
HANDBAST: The Trick of Children

by Sallie Tisdale

One factor determines all else about our relationship with our children: it is irreversible. The contract cannot be broken. Daily we leave jobs, houses, friends, lovers, but the child always comes along.

When the going is rough—when we don't like each other—my son and I can't call it quits and cut our losses. I can't pack a bag, make a break for it, perhaps find a more compatible child. Were it even the remotest of possibilities, everything else would change.

So I take risks with him I would never dare take with anyone else. I treat him badly, with rough impatience, with all the bile I hide from friends and lovers for fear of losing them. I am less tolerant of deviation and idiosyncrasies with him. We fight—bitterly—then, sad and weary of it, make up with a tentative kiss. I demand so much: love, loyalty, obedience, attention, and faith to a degree few adults would allow me to approach. For the most part, in these early years, I get what I demand—deserving or not.

He is tied and bound to me. We are entangled. When I wake from a bad dream without a sound, he wakes in the next room and cries for me. As a baby, his cry could make my breasts run with milk, his weight missing from my arms left



Illustrated by B. S. Beaver

Reprinted with permission of the author from: Tisdale S. HANDBAST: the trick of children. *CoEvolution Quarterly* (40):1-2, 1983.

me restless and sore. I watched the baby-fat melt and muscles emerge from the perfect downy skin. I watch the features smooth over, change, gradually hiding the newborn between cheek and chin somewhere. He is the flesh of my flesh that lovers promise and can't deliver.

Yet he is hardly conscious of the intimacy. Later, when he wakes to his own appetites, others' hands—strangers' hands—will stroke where I stroke now. I am jealous of this future secret-sharing apart from me, jealous of the response those hands will provoke.

Between us, yet, is no shame, no inhibition. He thinks me beautiful; he wants to grow to be like me. And I am bound to fail him, and bound to lose him. Daily the gap between us grows. He is not mindful of it—but I am. Oh, I am.

For many years, unremembered years, our children have only the vaguest notion of their separateness from us. We are an immutable and invariable framework in their lives, a perpetual foundation. Therefore they treat us with an abominable negligence and come one day, hat in hand, to claim themselves and leave. They grow into strangers certain to disappoint and perplex us, having long before wakened to disillusionment with us. They seem oblivious to our loss—after all, they've lost nothing. We are only their parents. And haven't we done all this before?

I treat my own mother with an offhand and rather inattentive disregard. She is, after all, my mother. She is always there, and I am always her child, as my son is my child, first, forever and ever.

Could she ever have felt this same fierce protective love for me? It seems she should be grieved, bereft, if that is so. I am far away from her. I cling to my son; this ordinary woman chats of relatives and the weather. What could she be hiding, unarticulate, beneath mundane conversation?

I may never know. Affection embarrasses us. A lump comes to my throat

when my mother and I move close to each other; we both feel relief when the contact is averted. Will it be the same for my son and me, who now crawls like a spoiled child-prince across my lap? How could such ease be forgotten, to become the shy silence between my mother and me?—though I know she is like a limb to me, a vital organ.

She shows up, surprising me, in my words to my son. I repeat what she told me, the phrases and platitudes, in the same tone of voice and inflection I heard as a child. We all have vowed to do it differently, to be unlike our parents, and the most we can manage is a variation.

Will my son, then, repeat me, as I my mother and she my grandmother? I become part of his inheritance, and will prevail despite his efforts. Even when he's gone and busy forgetting me I'll show up, surprising him. He'll try to throw me off, the monkey on his back.

I'll grow old on him. The trick of parents through the ages—we turn again into children. "When I grow up," he tells me, "you'll be my baby." Yes, I smile. Yes, if only you knew, my son. I have put my grandmother on the toilet, to bed, consigned to death. Perhaps I'll do the same for my mother in her time. Perhaps one day I'll lie in bed, watching this smooth-faced boy fold my diapers, and see in him a gesture that reminds me of myself once young. But now he remains under my still-strong wing, unconcerned.

This frightful responsibility! I invited it, and I carry it out in a workaday way. But I quail secretly at the number of mistakes I'm bound to make, what I'll saddle him with, what the price for both of us will finally be. I'll give the world a son, heavy with the grief of giving him at all. Then and after, he'll drift in and out of my view, keeping secrets, neglecting me, while I watch from a distance, unrequited.