

On Parenting

There is no question but that your parents failed you as parents. All parents fail their children, and yours are no exception. No parent is ever adequate for the job of being a parent, and there is no way not to fail at it. No parent ever has enough love, or wisdom, or maturity, or whatever. No parent ever succeeds.

This means that part of your task—like that of every other person—is to supplement what your parents have given you, to find other sources of parenting. You need more mothering than your mother could give you, more fathering that your father had to offer, more brothering and sistering than you got from your siblings.

The problem is complicated by the demands that our society makes on parents to be good parents. They are supposed to be 100 percent adequate, and it is a terrible disgrace if they are not. If they are successful, their children will reward them with devoted love, obedience, and success; if they are not, their children will turn out to be unloving, disobedient, and unsuccessful. This is the prevailing conviction of our society. But when parents buy this notion, they put themselves in an impossible position. They try first to be 100 percent adequate. When they inevitably fail at that, they try to *appear* to be 100 percent adequate. In either case, they cling to you, demanding that you get all your parenting from them, and thus reassure them that they have been good parents. (Such parental concern about children's "failures"

can be understood in part as an attempt to force the children to succeed, and thus reassure the parents that they have been good parents.) They thus find it difficult to let you grow up; that is, to find other sources of parenting. This means that you will have to grow up in spite of them rather than wait for their permission. They will not make it easy for you, and you must do it on your own.

To grow up, it is necessary for you to forgive your parents. But you must forgive them for your sake, not theirs. Their self-forgiveness is up to them, not you, and they cannot afford to wait for you to forgive them any more than you can afford to wait for them to forgive you. When you do not forgive them, it means that you are still expecting all your parenting from them. You are clinging to them in the hope that if you can make them feel guilty enough, they will finally come through with enough parenting. But this is impossible, and in order for you to be really free to find other parenting, you must forgive.

I hope you will not be embarrassed at your need for parenting, and that you will be humble enough and determined enough to find effective ways of getting it.

—HENRY T. CLOSE

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