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# Banished Knowledge

Facing Childhood Injuries

Alice Miller

THE DRAMA OF THE GIFTED CHILD  
(originally published as *Prisoners of Childhood*)

FOR YOUR OWN GOOD  
Hidden Cruelty in Childrearing and the Roots  
of Violence

THOU SHALT NOT BE AWARE  
Society's Betrayal of the Child

PICTURES OF A CHILDHOOD  
Sixty-six Watercolors and an Essay

THE UNTOUCHED KEY  
Tracing Childhood Trauma in Creativity  
and Destructiveness

BANISHED KNOWLEDGE  
Facing Childhood Injuries

PATHS OF LIFE  
Seven Scenarios

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Alice Miller

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*BANISHED*  
*KNOWLEDGE*

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*Facing Childhood Injuries*  
Revised Edition

Translated from the German  
by Leila Vennewitz



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## TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

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The following passage occurs in the Preface to the 2nd edition of Ashley Montagu's *Touching The Human Significance of the Skin* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986):

*One regret that every writer must have is that there does not exist in English a word which specifically refers to both sexes. In this edition I first attempted to remedy that situation by employing "it" as a substitute for the customary masculine pronouns. The result was of unacceptable impersonality which, combined with the awkward repetitiveness of "he or she" and "his or hers," rendered the change repellent. I, therefore, have adhered to customary usage. It is, of course, to be understood that in all instances both sexes are implied. This book is about human beings, not objects, and no baby is an "it" to its mother, nor should it be to anyone else.*

I wish to express my great appreciation to the author, Dr. Alice Miller, for the close cooperation I have enjoyed with her. I also wish to thank my husband, William, who has accompanied me throughout the work of this translation with his never-failing, expert assistance.

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## *PREFACE*

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UNLIKE ANIMALS, which generally become self-reliant shortly after birth, the human infant remains dependent on others for a very long time. He comes into the world as a bundle of needs, relying totally on the warmth of human arms, watchful eyes, and tender caresses. Incubators and electric heat are merely a very inadequate substitute for human contact, and the touch of cold instruments can be torture. A baby requires the certainty that he will be protected in every situation, that his arrival is desired, that his cries are heard, that the movements of his eyes are responded to and his fears calmed. The baby needs assurance that his hunger and thirst will be satisfied, his body lovingly cared for, and his distress never ignored.

Is that asking too much? Under some circumstances it is much too much, a great burden while under others it is a joy and an enrichment. It all depends on what the parents themselves experienced in the past and what they have to give. Nevertheless, every child depends on others for the satisfaction of his needs because he cannot look after himself. Although he can scream for help, he relies entirely on those around him to hear his cries, take them seriously, and satisfy the underlying needs rather than, in an excess of hatred, punishing the screams or even preventing them by means of tranquilizers.

The only possible recourse a baby has when his screams are ignored is to repress his distress, which is tantamount to mutilating his soul, for the result is an interference with his ability to feel, to be aware, and to remember.

When this innate ability to feel cannot blossom, a person cannot know later in life what it means, for example, to be defenseless and so is incapable of providing his or her own child with the protection and love in which this child will likewise stand in urgent need. Parents who have never known love, who on coming into the world met with coldness, insensitivity, indifference, and blindness and whose entire childhood and youth were spent in that atmosphere, are unable to bestow love—indeed, how can they, since they have no idea of what love is and can be? Nevertheless, their children will survive. And, like their parents, they too will not remember the torments to which they were once exposed, because those torments, together with the needs related to them, have all been repressed: that is, completely banished from consciousness.

A human being born into a cold, indifferent world will regard his situation as the only possible one. Everything that person later comes to believe, advocate, and deem right is founded on his first formative experiences. Today we have conclusive evidence that this cost of survival not only is much too high for the individual but also turns out to be the greatest threat to all humanity. In the fifties, experiments showed that monkeys separated from their mothers and raised with fabric dummy mothers had no motherly instincts when they later gave birth. And we have statistics showing clear connections between early neglect and abuse and subsequent adult violence. Why is it that hardly any conclusions are being drawn from these statistics? The repression of past torments and its cost render people deaf to the



screams of children and blind to the obvious connections. Thus the factors so clearly revealed by the statistics are ignored to block the eruption of once repressed pain, to prevent the recognition of the truth.

In the heart of snowbound Paris, in the cold January of 1987, a vagrant came upon a plastic bag containing a crying newborn infant. The parents, not wanting to keep him, had left him to his fate. The Arab clochard who, unlike other passers-by, was not in a hurry to reach a warm home (because he had none) saved the infant's life. If he had not listened to the baby's crying and if the baby had not been able to signal his plight, the child would have frozen to death. That baby survived freezing temperatures, and other babies have survived just as drastic physical circumstances: A baby found crying in the ruins of the Mexico City earthquake of 1985, for instance, had lived several days without food.

This great adaptability of the newborn infant to our cruel world, this toughness, has since time immemorial misled people to believe that one can inflict anything on a child with impunity: completely neglect him, hold lighted cigarettes against his skin, shake him, throw him against the wall, yell at him. Until recently no one corrected these notions because their defenselessness injured children could not speak about the torments they were exposed to; their signals went unnoticed. And later, as adults, they had themselves forgotten such experiences, or at least the memory was not vivid enough to cause them to speak of them. But somehow they must have known, their brains had obviously stored the knowledge, for in a sort of compulsive repetition they passed on their traumatic experiences to their children, again oblivious to the consequences.

To demonstrate the hidden sources of violence, I described Adolf Hitler's childhood in my book *For Your Own Good*. My aim was to show how the life of a mass murderer reflects the countless murders to which the child was subjected. I described the phenomenon for the same reasons others might describe a virus: to prevent the further spread of the disease or to describe the phenomenon as the result of ignorance. This description was necessary because many people still have no idea that they are placing dynamite in our world when they abuse their children physically or even "only" psychically. They describe their actions as proper and necessary. Others are of the opinion that such behavior, although not quite proper, is unavoidable since children are sometimes difficult and their parents overtaxed: They "can't help themselves" and lash out. To my mind, both views are mistaken, inhumane, and dangerous.

It is quite simply not true that human beings must continue compulsively to injure their children, to damage them for life and thus destroy our future. When I wrote *The Drama of the Gifted Child*, while under the influence of psychoanalytic thinking, I still believed that such a cycle of abuse was inevitable. Now I know that that is not true. Infectious diseases need not spread if the virus is known. Injuries can heal and need not be passed on, provided they are not ignored. It is perfectly possible to awaken from sleep and, in that waking state, to be open to the messages from our children that can help us never again to destroy life but rather to protect it and allow it to blossom.

Not to take one's own suffering seriously, to make light of it or even to laugh at it, is considered good manners in our culture. This attitude is even called a virtue, and many people (at one time including myself) are proud of their lack of sensitivity toward their own fate and above all toward their own childhood. I have tried to show in my books why this fatal belief that such an attitude is desirable can so stubbornly persist, as well as the trag-

conditions it helps to conceal. People from various countries constantly tell me, with great relief, that after reading *The Drama of the Gifted Child* they felt for the first time in their lives something like empathy for the abused or even battered child they had once been. They say that they have more respect for themselves than formerly and that they have become more precisely aware of their needs and feelings. "You have described my life in that book—how did you know about it?" is something I often hear.

How did I know about it? Today I no longer find it difficult to answer this question. Today I know: It wasn't the books, or my teachers, or my philosophical studies, or my training as a psychoanalyst that provided me with this knowledge. On the contrary. Their mystifying conceptualizations, their turning aside from reality, prevented me far too long from recognizing the truth. Surprisingly, it was only the abused, exploited, fossilized child in me, condemned so long ago to speechlessness, that finally found her feelings and thus her speech and painfully told me her story. It was *this* story that I began to describe in *The Drama of the Gifted Child*, and many, many people recognized their own story in it as if I were holding up a mirror to them.

In my fourth book, *Pictures of a Childhood*, I described in more detail how my encounter with this child came about after she surfaced from her banishment and how I could offer her the protection she needed to feel her pain and be able to talk about it.

The discovery that I had been an abused child, that from the very beginning of my life I had had to adapt to the needs and feelings of my mother, with no chance whatever to feel any of my own, came as a great surprise to me. The discovery of my total helplessness at that time also showed me not only the power of repression that all my life had kept me away from the truth but as well the impotence of psychoanalysis, whose misleading theories further reinforced this repression. For although I had undergone two complete analyses as part of my training, the analysts had been unable to shake my version of the happy childhood I was supposed to have had. It was only my spontaneous painting, which I took up in 1970, that gave me the first unadulterated access to my early reality. In my paintings I came face to face with the terrorism exerted by my mother, at the mercy of which I had lived for so many years. For no one in my environment, not even my kind father, could ever notice or question the child abuse committed under the cloak of childrearing. If but a single person had understood at that time what was going on and had come to my defense, my entire life would have taken a different course. That person could have helped me to recognize the cruelty and not tolerate it for decades as something normal and necessary, at the expense of my own life.

This absence of enlightened witnesses in my life may have contributed to my desire, through my books, to inform potential helpers about the suffering child. By "potential helpers" I mean all those who do not shrink from unequivocally taking the side of the child and protecting him from power abuse on the part of adults. In our child-inimical society such people are still rare, but their number is growing.

My spontaneous painting helped me not only to discover my personal history but also to liberate myself from the mental compulsions and concepts of my upbringing and training, which I recognized as being wrong, misleading, and fatal. The more I learned to follow my impulses in the free play of color and form, the weaker became my ties to aesthetic and other conventions. I was not out to paint beautiful pictures; even painting good pictures was not important to me. I wanted only to help the truth burst forth.

By the time of my therapy I had grasped the fact that I had been abused as a child because my parents had undergone similar experiences in their childhoods and had learned to regard that abuse as having been for their own good. Because they—like the analysts in my training—were not allowed to feel and thus understand what had happened to them in the past, they were unable to recognize the abuse and passed it on to me without a trace of guilty feelings.

I realized there was absolutely nothing I could do to change the history of my parents and teachers that had so blinded them. But I felt that, in spite of all this, I can and must try to demonstrate to young parents, and above all to future parents, the dangers of the misuse of their power, to sensitize them and sharpen their ears to their child's signals.

I can do this if I help the child—hitherto a victim condemned to silence, deprived of rights—to speak out, if I describe his suffering from his perspective and not from that of the adult. For it is from this very child that I received vital messages, answers to questions that had remained unanswered throughout my entire study of philosophy and psychoanalysis yet had refused to cease preoccupying me all my life. Only when the actual reasons for my childhood fears and pains became clear to me in their full extent did I understand what grown men and women must keep at a distance throughout their lives and why, instead of facing up to the truth, they prefer, for instance, to organize a gigantic, atomic self-destruction without the slightest inkling of its absurdity. For me, the absurdity acquired its compelling logic once I was able, thanks to the therapy, to locate the missing piece, the hitherto strictly guarded secret of childhood. For when we no longer need to confront the child's suffering blindly, we suddenly realize that it is up to us adults, depending on how we treat our newborn infants, either to turn them into future monsters or to allow them to grow up into feeling, and hence responsible, human beings.

In this book my aim is to share with others the knowledge I have gained over the last few years. The extent of my success remains to be seen. However, since I am convinced that the knowledge of the child's situation can lead people to a radical and urgently necessary rethinking, I wish to leave nothing untried.

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**A SAINT NICHOLAS  
CELEBRATION**

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THERE ARE MANY EXAMPLES of how the repression of our suffering destroys our empathy for the suffering of others. Let me pick out an ostensibly harmless illustration and examine it in detail.

One day early in December, while walking through the forest, I encountered a celebration. A number of families had come with their children, lighted candles at the edge of the forest and invited Saint Nicholas. Traditionally, this celebration is preceded by the young mother informing Saint Nicholas of the attitudes and behavior of their children and the saint registering the sins in a big book so that he can speak to the children as if he were all-knowing. The mothers hope thereby to gain support for their childrearing methods, and that is what they get. All year long they can allude to his words: “Saint Nicholas sees everything you’ve heard it yourself—make sure that next time he’s satisfied with you!”

How did it proceed, this celebration whose chance witness I was? About ten children, one after the other, were first chided and then praised by Saint Nicholas. Only one little girl was not rebuked, presumably because her mother had not felt the need to inform a strange man in writing, of her child’s transgressions. Saint Nicholas spoke approximately as follows: “Where is little Vera?” A small girl, scarcely two years old, with a trusting, expectant look, came forward and gazed up with candid curiosity into the saint’s face. “I must say, Vera, Saint Nicholas is not at all pleased that you don’t always like to put away your toys by yourself. Mommy is too busy. You’re old enough to understand that when you’ve finished playing you must put away your toys and also that you should share them like a good girl with your little brother and not keep everything for yourself. Let’s hope next year will see an improvement. Saint Nicholas will be looking into your room to see whether you’ve improved. But he has also found out some good things: You help your mother to clear the table after meals, and you can play nicely by yourself and sometimes draw pictures too, without Mommy having to sit beside you. I like that very much, for Mommy is too busy to sit with you all the time; don’t forget she also has your little brother and your daddy to care for, and she needs a Vera who can do things on her own. Well now, Vera, have you also learned a little song for Saint Nicholas?” Vera stood there too scared to utter a sound, so instead her mother sang the song Vera had prepared. At the end the child was given a small package from Saint Nicholas’s sack.

Now it was the next child’s turn: “Well, well, Stefan, you’re still using a pacifier; you’re much too big for that, you know [Stefan was scarcely two and a half]. If you brought along your pacifier you might as well give it to Saint Nicholas right away [the other children laughed]. No, you haven’t got it with you? Then tonight you will put it on your bedside table or give it to your little brother. You don’t need a pacifier anymore, you’re much too big for

that. Saint Nicholas has also noticed that you're not always a good little boy at the table, always interrupting when the grown-ups are talking; but you must let the grown-ups talk because you're still much too small to be constantly interrupting the others."

Little Stefan seemed on the verge of tears; he stood there looking thoroughly scared and shamed in front of all the others, and I tried to make him feel that he wasn't completely without rights. I said to Saint Nicholas: "A minute ago you were telling him he's too big for his pacifier, and now you say he's too small to speak up at table. Stefan himself will know very well when he no longer needs his pacifier." At that point I was interrupted by some of the mothers because my words were highly inappropriate to this sacred ceremony, and one mother put me in my place: "Here it's up to Saint Nicholas to say what Stefan must do!"

So I abandoned my good intentions and restricted myself to taping the scene on a small recorder because I could hardly believe my ears. The celebration continued exactly as it had begun. No one noticed the cruelty, no one saw the stricken faces (although the fathers were constantly taking flash pictures). No one noticed that each of the reprimanded children ended up not being able to remember the words of the little poem or song; that they couldn't even find their voices, could hardly say thank you; that none of the children smiled spontaneously, that they all looked petrified with fear. No one noticed that what was actually being enacted was a vicious power play at the expense of the children.

Thus, for instance, a little boy of scarcely three had to listen to the following: "Well, well, Kaspar, I see that you throw your toys around. That's very dangerous; you might hit your mother on the head, and then she'll have to go to bed and won't be able to look after you anymore, she won't be able to cook, and then you won't get anything to eat. Or you might hit your brother or your daddy and then they'll both have to go to bed, Mommy will be busy with them and have to bring them their meals. Then you won't be able to play anymore, you'll have to help Mommy." And on and on in this vein.

I was by no means sure whether this little boy had understood anything at all, he looked so utterly confused. But if he was able to absorb any of it, it was the dissatisfied tone and the message that he could wreak havoc on his family and as a punishment would have to be deprived of his mother. Whether he really understood what made him such a threat to his family is very doubtful, but his apprehension was abundantly evident. His smiling mother, however, seemed quite unaware of this.

Each of the children wanted to please Saint Nicholas, wanted to hear something nice; but before the children could hear those nice things, they had to listen to the bad things they had done. That was enough to interfere with their openness and attention. The reprimand engendered fear, and they had to repress this fear to retain pleasant memories of the occasion—which was exactly what the parents expected of them. Although the unconscious can never rid itself of the certainty that even the small child is wicked, the child's consciousness was clinging for decades to the beautiful version of that celebration. It follows that the future parents will treat their children in exactly the same way, likewise expecting from them great delight in the lovely ceremony without wondering why the children have to be exposed to such a procedure in the first place.

The greatest virtue attested to by Saint Nicholas in his capacity of the parents' mouthpiece was the children's ability to play by themselves and not need their mothers. In one case he actually said, word for word: "I have something good about you to report: You help your

mommy clear the table, and that's very necessary because Mommy can't do everything alone. But don't forget to put away your toys nicely, Mommy can't help you with that, you have to do that by yourself." This reasoning appeared quite logical to Nicholas: The three-year-old doesn't have to be helped by Mommy, the child must help Mommy. In the same way, helpfulness was one of the children's positive contributions: You don't mind being alone, you can put away your toys nicely, you can share with your little brother, and you can manage without your mother. Cause for rebuke, on the other hand, was talking, standing up for oneself, not being grown up yet, and the natural needs of the child for help, affection, and consolation. To the three-year-old boy who has a baby brother and is obliged to look after him while his mother nurses the baby, the pacifier is often nothing but a consolation in his loneliness, a help in his effort to suppress the feelings of jealousy that he wishes to spare his mother.

At first sight it was amazing that no adult at the Saint Nicholas celebration noticed the children's fear or the threat represented by the saint. The mothers didn't seem in any way unloving; they made an effort to help the children, to sing their songs or recite their poems. They were obviously concerned with providing their children with a lovely ceremony, an experience on which the children were supposed to look back with joy, emotion, and gratitude. Perhaps they did achieve their aim if all the children managed to retain only the pleasant memory in their consciousness. But without a doubt the children must also have had to repress intense feelings: fear of this strange man who seemed to know all their misdeeds like an all-knowing God, impotent rage at having nowhere to hide as a child, and shame over the public rebuke. What seemed worse to me, however, was that the children were left to cope alone with all these feelings; it was quite obvious that the smiling mothers had no understanding of their children's mixed emotions, or they would never have exposed them to such a situation.

Why did these mothers lack understanding? Why did they all, with one exception, put the children at the mercy of a stranger, delegate their authority to him, denounce their children, and allow those children to be publicly reprimanded by a stranger? Why did they allow other children to laugh at theirs? Why did they expose their children to feelings of shame and not protect and identify themselves with the defenseless child?

The most common explanation is that parents are overburdened in bringing up the children. People may think: Since help from Saint Nicholas has become an institution, why should we not avail ourselves of it and combine the useful with a fine old tradition? The fact is, however, that Saint Nicholas, to whom this custom harks back, was a bishop who distributed food to the poor at Christmastime, but he did not combine his ministering with any pedagogic advice, nor did he threaten with the rod. It was only the pedagogic efforts of the parents that turned him into an authority that dispensed both chastisement and praise. The custom was carried so far that, as recently as in postwar Germany, Saint Nicholas sometimes appeared carrying a sack from which a child's leg protruded, leaving the reprimanded children in no doubt at all that they might be stuffed into the sack for their misdeeds.

The knowledge of these practices, among other things, helped me to understand the attitudes of today's parents. Parents who, thirty years ago, exposed their children to such a massive threat undoubtedly did not give them a chance to defend themselves against the

cruelty. The children's feelings simply had to be repressed. When those children have become mothers or fathers and organize a celebration with Saint Nicholas, it is not surprising that their empathy for their sons and daughters should be blocked and that today their fear, repressed thirty years ago, should form a barrier separating them from the emotional life of their children: What I wasn't allowed to see, you mustn't see either; what didn't do me any harm won't do you any harm either.

But is it true that it didn't do them any harm, that every tradition, simply because it is dressed up in bright colors and lights, is something beautiful, good, and harmless? Through such ceremonies and through their own attitudes, the parents induce in their children the frightened certainty of being wicked, a certainty that will remain forever in the unconscious. At the same time they make it impossible for the children to recognize the cruelties being inflicted and thus cause future blindness. If thirty years earlier the mothers had not had to repress similar cruelties, their eyes and ears would today be open to the situation of their children, and we may be sure they would not permit them to be threatened, frightened, shamed, publicly laughed at, and left to cope alone, nor would they need Saint Nicholas's help for a whole year to blackmail their children and thus in turn raise them to become blackmailers. Today they would be making every effort to see that their children have less to repress and can later, as adults, assume more responsibility for their actions toward others.

Some people accuse me of exaggeration when I speak of child abuse in cases of a strict but nevertheless "normal" upbringing that has "nothing unusual" about it. Yet it is precisely the widespread nature of this type of childrearing that makes a warning imperative.

***MURDERING  
FOR THE INNOCENCE  
OF THE PARENTS***

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THE MORE FORTHRIGHT I become in my statements, the more I learn from the reactions of others. Some reactions challenge me to further thought and precision. One such reaction has to do with the innocence of the parents. People's questions run something like this: "But surely you don't mean that parents are guilty when they mistreat their child out of desperation? After all, you've said in your own books that parents are compelled to transfer the unconscious traumas of their childhood to their own children and, as a result, mistreat, neglect, and sexually abuse them."

This kind of reasoning makes me realize that I must now take a step that I did not dare take in my first books. I will proceed from the following very simple, virtually unquestioned perception: Any person who destroys human life renders himself guilty. This perception is in accord with our legislation, on the basis of which people are condemned to years of imprisonment; and no one can contradict my claim that this is a universal ethical principle of our society. Even when I replace "any person" by various occupational designations, the phrase does not lose validity, except perhaps for the occupations of military general and politician, these occupational groups being automatically entitled to send people to the death without having to bear the responsibility. But in times of peace, destruction of human life is not permitted and in fact is a crime that is punished. With one exception: Parents are *permitted* to destroy the lives of their children with impunity. Although this destruction is in most cases repeated in the next generation, it is far from being forbidden: All that is forbidden is to call it a scandal.

For a long time this taboo against condemning parents for their actions toward their children prevented me from clearly seeing and formulating the parents' guilt. But above all, I was unable to question the actions of my own parents because of my lifelong fear of the feeling that reexperiencing my former situation might arouse: my sense of dependence on parents who had no inkling of either their child's needs or their own responsibility. For everything they did to me and failed to do for me, I always found countless explanations, so I could avoid asking: "Why did you do that to me? Why didn't you, Mother, protect me, why did you neglect me, ignore what I said? Why were your versions of me more important than the truth, why did you never tell me you were sorry, confirm my observations? Why did you blame me and punish me for something for which you were clearly the cause?"

These are all questions that as a child I was never able to ask. And later, in my adult life, of course I knew the answers, or thought I did. I told myself: My mother had a hard time as a child, repressing everything and idealizing her parents; she believed in the kind of upbringing



everyone believed in then. She didn't know how I suffered because, as a result of her own history, she couldn't possibly have any sensors for a child's soul and because society bolstered her opinion that a child must be raised as an obedient robot, at the expense of its soul. Can we blame a woman who didn't know any better? Today I would say that we not only can but must blame such a parent so that we can bring to light what happens to children hour by hour and also enable the unhappy mothers to become aware of what was inflicted on them in their childhood. For the fear of blaming our parents reinforces the status quo: The ignorance and the transference of child-inimical attitudes persist. This dangerous vicious circle must be broken. It is precisely the ignorant parents who become guilty—knowledgeable parents do not.

A child who is not injured, not abused, can tell or show his mother when she enrages him or hurts him. This possibility was denied me. At the slightest resistance on my part to my mother's abuse I would have had to fear the direst punishments; and besides having to remain silent, I had to repress my memories and deaden my feelings. Of all of this my mother remained unaware; she could calmly go on applying her methods, confirm their "effectiveness," and so deem them correct and harmless. She never had to fear my reaction. She expected me to forgive her every injustice and never bear her a grudge. I complied as any child in my situation would have done; I had no alternative. My father avoided any confrontation with my mother and failed to see what was going on before his eyes. Although he didn't apply my mother's passionate pedagogic methods—on the rare occasions of his presence, he even showed me some warmth and tenderness—he never stood up for my rights. He never gave me the feeling that I had any rights at all; he never confirmed my observations and admitted my mother's cruelty.

I could never have told my father any of this as a child because I wasn't consciously aware of it. I could little afford to notice that he failed completely to assume his responsibility as a father. All I had was my comforting notion that his warm hand would protect me from every danger in life, that nothing could happen to me as long as I walked by his side with his hand holding mine.

I clung to this notion for decades to avoid having to acknowledge that the only legacy of even this hand was the good memory of a bond with another human being—with my father, who died early—but no more than that. If my father had had the courage to see what was happening to me and to defend me, my whole life would have taken a different course. He would have dared to trust my observations, to protect myself better, and not to allow myself to be damaged by ignorant people as I was by my mother. I would have dared to react to the language of my newborn children with my own instincts, instead of letting myself be intimidated by nurses who "knew better"—if as a child I had had a chance to live my feelings, instead of suppressing them, to express them and stand up for my rights.

Some people react to such perceptions by arguing that each person, each parent, has an individual character and that the child can't blame his parents for their idiosyncrasies and hold them responsible for everything the child has been denied. But the parental behavior I have described has nothing to do with individual character traits. Rather, it is a common attitude toward the child for which the sole explanation is the repression of the parents' own childhood suffering, an attitude that is entirely possible to change. Every human being is at liberty to do away with his own repression and to absorb information: information on the

needs of the small child, his emotional life, and the dangers inherent in the deadening of the child's feelings.

It follows that we can't evade the question of guilt, and I would like to confront the question head on rather than continue to avoid clarifying it. Although such clarification is long overdue, it may not have been possible until now, because only now are there some young people who experienced a more positive childhood and who thus need not be afraid to question the actions of their parents.

In leafing through my early books, I am struck by my constant efforts to avoid blaming parents. Again and again I pointed out that the patient has every right to experience and express his feelings of indignation, anger, and rage against his parents, yet at the same time I always added that I could not reproach the patient's parents because it was not I whom they had raised, manipulated, and hindered. After all, they had done it only to their own child. Today I see the situation differently. It is still not my aim to reproach unknown parents, but I am no longer afraid to entertain, and express, the thought that parents are guilty of crimes against their children, *even though* they act out of an inner compulsion and as an outcome of their tragic past.

I cannot imagine that any murderers or criminals do *not* act out of an inner compulsion. Nevertheless they are guilty when they destroy or mutilate human life. Although the law acknowledges "mitigating circumstances" when it can be proved that the criminal is not responsible for his actions, his motivation and personal plight do not alter the fact that one or more human lives had to be sacrificed for his situation. In contrast to court practice, I believe that every murder committed not directly in self-defense but on innocent surrogate objects is the expression of an inner compulsion, a compulsion to avenge the gross abuse, neglect, and confusion suffered during childhood and to leave the accompanying feelings in a state of repression.

Such compulsions lie behind even the cold calculations of a murderer. This can be illustrated by an example:

In 1984 I was asked for an interview by National Public Radio in Washington. Wendy Blair, the interviewer, read my books in advance, came well prepared, and seemed to have understood everything I had written. Her only problem was with my statement that no one will commit a murder when he can feel what was done to him in his childhood. Yet it was those very people in jail, I said, who were never allowed to experience the history of their childhood because it was so terrifying and because they found no one to help them. The telling of the life story of Jürgen Bartsch, from which I quote in *For Your Own Good*, was possible only because the journalist Paul Moor approached Bartsch, gained his confidence, and reawakened in him the emotions of the injured child. It is true that, in all similar cases, the murderer can recall the facts, even describe them and publish books about the abuse he suffered in his childhood, but he does so without feeling, without inner involvement, as if he were discussing the life of a stranger. Because he cannot feel, he remains under the compulsion to seek out a new victim for his suppressed, latent, and unaltered rage. Even the longest prison sentence does nothing to change this inner dynamic because the compulsion originates in childhood and can easily last sixty years or more if the murderer does not encounter someone who breathes life into his frozen emotions and thus helps at least partially to resolve the long-lasting compulsion.

I told my American interviewer that it was possible to check out my thesis by talking to prison inmates and asking them about their childhood. I was sure that they would all, without exception, report that their fathers were strict and often had to punish them, needless to say with beatings, but only because they had been bad and deserved it. I was equally sure that they would describe their mothers as loving and would cite external circumstances, such as poverty, as reasons for the cruelties they suffered.

Although my interviewer had difficulty accepting the mechanism of denial as an explanation for crime, she told me that statistics confirmed my statements. Those statistics showed that ninety percent of inmates in American prisons had been abused as children. I told her I was convinced that it was not ninety but a full one hundred percent. It was simple that the remaining ten percent were not yet able to admit it: They were not merely repressing their feelings but also denying the facts.

It is possible, of course, that the first abuses were inflicted not by the parents but by the inhuman child-delivery practices in our hospitals. This cause is hard to pinpoint in individual cases, and a baby seriously traumatized during birth or isolated from human contact in an incubator may at a very early stage become a "difficult child" who hardly can get the love he will need to overcome the trauma. But it is absolutely unthinkable that a human being who from the start, is given love, tenderness, closeness, orientation, respect, honesty, and protection by adults should later become a murderer.

"Can the explanation really be so simple?" asked my interviewer. It is very simple, yet most people seem to have a problem with it because access to this simple truth remains blocked by the pain experienced in their own childhood. They prefer to believe in theories that sound very complicated but have the advantage of sparing them pain. As a result, millions of prison inmates are deprived of help. They serve their time senselessly: Nothing for them is changed, and a machinery is kept in motion that ensures, among other things, that the guilt of the prisoners' parents remains undiscovered.

"But what happens," my interviewer wanted to know, "when a person in therapy finds out what his parents have done to him? Isn't it possible that he might want to kill his parents? I mean, that the reawakened feeling is no protection against murder?" No, I told her, it is possible that this person might wish to do it, but he won't, for two reasons. First, through reawakened feelings, he will sense the awakening of life within him and won't want to jeopardize that life. Second, feelings that can be associated with childhood experiences can change over time and make way for new feelings. The anger directed at parents remains unchanged as long as we cannot feel it, because we fear this anger, feel guilty about it, and are afraid of the parents' revenge. Once this fear has been experienced with all its attendant circumstances, and its ramifications have been understood, we are no longer compelled to feel guilty about something done by others. This liberation reduces the anger.

I wasn't quite sure when we parted whether my interviewer had found in my explanation the answers she was looking for, but the completed cassette she sent me showed that she had understood me correctly. Into our conversation she had woven interviews with victims of abuse and one interview, which had been stored for years in the archives of her radio station, with a man who had killed three hundred and sixty women. The journalist who interviewed the murderer had initially been struck by the fact that the man talked about his murders quite unemotionally, but the significance of this absence of emotion became clear to the journalist.

only through the strength of my arguments. In reply to questions, the murderer stated that his mother had been a prostitute and had hit him “whenever [he] didn’t stay out of her way.” On a few occasions she had almost killed him. When he was born she had wanted a girl, not a boy, and until he was seven years old he was forced to wear girl’s clothes and to keep his hair long. When a teacher cut his hair, his mother was so furious she almost beat the teacher to death. What had he felt while committing the murders? Nothing, said the prisoner. He set out from his house each morning with the purpose of killing a woman, as if he were going out to do a day’s work. Could it be that his harsh childhood had something to do with the murders? the journalist wanted to know. “Oh no,” replied the prisoner with total conviction, and for the first time with a trace of emotion. “I cannot blame my mother for what happened to me.”

This man had repressed his past so thoroughly that he had never in his life had a dream. He was fourteen when he first murdered a girl, one his own age. Presumably he wished to destroy the girl whom his mother had wanted instead of him. He murdered out of the simple and understandable despair resulting from his realization that he could never win his mother’s love because he was a boy and not a girl. Had his mother expected something else of him—something attainable—he might have managed to live up to her wishes, but this was a chance that life had not given him. A child will do anything to win his mother’s love because he cannot live without that love. So this child, who received only hatred from his mother who might, he believed, have so much love to offer, sought a way to obtain her love. Perhaps the boy felt compelled to kill the girl merely to gain attention. We know nothing of that. Only he could have told us, provided he had had the possibility of feeling, of weeping, or of dreaming. But he hadn’t. His soul was immured. Murder was its only language.

Who, then, is guilty of the death of those three hundred and sixty women? The adult murderer, of course. But not only he. Once we are prepared to look at the surrounding circumstances we can no longer say that his mother is without guilt. The murderer says that his mother cannot be blamed for what happened to him, and society agrees with him. In my opinion this mother made her son a murderer, even if the son doesn’t know it, even if society and the mother herself don’t know it or don’t want to know it. It is this very lack of awareness that is so dangerous. To prevent future crimes, the danger of this ignorance must be clearly recognized.

This conclusion is so obvious, so banal, that one would hardly expect any serious resistance to the necessary task of enlightenment. Yet that resistance, especially among those parents who are most urgently in need of such enlightenment, is intense. Why? After all, one would think it would be helpful for parents to find out more about how they unconsciously injure their children so they can avoid such behavior in the future. The fact is, though, that the parents most likely to benefit from proper information about the emotional life of the child are those who were not traumatized as children. Unfortunately they form a minority, for since childhood most parents have been in an emotional trap, waiting only for a chance to discharge their unconscious, pent-up anger. They can find no other door out of this trap than their own children, for only those children may, under the guise of childrearing and with impunity, be beaten, scolded, and humiliated just as their parents once were.

The tragedy is that a person caught in a trap and seeing only one door can’t resist using that door. He will remain blind and deaf to any sensible information as long as the door is not

closed once and for all through appropriate legislation. If it were a legal offense to act on one's rage against one's own parents on one's own children, other ways out of the trap would have to be sought, and parents would find them. Certainly, anguish over what has been inflicted on oneself is unavoidable, but it has been shown that such anguish can be healing, not destructive.

If a mother could feel how she is injuring her child, she would be able to discover how she was once injured herself and so could rid herself of her compulsion to repeat the past. Yet education and religion forbid her to feel what was inflicted on her. This refusal to acknowledge the consequences of former harm and injury to the child permeates our society and is reinforced by religious teachings. For thousands of years, all religious institutions have exhorted the faithful to respect their parents. These exhortations would be entirely unnecessary if people grew up in an atmosphere of love and respect, for then they would react naturally to all that they received. But when a person has no reason to respect his parents, he must, it seems, be coerced into doing so. The dangerous effect of such coercion is that any criticism of parents is called a sin and results in strong feelings of guilt. Because religions teach that parents, even if already dead, must be shielded under any circumstance, they do so at the cost of the parents' children. That this teaching is called moral obligation magnifies the scandal.

Future life is sacrificed to secure a forced respect for people who, having grossly misused their power when their children were small and trusting, do not deserve this respect. Nevertheless, almost every culture adheres to the commandment to respect one's parents. Over and over again, Indians, Vietnamese, Chinese, Arabs, and Africans have told me the same stories: "We had to be beaten to learn respect for our parents. Whatever they said we did was always sacred." Some of them add: "We, too, must raise our children to have respect for us; otherwise they'll turn into vandals." Only in rare cases do they realize that by beating their children they are—just like white people—laying dynamite and generating vandalism. A black psychology student in a group in London once told me, "From the very beginning I was physically, psychically, and sexually abused." "How did you come to realize this?" I asked him. "It was your books that made me aware of it, and now I see it all around me. But everyone, blacks as well as whites, tells me that what I see is not true. Our parents claim we have learned cruelty from the whites and deny their own parents' contribution."

"He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him," we read in Proverbs. This so-called wisdom is still so widespread today that we can often hear: A slap given in love does a child no harm. Even Kafka, who had a very fine ear for spurious undertones, is supposed to have said, according to a witness, "Love often has the face of violence." I consider it unlikely that the witness quoted Kafka correctly, but Kafka forced himself, as we all do, to regard cruelty as love.

Can there be such a thing as cruelty out of love? If people weren't accustomed to the biblical injunction from childhood, it would soon strike them as the untruth it is. Cruelty is the opposite of love, and its traumatic effect, far from being reduced, is actually reinforced if it is presented as a sign of love. In a book by the American television personality Phyllis Donahue, published in 1985, the following passage occurs:

So what is a parent to do? Does all this mean you should never spank your kids? You don't want them to grow up stealing

hubcaps; but you also don't want them to grow up undisciplined. Is there any way to punish a child without leaving emotional scars? Are children so sensitive to physical punishment that the slightest slap on the wrist constitutes trauma "abuse" and will ensure that the child grows up either delinquent or hopelessly neurotic? Is it possible to discipline a child physically without suffering from terminal guilt yourself if you do?

Not all behavioral experts agree with [Alice] Miller that punishment, even if administered in the context of a loving relationship, is inevitably destructive. Harvard's Jerome Kagan, for example, thinks children are capable of accepting punishment without developing propensities toward violence as adults. He believes that, except in extreme cases of abuse, parental behavior is not as important as how the child interprets that behavior. "If the child interprets the physical punishment as unfair," rather than as a reflection of the "parent's desire to help him become a productive adult," says Kagan, "then you get delinquency, crime, drugs, and so on."

In fact, Kagan thinks that many scientists exaggerate the role of parents in causing violent behavior in their children. Although he's foursquare against parental beatings and sexual abuse, he has a lot of confidence in the ability of the human animal to survive a traumatic childhood and become a responsible member of society. The typical response of parents who discover their children engaging in some antisocial behavior is guilt. They wonder, "What did I do wrong?" According to Kagan, the answer is probably nothing. He thinks it's simplistic to assume, every time a youngster snatches a purse from an old lady, that his mother didn't love him enough.

Although Donahue's discussion ostensibly proceeds from the question of which parental behavior might exert a traumatizing and lasting effect on the child, and although it would appear to give priority to concern for the child, the second paragraph shows that basically is concerned only with liberating parents from justified guilt feelings. They are assured that their actions pose no danger: The child will suffer no harm if he knows that he is being tormented out of "love" and "for his own good." This kind of reassurance that relies on untruths is based on the statements of "experts" quoted here and, I need hardly say, corresponds to the wishes of all parents who are not prepared to question their own behavior.

But might not there be a different way, other than reassurances? Might not one explain to the parents, in all honesty and frankness, *why* they traumatize their children? Not all of them would stop tormenting their children, but some would. We can be certain, however, that they would *not* stop if they were told, as were their own parents thirty years earlier, that one slap more or less does no harm, provided they love the child. Although this phrase contains a contradiction, it can continue to be handed down because we are used to it. Love and cruelty are mutually exclusive. No one ever slaps a child out of love but rather because in similar situations, when one was defenseless, one was slapped and then compelled to interpret it as a sign of love. This inner confusion prevailed for thirty or forty years and is passed on to one's own child. That's all. To purvey this confusion to the child as truth leads to new confusions that, although examined in detail by experts, are still confusions. If, on the other hand, one can admit one's errors to the child and apologize for a lack of self-control, no confusions are created.

If a mother can make it clear to a child that at that particular moment when she slapped him her love for him deserted her and she was dominated by other feelings that had nothing to do with the child, the child can keep a clear head, feel respected, and not be disoriented in his relationship to his mother. While it is true that love for a child cannot be commanded, each of us is free to decide to refrain from hypocrisy. I don't know whether hypocrisy exists

in the animal world; at least I have never heard of a young animal growing up with the idea that it has to be tormented almost to death so that one day it may become a “decent and disciplined animal.” Kagan’s well-meant but naive trust in the ability of the “human animal to survive a traumatic childhood unscathed ignores completely the potent, destructive, and disastrous nature of the traumas inflicted on the child. Many comparisons between human and animal aggression also ignore the fact that, in light of humans’ destructive atomic power and *readiness* to destroy (as documented by Hitler and Stalin), all the bared animal teeth in the world are bound to appear downright innocuous. Is it possible that Harvard professors don’t know this? Absolutely. If they derived their trust in the harmless nature of childhood traumas from the convictions of their grandmothers, they will learn nothing from fact because this trust clearly remains unshaken throughout their lives. But in view of the great confusions they are causing, in view of the dangerous hypocrisy they support, this trust is anything but harmless, since it is precisely the consequences of those universally ignored childhood traumas that threaten the world today.

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*THE WICKED CHILD*

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*A Favorite Fairy Tale of Scientists*

CONGENITAL BLINDNESS is in most cases an irreversible fate. But the emotional blindness that I am about to describe is not congenital. It is the consequence of a repression of feelings and memories that renders a person unable to see certain sets of circumstances. This blindness is not irreversible, since everyone can later decide to put an end to his repression. At that moment he needs help from other people, and this he can find if he is genuinely determined to confront the truth.

Whether or not the individual seizes this chance depends largely on the nature of his childhood: Did it resemble a totalitarian regime in which the only authority was the state police? Or was the child once given the chance to experience something other than cruelty? That, in the present situation as an adult, he can fall back on this happy experience?

To encounter one's own history not only puts an end to the blindness hitherto displayed toward the child within oneself but also reduces the blockage of thought and feeling. I will return to this point later, but now I offer some examples of how this blindness functions and how it influences human thought.

In the American weekly *Newsday Magazine* a few years ago, the writer Ann Jones devoted several pages to examining the question of what can induce a woman to kill her child. A recent murder of an eight-month-old infant had prompted general speculations. The author starts by describing the situation: A young woman is alone at home with her three-year-old son and eight-month-old daughter. She has just had an unpleasant telephone conversation with her father and now wants to tell her sister about it, but the baby constantly interferes with the conversation and never stops screaming. Unable to hear her sister's voice, the mother becomes more and more desperate and suddenly starts hitting the baby with the receiver until the infant is silent. Thus she becomes a child murderer, although she did not deliberately kill the baby. She merely wanted to get rid of the intolerable screaming.

The author describes the sufferings of this woman in childhood. Her father was an alcoholic and would often run around the apartment brandishing a knife and threatening to kill his two young daughters. He beat them regularly and abused them sexually when they were quite small. Once he dragged the girl from her sleep and hung her by her nightgown from a nail on the wall, leaving her there for three hours. The parents were having a quarrel, and the mother deserted the father at the very time the girl was hanging on the wall.

These examples are enough to show what tortures the present child murderer was herself exposed to as a child. Moreover, in later life she was never allowed to do what she really



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