

Parenting and Panic

Agnes Callard

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Parenting starts out lonely, because newborn babies do not know that you exist. No one in my social circle—grad students in their twenties—had children, so I joined a new moms group at my local hospital. You know the drill: sit in a circle, tell birth stories, swap sleep advice, etc. I quit the group after a few sessions, because everyone there was boring. So I started my own group, via Craigslist. But everyone there was boring, too. So I started another one. Were all the mothers in Berkeley boring? It was around the time I abandoned my third or fourth new moms group that I began to consider the possibility that I might be the problem.

The women in these groups had bent over backwards to be welcoming. They validated my childbirth choices; they praised my babywearing skillz; they made touching and concerted efforts to embrace my parenting idiosyncrasies. Let me give just one example. It was inevitable, in that world, that I would be asked why I was feeding my baby formula. My answer was not that I was unable to breastfeed, or that I was on some necessary medication that would taint the breast milk, but simply that breastfeeding didn't appeal to me: "And there's this other food available, so..." If you know something about the earth-mother babyculture of Berkeley in the early 2000s, you know that that should not have been an acceptable answer. And yet they accepted it, and me. (One woman praised me for having the "courage" to bottle feed in public, confessing she did not dare do the same!)

In every way they could, they were trying to tell me, "You are a good mother." But that was not what I wanted to hear. While they were comparing and affirming baby-care choices, my eye was on the babies, and I couldn't help but notice that one of them was chubbier, calmer and more beautiful than the others. My baby alone had the brilliant promise of profound intelligence shining out of his eyes. He was much better than any of the others. Why wasn't anyone remarking on this?



It is hard to speak about parenting without at the same time seeking validation as a parent. Every story about parenting has to do double duty as a story about how *I am such a good parent*. Even my confessions of bad parenting are carefully calculated to make you think *I am actually a great parent*. "Don't be so hard on yourself!"

In the second book of Karl Ove Knausgaard's *My Struggle*, he recounts an exhausting and humiliating first pediatric appointment. The trip starts out well, and their daughter is pronounced healthy and fine, but on their way home the baby starts wailing uncontrollably and the cheerful outing unravels. Nothing major happens, it's just a chain of the minor miseries that constitute so much of parenting: neither parent knows how to calm the baby. Knausgaard is ashamed of his inability to put the car seat in the taxi. He bickers with his wife. They arrive home drenched in sweat. Reading this tale is like coming out into the open air of truth: this is what parenting is like! But it gets even better. Knausgaard recounts overhearing his wife describe the visit to her mother:

Later that day I heard Linda telling her mother about the medical checkup. Not a word about all the screaming or the panic we had felt, no, what she told her was that Vanja smiled when she was on the table being examined. How happy and proud Linda was! Vanja had smiled, she was in perfect health, and the low sunlight outside, seemingly elevated by the snow-covered surfaces made everything in the room soft and shiny, even Vanja, as she lay naked on the blanket kicking her legs.

What happened afterwards was passed over in silence.

Passing over the panic in silence: now *that* is what parenting is like. Parenting has a lie built right into its name: we should've called it childing, because that's who is in charge. For about a decade I had the status, in my group of friends, as the sleep whisperer: both of my first two children slept on their own, without issues, from day one. Then my third arrived. That "baby" is now six, and the most recent time he came to my bed to sleep was... last night. It turns out that we had all mislocated the source of the sleep talent.

Notice how much we emphasize precisely those aspects of parenting that are farthest from the child's direct control, such as pregnancy and baby care, protection from dangerous predators and school choice. More extracurriculars, more homework, more safety, more of the parent seeing it as their job to govern and direct and above all occupy the child's attention: what we have these days is more and more parenting. I hear tell of a glorious past in which parents simply let their children roam free, but I wonder: How did they deal with the panic?

You won't find the answer in novels. Respectable literature avoids the topic of parenting. Even the exceptions—Knausgaard, Ferrante—focus more on the parent's experience of the child than on child-raising proper. Is that because they know that the real action lies elsewhere, in the child-rising? The first novel in *My Struggle* sings with truths about Knausgaard's father's parenting that no father would ever tell about himself. Imagine how boring it would have been if Ferrante had chosen to describe Lila and Elena's childhood from the parents' point of view instead of the children's.

When you're a parent, there's a story you are deeply invested in, it's not your story and you're not going to get to know how it turns out—at least, not unless you're very unlucky. Pretending one controls the story with one's "parenting choices" is one coping strategy; convincing oneself that the story is already written in the genetic stars is another. The truth is, the story is not yet written, you care tremendously how it goes and you don't get to write it. Which is all to say, the panic is justified.



There is a genre of novels about child-rising—we call it "The Bildungsroman." The artistry and brilliance of novels such as Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* or David Mitchell's *Black Swan Green*—to pick two of my favorites—lie in their ability to bring to light the sheer effort of thought and will required for a human being to rise.

When my son was four, he was obsessed with an armored polar bear called “Iorek Byrnison,” a character from the novel *The Golden Compass*. He insisted on being called Iorek Byrnison, and acted the part 24/7. The night before Halloween, I decided to surprise him with a Iorek Byrnison costume: I sewed cut-up white towels onto some of his clothes for the fur, and attached some foam armor we had lying around to the outside of the towels. I laid it on the chair next to his bed so he would see it first thing in the morning.

Before I tell you what happened next, I want to give you some background on what was going on at the time: I was finishing up my PhD and applying for jobs, so it was a period of high anxiety; I was temporarily single-parenting, because my son’s father had a job on the other side of the country; finally, I was experiencing unremitting nausea from my second pregnancy. So I was pretty pleased with myself for staying up till the wee hours hand-sewing this costume. That was some A-plus parenting, right?

I bounded into his room when he woke up, to be there for the reveal.

“What’s that?”

“It’s a Iorek Byrnison costume I made you.”

“But I am Iorek Byrnison.”

“Yes, but it’s Halloween, you can wear this to school, and later for trick-or-treating. Then everyone will know you’re Iorek Byrnison.”

“I am Iorek Byrnison. If I wore *that* I would be two bears.”

When he said “that” he looked over at the costume with such disgust, as though it were the disemboweled corpse of a polar bear. We continued to argue, but he won: he wouldn’t even try the costume on. He absolutely refused to let my parenting interfere with his childing.

Parenting is a hostage situation: you’re in the car, but your child is the one driving it—and he doesn’t know how to drive. You can’t get out, because you decided to love him before you knew who he was—before he even was anyone. Your life split at that point into multiple tracks, and one of them is not under your control. The worst part is: you can’t even cover your eyes. You have to keep them open, to try to talk him through it. He needs your help, at least for now. One day, of course, he will stop noticing you sitting there.



The problem with all those mothers groups wasn’t the mothers. It was the fact that what I really longed for was a window onto the child’s group: my full-grown son sitting in a circle with the grown children of the other mothers, discussing their childhoods—and what happened next, how their lives went, what they ended up achieving, what mattered most to them in life. They could tell our death stories. It would be riveting.

The Ted K Archive

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