

“WHAT AM I REALLY AIMING AT?”
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Reading:

In 1933, author F. Scott Fitzgerald ended a letter to his 11-year-old daughter, Scottie, with a list of things to worry about, not worry about, and simply think about.

“Things to worry about:

Worry about courage
Worry about Cleanliness
Worry about efficiency
Worry about horsemanship
Worry about. . .

Things not to worry about:

Don't worry about popular opinion
Don't worry about dolls
Don't worry about the past
Don't worry about the future
Don't worry about growing up
Don't worry about anybody getting ahead of you
Don't worry about triumph
Don't worry about failure unless it comes through your own fault
Don't worry about mosquitoes
Don't worry about flies
Don't worry about insects in general
Don't worry about parents
Don't worry about boys
Don't worry about disappointments
Don't worry about pleasures
Don't worry about satisfactions

Things to think about:

What am I really aiming at?

How good am I really in comparison to my contemporaries in regard to:

- (a) Scholarship
- (b) Do I really understand about people and am I able to get along with them?
- (c) Am I trying to make my body a useful instrument or am I neglecting it?

With dearest love,
Daddy”

Sermon: “What am I really aiming at?”

The Good Men Project is a social media company that gives men a chance to share, reflect on and learn about the defining moments of their lives. When its founder set out to collect these stories, he found that for each man he talked to, there was a moment when every single one at some point “woke up, looked in the mirror and said ‘I thought I knew what it meant to be a man. I thought I knew what it meant to be good. And I realize that I don’t know.’”

And so this project, with its tag line “the conversation no one else is having,” was born. It’s an opportunity to lift up how men’s roles are changing in modern life and to emphasize how important it is to think deeply and clearly about who they want to be, when it comes to parenting, career choice, homophobia, dating, racism and other issues of the day. The Good Men Project is about, to use the wording of our theme this month, integrity.

It is their blog that introduced me to one of my favorite reflections on integrity, which is our reading today. As Dee explained, it’s a letter from F. Scott Fitzgerald to his daughter, Frances Scott Fitzgerald who, when she grew up, became a well-regarded journalist and important mover and shaker in the Democratic Party. Her dad, whose full name was Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald, authored *The Great Gatsby* (among other works). He is widely regarded as one of the greatest US writers of the 20th century and, while most accounts of his personal life paint a picture of a tragically dysfunctional and extremely self-centered man, it’s fun to glimpse the whimsy of his private writings.

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In addition to this being a thoughtful and quirky list, I like that Fitzgerald wanted his kid to grow up knowing certain things. Dee talks about this too in her *Call to Gather*, tackling one of the broader questions inspired by our theme of integrity: how do we help our little ones grow up with integrity, supported by the best of what we ourselves have learned? A rich question for anyone with children.

Yet parenting is not always generative in a biological sense. Maybe because I do not have children of my own, I am always on the lookout for examples of the diversity of ways that integrity is transmitted. There are many kinds of moments when the lessons of life can be passed from peer to peer, uncle to grandpa, neighbor lady to local school children.

Marrying into an African family has taught me a lot about collective parenting, the idea that in an extended family or other kind of tight knit community, all adults and older children assume responsibility for whichever young ones happen to be around. Is there a small child in front of you? Make sure they've been to the bathroom, pay for their ice cream cone, help them up the ladder so they can go down the slide.

I was raised in a white American family, so the cultural networks I grew up in and around are somewhat different. We love our children no more or less than those of other races and ethnicities, and, of course, it's only possible to speak in generalizations about something so broad as how whole peoples relate to their young ones. That said, human variety is interesting to consider!

I would describe my culture of origin's approach to parenting and child-rearing as more individually oriented. I have learned, for example, that in this context it is often better to err on the side of respecting specific nuclear family rules and customs. So if one is connected to a kid then you might do well to ask the actual literal parents, "Would you mind if I offered him a cookie?" or "Does she want to get on the merry-go-round too?"

There is no right or wrong answer here. It's clear that there are many good and fine ways to bring up children but a glance at the variety of ways that parenting can happen helped me expand my definition of parenthood. It made me able to see parenting as metaphorical. At some level, we are all always bringing ourselves up. Sometimes witnessing the growth process of another can illumine how it is that we are also experiencing the changes and lessons of life.

My mother, with whom I often exchange poetry over email, recently sent me a fantastic poem about all of this. The reason I like it is that while at first it seems to be a story about the author's daughter, if you let it sink in then you realize that it's just as much about the mom herself. It's called "To a Daughter Leaving Home" and it is written by the American Jewish poet Linda Pastan, who gave up writing to concentrate on raising her family until, ten years later, her husband urged her to return to poetry. She is especially interested in

the anxieties that exist under the surface of everyday life and expresses them really well. Here's the one of hers that caught my mother's fancy:

When I taught you
at eight to ride
a bicycle, loping along
beside you
as you wobbled away
on two round wheels,
my own mouth rounding
in surprise when you pulled
ahead down the curved
path of the park,
I kept waiting
for the thud
of your crash as I
sprinted to catch up,
while you grew
smaller, more breakable
with distance,
pumping, pumping
for your life, screaming
with laughter,
the hair flapping
behind you like a
handkerchief waving
goodbye.

It reminds me of the time I shared with my own mother a big milestone I was reaching and she laughed, clapped, congratulated me...but also sighed, saying, "Oh my, I guess we're growing up." Watching me grow up made her aware that even as an adult, she too was still always growing up; aging, changing, learning.

Encountering this poem, I imagined that the mom from whose perspective it was written had once ridden a bicycle away from her own mom. It caused me to read Fitzgerald's letter to his little girl in this same light; the letter to the daughter he called Scotty is actually more of a letter from the author back to the author himself. After all, what we say to others is actually one way we communicate to ourselves.

That's not everything, of course. Talk, as they say, is cheap. Is the greatest measure of integrity what we say to people? Probably not. In recognition of the limits of simple speech, and in promotion of the importance of how we actually behave, the Unitarian Universalists often borrow from Protestant traditions the idea of valuing "deeds over creeds." I, however, think that integrity is about making sure there is a deep and clear relationship between our actions and our beliefs.

Otherwise we're just armchair psychologists, making the easy mistake of thinking that we can give sound advice without ourselves having any real familiarity about the other person's position. I've found personally that actually having lived experience of a situation can really change the terrain... and lessen my tendency to pass quick judgment. I'm not proud to admit that I've been guilty of this when it comes to observing how other people parent. I'm not the only one who does this, but I've sometimes thought from afar that I could handle challenges more skillfully than parents whose lives I only see in snapshot.

When I was in high school, a friend of mine who was already parenting a toddler—and pretty well, I might add—confided in me that her son's habit of squawking uncontrollable anytime she did errands on the bus was causing her a lot of frustration. Even though I was interested and full of sympathy, I remember thinking vaguely that she should have a snack handy or re-arrange naptime or something. The point was to fix the problem... how hard could that be, really? Helpful advice, right?

Fast forward to a few years ago when my toddler niece came to live with me. Getting to spend a couple years in that kind of close contact with her is, hands down, one of the highlights of my life. Yet I found that bringing up a kid (day in and day out) is, well, challenging in a way that I just didn't get when I was in high school without a child at home.

Here's the best (by which I mean worst) example of me achieving total melt down: my partner Amy had our niece signed up to play soccer in one of those little kid leagues where the grownups have to stand on the sidelines to help remind the kids which way they're supposed to be running and then everyone gets orange slices. Not quite Olympic training standards but very cute.

So, we wake up one Saturday morning. I pour my coffee and sit down to start the next day's sermon... and realize that we have a soccer game. It's starting in 15 minutes. We jump into the car without breakfast, my mother-in-law wrestling on the cleats and shin guards while en route. Somehow I get elected to hop out of the barely-stopped car with my niece and dash to join the team while Amy and her mom find parking.

Halfway across a huge grassy expanse, we get caught in a swamp—that's life in Florida for you—and I lose my flip-flop in the muck. I also lose my mind a little, because I'm tired and stressed, and start shrieking, "My flip flop! Oh my god, my flip flop!" My niece gets upset that I'm upset and takes matters into her own tiny hands by practically diving headfirst into the bog to try to find my flip.

Gripped by a wholly unrealistic terror that she is going to get sucked into quicksand and I will be forced to explain to my partner and mother-in-law that I have lost her forever, I burst into tears and yell at her until a random mom approaches us. The lady reaches for my niece's arm and extracts her, filthy and without my flip, and says very kindly to me, "I'll take her over to the field while you, um, have a moment to yourself." Not my finest hour.

I don't mean to make light of how scary it can be for a child to be hollered at, and it's important to me that you all know that after I calmed down I apologized directly to her and, being the big hearted sweetie that she is, she forgave me. I'm still embarrassed I lost my cool. And I will never live it down in my family, let me tell you. Even still, my niece sometimes says with a reminiscent smile, "Remember how we never found your flip?" Yes, I do. And I also remember when I thought that possessing logic was all that was necessary to dispense parenting know-how.

I can't help but compare my attitude now (which is that at least I had the integrity to say I was sorry and try to learn from the situation) to my high school self who thought I knew so much about child-rearing because I babysat. The whole incident made me a lot less likely to offer advice about situations with which I have not had direct and sustained experienced.

Poking around on the Good Men Project website, where I first read Fitzgerald's letter to his daughter, got me thinking. Maybe another fun idea would be called the Good Advice Project. Its rule of thumb would be that advice may only be offered if the giver has already or could realistically imagine incorporating their advice into their own life. Otherwise, it's too short on integrity to be helpful.

For me, the important questions of integrity—like how to embody it ourselves and how to encourage it in others—boil down to the level of care and fidelity we bring to them. F. Scott Fitzgerald, imperfect as he was, modeled this practice well when he wrote to his kid at camp because he took the time to discern which things were worth thinking about and to ask himself: "What am I really aiming at?"

Closing Words:

Elsewhere in the letter Fitzgerald wrote to Scotty while she was at summer camp, right after her mother had died and not long before her father also died, he says to her: "I am glad you are happy—but I never believe much in happiness. I never believe in misery either. Those are things you see on the stage or the screen or the printed page, they never really happen to you in life."

I would say that life can and does contain both happiness and misery—and with it all comes many opportunities to cultivate integrity.

Go with attention to your own integrity, and go in peace.

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