

Current Comments®

Handfast: The Joys and Frustrations of Parenthood

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Over the years, I've often discussed childhood and children. These discussions have included essays on child care centers,¹ child safety,² adolescent depression,³ and gifted children.⁴ All of these subjects are, of course, very important. But equally important, and perhaps more fascinating, is the very special relationship that exists between parents and children. As a parent, I know that this special relationship is not always a smooth one. And it can be difficult to share our parental problems with our friends and relatives. Indeed, I would lament with the British philosopher, Sir Francis Bacon: "The joys of parents are secrets, and so are their griefs and fears."⁵ But our children are ours, and even though we may sometimes despair at their behavior, we will always love them. Perhaps the most aggrieved parent is the one whose child's behavior is beyond redemption and forgiveness.

Some parents instinctively feel that their children guarantee immortality. This is a personalized expression of both evolutionary and biblical theories. Other parents need children to attain their own unfulfilled dreams. For others, parenthood is a satisfying way to give and receive unconditional love. After all, as the nineteenth-century essayist, John Ruskin, worded it, "Give a little love to a child and you get a great deal back."⁶ Whatever the underlying reasons, the parent-child relationship is fascinating. This is partly because our children are si-

multaneously extensions of ourselves, yet separate, autonomous human beings.

The following article by Sallie Tisdale, a parent and nurse in Portland, Oregon, describes well the parent-child relationship. It was originally published under the intriguing title "Handfast: the trick of children" in the Winter 1983 issue of *CoEvolution Quarterly*. In the days when arranged marriages were common in the Western world, the archaic word "handfast" described a contract of betrothal.⁷ Tisdale describes the parent-child relationship as a "contract [that] cannot be broken." She even intimates that this contract is stronger than that which binds the parents to each other. The child, she writes, is "the flesh of my flesh that lovers promise and can't deliver."

Tisdale's article evoked in me many of the feelings I experienced watching my children grow. Without our usual extensive scientific documentation, it is reprinted here as a poetic expression. Perhaps it will express for *Current Contents*® (*CC*®) readers who are parents their own wonder and trepidation at having brought another human being into the world. Of course, much of the sentiment expressed in Tisdale's article applies more specifically to mothers than to fathers. For that reason, we will reprint in a future issue of *CC* a similar article which presents a "father's view" of parenting.

I cannot fail, however, to point out that Tisdale's feelings are not universal. She, of course, could not imagine unethical parents. By that I mean she assumes that it is universally true that a parent "can't pack a bag, make a break for it, perhaps find a more compatible child."

I once told you about my father, Ernest Garofano.⁸ He was in fact my stepfather, a word which does such a terrible disservice to all of us who are "stepfathers." Ironically, my biological father did just what Tisdale considers unimaginable. Now that he is dead it does him no harm to mention it. My mother,⁹ of course, was the typical parent whom Tisdale imagined as one who could never conceive of calling it quits as a parent. Indeed, as with many parents, she tolerated behavior in her children that went beyond the call of duty.

While I could never understand the rejection of a "natural" father, in my case it made me a better parent. This is not at all universal. For example, the child-abusing parent often proves to have been an abused child too. To para-

phrase the Bible,¹⁰ thank goodness the sins of my father were not visited on me.

I need not rhapsodize further on the joys and pains of parenthood. That is why I choose to rely on Tisdale. She stands in a long line of poets and writers who have extolled the special feelings of a mother. But I've also known mothers who had to make terrible choices no less difficult than Sophie's choice when she was forced to select one of her two children for execution.¹¹

I have never been overly tolerant of those who insist that there is no parent-child relationship stronger than blood. I have stepchildren who are loved equally with my natural children. Eventually, each child takes on a personality of his or her own and you "like" one a little more than the others or feel more comfortable in his or her presence. But you love them all and nothing you feel for one detracts from the others. Like your good friends, there is no need to grade them. Each one offers a separate and unique relationship.

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