Cappelen Damm Agency *Spring 2024*

Before they disappear

Are our children small wonders and mysteries or just stepping stones to adulthood? How have we perceived and treated children throughout history? And how can we get closer to our own children before they grow up?

Birger Emanuelsen investigates and explores our perceptions of children. Through a wealth of sources, he writes about the value and importance of children, how we decide how to treat them, and what it really means to be a parent.

Before they dieappear is a well-informed documentary novel about the responsibility parents have to prepare their children for the world, and how they can approach doing this. But it is also an up close and personal tale about one of the most fundamental questions of life: What is a child?

Child-rearing for connoisseurs
«This is for those of you who can't stand another banal self-help book.»
VÅRT LAND

Moving book
«Birger Emanuelsen has written a poetic and scholarly book about childhood.»
MORGENBLADET

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b. 1982

Birger Emanuelsen (b. 1982) made his author debut in 2012, and has received several awards for his novels. He's from Southern Norway, where he lives with his wife and three kids. Before they disappear is his first non-fiction book.

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Excerpt from the foreword, p. 9

This is, in short, a book about children and childhood – about being a child and about giving birth to, having, and raising children. It is divided into four main sections. The first, and most brutal, is about the history of the child: How previous generations viewed and treated children, how they sometimes behaved with a harshness that feels alien, but also how children filled our forefathers and foremothers with the strongest, most familiar emotions. The past is perhaps another country, but when we read old texts, we see that it is inhabited by individuals whose thoughts resemble our own.

If you make it through the first part, part two awaits, where I explore the different ways we understand a child's value – whether we are referring to a child's cultural or financial value, their potential value, here and now, or children as investments in our common future. I write about children's significance as symbols of what we believe we are worth, about their inherent value, and finally, about children deemed to be without value.

In part three, I explore how, through child-rearing, we have sought to create the children we want or need through different forms of power and control. I write about some of the errors we have made historically, but also about the cowardice with which we protect our own, current choices.

Finally, I try to explore in depth what childhood actually is. I write about The kingdom of childhood, its intrinsic value and what threatens it, about why I believe we must make an even greater attempt to safeguard children's freedom and how I constantly fail in my efforts to do so.

Before They Disappear

An attempt to understand what children are

By Birger Emanuelsen

English translation by Diane Oatley

Translation Grant Support received from NORLA

We pour water upon the child and name it. Not to fix it in our hearts but in our clutches.

- Cormac McCarthy *The Passenger*

Foreword

While working on a novel I wrote a few years ago, I had a number of conversations and interviews with parents. These conversations led me to books about child-rearing, for me a previously unknown chapter in the history of literature. It was in the course of this work that quite by chance I stumbled across a modest publication by Nikolai Wergeland. The title of the book was *Hendricopoedie*, with the subtitle *A pocket handbook for parents*, and it offered forty-three recommendations for mothers and fathers on how to best raise their children – not for the nursery or the sofa, as Wergeland writes, but for the world.

The book was published in 1808, but most of the parenting tips could have been found in the more modern-day self-help books that I have read. For example, Henrik Wergeland's father thought that the child should be permitted to discover the world in his or her own way. Parents are otherwise advised to be careful about exposing infants to loud noises, powerful sense impressions and odors during their early years. The child should be allowed to lie unswaddled on a blanket and when the child cries, simply let her cry. It will not harm her.

But then, towards the end of the book, comes tip number 39: "Allow the child to experience suffering and to witness the suffering of others." This piece of advice is not proposing sadism or child abuse, but is rather about a child's need to develop empathy and compassion for others. Wergeland's book makes the argument that a child should experience every aspect of being human.

When I read this tip, it did not strike me as being any less true or valid than the others. At the same time, there was something unheard of, or perhaps even impossible about it. I had difficulties imagining myself proposing it at a PTA meeting: "Play groups are all well and good, but shouldn't we also give the children a chance to suffer a bit more?" Instead, I used this tip as a type of guideline for the narrator and main character of the novel I was working on, a father who wanted his son to develop a genuine and practical form of empathy. In the future that lay ahead of the main character, the same future I myself feared, there would be a need for people who did not think solely of themselves, people who also had the willingness and ability to help others, even if this meant putting themselves in danger.

During the period following publication of the novel, entitled *I Will Protect You*, I received many questions about the book, both in public forums and privately. Many readers challenged me to explain what I actually meant. Is Norwegian child-rearing too lenient? Should we be harder on our children? Toughen them up more? What was I really saying when I wrote that we must prepare our children for a world that might be more brutal? And what did it mean, actually, the idea that we should let our children suffer?

At first, the urge to discuss these questions came as a surprise. With time, I came to understand that amid the abundance of self-help books, podcasts and expert advice columns, there were few that discussed the connection that so interested Nikolai Wergeland: how the work of creating a better society starts with the birth of a new human being.

This was how the work on this book began. Initially I wanted to write a debate book about the need for another type of child-rearing, a book that took Nicolai Wergeland's insights seriously, but also applied them within the context of our times. In the midst of this work, which took place while Norway was in lockdown due to the pandemic and during the outbreak of war in Europe, it occurred to me that I lacked the most basic understanding of my subject matter. I realized that I didn't know what a child was.

An odd insight, perhaps, given how the question can seem both overwhelming and superfluous at the same time. Eventually, as I read historical, scientific and literary depictions of children and childhood, I developed a sneaking suspicion that I was absolutely not the only one without a good answer. And that's how I ended up writing the book you are now reading.

This is, in short, a book about children and childhood – about being a child and about giving birth to, having, and raising children. It is divided into four main sections. The first, and most brutal, is about *the history of the child*: How previous generations viewed and treated children, how they sometimes behaved with a harshness that feels alien, but also how children filled our forefathers and foremothers with the strongest, most familiar emotions. The past is perhaps another country, but when we read old texts, we see that it is inhabited by individuals whose thoughts resemble our own.

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There is no doubt that the examples and attitudes found in this book are shaped by who I am and I put no stock in the idea that I will manage to "offset" the bias of my own background, environment, or class. By following my curiosity's lead, I wish to share experiences and perspectives as openly, honestly and concretely as I am able to do. Reading and writing are the methods I use to expand my understanding of the parent-child relationship, and perhaps in the process find new ways to improve that relationship that can be helpful for others as well.

Along the way, I draw support from the insights of others and my own experiences. In this sense, my objective is also twofold: on the one hand, I hope this book can contribute to a richer conversation about what a child is. Hopefully, it will also lead to a greater appreciation of their uniqueness and fundamental dignity. On the other hand, the aim of the book is pretty straightforward and clearly personal. I want quite simply to become better acquainted with my own three children, before they disappear.

For all I know, you have accepted the most common approach. A child is a child and as long as you receive a bit of advice and a few tips now and then on the best way to raise one, that is more than enough. If this is the case, you risk being disappointed by the following chapters. But perhaps you have also been searching for this book. Perhaps you have, like me, wondered what a child actually is. And what you, as a father or mother, can do to protect that child, while at the same time preparing him or her for our adult world. If so, then I wish you welcome. This book has been written for you.

I hope you enjoy the book and wish you good luck.

Introduction

What is a child?

I had been a father for quite some time before I realized that I didn't know what a child was. We have three children at home and in the evening, I lie down beside them and read a bedtime story. Afterwards I sing to them, kiss their soft cheeks or hard foreheads, and when they fall asleep, I stay put for a while, playing a game of chess on my phone, as a reward for having once again succeeded in putting them to bed.

Our three children sleep together. They each have their own room, rooms that we have outfitted with toy chests and soft carpets, posters and pictures on the walls, cupboards and lamps, and shelves where they can keep books and medals and small objects they find or receive as gifts, a shark's tooth, a secret box. But even though they each have their own fully furnished bedroom, in the evenings they seek one another out. The four-year-old, the seven-year-old, and the nine-year-old[1] want to go to bed at the same time and snuggle with one another. They want to read together, sing together, sleep and awaken together and since this is practical and it moves us to see how they take care of each other, we let them. It is something they want, and as adults, we can see its value. For exactly the latter reason, and that reason alone, it is possible for them to do it. Even this simple, heartfelt wish to lie in bed close to one another, to spend the whole night together, cannot be fulfilled without our permission.

Had we made up our minds, my wife and I, that it was not a good idea for them to sleep together, they would have been obliged to split up, to retreat into their separate bedrooms, and we would have sung and read to them there as well, stood in the doorway and said good night and what choice would they have had but to accept this arrangement. Though it is absolutely not a given that we would have read and sung to them, because shouldn't the eldest be able to read for himself and what does a four-year-old want with storybooks and fairy-tales, his comprehension is limited, when he grows up his fragile memory will not have retained much of it. Besides, there's no point in firing up the imagination right before bedtime. Be that as it may, this is what we do, we allow them to sleep together and they get to choose the book, which is why I read a story about a green frog who is afraid of the dark, the way my eldest son is, and even though the story is written for children a bit younger than him, I know that he is lying there listening to every single word, ready to latch onto anything that might tell him something about his own fear.

[1] By the time this book is published, their ages will be six, nine and eleven. (Yes indeed, it's true what all these old people say: Appreciate every minute. The days race by like wild horses over the hilltop.)

He knows that I was also afraid of the dark as a child, to the point that it almost made me ill, and for many years this fear was one of my most defining characteristics. Because of it I would lie awake at night for hours, and with the light on, I would read Donald Duck comic books that my mother had put in yellow folders, and I would often wake up with an aching head planted smack in the middle of the folder and a red and white indentation from the staple on my forehead. He knows that since I was afraid as a child and felt so inhibited by it, that I want something else for him. I want to grant him another type of freedom, a freedom that differs from my own experience, so he can go on class trips and sleepovers, without being afraid of the dark and the night.

Of course, he doesn't put it like this. He wouldn't have said that I want "to grant him another type of freedom." But it wouldn't surprise me to learn that he feels I am seeking restitution for myself through him. At the very least, he notices that this one desire, this good intention, has led me to force him to do things he doesn't really want to do. Everyday things. If he has forgotten his sweater up in his room, he must walk up the stairs alone and retrieve it, even if his body is trembling with aversion and fear. He must dare to walk home alone, to lie in bed with the door shut, he must learn to be in the darkness and his fear, so it won't have the chance to rule over him in the way it ruled over me.

And what do I want for my daughter? I want her to feel loved, because I know that she lies in bed thinking that I hold her little brother more often than I hold her. Her little brother lies on a mattress beside the bed the two eldest share and every evening he asks me to take off my shirt, so he can lie against my bare chest. When I glance up in the dimly lit room and see my daughter's head just above the edge of the bed, I can tell that she is lying there watching us, because she would have liked this, to lie close to me. And I know that my own sister felt this way, and sometimes still feels it, that being the middle child, she more frequently felt left out. Our parents weren't as strict with her as they were with my eldest sister, but neither was she showered with the effusive, unconditional love that I received. In my daughter's eyes, I can see this history also repeating itself.

On an evening sometime in the future, perhaps we will be sitting around a table, at the cottage, or somewhere else, in a newly purchased apartment, perhaps, and then this memory will surface in her: Why didn't you ever hold me, Daddy, she asks – no, that's too direct, she wouldn't dare put it like that, something about the question sounds unreasonable. As an adult she can't sit there blaming me for this, or at least, that's what she thinks, because she has been more accustomed to managing on her own, taking responsibility for her feelings, and that independence has served her well, although it has come at a price and demanded sacrifice. I can see it in her eyes up there, above the edge of the bed, with her face half-hidden beneath the duvet, like a turtle, which is what her big brother thought she looked like as a baby. Her eyelids flutter, she scooches herself up a bit, rests her head on the pillow and stares at the ceiling, until her eyes slide shut again and she falls asleep.

And the youngest, he has stopped wriggling. Every night he wriggles, sticking his arms and legs between my own, trying to get as close to me as he can, and I have surrendered to this wish of his, have offered up my entire adult body, so he can warm himself, draw closer, feel safe. And it is actually strange that he is the one – the unruliest of the three, the most independent, the one who can wander off without a thought for our whereabouts – who is lying here and clinging to me. He is only four years old, but so fearless and strong that I sometimes wonder whether we have, without realizing it, parented him differently.

One of the most powerful memories I have of my youngest is of him standing in front of his cubicle at daycare. He was a year and a half old and had brought an extra hat that he wanted to put away, but the cubicle was too far above his head for him to reach, so he had to throw the hat towards it. A task he struggled with. He threw it once, without success, and threw it again, with the same result. Since I wasn't in a hurry that day, I found a seat on a tiny nearby chair and sat there watching him. Eventually one of the daycare teachers saw what was happening and she was neither in a hurry on this day (because I'd been late and the other children had gone home). Instead of helping him, or scolding me about the lateness of the hour, she waited beside me, watching. It is of course easy to resort to exaggeration here, but I still feel I'm being truthful when I say that he threw his hat towards the cubicle a good hundred times before he finally managed it.

Throughout this entire episode, the daycare teacher and I sat watching, without saying a word, without helping. We simply observed a character trait in my little boy for which neither she nor I could claim responsibility or take credit: his sheer determination, his tenacity, an inherent ability to persevere. The sense of approval I felt about his actions, or the pride and joy I felt in watching how he struggled but did not give up – did I have any part in this, really? Was there something in my parenting methods that could lay claim to this? Something in my genetic make-up or about my own personality that could explain what was taking place in front of me?

So, what is a child? One author who has addressed this subject is the Irish playwright George Bernhard Shaw. In his essay collection *Treatise on Parents and Children* from 1910, he poses the question that is the starting point for this book. In the section titled "What is a child?" he writes "An experiment. A fresh attempt to produce the just man made perfect: that is, to make humanity divine."

The aspiration Shaw writes about here offers one of the answers in which I often seek refuge: being a parent is, in one way or another, about creating the perfect human being, or at the very least, the perfect childhood. On the surface, this aspiration is full of promise, not least because it touches upon both the enormity and the possibilities of a new life. Yet the answer also hides many sins. The idea of a child as incomplete, as an "experiment" is the same idea that allows us to behave in the most ruthless manner when interacting with children. Side by side with the perception of the child as something divine that arrives in our world as if out of a hallowed mist, lies an excuse

for treating children as we see fit. We use the child as a laboratory for our own ideas and interests. As a battlefield for our own conflicts and crises. Because the child is not solely a child. Children are also our perceptions about the future – and our reckoning with the past.

There are different ways of understanding what a child is and I will explore a number of these in this book. At the same time, there are obviously different ways of being a parent. The American anthropologist David Lancy uses the expression *WEIRD parents* to describe parents like me. I am well educated, a member of a relatively secure middle class, and live a family life in a Western, industrialized, rich and democratic society.[2]

The variations within such a broadly defined group are of course considerable, but it is still possible to make some general observations about how "we" are as parents:

• We view children as special and unique individuals who need a lot of attention, love, and stimulation.
• We believe it is necessary to play with children and that play is important for a child's development and learning.
• We play an active role in the teaching of our children and in helping them to learn different skills, and are generous with our praise and rewards.
• We are interested in the future success of our children and do our best to ensure that they will have the best conditions to thrive in the life that awaits them.

The advantages of such an approach are that we strive to get to know our children, to give them a secure and loving childhood, and to support them in the pursuit of their interests and talents. An equally obvious disadvantage is that we may end up putting too much pressure on our children and on ourselves as parents, and that by "protecting them" we may overlook some of the natural and social ways that children learn to be human beings. I don't know for sure what the correct balance is. Finding that balance is something I struggle with daily. It is therefore precisely there, in the relationship between children and adults that I begin.

[2] Anthropologist David Lancy uses the term «WEIRD parents» in reference to parents who are members of Western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic (WEIRD) societies. What distinguishes these parents from other parents in the world is their extreme involvement in their children's lives and how they invest a great deal of time and resources in raising, teaching and playing with them. Lancy claims that this form of parenting is neither natural nor necessary and that it can even have negative consequences for both children and parents. Lancy has spoken and written widely about this subject, including in the book *Raising Children. Surprising Insights from Other Cultures* (2017).

The natural attachment

For a period of time during his childhood our eldest son practiced martial arts. He trained with a couple of boys from his class and one afternoon when I was bringing him and his friends to training, we drove down a gravel road that crossed a low-lying field by the lake. The road cut through the landscape and apparently also through the natural route for a flock of Canadian geese living in the area. The birds grazed on one side of the road and inhabited the shallows along the shore on the other.

It was mid-May and the weather was warm. We drove slowly with the windows open. The adult birds had baby goslings and just before our big car appeared on the scene, the little family had evidently decided that it was time for a swim. For that reason, two large geese suddenly stepped into view on the gravel in front of us and almost immediately we spotted two tiny replicas waddling beside them as well. We rolled slowly towards the birds, and although I stopped the car a good distance away, it was clear that the geese had noticed us. And as we sat there in the warm interior of the car observing them, both parents spread out their wings and took position on either side of their children. They stood still like this for a moment, with their wings out to protect their young, before continuing across the gravel road in a slow, sideways movement.

"Look Dad, they are looking after their children," I heard from the passenger seat.

My son was leaning towards the dashboard and staring through the windshield. It was obvious to him what these geese were doing. They were taking care of their young, the way his mother and I also take care of him and his siblings.

"Yes," I replied, not sure what else I should say.

There was something particularly touching about these two geese, who so clearly placed their inadequate bodies and wings in the path of danger. Down and feathers and cartilage facing the full weight of a heavy metal vehicle. Naturally, this was not the first time I had witnessed this protective instinct in animals. Entire afternoons can slide by while I watch videos of mother and father animals fighting desperate battles to protect their offspring. Monkeys, elephants, dogs, birds, polar bears—they all go to war for their children. They fight with the bodies and beaks and claws they have. It seems so obvious that the will to care for and protect our children is something fundamental and innate. And that this sacrifice, along with the love it requires, is something that connects us to the rest of the animal kingdom.

Now there is no shortage of another, more brutal form of behavior at work between parents and their offspring in the natural world, but watching these geese became yet another confirmation of the fact that the close relationship between children and their parents stems from something natural and primal. Love for our children is something we share, all of us.

Although this didn't occur to me there, in the car on that afternoon, perhaps mother and father goose were also real-life evidence of something else. Because when they spread their wings and the small goslings scurried to their sides, they were actually performing a short educational drama about the impulse that more than anything else has formed our modern-day view of the parent-child relationship. This insight also tells us something that seems self-evident, namely, that the one who is afraid is not just running away from something; he is also running *towards* someone. Yet this observation, however obvious it may seem, was not actually made until the 1950s and the man responsible was one of the most influential psychiatrists of our times, John Bowlby. Bowlby, known as the founder of *attachment theory*, attributes much of the credit for his scientific breakthrough to this idea in particular. In a letter to his wife Ursula, he writes:

> Most people think of fear as running away from something. But there is another side to it. We run TO someone, usually a person … It's screamingly obvious, but I believe it's a new idea and quite revolutionary.[3]

We are born with an instinctive need to seek closeness to a caregiver when we experience fear or stress. And we form a close and permanent bond with whoever it is that cares for us. This is how the first idea about *attachment* is expressed, and scarcely anyone raises an eyebrow when they read this on the page of a book today, because John Bowlby's ideas produced a paradigm shift in our view of the relationship between mother and child.

For most human children, the person we seek out will be a mother, or perhaps a father, and Bowlby held that this first attachment creates a *permanent* psychological connection. And not just that. He also maintained that our early childhood experiences with this caregiver would influence the way we form attachments with other people for the rest of our lives.

He was looked after by nannies. He saw his mother for maybe an hour a day, his father maybe once a week. From a very young age he was sent off to boarding school, as was common practice for the British upper middle-class at the start of the last century. Beyond this, his life was shaped by the wars in Europe. He was a child during WWI, completed his education in medicine and psychiatry during the period between the two world wars and served in the military during WWII. Towards the end of this war, he took on the position of director of the children's ward at the Tavistock Clinic in London. A short time after his appointment, he changed the name to *Department for Children and Parents,* and when the Second World War came to an end, he founded a research unit at the clinic.

This was where he was working when, in 1949, he accepted an assignment that would transform his ideas into universal perceptions. The World Health Organization (WHO) asked him to investigate one of the many consequences of the war, specifically, the impact that the absence of a close and stable caregiver had on all the orphans or abandoned children who were flooding Great Britain. He was asked to compile and explain the knowledge the academic community had gathered. What did we know and what did it mean? The volume of

[3] From the article "Disorganized infant, child, and adult attachment: collapse in behavioral and attentional strategies" (2000) by Erik Hesse and Mary Main. The authors cite an unpublished letter that John Bowlby wrote to his wife Ursula.

material was vast and the quality of the findings irregular. Most of the studies he reviewed were about children who had lived in institutions or foster homes. He also read studies on children who for periods of time during the war had been without the care or supervision of parents or guardians. Before long, a pattern began to emerge. Meeting physical needs was not sufficient. The children also needed closeness and love, and forming an attachment with someone was the only hope they had of securing this.

Missing mother

If the truth is really the first victim of war, children run a close second. By the autumn of 1940, German air raids had left large parts of London in ruins. Buildings and homes were destroyed, people were injured and killed, thousands were displaced. Countless children were orphaned. Many had to be evacuated, or fled their bedrooms and homes, while others were left to fend for themselves when their fathers were sent off to fight in the war and their mothers were mobilized to join the labor force. Soon after World War II broke out, orphans and abandoned children became an enormous problem in the war-torn regions of Great Britain.

Among those who felt called upon to do something to help all the orphaned and abandoned children was Anna Freud, Sigmund Freud's daughter. Together with her friend Dorothy Burlingham, she established Hampstead War Nurseries in London, where they ran both an orphanage and a daycare center. It wasn't long before they realized that this provided them with an opportunity to conduct research on the children living under their protection. The staff were therefore soon tasked with the responsibility of documenting observations of the children's behavior, especially regarding their reactions and development. The circumstances enabled them to monitor the children closely for an extended period of time. Freud and Burlingham compiled the findings systematically and on the basis of these, wrote and published a series of books, both during and after the war. This material was included in the report Bowlby was asked to write a few years later.

One of the most striking things both Anna Freud and Bowlby had observed was how deeply the children missed their parents. At the orphanage they were well fed and safe, but this was far from enough. Their sense of loss and longing became apparent through how the children talked about their parents all the time. They would speak at length and in detail about both their mothers and fathers, tell short anecdotes, or mention odd habits and quirks. And the children cried. Some of them whimpered softly, while others sobbed and wailed loudly. Besides this, the children developed in the *wrong* direction. Instead of mastering one development stage after the next—as we expect children to do—the orphans regressed. Children who had finished potty training and no longer needed a diaper, started wetting themselves. Children who had previously been able to talk, stopped speaking altogether.

Maybe it wasn't so strange. After all, the children were living in a city where a war was taking place right outside the walls of the orphanage. Nonetheless, Freud and Burlingham insisted that it was the absence of their parents that distressed the children the most. In the short book *War and Children,* which they co-wrote and published in 1943, the authors state that they don't observe the same anxiety in children who are still living with

their mothers. The two women were disgusted by the mere thought of infants living with the threat of air strikes and sleeping in underground bomb shelters. Yet for the children themselves, it was different, they write, "during the days; or weeks; of homesickness, this is the state of bliss to which they all desire to return."[4]

Better to be with Mommy while the bombs are falling than to be alone in safety.

In 1951, three years after he'd accepted the assignment, John Bowlby delivered *Maternal Care and Mental Health***,** and the report caused a kind of sensation in the postwar academic world. In the report he presents the scientific foundation for what would come to dominate the Western conception of the parent-child relationship. In the report he claims, among other things, that the absence of maternal caregiving during early infancy can cause serious ailments in the child, such as anxiety, depression, aggression, and attachment disorders. He calls the phenomenon *Maternal Deprivation Syndrome* and bases his claims on the findings from Anna Freud's orphanage in Hampstead. It is obvious, he writes, that children have an innate need to form a strong emotional bond with their primary caregiver, who is usually the mother. This bond is critical, not solely for the child's survival, but for its entire development and well-being.

Just a few years later, in 1958, he introduced what has later become known as *attachment theory,* which also made him one of the most influential psychoanalysts of the 20th century. His theory combines his training as a doctor and psychoanalyst, his experiences from the children's clinic in war-ravaged London, and the vast amount of material he had collected about the development of orphans and abandoned children. The groundbreaking nature of the theory also stemmed from how Bowlby had built on insights from other disciplines, in particular evolutionary theory and biology. Bowlby had a particular interest in behavioral science, also known as *ethology.*

Ethology is the study of how animals behave in their own natural habitat and holds that different animal species can experience the same world in wholly different ways. A moth, for example, folds in its wings when it picks up on the ultrasonic signals emitted by a bat. This is a behavior that has meaning for the insect in the moment, and which is important for its survival: by making itself smaller, the moth can avoid detection. But when I am standing outside in my front yard and see the bats flapping around me, I don't even notice the ultrasonic vibrations.

As animals, our behavior in relation to food, reproduction and protection differs considerably. What we have in common is that the interaction between sense impressions and actions is wired in such a way that it contributes not only to our survival, but also to our possibilities for having children. The influence of the insights

[4] The quote is from the book *War and Children,* by Anna Freud and Dorothy T. Burlingham, published in 1943. On page 44 they write: "Even apart from these unusual cases we have seen long-drawn-out states of homesickness, upset, and despair which are certainly more than the average inexperienced foster-mother can be expected to cope with. We certainly see no similar states of distress in children when we make the round of London shelters and find them sleeping on the platforms next to their mothers. Our own feeling revolts against the idea of infants living under the conditions of air raid danger and underground sleeping. For the children themselves during the days or weeks of homesickness this is the state of bliss to which they all desire to return."

from modern ethology on attachment theory was of fundamental import and is especially evident in Bowlby's understanding of something we call *imprinting*.

The Austrian Nobel prize winner Konrad Lorenz was, perhaps more than anyone else, a pioneer within modern ethology. While many scientists claimed that animal behavior was predominantly based on learning, Lorenz adhered to the ideas of Charles Darwin and evolutionary biology and made a connection between animal behavior and genetics. He demonstrated that a duckling is innately predisposed to follow the first moving object it sees, which in the majority of cases will be the mother duck. Lorenz concluded that *imprinting* of this nature, in other words, this instinct that is awakened after birth and causes the newborn duckling to follow its mother, must take place during a particularly sensitive period—perhaps only a few hours after hatching. Because if there are no moving objects around the newly hatched duckling, the compulsion to follow a caregiver will remain dormant.

The soft lap

Another scientist whose work had significant influence on attachment theory was Harry Harlow. In one of his most famous, and with time notorious, experiments from the late 1950s, he put twelve-hour old baby monkeys in a cage with two "mothers". The one surrogate mother was made of metal wire, while the other was wrapped in a soft, plushy fabric. He divided the baby monkeys into two groups and put one group in a cage where the metal wire mother was equipped with a nipple from which the babies could suckle milk. The others were put in a cage where the nipple was on the soft mother. Then he left the monkeys in the cages for six months and observed their behavior.

The results were conclusive: All the monkeys stayed close to the soft mother most of the time. This was true for each of the monkeys, also those who relied on the milk from the metal wire mother. As soon as they finished nursing, they moved over to the mother wrapped in fabric and hugged her, clinging to her soft body.

In one part of the trial, Harlow exposed the baby monkeys to a frightening creature and all of the babies rushed straight to the soft mother.[5]

Or as Bowlby himself had explained it to his wife Ursula: We don't just run away from whatever is frightening us, we run *to* someone who can protect us.

It was not viewed as good practice to generalize findings from animal studies to human beings, neither in psychology nor medicine. Nonetheless, this observation about *imprinting* became a guiding principle for Bowlby's

[5] Harry Harlow's studies of infant monkeys are described in several of the articles cited in the reference list, but should actually be seen rather than read about. Videos of the experiment and interviews with Harlow are available on a number of websites.

work, according to professor Terje Halvorsen in the article "Glimpses from the history of attachment theory," the contents of which provide much of the basis for my presentation here.[6]

For Bowlby, however, given that Charles Darwin was one of his most important academic role models, these experiments on animals were of decisive significance: in addition to providing causal explanations for our behavior, Bowlby could now expand our understanding of why we do what we do. From the teachings of ethology and evolutionary theory, he could also find *functional explanations,* in other words, establish that we behave in certain ways because these behaviors have benefited us as a species at some point in our evolution. Our need to form an attachment with someone from early childhood is thus a naturally selected trait, because children who successfully formed an attachment with their mothers were able to avoid danger and predators. And adults' inherent predisposition to take care of children has survived because their children have survived.

The timing of these observations and the correlated advancements coincided with the US psychologist Abraham Maslow's presentation of his pyramid of needs. In the latter case, physical needs such as food and sleep are what provide the foundation for our survival. Harlow's study—and Bowlby's theory—tell us however that this pyramid is not a good way of understanding the needs of our children. The need for closeness is not a secondary, derived need; it is a primary need. Without attachment we will not survive.

Is it strange that I, and many, many others have fallen for these ideas? Just think about what Bowlby is actually saying. There is a natural, universal, and unbreakable bond between children and their parents. For Bowlby this was predominantly a bond with the mother, but could just as easily be with a father or another caregiver. This means that the geese my son and I are watching through the car windows are physical evidence of the conglomerate of muddled emotions that I call fatherly love. It is almost as if existence opens up and reveals a flash of an underlying meaning. It is almost too good to be true.

Where is mother?

It is difficult to overstate the amount of influence Bowlby's attachment theory had on the Western world's view of the relationship between parents and their children. While previously the child was viewed to a large extent in terms of behaviorism, attachment theory's great contribution is about how human life begins with the connection that is formed between the child and others. In the course of the first three years of life—when we are especially open to this type of connection—the lifelong bond of love (or failed love) between the child and parents is formed.

And it is lifelong in more than one sense, because according to attachment theory, our early relational experiences also shape how we relate to ourselves and others. The first years of our lives and our relationships to loved ones determine whether we will be secure and autonomous and dare to cultivate intimacy with other people,

[6] I have based my presentation and the discussion of John Bowlby's life and work on a range of sources, all of which are included in the reference list. But Terje Halvorsen's article "Glimpses from the history of attachment theory" («Glimt fra tilknytningsteoriens historie») from 2018 was particularly helpful. It provides a clear overview of the history and cites several of the sources I have used.

or instead experience a fundamental insecurity for the rest of our lives. These years determine whether we will sink or swim in the social waters surrounding every single human being. The same relationships are also formative when it comes to our deepest experience of ourselves, such as whether we believe we are worthy of love and have the ability to love others.[7]

Maternal deprivation in particular is destructive for a young child. In the book *Child Care and the Growth of Love,* Bowlby claims that the experience of a warm, intimate and lasting relationship with the mother is critical to an infant's mental health. It is equally important for both the mother and child to experience satisfaction and joy. If this relationship were to be severed or disrupted by separation, absence, or poor caregiving, this could have serious and long-term consequences for the child's development.

He based this hypothesis on several observations of children who had problematic relationships to their mothers. For example, he examined 44 adolescents who had been convicted of theft and compared them to 44 non-criminal adolescents from the same social background. The study demonstrated that 17 of the criminal youths had experienced long-term separation from their mothers before the age of five and 15 of these were classified as affectless psychopaths (lacking the capacity to feel guilt or remorse). Only two of the non-criminal youths had experienced such a separation. This indicated that maternal deprivation could increase the probability of antisocial and criminal behavior in adolescence.[8]

In another study, Bowlby monitored 60 children who had been separated from their mothers due to tuberculosis before they were four years old. He reported that these children performed more poorly in school than a control group of children who had not experienced such a separation. This suggested that maternal deprivation could also have an impact on a child's cognitive development.[9]

A universal theory

The theory of maternal deprivation has greatly influenced psychology, psychiatry and child welfare policy. In these fields it has contributed to raising awareness about the significance of early attachment and care experiences for a child's overall welfare. It has also led to changes in the practices and policies of daycare centers, hospital admissions, adoption, foster homes and institutional care. And it has trickled down as a widely-held cultural view regarding the importance of the mother during early childhood. Or as psychology specialist Line Marie Warholm wrote in an article for the Norwegian national daily Aftenposten, when summarizing the most important advice she could offer parents: the first years are not only the most important; they are of vital significance:

> Every time you pick up a crying infant – and speak to the infant in a soft voice, console and soothe – you are giving the child important experiences. You are hammering out the direction of what will become the pathways

[7] This is the opinion of the Swedish psychologist Tor Wennerberg, who makes this claim in his book *Vi er våre relasjoner* [We Are Our Relationships] (2011).

[8] The findings are from John Bowlby's article "Forty-four Juvenile Thieves: their Characters and Home-Life" (1944).

[9] The findings are from John Bowlby and Dina Rosenbluth's article "The Social and Psychological Backgrounds of Tuberculous Children" (1955).

> for the child's perception of the world. The tenderness with which you caress the child, the look in your eyes, how the tone of your voice and your facial expression mirror the child's condition and experiences—these are the most important experiences in a child's life.[10]

Psychologist Warholm is claiming – in accordance with attachment theory – that the first years of a child's life are the most important and the child's first relationship forms the basis for all subsequent relationships. Woe betides the mother, father, or guardian who fails to give an infant the attention and care she needs. Or more specifically, not solely the care the child needs. The *attachment* involves more than a mother who fulfils the child's need for nourishment. It is about making her body available, cuddling and warming, fussing and cooing, and thereby forming an attachment to the child. Through this contact, the mother also invests strong feelings in the child, forging social, emotional bonds and these bonds are crucial in terms of ensuring that the child does not suffer permanent damage, in the form of life-long emotional limitations—difficulties forming attachments.

And this all-important work takes place from the time of birth, or actually, long before that: the mother can familiarize the child with her voice by singing to her swelling baby bump. The father can also take part here and often does: he kneels before his partner, rests his cheek against the taut drum of her belly, and whispers, "Hello there, little one, can you hear me? I'm your father." This intense emotional investment in the child, or in what will become the child, is not only important for us as parents; it is absolutely essential for ensuring that our children do not suffer harm.

For those who are thinking that this is a tall order for prospective mothers and fathers, or those who have a guilty conscience because they put their daughter down for a few minutes while they were folding the laundry, there is hope. What I mean is that during the years that have passed since these ideas first gained salience in research communities and a broader audience, there have been many who have disputed Bowlby's theory. These objections pertain to the description in particular and not least the impact of so-called maternal deprivation.

All the same, the ideas and insights from Bowlby's research have endured. Despite all the methodological weaknesses, alternative explanations, cultural differences and lack of nuance in Bowlby's view of the role of the mother and the child's needs, the theory continues to hold powerful sway. I asked a psychologist friend about the influence attachment theory has had on Norwegian psychologists' view of the parent-child relationship and he stated that attachment theory is so universally accepted that it is difficult to pinpoint where it starts and where it stops. In other words, it has so pervasively permeated our understanding of the relationship between parents and child that it colors just about everything.

This also affects how we as parents view our relationship to our children. In scientific communities that swear by *attachment parenting,* it is the emotional and psychological bond between the newborn and the mother that is emphasized. Neither is it the case that this attachment is considered a luxury reserved for a few fortunate

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[10] From the article "Du skal ikke lytte til alle råd om barneoppdragelse. Men disse er viktige å få med seg." [You Shouldn't Listen to All the Advice on Child-rearing. But these tips are worth considering] by psychologist Line Marie Warholm, which appeared in Aftenposten. (https://www.aftenposten.no/foreldreliv/i/Wbwj7Q/psykologen-du-skal-ikke-lytte-til-alle-raad-om-barneoppdragelse-mendisse-er-viktige-aa-faa-med-seg)

parents. Attachment theory applies to all children and mothers, everywhere, in every era. It is not the case—if we are to believe Bowlby, the man behind the theory—that attachment theory created or invented a good, sensible way to relate to our children. No, much like his academic role models, he had discovered a *universal* psychological mechanism found in all human beings.

The first thing that strikes me is that most children must then have attachment issues. And maybe they do, in one way or another. There are few of us who emerge unscathed from the extended period of dependency that constitutes the childhood of our species.[11]

In an extension of that thought, another, more serious question emerged: Are the majority of the people born before 1950 so emotionally damaged that they must be said to have attachment disorders? The youngest child of a family with eight children in the 1870s cannot possibly have had access to the amount of attention and care our 1.5 children receive today. How then can these prehistoric children have been as well-adjusted as they ultimately were? How did they develop creativity, compassion, lasting friendships, and relationships? How could their intelligence and creative ingenuity have flourished? How could they create artworks and technology and social innovations, or have been as full of humor, wit and humanity as they proved to be in the end? Is it really true that all the children who have come and gone since the dawn of time, have been more or less defective?

Anthropology puts its foot down

The latter point comes from the American anthropologist David F. Lancy, whom I already mentioned in the introduction. He has for decades studied how cultures other than that of our own prosperous, Western, and modern society have treated their children. In a number of books published over the past thirty years, he has demonstrated how atypical our modern approach to child-rearing actually is. Based on his anthropological findings, he has also made the argument that attachment theory cannot be universally valid. At the very least, it cannot be as universal as its advocates claim.

In the book *Anthropology of Childhood* he shows how parents' relationships to their children do not solely rely on the psychological value they attribute to their offspring, but also on the cultural perceptions of the society they are a part of. These perceptions can stem from material and political factors that influence childbirth and families. This means that our relationship to children is not solely determined by innate qualities, such as instinct, evolution or "love," but also by the cultural waters we are swimming in: how children are viewed and valued by the people around us.

Lancy has presented strong evidence in support of what he calls *delayed personhood*, a phenomenon found in a number of societies that do not view a newborn child as a fully-fledged human being with a given place in the social order. The newborn baby is considered an interim-being—neither wholly animal nor wholly human, neither

[11] The statement is from psychoanalyst Paul Wachtel's book *Relational theory and the practice of psychotherapy* (2008).

wholly alive nor wholly dead. This of course has an impact on the kind of care, protection and follow-up the child receives during the first period of his or her life. The cultural conditions of the child's environment have, in other words, a considerable impact on the early childhood experience.

Lancy is far from alone in his critique of attachment theory. German psychologist Heidi Keller writes in *The Myth of Attachment Theory* that attachment theory is too simplistic and limited in its approach to child development. In the book, published in 2021, she writes that attachment is far from being the sole factor influencing the child's development. Like Lancy, she criticizes the exaggerated importance attributed to one-on-one relationships between children and caregivers. The theory quite simply does not take into account how collective forms of care influence both the child's attachment patterns and how the child perceives itself and others. If the theory is allowed to provide the basis for our view of the parent-child relationship, this can result in excessive individualization, in direct contradiction to time-honored ideals such as community and collaboration.

A number of anthropologists have also demonstrated how many societies, either because they have chosen to do so or because they have no choice, practice so-called *distributed parenting,* in which several people, such as grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, neighbors or friends, share responsibility for childcare. These individuals, called *alloparents,* can provide the child with food, warmth, security, play, learning and socialization. Lancy claims that these caregivers can form bonds with the child that are every bit as strong as the bond with the mother, and that through them the child can develop a flexible and adaptive attachment style, which equips the child to handle different situations and relationships.

I am not interested in being a judge in a kind of academic contest. To the contrary, I think it is interesting that John Bowlby and David Lancy outline two different understandings of the child and why children mean so much to us. They do so by emphasizing different aspects of the relationship between parents and the small bundles we create, shape as human beings, and eventually lose. For one of them, it is the psychological attachment to the mother or father that determines the child's ultimate value. In the theory of evolution, the child has built-in value for the mother. This corresponds with the child's inherent urge to seek closeness with caregivers, especially in early childhood. Through this contact, a strong, individual bond between mother and child is created, a bond that can be either healthy or unhealthy.

The experience of closeness is vital for the child's development of security, self-esteem and the ability to regulate their own emotions. Children who develop this secure attachment to a caregiver live their lives with a sense of security, and for that reason are able to explore the world around them and learn new things. If, on the other hand, the child does not receive sufficient care and attention, this can have all manner of adverse effects. If you should have the misfortune of being deprived of a strong, healthy bond with your mother or father, you are at risk of having to drag this disadvantage around with you for the rest of your life, and since you are in a sense emotionally defective, perhaps you will also pass the damage on to your own children.

Obviously, there is nothing wrong with emphasizing the importance of giving infants security and love. Personally, I also have a great appreciation for the implicit social critique of attachment theory, in that for parents, modern-day working life's requirements for productivity and round-the-clock availability fly directly in the face of any ambition of healthy child-rearing. I am however more uncertain about whether attachment theory alone says anything about what a child is.

Lancy, on the other hand, is interested in the value a child has in the culture it is born into and the community that child encounters. It is this, he says, that to a large degree determines how the child is understood and cared for. Anthropologists of course recognize the significance of social relations for a child's development. In addition to David Lancy, scientists such as Margaret Mead and Nancy Scheper-Hughes have shown how children in different cultures bond with different caregivers, such as grandparents, siblings or neighbors, depending on cultural norms and resources. While attachment theory emphasizes the significance of connection to a specific caregiver, anthropological research shows how children have often been and continue to be connected to a broader social network. They can be a part of a community of caregiving and understanding. Naturally, attachment theory and the anthropological perspective share an understanding of how caregiving and social relations are of fundamental importance to a child's well-being and development.

David Lancy's anthropological empirical findings do however suggest something else about how we as individual parents and a society relate to children. In his books it is clear that the child's value varies according to how they fit into the adult world. His research more than implies that a society's view of children and the cultural value it attributes to the child play a part in determining how parents view their offspring. Lancy's theory makes a fundamental distinction between societies in which children are highly valued (*neontocracy*), and *gerontocracies*, in which it is the elderly who are held in highest esteem. Those of us living in neontocracies are a relatively recent exception in the history of the world.

However, this does not mean that we have reached a higher plateau of civilization in our evolution, which guarantees that we treat our children well. In the Western world, cultural trends can also emerge, along with social changes or technology, which change our view of children. Something as basic as the introduction of paternity leave shows how the relationship to the child can be altered quickly and profoundly, for both individual fathers and society at large. If we put our faith solely in the idea that a child has an innate psychological value and that our relationship to them is controlled by a genetically determined love, we as a society are perhaps not particularly well-equipped to protect them when times change.

The latter point is honestly not difficult to imagine. During the pandemic, with time it became clear that the interests of adults carried the greatest weight.[12]

[12] And for whom is our society is actually designed? Who are we working the hardest to take care of, with society's combined economic, cultural and political forces? Last summer (2022) we took our children to Arendal several times, to go swimming in a public pool by the visitors' harbor and to dine at a restaurant in the center of town. To round off our visit to the city, we took the children to a small playground set up by the square. And it was only once we had arrived at the tiny playground, which occupies a rapidly shrinking area of the city, that the children found a place designed and

All three official evaluations of the management of the pandemic in Norway found that children and adolescents were saddled with a "disproportionately large burden" of the restrictions.[13] Many parents took good care of their children, but as a society we were more than willing to close schools and effectively banish children to the confines of what we knew were dysfunctional homes. We were willing to suspend the support system around them for weeks at a time; we shut down clinics, daycare centers and playgrounds. A lockdown of this nature was only made possible because the political risk of measures affecting children and young people was relatively negligible. Even in the most well-developed neontocracies such as those found in the Western world, there is a virtually unspoken consensus that in the end, children must find a way to adapt.

We love those we need

One of psychoanalyst John Bowlby's publications is a biography of Charles Darwin. Throughout his entire career Bowlby was fascinated by the connection between biology, evolution and human psychology. He was always searching for examples and observations from the natural sciences and from the animal world in particular. It is therefore perhaps fitting to conclude this chapter with another observation of the rhesus monkey, the type of monkey on which Harry Harlow performed his last experiments. In terms of appearance, these small monkeys are not among the primates that most resemble humans. They are relatively small, with brown or grey fur, pink faces, and tails of medium length. They are nonetheless among our closest relatives in the animal kingdom. And they share one significant trait with human beings: There are many of them and they are able to live in very different ways and environments. The rhesus monkeys are the largest primate population in the world after humans.

Their widespread geographic dispersal in particular was one of the reasons why the Italian biologist Dario Maestripieri developed an interest in them. He studied the monkeys for more than twenty years and his research resulted in the book *Macachiavellian Intelligence*. Here he compares the monkeys' social behavior to our own.

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intended for them. They can enjoy the swimming pool, at least at certain times of day, but they are supposed to behave like adults while they are there. In other words, it's fine for the children to practice swimming with long, relaxed strokes, wearing swim rings to prevent them from drowning, but they are not allowed to run and holler and scream and play and jump and perform acrobatics that will disturb the adult guests. The same holds true for the restaurants. It's nice to teach children good table manners and nothing elicits more approving glances than a large family sitting and chatting politely over the meals they have ordered. But the children's own place in the city is a tiny patch of land with a soft, low-impact ground surface, a few jungle gyms, a tightrope and a couple of swings. The children are not included in the city's logic, which of course is about something other than play and recreation, namely, commerce and consumption. The children have no place in this market. What if cities were set up in such a way that the adults' activities were restricted to a small playground by a square? The space allotted to children is always so small and so specific: they can do one thing: play on the playground, while the adults have myriad possibilities for enjoyment.

[13] The statement is from the official NOU report «Evaluering av pandemihåndteringen» [Evaluation of the Pandemic Management] submitted to Norway's prime minister 02 June 2023. In the evaluation, the Corona Oversight Committee writes the following: "The Corona Oversight Committee finds that children and adolescents were obliged to shoulder a disproportionately large burden. Despite children and adolescents' low risk of illness and death due to infection, their opportunities for self-realization were severely curtailed due to reduced in-person school attendance and periods when recreational programs were suspended. For the majority of children and adolescents, the pandemic has not had long-term, negative consequences, but many suffered diminished quality of life in the course of the two-year pandemic and there are indications that a small number have suffered more long-term, negative effects. Childhood and adolescence are critical stages in human social development and scientific communities have expressed concern about the risk of greater social insecurity in young people after the pandemic. When children's needs were to be taken into account in addressing issues that concerned them, the committee is of the opinion that the public authorities to a larger degree should have applied the experiences from the earlier phases of the pandemic. In this way, the burden of restrictions for children and adolescents could have been reduced during the final phases of the pandemic. This could have been achieved through a greater differentiation of restrictions, such as within recreational sports and other outdoor activities, or more geographic differentiation. It is the committee's opinion that the government, in keeping with its strategy, should have endeavored to achieve better correspondence between the objective of lower restriction burden for children and adolescents and the design of infection control restrictions" (p. 239).

Like Harry Harlow, Dario Maestripieri holds that he has discovered many striking similarities between these monkeys and humans. This is particularly true in terms of how they relate to their children. They cuddle with them, teach them, reprimand them. They are clearly fond of their young. However, this maternal love has a few limitations. The young rhesus monkey mothers lose interest in their newborns if the latter show little hope of survival or demand too much of them. These mothers, who are usually devoted and caring, may ignore the cries of their young. They will stand impassively by watching their children starve to death, apparently without feeling anything whatsoever. This both seems and is gruesome, naturally, in the ordinary sense of the word, but it is also a necessary means of preserving their strength and resources, especially if the monkeys live in a harsh, demanding environment and the battle for food is ruthless.

A similar phenomenon can also be observed in humans. In a study from 2001, the Hungarian psychologist Tamás Bereczkei shows that Hungarian mothers breastfeed their healthy children longer than they breastfeed children born with low birth-weight or other health challenges. But not just that: Hungarian mothers smile less often at children who are at greater risk of dying and they play with them less than with their healthy and thriving siblings. If a woman gives birth to a so-called high-risk child, she will also become pregnant again more quickly. In short, the mothers reduced their emotional investment in the children and behaved as if they did not expect them to survive. This is, at least on the surface, a less uplifting story than theories about children's universal, innate psychological value. Perhaps it merely indicates that humans, like other primates, adapt to different environments and challenges by adjusting our emotional attachment to our offspring. Or at the very least, it suggests that our living conditions, whether material or cultural, play a part in determining how we view our children.

Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein maintained that the limits of our language also constitute the limits of our world. To put this in another way, we think using the concepts and insights that are available to us. In Ancient Greece, children were often compared to plants that could grow and develop freely. In the Middle Ages, children were compared to animals that had to be tamed and disciplined; they were considered irrational and disobedient creatures that had to learn to submit to authority. In the Enlightenment, children were compared to wax figures that had to be shaped and educated, or blank pages to be written on. They were malleable creatures in need of the right kind of knowledge and good morals. The Romantics, for their part, often compared children to angels who should be protected and admired. The poet William Wordsworth viewed children as messengers from heaven—innocent and beautiful, with a clear connection to the divine.

Later, in more modern and industrialized societies, children have been compared to machines or soldiers. They must perform well and compete. Authors such as Aldous Huxley have written about children who were produced in factories, created to serve the system. Here children sound like inferior beings, a kind of raw material for society.

No matter where you look in history, you will find these metaphors that say something about what a child is. Or is that what they are actually saying? Are they not saying instead something about how society views children? Perhaps this is above all the purpose a child serves: they tell us something about our adult life and

society. Sometimes we project social ideals, ideas, and our needs onto them as if they were a blank slate. Or perhaps at other times more like a magic mirror: children show us a distorted image of our adult lives, with all the dreams and defeats, the ambitions and fears that lie hidden within them.

Leave them in peace

The parents in my community tend to describe their children, first and foremost, as extremely valuable. Children are irreplaceable, priceless, the most important thing in our lives. Parents even speak of children as the very meaning of life. That sounds undeniably positive, and it is easy to envy a tiny human being who is described in such flattering terms. Of course, it is not solely easy being a parent. Having a child involves work and sacrifice, hardship even, but for Norwegian middle-class parents, taking care of an infant is more often associated with joy than with a burden. In our society, parents of young children speak of how nice it is to be a stay-at-home mother or father when they are on leave, expressing how wonderful it is that both parents now have the opportunity to get to know their children.

It is tempting to think that these children must be living in the best of all possible worlds. When we consider the history of childhood and the child, which I will address in the following pages, it is also obvious that our manner of understanding the child has undergone huge advancements. While our forefathers cared about the type of child the society or family actually needed, our self-perception is different. If you ask the average parent, we will say that we think about our children's needs, first and foremost. We are concerned about how our children are doing.

This type of attention does not come without worry. We are worried about how happy the children are, about their self-confidence, whether they have good enough friends or if they are socially excluded. We worry about whether they are learning enough at school, whether they are doing their homework, if they are getting enough fresh air and exercise, if they are cold, if they are really doing well, if they are getting enough sleep, if they will succeed in life, succeed in entering the housing market. We worry about whether they will manage on their own, or if they will hurt themselves, get lost, drown, fall off their bicycle, get hit by a car, not find the way home from school. In short, we worry about whether, as parents, we will manage to teach them everything they need to know in order to be safe and happy.

To counteract this anxiety, to ensure that they will be safe enough and happy enough, we turn to organization, surveillance and teaching. And above all we strive for perfection in our child-rearing and parenting roles. In what can be described as an ongoing marathon of caregiving, the bar is raised all the time for what is considered adequate parenting.

When I became a father for the first time, I didn't read books about child-rearing. When I think back, this strikes me as strange, since throughout my life reading has been my greatest interest. For some reason or other, I must have thought that I didn't need advice or guidance about how to be a good father. I trusted my own intuition

and above all, I trusted my wife. I probably also thought that being a parent was something that came naturally and that our son would let us know what he needed.

I have obviously made mistakes, but I continue to question whether I should have delved into parenting literature previously. There is something about the style of these books that causes me to suspect that by reading them, depending a bit on which book I happened to pick up, I would have ended up putting blind faith in whatever parenting model I then chose to implement in real life.

After having read about different cultures' and eras' perceptions of childhood, however, it's not the thought of everything I could or should do for my own children that stokes my guilty conscience. No, in fact, the opposite is true. Instead of being so deeply invested in raising or instructing my children, I should have tried to make space for their freedom. I should have let them try to do things on their own, and paid attention to what happened when they tried to solve their problems by themselves.

Of course, I don't regret all the hours I have spent with them. I believe that these are some of the loveliest and most meaningful moments I will experience here on earth. But I realize all the same that I should have left them in peace a bit more. I wish in truth that I had dared to ask myself what a child actually is earlier on. Then I would have presumably given it more thought before I meddled with their exploration of the world.

Part 4

The kingdom of childhood

Turn wheresoe'er I may,
By night or day,
The things which I have seen I now can see no more.
William Wordsworth[14]

From time to time, I am reminded that my children and I do not inhabit the same world. A few days ago, we went on a bike ride to Hove, a walking area on the southern tip of the island where we live. In front of me on the narrow gravel road, which runs through a small forest belt down by the ocean, my youngest son was riding his bike. His little body was doing just fine, but he struggled with the large stones poking up out of the gravel and on the steepest hills I had to hold my hand against his back and give him a little extra momentum. Flowers were in bloom all around us. It was May 14. This entire part of the island is covered by large trees. Old, thick trunks of pine, oak and birch. Along the bicycle path the forest is especially dense, with trees and bushes on all sides, and we rode through a green corridor.

When we passed his daycare center, he started talking about how he was looking forward to the summer. He tried to turn around and look at me every time he wanted to tell me something and twisted the handlebars along with him in the process. But there are no cars driving on these roads, so I let him wobble from side to side. He was looking forward to the summer, he said, because that's when the blueberries come. There are so many blueberries in the forest. They grow wild all over this entire area.

"Filip and I have a secret place," he said. "We are the only ones who know about it. There are so many blueberries, Daddy. We can eat as many as we want."

He turned around to face front again and righted his bicycle. The helmet on his head was a bit too big for him and rested askew on top of his blonde hair. Then he turned around again.

"Only Filip and I know about it," he said. "And Hedvig. But she won't say anything."

He glanced over his shoulder, to make sure that I was listening.

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[14] Wordsworth is wonderful. But for a more prosaic approach, I can recommend reading what adolescents and young adults write about longing for their childhood. For example, on the Norwegian online public information site, Ung.no, a fourteen-year-old girl writes: "Hi. When I think back to when I was younger, I feel melancholy. I miss how it was before. I miss being a child. Really living. Lately I've felt that life has no meaning. I am absolutely not suicidal, far from it, but I miss the way things used to be. Christmas is not the same. I used to get a nice, warm, and secure Christmas feeling. Every moment was magical. Last year Christmas felt strange. The day passed far too quickly and I felt like it wasn't Christmas at all. The same goes for the summer. I have experienced a lot but it doesn't feel real. It's as if I'm living in a dream." Or 18-year-old Jula Anderson, who was interviewed in the Wall Street Journal article "Teen Girls' Sexy TikTok Videos Take a Mental-Health Toll" from 2022: "I think I tried growing up a lot faster than I should have."

“It’s true that they grow back right away there. You eat the blueberries and then they grow back right away,” he said. “The blueberries never run out.”

Once I had a childhood and then it was gone. Now I am uncertain about what it actually was. It sometimes feels easier to think about childhood as if it happened to someone else. That it’s a story I heard or read. Childhood is a kingdom I was allowed to inhabit for a few years, until I was banished by my age. Since then, I have been forced to stand outside and look back at the places where I spent time as a child. I believed for a while that they were the same places, but that was wrong.

You have only one childhood, my mother said once and I couldn’t understand that, because I wasn’t living anything called childhood. The days I had weren’t connected, but arrived instead one by one, and each of them called for something new and unique.

I remember *something* from it, in glimpses. I can remember how I felt when I couldn’t sleep or how happy it made me when my father had organized a series of games in our backyard for my birthday (and I remember that Nils Johannes and I were on the same team), and I can remember the underwater sounds, when I explored the shallows from behind a diving mask, along the sandy beaches on the southern side of the island where I grew up. Noises and smells (from all these huge trees in the spring) and places can awaken memories of these experiences, and as an adult I can experience a strong, physical sensation of having been a child. I am reminded that I was once someone else, before all the thoughts and experiences I have had as an adult pulled me away.

Instead of meeting children the way we do now—where they are delivered into our custody, where we conceive, carry them to term and give birth to them—what if children came into our world like aliens from another planet? We would see that they resembled us, they had the same characteristics, the same body, and the same senses. Would we view them as having a form of intelligence that was more advanced than our own or less?

As I write this, my little daughter, whose older brother once said looked like a turtle, is already six years old.[15]

How many summers does she have left before she becomes irrevocably someone else? Before she is also exiled from her first homeland.

In the work of authors such as Edvard Hoem, Johan Borgen and not least Tove Ditlevsen, childhood is brought to life, not as a forerunner to adult life, but as a separate country, a wholly unique period of time. Instead of thinking about childhood as a precursor to adult live, it can be meaningful to think of it as something wholly demarcated and different. That at some point you went from being a child to a non-child.

[15] She is now seven years old. (Now she’s eight!) … Now she’s nine.

And the child knows how to do so many things that are out of reach for a non-child. They imagine things that become real for them. They have access to something in the world that no longer exists for me. An openness that allows them to experience nature and the world around them in a meaningful way.

If we deprive our children of the possibility to be children, we commit a violation that I don't believe can be forgiven.

Maybe it's my job to protect their childhood. Make it last for as long as possible, free of any criminal interference. I believe that could be a meaningful task. To refrain from denying them the possibility to live in the freedom we ourselves throw away.

Missing childhood

I am in the shower, where I can see my children brushing their teeth in front of the mirror, and I understand that I will be forced to miss childhood all over again. I will miss their childhood, which I've been fortunate enough to have been a part of. It sprang up before my eyes and I have been able to touch it, even play a part in forming it. My task was perhaps different than I believed it to be.

In such moments, when I can see how the years have crept into my children and are in the process of taking them away from me, I am filled with sorrow over how I have deprived them of the opportunity to be what they could have been. That with all of my warnings and ideas about how they ought to be, I have curtailed their capacity to be themselves. Who would you have been, I think, had it not been for my interventions.

When I became a father for the first time, I thought my job was to show my son how to face the world that awaited him. But perhaps I should have behaved differently and prepared him instead to be the child only he could be. Help him connect with what made him happy. That wouldn't mean letting him wander around alone or do whatever he wished, but something would have definitely been different. I should have been more conscious about taking us places and into environments where he could be free. I should have spent less time worrying about his fears, the sensibility he demonstrated when confronted with darkness, been more curious about everything he imagined would emerge from it. But because I was afraid of the dark as a child, I became more focused on finding ways to ensure he would be spared the difficulties I'd been through.

My children are full of courage. I am so proud of them. One day E and I stopped at a store after soccer practice. When he first started playing soccer, for a few years he abhorred these training sessions and for that reason I volunteered to be a coach, because I thought having his father there would help him. He has since then developed an inner strength of his own and he doesn't really need me any longer, but I have grown accustomed to this now, to coaching these young boys.

In the store we met the head of the after-school activity program. My son was in his final year there, and she was so happy to see him, the way many people are. I hear it all the time, that he brings joy to people's lives, because he is so cheerful and positive, so nice.

She asked if he was looking forward to the trip to the zoo and this baffled me, because he hadn't mentioned it.

Well, he said and looked at me, before turning to the head of the after-school program again and saying he wasn't sure he would be going. He had to think about it.

Wouldn't it be nice, I said then, because I could remember how much I had enjoyed trips to the zoo.

Then I understood that they would be staying overnight.

And my son said: spending the night, that's not really me.

I was reminded again of what I so often observe. He is me, not only my son, but a kind of extension of myself. And there's nothing I can do about it. I inhabit him like a ghost. I have passed on to him this useless, inexplicable fear, which is both the source of serious terror, but also of an almost ridiculous shame and loneliness because it is so impossible to explain in the light of day when morning has come. It's as if you don't even believe it yourself as you are trying to explain. *I don't dare stay here because it's dark.* What an idiotic confession!

"But what are you afraid of?" I have had that impossible conversation a thousand times. Tried to explain it to a friend who is not afraid. Who believes in what he sees and nothing else. Who isn't afraid of the dark. It's not possible. And after a while, you doubt your own experience: Maybe I'm not afraid, maybe I'm crazy? At the very least, there must be something wrong with me.

That is the feeling I have given to my son. *There must be something wrong with me. So I must change.* He has thought this. And I am the one who has given him that feeling. Not out of malice or sadism. But because I've wanted to make him an adult. Because I've wanted to protect him. Even though that's every bit as foolish as standing there screaming at an acorn because we can't hang our swing on its branches yet. The nut is a nut and the child is a child. And all the many expectations we might have because we have been around the block before and think we know the lay of the land, the expectations are not for the nut or the child but for ourselves.

Andrew Solomon explores the same ideas. He says that parenthood's abiding error is that "we give our children what we wanted, whether they want it or not. We heal our wounds with the love we wish we'd received, but are often blind to the wounds we inflict."[16]

I should have been better about keeping these expectations to myself. Fortunately, we have a few years left. But how do I know, even now, that it will be difficult for me? That I will struggle to be loyal to this text I am writing? Is it because I don't believe it's true? Because I am crafting a romantic idea about childhood? The reason

[16] Andrew Solomon writes about this in *Far from the Tree* (2012), p. 711.

it is difficult to let children be children and to foster unfettered, free development is that here, at my desk, I am alone with my ideas and fantasies, while out there, with my son beside me, I am in the social world. I must relate to other people there. And I believe part of the reason I am standing in the shower already missing his childhood, is that I feel I have taken something from him that I can no longer give back. For my son to fit in there, in society, I must scrape something off him.

Perhaps the writing of this book is merely a long, drawn-out form of grief. I watch my children disappear, as my own childhood also slipped away and there is little one can do to stop this slow erosion. I am not afraid of death, but I miss what time takes from us. The worst part is all the lonely and idle hours that come to nothing, which are stored away as nothing more than small bubbles of fat and waste.

A friend of mine described a typical late-summer day, when she had come home from work and begun making dinner. She'd stood over the stove in the hot kitchen, and eventually served her children and husband dinner, and afterwards they set about clearing the table and doing the dishes. I stood in that kitchen for two hours and watched the day just disappear, she said. I can't do it, she said again, after a long pause, I can't bear to watch yet another day just disappear.

This also upsets me. The lost opportunities, the hours that slip away from us, that we failed to put to use in any meaningful fashion. By writing I can hold on tight to this time, while the children are still young, and I can try with my entire being to understand what kind of time it is, and perhaps also understand better who they are.

The grief over a childhood that comes to an end is maybe just as much about a recognition that also my children, these free, expectant, and virtually magical human beings, will become adults, in adult lives. It's as if I want something better for them. Is it not a far too narrow dream that we have for our children, that they shall become adults like us?[17]

[17] I read an article about how it is advisable for children to start learning to save money as soon as possible. Children often receive an allowance from the age of three or four and then they must learn that things cost money. They must understand that they have to save money to be able to buy what they want and therefore also learn that they must choose to buy what they want the most. And I think about that child, the three-year-old or four-year-old or nine-year-old, for that matter, who goes around dreaming of being allowed to buy something. What a dismal dream that is.

A good childhood

I had gone for a bike ride in the evening, cycled to the store to buy some cookies that my two eldest children needed for school, because it was the second-to-last day before summer vacation and they were going on a picnic on a beach not far from where we live. On the way home, I rode by the wharf where our boat is moored, because I wanted to look for a lantern that I believed was tucked away in the storage space beneath the thwart at the stern.

Out by the boat, I could see how still the water was and it struck me that it was because it was evening, the wind had died down, and even though I was tempted to take the boat out and glide across the almost black water, I had to go home to make bag lunches and prepare the family for the next day. But I checked the weather report, which confirmed that it would remain this calm all night long, until the early hours of the morning. The sun would rise at 4:15. It was one of the longest days of the year and as I cycled the last kilometer home, I pictured how wonderful it would be to glide out onto the water, early, early the next morning and watch the sunrise, maybe do a bit of fishing.

I thought about the fisherman Markus, a character created by the author Gabriel Scott, and remembered how the novel *Markus The Fisherman* describes his meeting with the early morning. I want my son to experience this, I thought on the way home, so after I had let myself in, I made us both a bag lunch, filled up two water bottles that I placed in the refrigerator, and carried a mattress into the guest room. Then I brushed my teeth, said good-night to K, and went to find our eldest boy. When I carried him into the guest room, so we wouldn't wake up the rest of the family when the alarm clock rang at 3:30, I could feel that he'd become as heavy as a teenager.

He was still only nine years old, but the weight of his large body was almost more than I could manage, at least for the task of carrying him as quietly and unobtrusively as I had planned. His long, heavy body was fast asleep. But it was possible to carry him, I could still do it and then I laid him on a mattress, pulled the duvet over him and soon we were both asleep. When the alarm went off it was light outside, even though the sun would not be up for another 45 minutes. He was groggy, but I told him about my plan, the plan I had come up with for the two of us and his face lit up: Are we going fishing? Just you and me?

Yes, I said, and handed him the clothing I'd laid out the night before.

Soon we were on our way to the wharf. In my knapsack I'd packed a bar of chocolate and warm clothes.

We undid the moorings and the boat glided across Hovekilen Bay. The sun had still not come up. We had to make our way to the other side of the promontory to see it rise out of the ocean and I haven't experienced this many times in my life, floating on the flat surface of the ocean and watching the sunrise. But yesterday, before I fell asleep, I had nonetheless imagined it and looked forward to sharing this with my eldest son, how we lived so close to beautiful events like this that occur with such daily frequency that we forget to look for them.

Once we had left the bay, I could accelerate a bit and although we were out on open water, there was virtually no wind, so we could travel at a high speed without slamming the bow against the waves. He is not especially frightened by the waves anyway, he can take it, and when I glanced over at him from the driver's seat, I saw his blonde hair, the contentment on his face. We stopped when the echo sounder registered around one hundred meters, readied the fishing pole and dropped the weighted jig into the water, watching its shimmer fade as the reel spun.

It took a while for the jig to reach the bottom and then I reeled the line in a bit before handing him the pole. I let him hold it while I poured myself a cup of coffee from the thermos. The boat was rocking, so we had to stay seated to keep it balanced, and while we were sitting like that the sun rose behind us. At first, it was only visible as a broad strip of yellow light, but before long as a familiar half-orb peeking above the water. I can't know what he was thinking and I didn't want to ask him, concerned that it would perhaps make him aware of the kind of situation this was, the types of expectations that went along with it. More than anything I wanted this to be just an ordinary morning, an ordinary start to the day, that it was the most natural thing in the world for a father and son to be sitting in a tiny boat in the middle of the ocean, awash with sunlight and the morning as the fish circled the shiny jig.

We hooked a fish. I could see the yellow pole bending towards the water, and he started shouting, a fish, Daddy, it's a big one.

I watched him start reeling it in and he managed a few cranks, but soon it became too difficult, and I took over, every bit as eager as he was. And then I had forgotten about it, what this was, or what just a few seconds before I'd thought this was. There was nothing left now of the performative, memory-producing parenting work, there was only this fish, the line that had to be reeled in, the knife and the bucket that had to be taken out and made ready.

We caught two more fish before he said we had enough, more than we needed for dinner and we washed our hands in the water, rinsing off the blood, before we both sat down and shared the chocolate bar. I drank coffee, he drank water and in front of us on the bow lay three pollock in a row, in descending order, largest to smallest.

I don't know if this will be a memory that stays alive in him. And I'm unsure about how important that is for me, even though the evening before, this had been part of my motivation for doing this. Greater than the joy I feel when I think back on this, and greater than the expectations I'd had in dreaming up the situation, was the feeling that emerged when I forgot that I was a father, forgot that we were out on the ocean to accomplish something, and simply reeled in the heavy fish while I watched him pull out the knife with quick, almost effervescent movements.

This is what I want to experience with my children. Share an activity with them, experiences, which don't constantly remind us that there is a power dynamic between us, don't mushroom into preconceived notions or expectations about what will transpire, but are instead alive and unfolding in the moment. Naturally, it feels banal to write this. A kind of delayed universal recognition that it is the here and now that counts, that it is when a life experience is concentrated and spontaneous that it is the most powerful.

But I don't just want to write it, I would like to learn from it. It must mean something, that I now know how valuable these moments are. And for that reason, I must think: how can I live my life so we exist in this way more often?

Father of man

One of the most fundamental conceptions we have about childhood today is that it lays the foundation for the adult human being. The experiences and feelings of childhood stake out our path in life. "The child is father of the man," the poet William Wordsworth wrote in 1802. And this idea in particular, that childhood is a critical phase, that it sort of yields dividends throughout an entire lifetime, is a modern idea. For a long time, childhood was treated with a great lack of interest. The distinction between viewing childhood as important and thinking of it as a virtually insignificant waiting period, is one of the changes in mindset that makes us different from our forefathers. We view the child differently also because the child means more for who we are as adults.

It is easy to find things to criticize our parents for—the mistakes they have made and the misunderstandings which have, in the end, been repeated again and again over the years. At the same time, as I grew older and had my own children, I have gradually realized that the things I should possibly reproach my parents for are not so much about what they did or didn't do, but more about who they were. The values and ideas that influenced them. Because mistakes and snide remarks we can both forgive and understand, perhaps not there and then, but when we grow older and see how chaotic and messy the task of raising children actually is.

Why is a good childhood valuable? Is it valuable because it forms the basis for a purposeful and well-adjusted adult life, that a childhood would be, strictly speaking, wasted if the child, or the teenager, were to have the misfortune of lying down to sleep in a field only to be run over by a combine harvester? When childhood is only an objective, no meaning remains. Doesn't childhood have an intrinsic value? Would it change the way we treat our children if we didn't think that they would become adults? If all children died at the age of twelve, what would we have done with their childhoods?

We have let the grass become overgrown; the lawn is like a field of wheat outside the living room door. My eldest son is going to mow it when he gets home from school. All day long he is at school, he rides his bike there and

back, and when he comes home, he is going to mow the lawn. They have no homework, summer vacation is approaching, and I don't feel guilty about putting him to work. He is strong.

This will be his eleventh summer. Our daughter, the middle child, who on Sundays rides her bike all by herself to a little café nearby, is looking forward to the weather getting warmer. So is the youngest, who is in his final months at daycare.

This summer the eldest will turn eleven and I am not sure about how much longer I can expect him to remain a child. How many summers do I have left with him? Five, six? That's optimistic. Maybe not even that many. And what about the other children? Before they drift so far into adolescence that they are no longer interested in us. I am on the verge of losing them.

Sometimes it feels as if summers like this are what my entire life is built on. I remember so much about them. How we reached the final gravel stretch of road on the way to the cottage and I said "Martin Schanche"—the name of a Norwegian rally driver who was popular in the 1980s and 1990s—and my father gunned the engine and spun out on the narrow road with fields on either side, so ever since then, I can feel this memory every time I drive through there. How many times did my father spin out like that? It can't have been more than four or five, maybe less. Still, that is how this road lives on in me.

The parking lot by the path to the cottage where the letter E for Emanuelsen was painted in white on a little piece of wood. The dark, slightly colder forest, where we once met an abandoned baby deer. The weight of the knapsack on my back, my father walking in front of me pushing the wheelbarrow, the gas drum that rolled across the uneven ground and bounced with metallic thuds. My mother who was heavily laden, my sisters who walked side by side, chatting. How many times did we walk along here this way? And when we reached the cottage, I was sent off to the well with the red pail, which I balanced on the stone slabs as I lowered the well bucket into the dark water and filled it.

We ate our evening meal in front of the big picture windows. If it was quiet, I would go to bed, and wait for my father to wake me around midnight, and still half-asleep I would pull on my clothes, along with an extra wool sweater, and we would row out across the water to go crabbing by lantern-light. The red creatures who froze when the beam from the gas lantern hit them, my father leaning over the side and picking them up with his bare hands. The sounds their claws and pointy legs made as they explored the white Styrofoam cooler on the deck. The slick kelp we had to tear off and place on top of them so they would live through the night. How many times did we do this, really?

Nobody knows which memories survive and which events and experiences fade away and disappear. In other words, which experiences in fact make up this foundation, or these hidden rooms inside you, to which you attach so much significance and meaning. And if you did know this, as a parent, how would you go about ensuring that your children would experience something that would later become such a defining memory?

Despite this productive uncertainty, that we don't know what will stick, and that children's good memories can just as easily have been from an afternoon and evening when they were left to their own devices, the parents around me insist – and I probably do as well – on producing and organizing these memories as well. We search for opportunities to create a childhood, a good childhood, which our children can carry with them into adulthood. Because we hold the answers, because we know there are some memories which carry us across the water on difficult days, or memories we can simply awaken and revisit if we need to brighten a gray morning, we are determined to make sure our children will also have this opportunity.

My own childhood is a mother tongue and I can only remember a few words and phrases. That language is all these things that I no longer am or can do. When I was a child, I thought like a child, dreamed like a child, felt like a child, but when I grew older, I lost access to this world and became an adult. If I try to retrieve the memories and events from my childhood, what emerges is something else, the feeling that I have lost a homeland. I can't become a child again, but I can pass on a childhood. What is it I want to pass on? Freedom, more than anything else. I want my children to feel free, that the physical and intangible world lies open to them.

One of the portals we have offering entrance to childhood is naturally that of our own memories and experiences. We can think back, force ourselves to dig up these experiences and words and feelings that once filled us. But we forget how we were as children. Another entryway can be to speak with children, listen to their own perception of the world they inhabit. At every children's party there are always a few adult men, usually men, who remain on the outskirts of the games and calmly make it clear that they are not children. They set up some unscalable partitions between their world and the world the children inhabit. They don't want to play *Capture the flag* or *Kick the Can*, don't want to get their white shirts dirty, don't want to risk losing any of the dignity they believe they are preserving seated around the picnic tables. I think they are missing out on something essential.

Because this last example has caused me to think that childhood is a potential that is first triggered in an adult, but it is also a place where the child and adult can meet. Where they can be our equals in another way than in the situations in which we must ask them for something, deny them something, raise them to be something we have imagined they will become. I have therefore begun an active search for situations in which my children and I can be on as equal a footing as possible. Where there isn't too great a distance between the adult role and the children's roles. While dancing, at play, out fishing, when we sing, go walking in the woods, in silent companionship.

It is the simplest of insights that make the greatest impression on me. And the simplest of all is precisely this: that childhood from a child's point of view is endless, while the adult reality is a series of busy weekdays interrupted by a few all-important trips and events and vacations and people. How fleeting it all is.

About changing the universe

One of the world's oldest texts, *The Instructions of Shuruppag,* is a collection of advice from a father to his son. The father is not just anyone; he is the king of Mesopotamia, and his son Ziusudra is told among other things that he shall not boast, start arguments, or pass judgment on others when he is drinking beer. But the father also has a good deal to say about family life. He says that a heart full of love is what holds the family together, while a heart full of hate can destroy it. And in the more than 4500-year-old text, he also touches upon what appears to be a modern-day issue. Because although life on earth can offer riches and power, there are no treasures or possessions that can rival his young children.[18]

From the very beginning, these unanswered questions have existed. Not just about how we can best prepare our children for the world they will inherit, but also questions about what they mean to us. Like the Sumerian king, I can say that my children are the most valuable thing I have. But if I am asked to specify what this value consists of, exactly why I love them, exactly what they are, finding the right words is not easy. Along the same lines, I am also interested in how I can best prepare my children for the life they are already living. But if you ask me to explain in concrete terms how I do this, the clear responses slip through my fingers and into a lukewarm soup of general reflections.

I dare say I could have passed on some of King Shuruppag's advice, such as that children shouldn't steal or speak ill of others. Other advice seems less necessary, such as that they should not sleep with slave girls.

The expectations and wishes for a child's way of life are naturally connected to the time period they are living in and the way we raise and prepare them must take this into account. They are going to join and function within a particular society. At the same time, the saddest thing of all would be if we were solely to equip them to uphold the social order, or preserve the developmental stage we happened to find ourselves in when they were born. Every child that is born, regardless of how incomplete he or she might be, in a sense carries a promise of a new world.

When George Bernhard Shaw asks what a child is, he answers: "An experiment. A fresh attempt to produce the just man made perfect: that is, to make humanity divine." Many parents take this metaphor literally and treat their children like small, concrete experiments. They try to create *good children* by pulling specific strings or instilling a mixture of shame and dutiful love. But if the child is an experiment, that child does not belong to us as parents. And now you will have to forgive a somewhat lofty tone: children are owned and

[18] This interpretation is based on lines 101 and 102 in the text. There have been scholarly discussions about the translation. See i.e., *Wisdom of Ancient Sumer* by Bendt Alster from 2005, p. 75; 138–139. In a conversation with Professor Emeritus Piotr Michalowski at the University of Michigan, I have however found solid support for such an interpretation, based on these two lines, but also in terms of the sentiment of the rest of the text. For the entirety of his career, he has done research on civilizations and language in the ancient Middle East and he writes: "The lines you cite (101–102) are difficult because the verb in the first one is otherwise unknown, and the syntax of the second line enigmatic to us. There are as many translations of the line as scholars .... For example, it is not clear if 'my little one,' or my child is vocative—that is addressed to someone or is the subject. It may mean something like, 'Possessions are something that is to be [...], but nothing can compare with my children."

controlled by life itself. And if you try to shape this new being according to your own ideas of the divine, you will risk destroying it and perhaps even create a monster.

I find that the world has changed through the entrance of my children. Their way of seeing and experiencing things is often different from my own. The world I live in has become richer. This is due to the best moments I have shared with them, when I hear how they tell me about their day or about the thoughts that flutter through them.

Once when we were out for a drive, one of our children said that we've forgotten that birds also start life facing a fear they must overcome. Or rather, he didn't put it that way. We forget, he said, that baby birds are afraid when they are learning to fly. "It's horrible," he said. That was a thought I'd never had and without his help would perhaps never have considered.

Now, every time I see a baby bird, or every time I see a bird, I think about how they are also living in a way that means something. They are no longer merely birds, a category of living creatures that I learned about, first from my parents, later at school. They are tiny creatures trembling with fear but nonetheless brave enough to learn to do what they are created to do, to fly through the sky and be birds.

The world would have been a more impoverished place had my children not been born and because of that I had never gained access to this thought. There is quite simply something about the world and the life within it that can only be expressed through children and only be experienced by the rest of us through them.

Once when I was a teenager, I wrote a poem about how I missed everything time had swallowed, all the maple trees and narrow passageways, all the dates that were made with the utmost seriousness, all the girls I had met, I don't know, everything. When I wrote the poem, this sentence about missing everything was mainly that, a sentence, a conjecture. In my children, it becomes real, in them I see what disappears. They slip away from me, no matter what I do. The time with them will come to an end, I will no longer experience this closeness, the moments together with them, because when they grow older, they will no longer be children, and can never be children again. Hopefully, we will also be close when they are older, as adults, but adult human beings are something else, less interesting, more familiar, more boring. The world is full of adult human beings, they're everywhere.

An inner world

In one of his poems, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Profrock," T.S. Eliot asks whether he dare disturb the universe.

He could just as easily have asked the question: "Do I dare bring new life into it?"

Children fill us, as adults, with feelings of fear and inadequacy because they disclose our errors. Not just our errors as individuals, but also the errors of the society we have created together. Children can therefore also fill us with shame over our failure to make good choices. But for precisely this reason, they should also potentially fill us with hope. And not a diffuse, soothing version of hope, but a concrete and demanding type: Children show us

how the lives we have chosen to live have something mythical and rhetorical about them, in the sense that they are chosen and created and therefore not given. They can be changed, and perhaps also improved.

How can we express our gratitude to children for showing us this? I believe we should start by giving back to them more of their own world, more of the freedom they have, after all, the possibility to inhabit. Less schooling, less organization, less imposition of values, less buying and selling, less management by objectives. I believe they should be left more to themselves, to their own evaluations and mistakes. I believe we do them an injustice when we monitor, rank, and control them more than necessary or encourage them to monitor and rank themselves.

Your task as a father or mother is not to break in and train an obedient human being to step in and take over your responsibilities, or a tiny human being who can live your life better than you yourself are able to do. The job is rather to create a child who can live well, also without you. You are to leave them so secure and strong that they are able to meet life's challenges without your help. And you shall equip them, if not to change the universe, then at least to change their own life conditions. Give them the courage to create their own lives. How many adults do you really know who have done that?

One of the most beautiful texts about children that I have read was written by the Norwegian poet Jakob Sande. In the poem "Hymn" (*Hymne*) he writes about the child who comes to him from the pale shores of dawn, "dreamed once by God in eternity" (*drøymd av Gud inni æva ein gong*). They come wandering into our lives out of nowhere, from a hallowed mist.

Jakob Sande's poem is about the love that emerges as a child comes into being and expresses both a care and respect for the world that "springs up inside you." The greatness of this poem, at least for me, derives from Sande's description of the miracle of how a child, who has just been pulled out of death, is already its own person. But this person perhaps does not reveal itself right away. That person is something that first slowly, and then suddenly, becomes apparent to us as parents.

Children are many things. They are one thing for society, and something else for their parents. And then, they are also something in their own right. And it is the latter that we as parents are supposed to protect and defend. The child's unique nature. A child is not only psychologically speaking irreplaceable because we love him or her, or because we assign the child cultural value, but because the child has an inherent value. An inviolability. And what about a human being is inviolable? Every human that is born and takes its first breath from flat, empty lungs, contains the possibility to recreate the world. When the light streams through the pupils and is converted into images in a new mind, it is the first time anyone has ever seen the world in exactly this way.

They are therefore not merely new in their own right, all these children who are born and grow up around us. They also enable the rest of us to see the world anew. Naturally, they also bring with them something old. And

those of us who raise them, we feel responsible for helping them, with words and categories. But the entire journey travelled by a human being during the brief period of his or her existence, all the new stages and thoughts and words, were first pulled out of this hallowed mist, out of nowhere, by a child.

They have not brought stone tablets with them down from the mountains, that is not what I am saying. But on a wholly ordinary Tuesday you see your daughter standing in front of you and then she does something you didn't know she could. At that moment perhaps you realize, in a locker room at school, in the hallway at home, that she is her own person in the world. She is not just an extension of you or an experiment or a work task, a "child" who must be transported and picked up and delivered and fed and lulled to sleep and guided and raised. No, she is simply that, a wholly unique person unto herself, with a wholly unique version of the world inside her.

This inner world is something we as parents are allowed to help shape and that is what makes our job both meaningful and terrifying. But since we are so invested in this task, and since it is loaded with so many expectations and rules, we can be fooled into believing that this is all the child is: A recipient of guidance and conventions and knowledge.

But in reality, the child comes to us as a whole human being. And if we are truly fortunate, we will be closer to them than anyone else for a few good years. Before they disappear and become adults.

Epilogue

Good morning

"No, Alexei, you're not a medal, you can't hang around my neck. There's no room for you here. You must go into the world. And I went out into the world."

Maxim Gorky, My Childhood

Once again, I have awakened so early that it's not even morning. I have spent the hours while I was alone in the house writing, but now I am sitting in the room where our three children are sleeping. I am waiting for them to open their eyes and become real. The house is completely silent and it is silent outside. Only thin strips of light are visible, falling now on the south side of our house, onto the impregnated tables below the kitchen window, where the paint has already begun to peel. It is easy to think high-flown thoughts while they are asleep, quiet, and incomplete. At night they sort of better lend themselves to theories and dreams. They fit in between all the words. But when the sun appears, the day begins and is quickly filled with all manner of requirements. The light breaks through the words and takes hold of us. The children awaken with all kinds of specific whims and needs.

The middle child is the first to wake up. She just opens her eyes and then they are filled with her. Present from the first moment. I am so fond of those clear, open eyes. She smiles when she sees me and I whisper good morning, say it's time for her to get dressed and comb her hair, and I will wake up the other two. And I remain seated, listening to her race down the slippery stairway. Once she fell down a flight of stairs. Or actually, it was more of a ladder attached to a wall, leading down from a loft bed. We were in Denmark, where we had rented a cabin with some friends and the four children we'd brought with us had climbed up the ladder so they could play undisturbed on the loft bed. Or maybe we sent them up there so we could talk in the tiny cottage. None of us noticed that after a while the youngest tried to climb down by herself. I just heard the crash when she fell to the floor. There's no point in carrying around the burden of all the times I've been afraid or uncertain or sad or desperate or upset because something has happened to one of them. I don't remember all of these feelings. But I remember how happy I was to see her clear, open eyes when K picked her up and held that little body against her shoulder.

The eldest is easily awakened. It's slow going, but we know what we are doing. I use a method I learned from the novel *The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway. When the fisherman Santiago wants to wake up the young boy who helps him, he sits down beside the small bed and holds one hand around the boy's ankle until he wakes up. I once told the story about Santiago and the boy and the giant marlin at the dinner table. Our eldest son, who is now waking up before me, was so moved by the story that he started to cry. But I had made a mistake. Or I didn't remember the story correctly. In my version of the story, Santiago died in the end. And this was what made

my eldest son cry. But the next day I came home and told them that I'd been mistaken. Santiago doesn't die. He just falls asleep. He is worn out, but he is only sleeping. Gathering his strength throughout the night and preparing to meet a new day, undefeated.

I can't wake up the youngest. He sleeps so heavily and wants to sleep so late that every morning I must lift him onto my back and carry him down to the breakfast table. As I walk down the stairs he clings to my neck like a monkey. Out of pure instinct he clutches me tightly, still asleep. It is only once we reach the floor below and enter the kitchen that he releases his full weight against my back once more. I see the way his older siblings look at him. How they envy him up there.

"Good morning," I say to him. "Time to get up now."

No reaction. I would love to let him sleep, but he too must wake up and greet the day. Not because he has something to do, or at least not anything important. But he must get up now, so all the rest of us can also begin our day. So we can start doing all the important stuff and nonsense somebody has asked us to do. The eldest must have time to ride his bike to school to hand in his math homework, the middle child can't miss the school bus, her knapsack is also full of homework. K must leave for work and I, well, I also have commitments. That's why I am sitting here trying to tickle him gently, so he will wake up. The rest of us have many important things to do, so before long I will carry him like a baby monkey to the breakfast table.

"Are you there?" I ask. I look towards the light-filled window. The day is here, we can't just lie about dreaming. He must get dressed now, and he must go to daycare, so he can learn how to be a child, the way we want children to be. If he is good at learning that, he will be a good child. Soon, when summer ends, he will start school. There he will learn even more. No sooner will he have learned how to be the best possible child than he will learn how to be an adult. He is the last one to learn this in our little family, the last one we have left. And now I can hear them calling us from the kitchen. Come on, time to wake up, I say, and draw his little body to mine. Time to get up and disturb the universe.