

The Roots of Domestic Abuse

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Even small acts of mistreatment of children register in their open, still-developing brain. While psychologists tell us that children are adaptable and that parenting need only be “good-enough,” it is easy as parents to be unaware of the larger patterns in our child-rearing practices. A pattern of mistreatment of a child can lead to an adult who believes it is acceptable to harm children “for their own good.” It can lead to an adult who justifies abusing a spouse, or accepting abuse, with Qur’an.

To continue the discussion of the roots of violence begun previously (*in article, “The Death of Aasiya Zubair Hassan, Domestic Violence, and Child Abuse”*), I would like to share with you a poem I find moving, and a wonderful example of a fiercely honest mother with gifts of both awareness and word-craft. Take your time with it.

Sharon Olds http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sharon_Olds

The Clasp http://www.amazon.com/Strike-Sparks-Selected-Poems-1980-2002/dp/0375710760/ref=sr_1_2?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1239662523&sr=1-2

She was four, he was one, it was raining, we had colds,
we had been in the apartment two weeks straight,
I grabbed her to keep her from shoving him over on his
face, again, and when I had her wrist
in my grasp I compressed it, fiercely, for a couple
of seconds, to make an impression on her,
to hurt her, our beloved firstborn, I even almost
savored the stinging sensation of the squeezing,
the expression, into her, of my anger,
"Never, never, again," the righteous
chant accompanying the clasp. It happened very
fast-grab, crush, crush,
crush, release-and at the first extra
force, she swung her head, as if checking
who this was, and looked at me,
and saw me-yes, this was her mom,
her mom was doing this. Her dark,
deeply open eyes took me
in, she knew me, in the shock of the moment
she learned me. This was her mother, one of the
two whom she most loved, the two
who loved her most, near the source of love
was this.

How do you feel after reading the poem? Why might you feel that way? I chose this poem because it captures such a fleeting moment, such a tiny burst of anger of the sort so

common to us all. I chose this poem because it captures parental behavior that many of us may see as appropriate and necessary. For those who have parented children, it is most certainly behavior that is understandable.

Yet our beloved Prophet, may Allah bless him and give him peace, commanded us, “Do not become angry.”

The scholar of *usul al-fiqh* (fundamentals of Islamic jurisprudence), ‘Abd al-Wahhab Khallaf (d. 1956) comments on the above narration,

“it is not legally valid to make a person responsible for various innate human states which are the results of natural causes that are not of the person’s acquisition or choice, such as emotional arousal when angry. ...This command outwardly is an order to refrain from something natural and unacquired, namely anger, when motives for it exist...But the real meaning is ‘Control yourself when angry and restrain yourself from its bad consequences.’”¹

This mother intentionally hurts a child of four who is about to make a mistake. The poet tells us, “I even almost savored the stinging sensation of the squeezing, the expression, into her, of my anger...” That the mother experienced a flash of anger is understandable, a human response. However, the behavior that she describes as expressing into the child her anger, is a bad consequence of the sort to which Khallaf referred.

How bad? We know from the poet’s description of the incident that the child took some lesson from the incident. The poet constructs the lesson as, “near the source of love, was this.” How bad is that?

The lesson the child takes is dependent on the entire context of her life with her mother. As an isolated incident, the probability of significant psychological damage is likely to have be small. Incidents in which a child is frustrated and in turn frustrates her parent are after all common. If the child’s needs are usually satisfied in a way that is good enough, currently accepted psychological findings hold that the child can adapt in a generally healthy way. A certain level of frustration for the child is even seen as beneficial:

“But the world is not a perfect place and we are not perfect parents. Though we will often meet our children’s needs, we will sometimes frustrate them. Our hope is to provide a matrix in which the frustration itself becomes a tool for building strength of character. Psychologists have termed this "optimal frustration". The key here is to determine what amount of frustration is overwhelming and will result in a breakdown of a healthy sense of self for the child, and what is benign or even advantageous to work through with appropriate emotional support. This balance creates the essence of the "good enough parent".
(<http://parenting.ivillage.com/mom/structure/0,,42pv,00.html>)

So if most of the time, we as parents are good enough, the psychologists tell us the child will be okay. We're off the hook, right?

But We shall set up just balance-scales on Resurrection Day, and no human being shall be wronged in the least: for though there be [in him but] the weight of a mustard-seed [of good or evil], We shall bring it forth; and none can take count as We do! (Qur'an 21:47 -- Asad)

Qur'an makes it clear that even small actions will be placed in the scales. The consensus of modern psychology may be that no lasting harm to the child from the incident related in the poem is likely. One can understand this consensus as an acknowledgement that many small good actions also go into the scale. But in this specific incident, the poet eloquently describes "the expression, into her, of my anger," Does not the act described carry the weight of a mustard-seed of evil, or more than that?

Consider this: one lesson the child may have learned from this is that it is okay for a parent to hurt a child. Reinforce this lesson, and we are likely to have an adult that believes it is acceptable intentionally to harm a child, or possibly, anyone who is weaker. If this is the lesson that is learned, it is a lesson that is likely to propagate down through the generations, and the expression of this lesson will be harsher for some than for others.

Many readers may have some difficulty accepting this. Really, why make such a big deal over this? Please reflect on what Alice Miller, (http://www.alice-miller.com/index_en.php) world-renowned psychoanalyst, says about it in her book, *The Body Never Lies: the lingering effects of hurtful parenting*: (<http://books.google.com/books?id=jm2NTJivXmoC>)

"In my reading of the notes sent in to the 'Our Childhood' [on her website] forums over the past few years, one thing has struck me repeatedly. Most newcomers write that, while they have been visiting the forum for some time, they have serious doubts whether they have come to the right place because they themselves never really experienced abuse in childhood. Appalled by the sufferings reported on there, they say that, although they were occasionally beaten and exposed to contempt or other forms of humiliation, they never had to suffer anything remotely like the cruelties inflicted on many of the forum participants. In the course of time, however, these newcomers also start reporting on shocking behavior on the part of their parents, behavior that can be unreservedly classified as abuse and is also considered as such by the others. They need some time to actually feel the suffering they went through as children. Thanks to the sympathy of the other participants, they can gradually admit their true feelings.

Might it not be the case that the poem moves us because it touches in us a chord of recognition? In fact it is far more likely that we will identify with the mother,

and excuse her, than with the child, because to identify with the child runs the risk of allowing into our consciousness hurt done to us as children. Miller goes on:

“This phenomenon is a reflection of the attitude displayed by the entire population of the world with regard to child abuse and cruelty to children. Such behavior is at best regarded as an involuntary “lapse from grace,” committed by parents who, though they have the best intentions, are simply overtaxed from time to time by the burden of bringing up a child. In the same vein, unemployment or overwork are quoted as the reason that a father gives his children a slap, or marital tensions are cited as the reason a mother has beaten her children with a hanger until it breaks. Such absurd explanations are the fruits of the morality we live by, a system that has always taken the part of the adults and left the children to fend for themselves as best they may. From this perspective, it is of course impossible to perceive the sufferings of children for what they are...

Sit with this for a moment. To what degree have we hardened ourselves to the suffering of children? Not the poor children of Gaza, or Somalia, or somewhere far away of course. But what about our own children, and what about the suffering of the child we once were? Miller goes on:

“The inquiry into the childhood patterns, the abuse, and the humiliation that have contributed to turning normal children into monsters is still, however, a matter of public neglect. These monsters and the people who have directed their feelings of anger and rage against themselves and have fallen ill for that reason have one thing in common: they ward off any kind of accusation from the parents who once maltreated them so severely. They do not know what that treatment has done to them, they do not know how much they have suffered from it. Above all, they do not want to know. They see it as something beneficial, something inflicted on them for their own good.”

Miller is telling us that the mistreatment of children, including even humiliation, contributes to the kind of bad consequences we have been warned against. She points out that the abuse may turn the child into a perpetrator of abuse, or the rage may be turned inward and lead to poor physical health.

The anger of the parent, expressed into the child, is a bad consequence of some weight. When the pattern of mistreatment is severe enough, it can produce a man who beats his wife, and uses Qur’an as a justification. How severe the mistreatment must be in order to produce this effect is a complicated accounting. And none can count as He does.

¹ Quoted in Keller, Nuh Ha Mim; translator and editor. *The Reliance of the Traveller: The Classic Manual of Islamic Sacred Law* ^c*Umdat al-Salik* by Ahmad ibn Naqib al-Misri. 1994. Beltsville, MD. Amana Publications. Page 41.