them but was not old enough to realise that ducks prefer not to build friendships that way. The chasing was not their preferred way of getting acquainted. He kept chasing them and squawking and I was getting quite irritated. I was thinking: "Doesn't this boy know better, and why doesn't the mother stop this behaviour?" He was annoying the ducks terribly and was being very ineffective at making friends of them.

As this continued, I found myself getting increasingly irritated with the mother and the boy. I was thinking of some ways I could wreak violence on this little boy, something of which I'm not particularly proud! I was acting as if I believed that children were devils. Now in my heart I don't believe that, but I was acting that way.

There are a lot of reasons we act that way. We may act like that because we believe it through our beliefs or because we are very tired. Have you noticed that when we're tired everything irritates us? It may also be that we have a child who is very different from us and does things in very different ways and we just find that so irritating. Don't children know that our way is the best way? What's wrong with them?!

I thought you might be interested in a few quotes about the idea that children are little devils. John Calvin, the Christian reformer, was one who took that view and said it rather forcefully. He said that children's whole nature is a certain seed of sin, therefore it cannot be but hateful and abominable to God. Children were clearly seen as little devils.

I guess the proof of the pudding is in the eating as on one occasion, a boy was brought to him who had disobeyed his father, having even reacted physically to a father who was trying to get a little boy to obey. The case was brought to John Calvin for his counsel and he said: "God commands that children must obey". He decided that this little boy should be executed, and he was. I just think it's interesting to ask: If every child were executed for disobeying parents, sometimes angrily, how many of us would be here today? It would be a pretty sparse audience, wouldn't it?

The view that children are basically bad leads to some very clear recommendations. We've got to watch them and control them. These little people are going to make us crazy and do awful things and destroy this world if we don't get them under control.

There is a man named O'Neil Pullane from Alabama, he was in charge of mental health in that state. Once he and I were visiting and he said something that stuck with me. He said: "It is our duty to suffer and die for the amusement of our Creator and I am doing my part". Now is that not sick and perverse? It is our duty to suffer and die to please some heavenly being! That doesn't make much sense to me.

There is another, and I don't want to be seen as picking on those with a religious bent, as I am one of those too, but sometimes religious people have been the spokespersons for this view.

John Wesley's mother Suzannah, wrote a lot about parenting and was somewhat of a take charge person. His father was a poet and reportedly a ne'er-do-well. Her view and counsel was this – *whenever a child is corrected, it must be conquered*. She even said that this would not be hard unless you had allowed children to become stubborn. Our job is to conquer the will of children.

That's a view that has been pretty popular at times in history and in my opinion the fruits of that view are clearly manifest in John Wesley's life. He became a very famous and popular preacher. Through all of his life, he felt like he was an absolutely useless, worthless person, just a cinder. His statement was this - as the years passed he sought to be pleasing to God but found himself to be worthless, but because the people responded so warmly to him, he concluded that perhaps he was acceptable to God in spite of his own misery. As a result, psychologists and historians have called his history "justification without joy".

Now I don't know if the irony of that feels as keen to you as it does to me. Justification without joy! If you're made right with God it seems to me that your assignment would be that you are filled with joy. Whereas Wesley's conclusion was somehow God had found him acceptable yet he was still completely miserable.

One of the practices initiated in that time was "hardening" of children. You don't want them to be soft and weak. One of the practices they had was to put an infant in a little harness and with a rope, lower them into a well of bitter cold water in the middle of winter. The assumption was that it was good for them; it hardened them for the difficulties of life.

So you can see in the view that children are evil, parents had to do things like that to control their children. Sigmund Freud said: "I have found little that is good about human beings and in my experience, most of them are trash". I bet there are times when we feel that way. When children are screaming or contrary or fighting with each other, then we may indeed feel that way. But I'd have a hard time saying that in my finer moments. "What a nice little piece of trash!" That just isn't my response.

Anna Freud, the daughter of Sigmund and really the intellectual caretaker for his view of the world said this (now think of a young child or toddler you know and see if you would describe them this way): "Children no less than adults themselves are dominated by their sexual impulses and aggressive strivings". Now when you think of a typical 1 year old do you think "Now that is a kid who is sex-craved and looking for opportunities to be violent".

Well it sure doesn't ring true to me! She continues, "From birth onwards, children feel the pressure of urgent body needs and powerful instinctive urges such as hunger, sex and aggression which clamour for satisfaction. A parent's task is to turn their children from unrestrained greedy and cruel little savages into well behaved, socially adept and civilized beings". What an interesting view of human nature.

It's worth noting that if you look for that in a person, you will find it. You can particularly find it in your spouse. Spouses are such a wonderful opportunity for finding all kinds of awfulness! That's a nice thing about being in a family. You get to know each other well enough that you can be pre-irritated with each other, pre-judging of each other. We all have plenty of data as a basis for disliking and even hating each other.

Some would say that even the Freuds are somewhat out of date and so I would turn to a current author, popular in America, named John Rosemund. I would recommend that if you haven't read him, then don't. I think it is an extremely troublesome attitude that he conveys. It is extremely popular with people who want to see the parent's job as getting children under control - and that is their primary job.

He said this in one of his books *"Give your children regular and realistic doses of vitamin N"*. Those of you into nutrition may not know about vitamin N, do you know what it is? - **NO!** He continues, "When you administer this dose of vitamin N and they fall to the floor screaming, pat yourself on the back for a job well done. Remember the sufficient exposure to frustration not only prepares the child for the reality of adulthood but gradually helps a child develop a tolerance for frustration. Stop thinking that your first obligation is to make and keep them happy, because it not".

Now, the danger at this point is that some of you may have a divided reaction, saying, "Well OK that may be a little bit of a strong statement, but children do have to have limits", and I would say - you are absolutely right, they do. The way in which we establish limits and the way in which we follow up and impose limits, makes all the difference.

Just as a side note, I believe the best parenting book ever written is the one by Haim Ginott. He released it in 1965 and unfortunately died in 1973. He emigrated from Israel to the USA hoping to understand children. He gained a doctorate and worked with parents and children for years and years then he wrote this classic book. His widow and I revised his book and it has been republished. I recommend every parent read this. John Gottman, the great relationship researcher said that this was the most important book ever written on children and their emotional world.

Let's return to that little boy running around the lake chasing the ducks. If I see him as bad I will probably grab him and perhaps swat him and drag him home saying "If you're going to misbehave, we're going home and I'll not bring you again as long as you act in such an uncivilised way". At the time I thought his Mum should have done that, it sounded quite appealing. But I fear that I was under the influence of my poorer nature. Fortunately, Nancy was with me.

A second view of human nature is that children are basically clay. They are whatever we make of them. This is the behaviourist's view. Some of you know about behaviourism, I don't know who the main proponents of behaviourism have been in Australia. It was popular in the 20's and 30's in America. B F Skinner was a chief spokesperson but a man named John B Watson is said to be the father of American behaviourism. He did, and wrote about, some interesting experiments and wrote interesting advice to parents. We can go way back to the view of Aristotle, who is reported to have said "The soul of a child is like a clean slate on which nothing is written". So a child is a clean slate and has no nature or preferences of his or her own and we write on that slate and make the child good or bad. John Locke said a child's mind is like white paper or wax to be moulded and fashioned as one pleases. It's a view we often teach to teachers when they are in training, saying you are going to form these children.

I'd say that that view is generally most credible to those who have had one or no children, because **as soon as you have a second child, it dawns on you that the brilliant outcome with your first child was not entirely due to your actions.** I think I see a recognition reflex. Each child brings a different disposition and so to view the children as clay is an interesting one but not the whole story.

Each of these views tells us something interesting. No one of them is entirely right and no one of them entirely wrong. However, the blend we make of these different elements makes a very big difference.

John B Watson, the American psychologist, in 1928 wrote a book, 'The Psychological Care of Infant and Child'. He gave advice to parents and one of the things he said was *"Give me a dozen healthy infants and control of their environment and I will guarantee to make of each child anything*

I want. I will take this child and make him a beggar or thief, this one and make him a business person, a politician, a barrister". Those of you who have raised children for more than 3 minutes, do you think there could be a problem with that idea?

He did experiments in which he taught children to be afraid of things. In one instance one of his workers had a small child and they brought in a white rat. Every time they brought in the rat, a worker would whack the table behind the child with a steel rod making a terrible noise. That child was eventually afraid of the rat because of what happened whenever he saw it. Pretty soon, he was afraid of everything white and furry and then everything white. He was going to undertake to desensitise the child, which he never quite got around to. Today he would be thrown out of the American Psychological Association for that experiment. He would be considered highly unethical.

But he was convinced that through this process he could train a child to anything he wanted. There was with that observation some interesting advice. He believed that children should be raised in the scientific way. That we very carefully reward good behaviour and make sure not to reward or punish bad behaviour and if we did that very systematically, we could train a child to be anything we want. He even considered it a reasonable question whether children should be raised by their parents. He thought that maybe they should be raised in institutions. He said that Mums are such a mess; they keep hugging their children for no reason at all. How sick! Doesn't this make you feel guilty that you may have hugged a child for no reason at all?

Let me actually read something that he said – *"There is a sensible way of treating children, treat them as if they were young adults. Never hug and kiss them, never let them sit on your lap, if you must, kiss them once on the forehead when you kiss them goodnight"*. Incidentally, this is exactly contrary to what research says today. Children need to be loved and hugged and held, caressed and talked to. It is essential to their development.

He continues – *"Give them a pat on the head if they have made an extraordinarily good job of a difficult task. Won't you then remember that mother love is a dangerous instrument. An instrument which may inflict a never healing wound, a wound that may make infancy unhappy, adolescence a nightmare, an instrument which may wreck your adult son or daughter's vocational future and their chances for marital happiness"*. So in his view, love makes children dependent.

People who were inheritors of that intellectual perspective believed that you could train children - and in fact, in his era and even earlier, they trained children to be fully potty trained by 8 months of age. How did they do that? They would take little bits of soap and whittle them into suppositories and when they wanted their child to have a bowel movement they would insert the suppository in the appropriate place which would irritate the infant bowel and generate a bowel movement. You can train children to use the toilet on a specified schedule, but it takes an enormous toll on both their body and spirit.

Some others of that time believed that you should use opiates to train children's nature. I know research today would say that's an incredibly bad idea. In fact, in our family we subscribe to something closer to a fulfilment view, that if you love children and take care of them, a lot of other things develop on schedule. In fact, that's what a lot of research on genetics is saying, that most children learn to be potty trained eventually. It may not be on our schedule, but our family rule was you may not date until you're 16 and potty trained!

Another thing related to development, I remember when our Emily was 5 years old and we got her a bike. It didn't matter that she wasn't interested in riding a bike, I bought her a bike and she was going to ride it even if it kills both of us! As I was about to drive Emily crazy, I actually turned the task over to Nancy, a very gentle soul, who by taking a little more time working with Emily, had her soon riding a bike gladly. I could easily have taught her to hate a bike as a result of the training I was using.

Some of you may know of the great psychologist Jean Piaget. He researched and studied the stages through which children developed, which are very predictable processes. It doesn't mean

that it will happen in a certain day or hour but within a certain span of time. Children would learn to crawl, to walk, to talk. We have been pre-wired to do some pretty amazing things and, given a pretty basic environment, it will happen. He visited America many times, and he thought Americans were idiots. He would come and meet with parents and psychologists and would always be asked what he thought was the American question - How can we get our children to do these things faster? He would laugh and say they were crazy, why would anyone want them to do these things faster? It's typical of Americans to rush through everything, if you can do something, then learn to do it faster, instead of savouring things. Research on happiness shows that the level of happiness increases the more we savour; not as we rush, but as we savour.

So, what of the view that children are basically clay? Well, if I had subscribed, or acted as though I subscribed to that view when that little boy was circling the lake in North Carolina I probably would have looked for a moment when he was doing something good and say "Ah you're standing there watching the ducks, I'm so proud of you" and thereby hope to encourage him to do what I found more appropriate or shape the behaviour. Let me ask - Is there any truth to behaviourism, are behaviours shaped in any way by the consequences? For instance, if every time you drive to work you exceed the speed limit and every time you do you get a ticket, will your behaviour be changed? If every time you say good morning your wife slaps your face, is there a chance your behaviour might be changed? Yeah, there is a truth there to behaviourism.

Let me introduce the third view that children are basically angels, with a story from our own family life. Nancy and I have 3 children and we have always wanted them to not grow up in a moral vacuum. We wanted to celebrate and encourage awareness and appreciation of all that we think is good and fine and loving and truly virtuous. So when our children were little we established a tradition that before breakfast each morning we would tell them about one hero or another.

One time we studied Old Testament stories. It took us almost a year to get through it. We borrowed some picture books and we would tell the stories from the Old Testament and show the children the pictures. Our children were young but they loved the stories. Of course Moses plays a prominent place in those scriptures so for quite a while we told stories of Moses, about his service to the people, his love of the people and the wonderful and challenging things that happened. We told these stories for a few weeks then we got to the point where Moses left his people, never to see them again in this world, and when that morning came, I told the story and showed the picture of Moses departing. I asked them to think about what it may have been like for the people to have this person who had loved them for so long, leave. Then we went ahead as was our custom with breakfast. We were eating our breakfast cereal and I turned and noticed our little boy Andy, who was always a tender boy, was weeping (I thought maybe we were out of Granola!). I said "Andy what's wrong?" and his whole body shook as he said "Dad, I just miss Moses" and I thought wow, here's this tender little boy who has come to appreciate and love someone he has valued as a hero and it felt like Moses had become a breakfast guest at our table for weeks.

As I tell this story, let me ask you to think about whether little Andy is just clay or a little devil that must be controlled. I don't think that particular experience illustrates either of those, but rather suggests that Andy is in fact an angel. There is some part of his nature that is noble and fine and good.

I love what Abraham Lincoln said in his second inaugural address, he talked about *listening to the angels of our better nature*. I guess my view is that all of us have within us many voices. We have devilish voices which encourage us to be angry and hurtful and care only about ourselves at all costs. We also have those voices that listen to what's rewarding you and helping you get a reward, whatever it is. I think we also have those voices that speak of things noble and fine and holy.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the philosopher and author, wrote: *All things are good as they come out of the hands of the Creator, but everything degenerates in the hands of men*. As we fall into the

hands of this world we learn some bad ways. I think there is some interesting merit to what he says.

His life tells a pristine story that is hard to reconcile with his view. He had 5 children and found them to be very irritating and made it hard for him to get his writing done so he sent them to an orphanage. Is that ironic or what? We can actually believe that children are fine and sweet and a heavenly blessing but we may still wish they were in a different country. So while we have one view mentally, we sometimes have a different view operationally. We may treat children as though they were bad while believing they were good.

Let me turn also to a psychologist named John Flavell. He has been a spokesperson for a lot of Jean Piaget's work. After decades of his work, working with children and writing with children he said, "*Aren't children amazing? When a child is born, that child learns for no good reason, not because they're rewarded, not because they necessarily have to, it appears that children are pre-programmed to learn just for the joy of it*". Isn't that an interesting view? He in fact says they learn when there is no practical need to do so. I had the opportunity yesterday to discuss the idea that children are also pre-wired with something that can be very, very useful in humans, something called compassion.

The work of Martin Hoffman, which I think is brilliant, talks about the fact that all humans are born with fundamental compassion and what supports that idea is when they take little children and play for them recorded "pink noise". "Pink noise" is the spectrum of sound to which our ears are sensitive, they show interest and that's all. If you play the same amount of sound of a human crying, what does the baby do? Cry! Many psychologists and developmentalists have concluded that we come into this world pre-wired with compassion. Could that prove to be useful? I think so. Of course, we are very effective in this world of training people to be selectively compassionate.

In the USA if you are Republican you learn to be very non-compassionate with Democrats and vice versa. In my opinion, Americans have not lately been very compassionate with people of other nations and I perhaps apologise for my country and my countrymen. We have sometimes acted as if being big made us right. Compassion is a fundamental human tendency but it can be trained to be minimised in humans.

I love what Abraham Maslow wrote. I remember the first time I read of his motivational personality - I thought this feels good, it's so optimistic. He suggests that inside every human are some fundamental drives to do something worthwhile. He said if we just give people basic love and care and give them opportunities to grow they will develop into someone wonderful and amazing; someone who loves and grows, serves and builds and makes this world a wonderful place. He called it self-actualization and he says that the idea is to develop the finest within humans. He wasn't talking in a behavioural sense of rewarding a child every time they do something good. That suggests that you can buy even character for money or rewards, an idea that I think is suspect. I'm not sure you can get character through bribery. But Maslow's view was that all that's noble and fine and good is found in children. He said that all the good qualities we value except one are found in children. Can you guess what that one is? He said infants are not famous for wisdom. It does take time to develop wisdom!

Research says that long life doesn't guarantee wisdom. Wisdom is not necessarily associated with age. So those of you who are hoping to claim wisdom as a result of survival may have to do some homework in order to capture wisdom.

Let me quote Abraham Maslow who says: "*It's quite impossible to see anything that could be called evil - original sins, sadism, malice, pleasure in hurting, destructiveness, hostility for its own sake or deliberate cruelty - in children*". Some of you with young children are probably saying "You have not met my children!" If Abraham could come by the house! But we can see that when children are hungry and tired, they are not at their best. But perhaps the same is true of adults. When we're hungry and tired and frustrated, are we noble and fine and sweet and companionable? Probably not! He said "*Everything that's loveable, admirable and enviable is found in babies*".

Now clearly, my presentation today is not one that is founded in religion, however, religious people have often been spokespersons for important views. Some of you have heard of a man named Jesus. Let me tell you something he said that is pertinent to this idea that people are basically good. He said *“Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”* He called a little child to him and set him in the midst of them and said *“Verily I say unto you, except ye be converted and become as little children, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven”*. Now whether you honour that particular person as having special claim on your interest is up to you. But I would say that the view that children are basically good is one that has been respected and appreciated in many eras and by many people.

Sandra Scarr, a respected American psychologist and past president of the American Psychological Association, has said *“Our job as parents, is to help children become themselves”*. She speaks in part from a biological perspective believing that genetics are very important in determining outcomes in children and she says that it is our job to help children become themselves. It’s not to form them into what we want them to be through careful control of contingencies nor is it to bind and control the little devilishness inside of them. It is our job to help them discover what’s inside of them and become that.

Now, even if you believe that all children are angels, it is clear that each is an angel with a different personality. There are perhaps many ways of being angelic and no two angels are quite the same. I would say that Scarr’s view that we help children to become themselves is the highest and noblest thing we can do; to notice a child’s preferences and work with them. If we can discover what is characteristic with a child, we can draw that out and work with their nature. That’s what she is saying. If we try to impose our preferences on a child, we are always fighting an uphill battle and we will ultimately lose!

Emmy Werner studied children in Hawaii for over 40 years. She studied a selected group of children from one of the islands. She was particularly interested in those who were almost guaranteed to fail. She looked at those that had all kinds of things working against them. She studied and followed them and found that from those who should have failed, a third of them did not. She being a researcher, scratched her head and asked why. She gathered the data that had been taken over the 40 years and found that there was one thing that was characteristic of every single child who was resilient, who flourished in spite of terrible circumstances. Every one of those who was resilient had someone who loved them. Because they were such high risk kids, it often was not a family member. Often Mum was depressed and Dad was in prison. It was the only thing that was characteristic of all of those resilient children. Maybe the person who loved them was a scout master, a teacher, a neighbour and relative. Humans flourish when they are loved.

So as we conclude, we ask – which of the 3 views is right? My bias is obvious. As I said earlier, I think all 3 views have merit. I think they need to be understood. The one that in my view is most interesting and most powerful is the view that children are basically good and our job is to help them to become themselves or, in Abraham Lincoln’s language, to draw out the angels of their better nature.

Now going back to that day in Carolina, that little boy running around chasing the ducks with his mother way behind, I said *“Stop chasing the ducks!”* My wife, Nancy said in a sweet way *“Honey, do you think he might like to feed the ducks with us”*. I said, *“Well, I don’t know, but I’d kinda like to hurt him!”* But my soul knew that I was not acting consistent with my own beliefs. So I asked the little boy *“Would you like to feed the ducks?”* He was so excited *“Oh I would!”*. He was in heaven as he fed the ducks, the ducks were in heaven and I had not done him any bodily harm!

I’ll conclude with one story. There was a time when I was watching our son, Andy, while Nancy was out. I was washing dishes in the kitchen (which we men think is somewhat of a noble thing to do), however I did not notice what all mothers would have noticed – which was, Andy was quiet. It’s a very serious danger signal. When I finished the dishes and came into the living room, I found

that Andy had discovered on the bottom shelf of the book shelf, finger paints. He had opened them and he, an artist at heart, had dipped deeply into each container and applied it with great gusto to our brand new, tan carpet. It was breathtaking! I went in there and I said "OOOHHHH, Andy!" He said "Hi Dad". He didn't run and hide. This is the kind of point where you believe children are devils trying to torment us, or clay and need to be punished or rewarded, or angels. Knowing Andy and knowing how much of Nancy's gentle soul he has inherited, I said "Andy, you've done something amazing here" and he said "Yeah, I've made a picture for you Dad". I said "Wow, Andy this is just eye-catching but you may not know that usually when we finger paint we use that white paper that's in the box". "Oh, I see". "You see, being here on the carpet, people might walk on it and make a mess, I think we should clean it up". He said "OK". So I went and got a bucket of water, with a little soap in it. I got up most of the paint. That left over hint of colour always reminded us of the sweet boy who was trying to do something for his parents.

Are children devils, angels or clay? The answer is yes. But when you see them as angels, they tend to become angels. Thank you.