



## The State of the School

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I recently went to see the movie, “The Big Short,” about the lead up to the financial meltdown of 2008. I knew quite a bit about the specifics because I had read many books on the subject shortly after it happened. But the movie wasn’t really about that. It was more about the human side of it, the human failure, greed, and foolishness, the inability to be heard amidst the noise of a giant money making machine, and the staggering power of denial.

The movie did a remarkable job of revealing in excruciating detail what it felt like for the group of people who saw the crash coming but could hardly believe it themselves, let alone convince others. The constant juxtaposition of those who knew it desperately trying to disprove it, with those who were perpetrating the fraud, either knowingly or unwittingly (never mind the greed), was a masterpiece. With great deft, the movie made you a member of the group of people in the know and what they must have experienced as they frantically interacted with the perpetrators, the clueless, and the suckers, and it was devastating.

There is something terrifyingly similar afoot in the world of parenting. There are many experiences and sources that have made this troubling realization clear to me. First and foremost, it is work with children themselves. Make no mistake about it. The changes in the day-to-day living of our lives, automation, technology, and cheap goods and services have had a profound impact on how our children are developing. And I say with grave seriousness that it is not for the better.

For years I have had this conversation with small groups of educators. Why are the children behaving as they are? Why don’t they want to do anything? Why are they not connected to one another? Why has learning become so difficult for them? Why does it take them so long to learn the alphabet? Why are they learning to read so much later? Why aren’t they able to learn the same academic content they were able to learn 20 years ago? Why aren’t they aware of their impact on other children? Why don’t they know

what things might be dangerous and require caution? Why can't they anticipate outcomes? Why can they no longer seem to be able to change their behavior? Why can't they complete a task independently?

Why do they seem so...impaired?

I have asked people at different schools about their experiences all around the country, wishing and hoping desperately, as in the movie, that maybe I didn't have it right. Maybe it was I. Maybe I was just crusty. Maybe I was just burned out. But I have spoken with hundreds of educators, from public and independent schools, and there are precious few who see things differently. Children are categorically less able than they were in the 1980s.

Still, I have never spoken about this to parents without filtering the message for many reasons. I have always considered its impact on my role as a child's teacher, a mentor to parents, more recently a leader of a school community, and not least, the historical fate of the messenger. My sense has always been that no one wants to hear it, and no one will believe it anyway. And to be truthful, I still feel that way.

Nonetheless, I am finally writing it.

I won't be taking credit for any original ideas in this essay. Nor will I be afforded the luxury of standing in judgment, as I have reflected on many of my own decisions as a parent. My understanding has been shaped by many people: John Rosemond, Jonathan Sacks, Robert Brooks, Julie Lythcott-Haims, Brené Brown, and Sherry Turkle, to name a few. But this list is by no means exhaustive. There are many people nibbling around the edge of this topic. But do not be misled: the evidence that current parenting (among other cultural changes) is having a significant detrimental effect on young people has been established.

Still few people are talking about it with the urgency of a true crisis (though John Rosemond is one). Perhaps this is because the tsunami is so far in the future. As parents, none of us will be fully aware of the collapse of our own children until they are in their teens or even young adulthood. When there are so many other imminent crises demanding our attention, who can worry about something so far off? And really, how bad can it be? Perhaps it is because the alternative narrative being told in so many ways and so many places is so much more palatable: do as much as you can for your children, give them every advantage, pave the road for them, and they will succeed.

While I cannot say with conviction that I know which children will suffer the most (though offspring of the affluent are at highest risk), nor the exact details of the tragic outcomes, I do know that what we are doing collectively as parents to this generation of children is tragic for them. We are raising a generation of children who will become adults poorly equipped to face life's challenges (to put it politely). There are adults you are starting to come across already in your work places, in universities, in government. Adults who lack the common experiences that develop common sense. And what's most

dangerous, adults who do not develop a sense of agency or empathy, qualities that are essential for personal development and the welfare of humanity respectively.

How is this happening?

To extend the financial metaphor for a moment: we need to ask what the corresponding financial products we are all being sold in the world of parenting are? What is the parenting equivalent to the cheap home equity loans? The adjustable rate mortgages? The can't-lose investment properties? What are the sucker bets?

The parenting scam is no less creative, no less alluring, and no less devastating. It is a multi-faceted one with many equally fraudulent products, albeit psychological ones. Here are a few of the whoppers:

- Parenting is a constant joy.
- Good parents provide constant fun.
- Good parents devote every moment of their free time to their children.
- Good parents send their children to lots of classes that develop skills that will look great on their resumes.
- Good parents prevent failure.
- Good parents frequently intervene on behalf of their children.
- Good parents do not allow suffering.
- Good parents do not abandon children to do things on their own.
- Good parents do not force their children to entertain themselves.
- Good parents do not expect their children to make contributions to the household.
- Good parents never allow their children to get hurt.
- Good parents are partners with their children not figures of authority.
- Good parents are always liked by their children.
- Telling children how great they are will make them feel great and actually be great.
- The more you do for your children, the better prepared for their future they are.
- If children put up a big fuss, you must be doing something wrong and should change your parenting choices.
- Children know what's best for them.
- Parents don't have to be the *adults* in the room.
- Consequences are harsh and old-fashioned.
- Engagement in screen time has no negative repercussions.
- If you do it right, your teenagers will be your friends and tell you everything.
- Your child's success is *your* trophy and the only reflection of your own success that really counts.

What a load! in every sense of the expression. These guiding principles are a slow bloodletting of our children's efficacy, of their chance to be intelligent, empathic,

creative, competent, resilient, determined, leaders: in effect everything we want for them when we first hold them in their tender infancy.

I cannot speak authoritatively about how it is that we got here. But I can say some things about why these ideas are so destructive and what will help us correct our course.

As for the first notion, *Parenting is constant joy*. My advice: stop looking at Facebook and start looking at families in the grocery store. I'll leave it at that.

Parents who *provide children with constant fun* are raising children who will not develop the comfortable relationship with boredom that is often the birthplace of our creativity. And these children can look confidently forward to a life that will be a great disappointment, as life is anything but *constant fun*.

*Parents who devote every moment of their free time to their children* raise adults who understand their place in the universe as the very center. They will expect, as do all children, that their first experience with community (the family) is what they should get from every community thereafter. Anyone interested in working with this guy?

The rocking, rollicking carousel of *brain stimulating, math building, self esteem growing, competition generating, resume padding activities*, when overdone, leaves no time for the contributions that need to be made on behalf of community. And few children are genuinely interested in different activities five days a week. In addition, these activities are generally designed to maximize provable output with greatest efficiency. This means adult directed, content controlled, direct instruction with some sort of product or production at the end. Not exactly an educator's description of the *best classes to build skills*. In fact, oftentimes the development of the skills are primarily evident only on the brochure.

*Good parents prevent failure*. This is one I think that we all sort of scam ourselves with. "I let my kids fail." Most of us won't even let our children get frustrated zipping their coats without intervention. The result? Adults who do not have the experience that allows them to know that failure is actually a step on the road to somewhere. Not a final destination. Nor a final devastation.

*Good parents frequently intervene on behalf of their children*. This is now known as advocating for your child. Sounds reasonable. But here is what it really looks like: "Be sure that my son gets snack before 10:00 every morning. He gets tired if he doesn't eat before ten." This is the person you work with now who needs his down time midmorning every day because he has worked uninterrupted for 45 minutes. "That boy is mean to my daughter. He shouldn't even be at this school." This is the person you work with who can't seem to get along with anyone and is sure that the source of all problems are those around him. "My son doesn't get enough play at the soccer game. Time to talk to the coach." This is the person you work with now whose every underlying question is: "What about me? What about my feelings?" "My son said you wouldn't let him explain what happened. He has the right to share his side of the story." This is the co-worker who feels

that every thought he has should be expressed, should be heard, and should be acted on. "My daughter doesn't like it when you tell her that she is rude." The problem is she *is* rude. Everybody knows it, but no one has the courage to be honest with you. And being rude, unfortunately, does not disappear with age like baby teeth. So what should you be saying instead? Most often you shouldn't be saying anything at all. These are the normal little ups and downs of life that we simply may or may not take note of and then move on without comment. If it is your child who is complaining about something trivial, and most of it is trivial, your answer should be, after a moment of pause to reflect, "I feel ya. Life is tricky sometimes. Let me know what you decide to do." And finally, the quintessential child advocacy choice: "My child is a really special case; he is extra smart and needs to be in a special school that knows how to work with gifted children." You have fallen for the mother of all sucker bets, and your ego has gotten the best of you. Period. Smart children don't actually need to be segregated from the general population and provided with special services and special teachers. They work quite well with all kinds of children and learn quite easily from all kinds of teachers.

*Suffering.* Surely nothing good can come of this. It all depends on the event. When a child makes a blatantly destructive, selfish or mean spirited choice, let the suffering begin. There is no substitute. No work-around. A parent who intervenes in this process is raising an adult who will not readily associate her choices with the impact it has on those around her. But what about the suffering at the hands of others or fate? In this case, offer comfort, offer perspective, offer hot soup. Anything but intervention. (I am hoping we can all set aside for the sake of this essay things like abuse and agree that these are not the circumstances to which I am referring. More along the lines of, "I'm not allowed to sit with my friends." Or "The coach never puts me in." Statements that often end with, "It's not fair!") In these cases, a young soul just needs some comfort and strong encouragement to get back up on the horse.

*Good parents don't abandon children to do things on their own.* And that, sadly, is what it has come to be considered. Abandonment. But children who are not left to do things on their own do not learn to...well...do things on their own. The act of teaching is different than the act of learning. Children need help, guidance, instruction, and mentoring. But this is not actually when they learn. The learning comes when they DO things. On their own. And unless you are planning to accompany them to work every day, they better figure that one out. Note: time on the iPad is not time on their own.

*Good parents do not force their children to entertain themselves.* Force them? Children are wired to entertain themselves. Ever watch a baby discover his own foot? Children who lose their sense of curiosity, who are unable to get beyond, "I'm bored," are not likely to have the stamina necessary to persevere through the grunt work that precedes discovery and invention. Parents who constantly provide entertainment for their children are lovingly strangling curiosity.

*Contributions to the household.* Contribution to the community of the family is the seminal experience that leads to both personal and social responsibility. Parents will always be the primary influence on the child. Your children will not be shaped by what

you give them but rather by what you ask of them. We have fallen down on the job here. Completely. See paragraph on brain stimulating activities and no time for anything else.

*Good parents never let their children get hurt.* Again, let's put aside things like allowing children to cross the highway on foot. The problem with childproofing every experience is that you later have to idiot-proof the world for these adults. Children need to learn that things that are hot burn. Things that are sharp need to be handled with care, not be avoided until puberty. Putting soap in your mouth tastes bad. There is no way to learn to ride a bike without taking a few falls. Things you don't know about should be approached with caution. If you climb up a tree, you had better have a plan to get back down. Kids are going to get hurt sometimes.

*Parents as partners.* UGH! A family should have one pair of partners: the parents. All others are free to help with the chores. A child who sees himself as an equal partner with his parents will take that show on the road. His employer will be his "partner" with equal but not superior authority. The police officer will be his "partner" with equal but not superior authority. And eventually, so will the judge: the last in the line of those who reside out of your household who will try to put an end to this nonsense. Authority is not by definition evil. It can be. But the best way to help your child grow into an adult who can handle both good and evil authority is to help him develop a healthy relationship with an authority figure who has his best interest at heart. You.

*Good parents will always be liked by their children.* Hopefully the preceding paragraphs have made these two things clearly mutually exclusive. But if you are currently constantly liked by your children, you can consider it the canary in the coalmine.

*Telling children they are really great will make them so.* Ever work with someone who singularly shares the opinion that she is great? Wonder how she got that idea? Somebody told her. Just sayin'. Being great in any way comes from what you do, not from what someone says about you.

*The more you do for your children the better prepared for their future.* Truth: the more you do for your children the less they can do for themselves. Not a recipe for success. Nor for contentment.

*If children put up a fuss, you must be doing something wrong.* Simply reverse this. If children are putting up a fuss, you are probably doing the right thing. You are setting limits. You are saying no. You are letting them suffer. You are forcing them to entertain themselves. You are being a benevolent figure of authority, one who has their best interest at heart.

*Children know what's best for them.* Really? If they don't have the wisdom to brush their teeth so they are not toothless in their thirties without your insistence, why would you think they have the wisdom to make the choices that will lead to good character without a strong leader at the helm? Sort of silly when you think about it.

*Parents don't have to be the adults in the room.* We've all read *Lord of the Flies*, right? Children need adults in their lives to tell them when they are off course and set them aright. Without that, well, ask Piggy.

*Consequences are harsh and old fashioned.* So it seems are manners, cooperation, responsibility and integrity. See Congress.

*Engagement in screen time has no negative repercussions.* It will take time for the outcomes of unfettered hours of screen time to be revealed. But the eternal reality that childhood is the period in which the human being learns how the world works certainly hasn't changed. If we are hoping for an electorate of citizens who can analyze an argument, recognize a con, have courage when life is frightening, stand up for justice, or even recognize a cantaloupe when it still has the skin on it, we are going to have to consider just how much time on the screen is acceptable, exactly what our children are getting out of it, and what they are not getting at the same time.

*Your teenagers will tell you everything.* Adolescence is the part of the path designed to help children move toward living as independent adults. This includes, by necessity, a growing separation from their parents. Teenagers do not tell their parents everything. They never have. And quite frankly, because their lives involve other young adults, not everything they have to tell is actually any of a parent's business.

*Your child's success is your trophy.* Contrary to how it feels when the nurse hands your first born over to you and waves goodbye, your children do not *belong* to you. They are not simply extensions of you. You have your life and they have theirs. Your lives are not interchangeable. Your dreams are not interchangeable. Children are yours on loan, for what will feel like a shockingly short period of time when they get ready to launch off on their own. And remember, your most important job is to prepare them for that launch.

It is critical to remember, however, that despite all of our best intentions and even good parenting choices, there are no guarantees. Children are agents of free will. At some point, your children will have to make their own decisions. Some will be good ones, some will not. This *is* a guarantee. The best we can do is set our sights constantly on the future, on who we want them to become. And ask ourselves what we have done recently to help our children develop this way. I have found that my answer as a parent is frighteningly often...nothing.

We are consumed with the little things happening in the moment at the expense of considering the adults we long for our children to become. The last test score. The gifted evaluation. The cross word from a friend at school. The math lesson given in January instead of November. Making the travel soccer team. The "Child with Best Character" of the month award. The ADD diagnosis. The missed cupcake. Neighborhood friends. Larger classes. Smaller classes. More technology. Less technology. Quality time. Third place in the spelling bee. The neighbor's son who learned to read first. The nephew with a better report card. The lunchtime that was too short. The snack that was missed.

None of these things will make one spit of difference when your child is an adult and has to choose whom to marry, how to treat a co-worker, whether to help a friend, whether to cheat on a test, how to face cancer, whether to take care of her ailing parents, or honesty or integrity or dignity or humility or agency or gratitude or tolerance or sincerity. None of it. It will have no bearing at all. And we will have frittered away the only time in our children's lives when we could have had an influence. An influence on the things that give a life its shape and texture and depth and beauty and meaning and value.

As the Head of School who is exposed to all aspects of the school (the students, the parents, the faculty and staff, our successes and failures) I can tell you that even here at CMS there are times and instances when our community is getting unsettlingly close to being swept up in the crazy cultural mania masquerading as essential experiences for success. And it is grinding our children down in the rat race that has become growing up in a 21<sup>st</sup> century affluent family. Even we, despite our efforts, are uncomfortably close to raising children who will grow up to be selfish and petty, weak and stubborn, foolish and arrogant. We are not immune to falling prey to the powerful cultural messages that run counter to the best interests of our children. Simply being a part of CMS is not enough.

It is imperative for **each of us** to think carefully and critically about this proposition and our respective roles in it. Our continued success is not a given. It cannot be taken for granted. The work we are doing together is hard. It will take nothing less than creating a culture within a culture. We are swimming upstream here. We are taking a road less traveled and frequently judged. We need to acknowledge that CMS is a community that requires more of parents, more of students, and more of faculty and staff than do other schools. And as a result has student graduates who are capable of more. And we have to accept that it is not for everyone.

It is time now for us to sustain what we have so carefully crafted together. We have to mindfully and intentionally protect and nurture what we have created. The faculty and staff at CMS know that it is a privilege to work with families who have the courage to choose a different school than their neighbors. It is a privilege to work with families that have the courage to be a part of something that it is not conventional. It is a privilege to work with families who make great sacrifices personally and financially in order to send their students here. It is a privilege to work with families who send their children to a school whose value is too complicated to ever articulate sufficiently and have to answer the question of, "Why do you send your kids to Countryside when you live in such a great public school district?" with the answer "It's hard to explain." It is a privilege to work with families who have made a commitment to be a part of something that can be more than good, but something truly great. Something remarkable and unparalleled. A school to which others look for inspiration and guidance. A school that provides the conditions for its students to develop in such a way that strangers ask, "Where does she go to school?" for all the right reasons.

If I could sum up what we strive and struggle to help our students develop it would be this:

I want our young adults to see themselves as agents of change in their own lives. I want them NOT to see themselves as bystanders or victims of their lives or circumstances or fate. I want them to know that regardless of what happens around them and to them they can always ask:

Being that things are as they are, what then shall I do?

And

I want to see them ponder each day in audacious and also in little ways: How can I make this life, this world, this moment a little bit better, a little easier, or a little more beautiful for those I share it with and those who come after?

People who can do this will be able to create the success they want in their lives, and will do it with honor and with deep respect for those around them. That's an education.