

Play It Again Sam

After receiving a steady stream of goblins and Gagas, my Halloween stash of chocolate candy was running low. How many more disguised children would traipse up to my door to demand a treat? Should I begin to enforce the one ghoul one bar rule? Just then, as if appearing precisely at the moment I needed to be rescued from my miserly miscalculation, what looked to be a three year old inside a pirate costume shyly approached my steps. As he reached me, he placed his plastic pumpkin candy satchel on the ground and froze in place, forgetting what comes next. His mother, cheerily following a couple of steps behind, encouraged her sweet son, who was obviously experiencing his first Halloween as a Trick or Treater. "Sam, what do you say and what do you do?" prompted the young pirate's Halloween etiquette mentor. Quickly remembering, Blackbeard Sam piped up: "Twick o' Tweet!" His lines proudly dispatched, the gentle marauder then reached into his little trove of sugary treasure, picked out a Reese's Peanut Butter Cup (how did he know they were my favorite?) and handed it to me. As his mom and I giggled in pleased amazement, I thanked the boy and traded his gift for one from my own supply. Oh, and as they departed into the holiday night, I told Sam's mother that she was doing a terrific job of parenting.

Was I right about the connection between Sam's spontaneous act of kindness toward a stranger (in fact, I had never before met him or his parent) and his upbringing? Or did he express an instinctual, even a genetic propensity of human beings to be generous, even when it served no obvious direct benefit to oneself? How early in life do we start to recognize good from bad behavior and good versus evil intent? Is morality based on an innate human capacity to learn from and perpetuate cultural and social practices, customs, expectations and role models? Should I have rewarded Sam with two Twix bars in exchange for his peanut butter cup?

These and other musings on the moral development of children have occupied my thoughts ever since that hallowed eve. So I did some reading of old texts and new research on this intriguing subject. My interest stemmed from the abstract fascination with how human beings grow to ponder, pursue and pass down personal standards of right and wrong. Maybe, too, studying the development of individual moral behavior might shed light on the foundation of big matters crucial to the survival, health and progress of civilized life on earth – like the origins of why and how we honor principles of justice, freedom, peace and interdependence, enabling people of diverse races, cultures, beliefs and nationalities the possibility to live in harmony.

For decades, the theoretical underpinnings of moral development were rooted in cognitive psychology or the discipline of how we come to think about natural and social law, and how we build an understanding of our opportunities in relation to our abilities and the needs and interests of others. A venerated psychologist, Lawrence Kohlberg, made a career of posing hypothetical moral dilemmas to folks of various ages and stages of mental development, listening carefully to the reasons behind people's solutions to the problems (questions like was it okay to break the law to steal medicine that you needed but couldn't afford). Kohlberg then proposed a theory that all people progress through some number of six possible stages of moral development from an infantile judgment about whether a chosen act results in personal pain or pleasure through a respect for the rule of law and order above

personal choice to a commitment to act on universal principles of equal rights and respect overruling social contract (a level that relatively few persons ever reach – included might be founders of the great religions, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr.). This paradigm implies that children younger than school age do not have the reasoning skills to discern right from wrong or make principled decisions.

This all started to change in the 1980's and 1990's when behavioral and physiological techniques developed that enabled researchers to systematically observe children in the first year or two of life communicate consistent preferences for people and animated objects that behaved kindly and helpfully to others in need. Paul Bloom and his colleagues and students at Yale University and Michael Tomasello and his colleagues at the Max Planck Institute in Germany have been engaged in a series of carefully designed studies that are opening our minds to the certainty that infants and toddlers already have a basic knowledge for what matters when it comes to showing sympathy for people who act supportively and aversion for those who hurt or hinder, even toward strangers. What those infants couldn't know is that behaving altruistically boosts your immune system, increasing resistance to illness, and stimulates the production of chemicals that lower your stress reactivity, controlling your blood pressure. Sixty-five years ago, Viktor Frankl observed that those of his fellow inmates in a Nazi concentration camp who shared their crumbs with equally famished prisoners survived until the Allies liberated them while prisoners who hoarded their morsels starved to death in prison.

Sadly, at the same time, witness how early in childhood kids start to prefer to associate with individuals who look, speak, dress, eat and, ultimately, think like themselves. They likely learn by direct observation of behavior modeled by kin and by peers. Even the most zealous scientist admits that babies may at best possess the elemental pre-wiring that helps them notice qualities of behavior they see and feel. The mature ability to make well-considered choices and to develop an ethical belief system that guides one's social behavior is the product of family and culture interacting with individual psychobiology.

In the end, we are shaped by what we experience, whom we learn from, and how much we develop the courage to integrate all that life presents and then choose for ourselves what to believe in and how much to care. Here's hoping humanity wins!

Oh and I decided it was okay to give the young pirate just one piece of candy. I didn't want him to think (actually to know) that he could expect to profit materially in return for his kindness. On second thought, what's so bad about that? Sam, come back! If only we really could roll back time, learn from and then erase the past, start over and get it right the second first time. If life worked that way, prevention would be the only treatment we would need (and every day could be happy Halloween).