

Man's greatest endowment in mortal life is the power of choice--the divine gift of free agency. No true character was ever developed without a sense of soul freedom. If man feels circumscribed, harassed or enslaved by something or somebody, he is shackled. . . God intends man to be free.

Richard Vetterli, Constitution by a Thread

Principle Three

CHILDREN ARE ENDOWED WITH THE GIFT OF FREE WILL

Often we hear the expressions, "You made me angry when you. . . I lost my temper because you. . . I was raised by my parents who were unloving, that's why I. . . I cannot help myself--I've always been this way." All of these statements indicate an underlying conviction that man is programmed to do or be something, without the power to decide or choose his own behavior. One of my basic disagreements with the child guidance techniques is the common teaching that man is not an agent of free will, but merely the product of hereditary and environmental factors. "There is no free will in the human soul. . . Man believes that he is free because being conscious of his actions, he is ignorant of their causes, but we know very well that every action has a cause." (Spinoza)

Consistent however, with the principle that man is of spiritual origin is the principle that where life is given so also is the power or agency to direct that life. It is important that parents keep in mind that children are not solely the outcome of hereditary and environmental factors; they do not merely react to stimuli; they do not come "tabula

rosa”, but are endowed with personality and preference, with an innate drive to determine their own destinies.

Insects and animals follow certain patterns of action. Honeybees, for example, all make the same hexagonal cells of wax. Beavers all build the same form of dam, and the same kinds of birds make the same kinds of nests. Generation after generation, they continue to follow their routines--always doing the same things in the same ways. But man is different because he is a human being; and as a human being, he has the power of reason, the power of imagination, the ability to capitalize on the experiences of the past and the present as bearing on the problems of the future. He has the ability to change himself as well as his environment. He has the ability to progress and to keep on progressing.

Plants occupy space and contend with each other for it. Animals defend their possession of places and things, but man has enormous powers, of unknown extent, to make new things and to change old things into new forms. He not only owns property, but he also actually creates property. (H. G. Weaver, *The Mainspring of Human Progress*, pp. 20-21)

Since man is born free, he is free also to destroy that freedom through wrong choices. He is free to become knowledgeable or to suffer the consequences of remaining ignorant. He is free to maintain the health of his body or to abuse it. He is free to plan a life’s mission and to create joy, or to idle away time. He is free to govern himself by the heart and mind or to succumb to the horrors of being ruled by the carnal passions of the body. He is free to strive for maturity and responsibility and to know the joy of making a contribution or to remain in the narrow, immature concerns of a child. He is free to climb or to slide, but he is not free of the consequences of his decisions. In a sense each one of us has the power within us to

create our own heaven or hell. We have the power to choose dignity or depravity, freedom or bondage, the exalted or the mundane, the beauty in our souls or the beast in our souls. Animals are governed only by instinct and not by choice; of the creations of God, man alone has the agency to choose.

F.A. Hayek has said, "Liberty not only means that the individual has both the opportunity and the burden of choice, it also means that he must bear the consequences of his actions. Liberty and responsibility are inseparable." (*The Constitution of Liberty*, p. 71)

The man who remains without a deliberate plan of action succumbs to disorder, disunity, and destruction. In a very real sense, then, man creates himself by the willful acquisition and application of knowledge, truth and understanding.

"I become what I am," said Henry Bars. "I must win and pay dearly for my personality as for my freedom." Jacques Maritain, a French philosopher, agrees: "Man must win his personality, as well as his freedom, and he pays dearly for it, and runs many risks. He is a person in the order of doing only if his rational energies, and virtues, and love, give (battle) . . . to the torrential multiplicity which inhabits him." (*Education for Freedom*, p.40)

This is not to say that we are not affected by hereditary and environmental factors; but, that despite these factors and with the God's assistance, man can choose to change, choose to break with negative family traditions, choose to form new ideas, perspectives, and habits.

Kahlil Gibran expresses it this way:

Your children are not your children.
They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.
They come through you, yet they belong not to you.
You have given them your love but not your thoughts,
For they have their own thoughts.
You may house their bodies, but not their souls.
For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow,
Which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.

You may strive to be like them,
But seek not to make them like you,
For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.

Courage of Convictions

While parents may become frustrated with the child's free will, it is vital to remember that it is this same free will, which produces children that grit their teeth and endure in the face of life's challenges, and that stand firmly for their convictions.

Thomas Carlyle wrote, "The courage we desire and prize is not the courage to die decently, but to live manfully." Abraham Lincoln said, "This love of liberty which God has planted in us constitutes the bulwark of our liberty and independence. It is not our frowning battlements, our bristling seacoats, our army, and our navy. Our defense is the spirit which prizes liberty as the heritage of all men."

Great leaders throughout history have been characterized by their strong wills. The prophet Abraham left home and family to begin a new life in a new land because he opposed error and loved truth. Deborah's unwavering determination and spiritual strength inspired the Israelite armies to victory when everyone was saying it could not be done. Joseph preferred to suffer in the prisons of Egypt rather than violate his conscience and commit fornication with another man's wife. Patrick Henry proclaimed, "I know not what course others may take, but as for me, give me liberty or give me death." Jesus, at the age of twelve, told his mother, ". . . I must be about my Father's business" (St Luke 2:49).

In each of these examples the hero had to have the courage of his convictions. So while a parent may become exasperated with the child's early manifestations of strong will, it is ultimately this characteristic that will provide the passion of conviction during moments of trial. Therefore, the child's initiative to live manfully must be preserved in the course of training, not trampled upon. Ella Wheeler Wilcox wrote a poem that illustrates this idea:

One ship drives east and another drives west,

with the selfsame winds that blow.
Tis the set of the sails
And not the gales
Which tells us the way to go.

We and our children are free to determine our own course in this life; we need not let ourselves be driven by the wind.

Victor Frankl, a psychologist, wrote about his experiences in a Nazi concentration camp that led to his realization that man is endowed with the gift of free will. He had been taught that what happens to you as a child determines your whole life--that man is not an actor but merely a reactor to his circumstances. Yet, he discovered that, in spite of the minimum of physical freedom in a concentration camp, man could still have a maximum of spiritual freedom. He was free to think, to imagine, and to respond. He wrote:

But what about human liberty? Is there no spiritual freedom in regard to behavior and reaction to any given surroundings? Is that theory true which would have us believe that man is no more than a product of many conditional and environmental factors--be they of a biological, psychological or sociological nature? Is man but an accidental product of these? Most important, do the prisoners reaction to the singular world of the concentration camp prove that man cannot escape the influences of his surroundings? Does man have no choice of action in the face of such circumstances?

We can answer these questions from experience as well as on principle. The experiences of camp life well show that man does have a choice of action. There were enough examples, often of a heroic nature, which proved that apathy could be overcome, irritability suppressed. Man can preserve a vestige of spiritual freedom, of independence of mind, even in such terrible conditions of psychic and physical stress. We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the

huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms--to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.

And there were always choices to make. Every day, every hour, offered the opportunity to make a decision, a decision which determined whether you would or would not submit to those powers which threatened to rob you of your very self, your inner freedom: which determined whether or not you would become the plaything of circumstances, renouncing freedom and dignity to become molded into the form of the typical inmate. (*Man's Search for Meaning*, pp. 86-87)

I attended a lecture in which the professor was discussing the principle that we are free to alter our response to situations. He said, "It is bad enough that the milk was spilt; you do not have to let it ruin your day." I was amazed--wasn't it right to get mad when someone spills the milk? Isn't that how rational, normal human beings act? I thought through his statement. Before I heard this lecture, I almost always reacted to a difficult circumstance with a temper response. I believed it was expected of me!

In time, I came to understand the logic of it all--why add negative to negative? Is it not bad enough that it happened? Why multiply it with an aftermath of temper, sour feelings, and a ruined day? We have the power to determine how to respond.

Choice and Spiritual Growth

Life is a process of becoming--a sequential advancement from one stage to another. The infant grows to become a toddler, then a child, then an adolescent, then matures into adulthood. With each state the physical body carries out its programmed message--to grow and develop.

Moral and spiritual advancement of the soul, on the other hand, does not occur automatically, but takes place through the agency of choice; without this agency there is no advancement. Children may learn to follow the rules--they may be conditioned to act in a certain acceptable manner-- but the objective is not mere compliance to law, but, as discussed earlier, the freedom to love, to be, and to share! Children who have been forced, coerced, or manipulated into a pattern of living may lose the innate ability to think, to choose, to feel, and to be independent in the midst of opposition. In addition, parents who have succumbed to the use of negative power techniques: destructive anger, rage, rancor, harsh physical abuse may find themselves caught up in a web of hate that can no longer be controlled. The use of force breeds the use of more force, and the continued use of force upon the child, eventually erodes freedom of the soul, spontaneity, and spirit.

Force and fear have their uses, but they are ineffective in stimulating ambition, initiative, creative effort, and perseverance. . . . Furthermore, the unbridled use of arbitrary power, maintained through force and fear, always has a demoralizing and degenerating effect on those who use it. It breeds arrogance, intolerance, and sadism. Like the dope habit, it may start out innocently enough; but it feeds on itself, and things go from bad to worse. The more a person relies on it, the greater the temptation to increase the dose. Thus the temporary remedy becomes a pernicious habit, and it is almost impossible to turn back.”
(H. G. Weaver, *The Mainspring of Human Progress*, p. 58.)

Another danger of overly authoritative parents is that children may come to depend upon parental authority and, thus, surrender their agency. In time they become unable to exercise their choice and therefore lose the ability to develop their own personality and potential. An example of this behavior, and its consequences, is found in the New Testament. During the Savior’s ministry his greatest opposition was from the scribes and Pharisees --those who were

exact in keeping the law, but who had lost all vitality of life. The law given to Moses had been discussed, dissected, and detailed out for generations. These laws determined their every move--from how many steps were permissible to take on the Sabbath to how many tassels a man could wear on his clothing. Jesus' message to them was simple, love God, love your fellow man, but they were too steeped in the tradition of authority and exactness to comprehend. Resentment replaced understanding.

My first experience snow skiing helped me to understand some of the feelings of the scribes and Pharisees toward Jesus. While I was intently struggling to acquire the knowledge and skills of downhill skiing, a little child whizzed by me, full of freedom and grace. I immediately resented him--how could he make it look so easy when I was having such a miserable time? How dare he? In the same manner, those struggling with the details of the law resented the confident, free spirit of the Master. How dare he simplify everything when, to them, it was so complex? They had taken such great pride in their ability to understand the laws complexities, but the Savior condemned this pride. He regarded their accomplishments of understanding the law (for some a life-time endeavor) as "useless as straining at a gnat." He constantly had to remind them to focus, on the spirit of the law, not the letter of the law. In their overzealousness for the law, they became blind to the basic principle underlying every commandment--love. He called them, "Whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness." (Matthew 23:27) In other words, while they looked good on the outside, they stank on the inside.

The challenge of parenting, it seems, is to instill and inspire correct behavior without suppressing the inner spark of spontaneity and personality. Children come into the world naturally free, spontaneous, and of goodwill. They often display surprising understanding and compassion. They value friendship highly. They are eager to love, to be, to share, to learn, to become--all that they were meant to become as children of God. They are also free to be mischievous, to have fun, and to frolic. They become angry, but are eager to resolve and to forgive. Children are referred to as examples

by the Savior, “Verily I say unto you, except ye . . . become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3).

Perhaps his reason for using children as examples was to point out the difference between living the law and living life. Children live life and live it abundantly. Our objective as parents ought to be the same--to promote, not mere compliance to law, but the celebration of life.

Summary

Just as it is wrong to surrender one’s identity to another, so it is wrong to induce another to surrender his identity to your own in the name of parenting. The goal for parents, then, is not to create clones of themselves in their children, but to create an environment that will enhance individual diversity, with the understanding that parenthood is not ownership but stewardship. Parents, then, exhibit the highest quality of love by encouraging rather than squelching the buddings of personality and preference.

A parent who respects the divine nature of children would not perceive the child as a possession, attempt to substitute his own personality for the child’s, use the child to fulfill his own ambitions, discipline merely to maintain power and control over the child, or take all the credit for the child’s success--or all the blame for any supposed failure. They would recognize that, since ultimately the child will grow into an adult and choose for himself, childhood is a prime time for coaching the child in the ability to make wise choices.

In addition, the parent who sees that the child is endowed with the right of free will--and uniqueness of personality--would realize that his position as parent is one of stewardship. The parent would teach by example and word, and would apply the tools of love to influence--prayer, persuasion, enthusiasm, example, patience, gentleness, and strategy--and would utilize firm correction in a constructive rather than destructive spirit. Of these tools, I am convinced that prayer should be at the top of the list, the middle of the list, and the bottom of the list--in other words, constant and continual.

There are times when, in the best interest of all, the will of the child must be suppressed by the divine right of parents to govern their homes, for the acknowledgement of the agency of the child is not a case for permissiveness--quite the contrary--while respect for agency contributes to the maturity of the child, permissiveness caters to his immaturity. In other words, the understanding of the child's right of choice does not suggest that a parent ought to give into his choices. Giving a two-year-old the right to choose what he eats and wears is unwise. Giving a teenager the right to abandon education is injudicious. Giving in to twenty-year-olds' demands for a new car is unrealistic. Giving in to anything that will hinder the child's growth physically, spiritually, socially, or intellectually is poor parenting. While this sounds contradictory, it is not. Respecting agency does not mean giving in; it means giving respect.

Final note: While the philosophy of this principle has, I hoped, been explained, the day-to-day implications will be discussed in subsequent chapters. The understanding of agency is only one of the considerations in parenting; it cannot be perceived accurately without the others--conscience, justice, the rights and responsibilities of parents and children, and the age of the child.

The Principle in Action

It is important to strengthen the child's ability to make decisions. Begin with little ones: What do you want for breakfast? What do you choose to wear today? What shall we read for a bedtime story? Where shall we go for our family outing? Then, to move over to moral choices: Help to develop a keen sense of conscience: If you go to the store and the clerk gives you too much change, what will you do? Why would you do that? What would happen if everyone kept money that was not theirs?

Teach children that the right to make a decision in their life includes the responsibility to live with the consequences. For every action, there is a reaction. What would happen if we always told lies? Why is it important always to tell the truth? Is immorality wrong? Why? What happens to the kids around you who are having sex? Is

there any relationship between teenage marriage and divorce? Children could be asked to research such issues to gain a better basis for decision-making. Share stories of individuals who had to make difficult decisions in their lives. The librarians would be happy to direct parents to books that help to develop the ability to make wise decision.

The Right To Oppose

Our little Jessica expresses her opposition every time I wash her hair. She cries, screams, demands and fights every step of the way. There was a time when I believed that children did not have a right to oppose. I resorted with actions of the same type and manner--I cried, screamed, demanded, and fought! Now, with the awareness that even little children have a right to express their opinions--and opposition--I divorce myself from the tantrum with the confidence that while the child has the right to express opposition, I have the right and responsibility to carry out the task. With firmness tempered by gentle persuasion, I press on.

Jessica is now three and likes to do things for herself. She yields to my washing her hair but still wants to rinse it by herself. It usually takes twice as long to let her lean back into the stream of water, but more important to me than impeccably clean hair is my child's expression of her free will.

The Enthusiastic, Positive Approach

"I realize that you don't want to go to school or do chores. I understand, too, that you would rather not practice the piano, and I am fully aware that you would prefer to eat candy instead of vegetables and watch T.V. rather than go to bed.

"However, you are so lucky to have me! I just happen to have Wonder Vision! Yes, it's true. You see, while I can hear what you are saying NOW I have the ability to see way beyond the NOW. Because of my age and experience I can see into the future. I can project what will happen to children who say, no to school, chores, piano practice,

nutritious food, and sleep. They turn into couch potatoes--shallow, ugly, and sickly green.

“You can’t see into the future because little children don’t have Wonder Vision. So, while I want to hear your opinions, and I want to say, yes, I really can’t unless it’s right for you today and right for you tomorrow. Aren’t you lucky to have a mom like me! I care enough to say no.”

The Right To Remain Silent

Recently, we had the painful experience of having our seventeen-year-old son leave home for months. There were no arguments, no contention--he simply wanted to live on his own for a while. For a long time, our hearts were filled with resentful bitterness. “How could he do this to us? Look at the example he is setting for the rest of the children! So many children have said how they would love to be a part of our family and he walks out! Why would he do such a thing?”

When he came home to see the family, we would attempt to put him through the third degree: “Do you realize what you are doing? Why are you doing this to everyone? How inconsiderate and selfish can you be? Why?” But he would not answer. He just sat and listened, staring into space. Usually, he would walk through the house without saying a word to anyone.

We prayed for the greater endowment of love to overcome our resentment--to accept him where he was and for what he was and to respect his right to choose another way. When he came over, we did not pry for answers; we accepted his right to remain silent. We were there if he wanted to talk, there if he wanted not to talk. We concluded that it was not right to give him special attention for his actions; instead we treated him with a friendly, comfortable distance. From time to time I wrote letters of encouragement, but not of condemnation. I resolved--like the story of spilt milk--that although he had left home, I would not let it ruin our relationship. He might choose to alienate himself from us but we would not alienate ourselves from him. In short we decided to act, not to react, to the situation.

Though it was difficult--at times extremely difficult--we tried to respect his agency of choice. In time it paid off. Several months later I sensed that it was time to make a move. I had heard that he was ready for a change--to get away from friends. One day while he was over, I said, "What would you think of going away to school with the family for the summer?"

He responded, "I think I'd like that."

We had made no plans to leave for the summer, but when I heard his answer I quickly made some. He kept his promise, and we all left several weeks later. At first, he remained almost removed from the family; but in time, our son emerged--talkative, humorous, fun-loving. I will long remember the night he opened up and shared, until the wee hours of the morning, the feelings of his heart. What a thrill! The healing process was taking effect.

We returned home at the end of the summer, I was afraid that he would return to live with his friends, but he stayed home until he left for school in the fall. During this brief period at home, he was thoughtful and considerate of everyone. He played with his younger brother and sisters. He cleaned and made repairs around the house.

When he went away to college, he left a personal written message to each member of the family. In his words to his little sister--"Don't grow up too fast!"--I could sense his regret. To Mom and Dad he wrote, "It's been great being a part of the family and household again. Thanks for everything--especially for giving me a second chance!"