

Podcast #45--Suffer the Little Children: Why Family Separations at the Border Broke Our Hearts

I've been thinking a lot about the uproar caused by the images and stories that we all saw and heard of toddlers and children caged at the border, and what it was-exactly- that was so incendiary about them. The uproar about forced family separations spanned the political spectrum--Christian evangelicals, the UN Commission on Human Rights, several Republican lawmakers, and even the Pope were all upset and angry.

But I was thinking about the fact that we didn't and don't see the same degree of passion about the children who were about to lose their health insurance, or the heartbreaking plight of latchkey children raised in families headed by single mothers

working for stagnant wages, barely able to make ends meet, or children raised by parents addicted to opiates. These kids will never appear on the cover of Time Magazine.

The media just doesn't cover what Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb once called the "hidden injuries of class." The topic de jour was then about Russia and Robert Mueller and is, today, of course, about impeachment. And as the news rolls out, the Left and Right inevitably settle into their own tribal tents.

So--why doesn't the plight of the 16 million children currently being raised in poverty elicit the outrage that these children at the border do? Why exactly did so many people seem to wake up to the

cruelty of Trump and the Republican Party only when immigrant families were broken up?

The abstract facts of poverty, social injustice, and the unequal distribution of wealth don't elicit the deep psychological reflexes that are triggered by the stories and pictures of real panicked and grief stricken individual children and their parents. The former is suffering at a distance; the latter is up close and highly personal. Ultimately, I think that our moral outrage reflects the universal importance of attachment in human life – the central importance of the earliest connections between parents – especially mothers – and children. We know quite well that any disruption to such ties in the course of development results in tremendous grief and distress, and if the rupture is great enough, it causes significant trauma that indelibly damages children's

brain development and psyches. Research has shown that significant disruptions of attachment result in later life in an increase of cardiovascular disease, anxiety disorders, addiction, criminality, depression, obesity, and suicide.

I believe that we react so strongly to stories of broken attachments because all of us have experienced, even in the best of circumstances, some version, some degree, of exactly such a loss. When we see it on television, it resonates with unconscious reservoirs of grief and trauma in all of us.

Let me explain.

See- even in the best of circumstances, growing up invariably involves some degree of loss. Losses attendant on separation from our caretakers dog our tracks throughout development. For every step

forward, there is a letting go, a loss that has to be mourned. We learn to walk but we also miss the lap. We assert our wills and defy our parents, but we also miss surrendering to their care and protection. We might eagerly leave our parents behind when we go away to school, but we then often complain of homesickness. We further relive these separations when we become parents, as we watch our children grow up and need us less and less over time. And, of course, everyone has to deal with loss when they, or their loved ones, face the ultimate separation of death.

Loss is normal. However, since most families have at least a touch of dysfunction, these painful feelings are often heightened by psychological conflict. For example, in some families, children grow up feeling guilty about leaving parents behind

or doing better than their parents and thus come to experience separation as tragic. Such children might then hold on and become fearful of letting go and growing up comes to feel especially sad. Later on, such feelings are re-evoked when as parents, their own children leave them, and on and on it goes.

In many other families, parents are either physically or emotionally absent or neglectful. In these circumstances, children are forced to cope with great feelings of loss and abandonment. They feel bereft, abandoned and either cover it up with a defensive stoicism or get into dependent relationships in order to put a Band-Aid on the problem. But the underlying feelings of grief don't go away.

Each of us has within ourselves a reservoir of grief, longing, and other painful affects. Such feelings trigger our defenses and we often get angry, even indignant in response. But, you know— isn't it true that anger often masks sadness? We manage these feelings more or less well. We develop coping strategies that enable us to work and love and raise families in ways that are more or less successful. Feelings of loss or grief don't necessarily make us mentally ill. In fact, sometimes they enable us to empathize with others who are suffering similar distress. Sometimes they enable us to better comfort and protect our own children in order to avoid repeating the traumas of our childhood.

But these feelings also don't go away.

What does this have to do with the public's reaction to the travesties resulting from Trump's Zero Tolerance policy? Simply put: when we see children mistreated and orphaned at the border—pictures of a child wailing in response to being taken away from her mother, or being fenced off in some cold shelter—we identify with both that child's loss of his or her parents as well as the parents' loss of their child. We quite naturally are outraged, protest, and we want to rescue those who are suffering. Our own warded off pain is activated by the suffering of these families.

If attachment, loss, and empathy weren't reason enough to account for the public outrage at Trump's border separations, the fact that these children are intrinsically innocent makes the provocation into a perfect storm. We almost always view children as

innocent. This is why child sexual abuse is so emotionally incendiary to most people, even hardened convicts. That little immigrant girl crying at her mother's feet, unable to get her attention because her mother is being interrogated, the depictions of children in cages, stories of staff being forbidden to hold or touch the children for whom they are caring, accounts of parents freed from jail unable to find out where their children have been relocated or even whether or not they are alive, all impale us in especially painful ways because innocent beings—children—are being made to suffer even though they've done nothing "wrong." Their intrinsic innocence enable them to make legitimate claims on us for protection and care. And we howl in protest at the injustice of it all.

Guilty people deserve punishment. Innocent people deserve love and protection. This is why, of course, that Right-wing commentators cynically impugned the characters of parents who bring their children to the U.S., or make cynical claims that the children are pawns of drug smugglers. If the adults are guilty, then we shouldn't be making such a big deal about their pain. Right-wing extremists like Ann Coulter even try to tarnish our perceptions of the orphaned children by calling them "child actors."

Her real intention should be noted, namely, that the objects of our empathy are not innocent and, thus, not deserving of our indignation.

The celebration of innocence is all the more salient because in our society, based as it is on an imaginary system of meritocracy and shot through with some version of the Protestant work ethic and

the ideal of the rugged Horatio Alger individualist, none of us is ever allowed to be innocent. It's just hard for most of us to feel really innocent. Instead, we are made to feel responsible for whatever pain and suffering afflicts us. Even when we plainly are innocent, we have trouble accepting that and, instead, ***we project onto children the innocence that we, ourselves, are forbidden to feel.*** Isn't it true that most of us are burdened by painful feelings of guilt and responsibility? We look upon young children as free of such burdens in a way that we secretly, but unsuccessfully covet. We idealize and protect the innocence outside of ourselves—the innocence found in children—in part because we can't locate and defend a sense of innocence inside ourselves.

When people do a bad thing to a child, they are exploiting the inherent vulnerability of an innocent being who can't defend him or herself and who depends on adults for protection. As with child abuse, the very people in authority who should be looking out for the child are the ones inflicting pain. Such a betrayal not only evokes similar but long-forgotten experiences in all of our backgrounds, but it tarnishes the cherished ideal of innocence that all of us wish could remain untouched and unsullied. As a result, we react with vicarious indignation.

It therefore makes sense that forced family separations should be psychologically explosive and should have triggered widespread outrage. When deep feelings are evoked in the political arena, especially when they involve children and families,

public opinion can shift rapidly. Such sentiment wasn't enough to fuel a political movement because raw feeling ebbs and flows and unless it is embedded in structures, in organizations that are set up to gain power, it can be ephemeral. And, in fact, we saw conservative forces dishonestly spin a false counter-narrative about immigration being about crime and national security, not morality. By so doing, they hoped to create a situation in which the issue appears to be another typical clash between the Left and the Right, between Democrats and Republicans, rather than a universal human tragedy perpetrated exclusively by Donald Trump and the Republican Party.

Still, the spontaneous outpouring of emotional distress, moral outrage, and political activism that resulted from Trump's and Sessions' nativist

immigration policies remind us that the vast majority of people are capable of empathy for those who are powerless. Masses of people can stand up for the victims of a tyrannical government.

Progressives should take heart from this and figure out how to elicit empathy for the millions of children—and their parents—who suffer from social and economic injustice in our country and are every bit as innocent as these families at the Border.

Elie Wiesel argued that the opposite of love, art, faith, and life, is indifference. When we lead from the heart, expressing our most fundamental longings, we are not only better for it, but we have a better chance of changing the world.