

Children Are the Prophets of the Future And Elders the Messengers of the Past

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**Our tale, the good and the ill shall be written, for
Time has its own leaves, books and hall of records.**

“One wrong step is enough to change a whole destiny.”

— *Attributed to Alfred Nobel*

Retirement has a wonderful world of its own. Many a retired person who gradually turns into a handy page. “So sorry,” he’s told, “but could you please take the kid to the kindergarten?” “Please buy a box of powdered milk for the baby! We’ve run out!” “Could you take the kid to the park? Thank You! I’m too busy to do it myself!” And better be careful not to tell anyone that the lady of the house is too busy partying with her lady friends!

I had taken my lovely 4-year old grandchild to the park when a helicopter appeared above us. I erred when I said in Persian, “Dear, look at that airplane!” He laughed and said in Persian, “Grandpa! That’s an “eli-coptelle!” I asked, “Oh dear, how old are you?” He showed his fingers and said, “I’m 4 years old.” I asked, “How old is your daddy?” He answered, “4.” I said, “But that would be impossible!” He answered, “Mommy says that daddy became daddy when I was born!” I asked, “Why didn’t you go to the kindergarten today?” He continued in the same tone and explained in earnest, “*Baruch ha-shem* — Thanks God — daddy’s car was broken and he couldn’t take me to the kindergarten.” I pondered in silence, “How far they tread ahead of us.”

I was talking to a mother-in-law with a controlling personality. She only had the worst things to say about her son-in-law. But when her grandchildren were mentioned, i.e. the children of this very son-in-law, she exclaimed, “Second Einsteins!” Well, I’d better leave it there. It reminds me of a popular Iranian catchphrase, “He’s just a kid; he wouldn’t understand,” unaware that to the

contrary, it was the grownups who didn't understand and couldn't realize how well the children, those delicate fresh computers, understood and recorded everything.

What a world it was, and especially after a leap forward worth centuries, i.e. the fruitful recent waves of mass migration, what a new world it's become. Suffice it to compare the progress just made over the past 25 years with that of a far earlier past in order to project and to fathom the future. Until 25 years ago, few of us had regular access to fax, internet, mobile phones or many other inventions of modern times, whereas today, our lives can hardly be imagined without them. What will take place tomorrow? But then, *what* tomorrow?! I recall fondly the Alā Spring in the Damavand area of northern Tehran, especially for the few verses that were engraved on a solid rock next to the spring:

**I heard of the blessed soul Jamshid,
Who wrote on a rock next to a spring,
“Many a man who drank of these waters as I did,
And who left the world in the blink of an eye.”
Alas, many a March and April or May shall arrive,
When we'll have turned into dust and bricks.**

Yes, they said, “He's just a kid; he wouldn't understand.” They took the children with them to the public bathes, said and did all sorts of improprieties before their eyes, and dismissed it all by claiming that, “He's just a kid; he wouldn't understand.” But today, it's the children who are telling us in effect, “You didn't understand then, and you don't understand now.” We may dare and say that today, most 7 or 8-year old kids have become *de facto* experts of the house in computers and other electronic devices. Thanks to the boundless eye, ear and memory of the mobile phone in their pockets, they can see the world far wider than the grownups did, making an illiterate fool out of anyone who stands helpless before this wonder of human history. I for one somewhat belong to the latter group, as everyday I need to ask a little child to help me with the technology. In that sense, I am the little one, not the children. To be little doesn't have to do with our calendar life. **The little one isn't always the younger of the two, but he's always the one who understands the less.** These children shall be building the road ahead. They are the prophets of the future and the transforming agents of the world, while we grownups are the messengers of the past. As such, we should mind and make certain that we shan't pass our tried and failed misconceptions on to the coming generation.

The times of holding fast onto discriminations and some fixed theories in the name of “preserving our identity” are past far behind. Today, a professor before the class relies not only on the textbook printed awhile earlier, but on her most up-to-date notes. In this race, the winner will be who knows the more and keeps up better with changing times.

**The soul is but knowledge being tried.
Who knows the more, his is the greater soul.
Our soul’s larger than the animal’s, why?
For ours has more knowledge of the world.
O, dear heart! Where the soul needs knowledge,
Who knows the more, his is the stronger soul.
How can the soul know of good and evil,
Be joyful for goodness and in tears for perils?
For the soul is an informer, in its head and being,
And who knows the more, his is the richer soul.
The world of the soul spills over with understanding.
He is devoid of all knowledge who lacks a soul.**

Let’s talk a bit more about the mobile phone. This magical device, this favorite child of human history, this little box with a big eye and a sharp ear and a huge memory, this common tool especially in the hands of modern children, it comes with countless benefits, but also naturally, with its share of harm. One such problem is that everybody especially children develop an extreme dependence on them that at times rises to an addiction, so far as they may sleep with them, wake up to them, dance and play along them, and so forth. But then, as the story goes, an old rich guy’s mobile rang when he was in the restroom. He picked up the phone and said, “Hmm?!” The joke is self-evident.

This brings me back to my childhood. Back then, our only toys were the clay marbles which we made ourselves, of course, because Toys R Us didn’t have a branch in our city of Kashan! In contrast, today the toys have become mostly electronic, and every house has a room full of them which lost their attraction within hours of landing in the place. Children constantly expect new toys, and I don’t know how they’ll choose a spouse when the time comes. But let’s stick to *my* childhood. One of the unforgivable and irredeemable missteps of the Iranian tradition of our time was the physical punishment of children in the name of education. Wrongly, to beat the children

was deemed synonymous with educating them, as they said, “The stick of the teacher is a daisy! Who doesn’t receive it is crazy!” Whereas in reality, who brought down the blow was the crazy one.

I remember how an 8 or 9-year old child was laid down on his back, before all the children, teachers, and his Honor the Principal (sic!). His two delicate feet were tied naked to a bar, and the



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crazy school caretaker flogged the poor child on his bare little soles with a leather whip, so hard as the child cried to heavens and his feet blistered. So often on such occasions, as a helpless bystander, I wept in sympathy with the poor child being flogged.

Today, I cry out and ask, “Where were his parents to save the child?” I won’t forget a primary school student who every time at the chalkboard misread the number 3 as 2, 4 as 6, and “book” as “cook”. The children laughed, while the ignorant teacher punished the poor kid, slapping him in the face, kicking him, flogging him with a ruler, or pressing on his fingers with a pencil stuck between them, deluded to think in that stupid mind that he was educating the child. So often they tied and flogged that innocent child to make him a better student (sic!), and nothing happened, for a compass under pressure would draw an oval instead of a circle! As much as I cried then for the poor kids being flogged, I’m ashamed today when I remember the idiocy of those teachers.

The said child was unjustly referred to as “the class bum”, and he was constantly subjected to the rage of the growups and the ridicule of other kids. He finished the elementary school at 14, a few years later than others of his age, then he left Kashan for Tehran. He suffered permanent headaches.

They took the boy to Dr. Issa Rafi’, an ophthalmologist. The doctor said, “This child can’t see well! **He needs eyeglasses**, and the headaches are caused by the impaired vision.” Once he started wearing the glasses, the poor child and his parents sighed from the depth of the soul, and he went on crying for a long while. The headaches were gone, but this delicate flower, like thousands of other children in his situation, was shattered forever. The damage done by the cruel punishments and by shaming him in the public was never remedied.

On the first day, the teacher taught me the “A”.
He suffered much till I learned and wrote a “BA”.
If only instead of the fox and the crow,
He had taught us about life tomorrow.

As our elders would remember, a thousand years ago, nay, just 70 years ago, a child wearing glasses could never be found across the school or society. An eyeglass was something unique to a handful of the elderly, and no one imagined that countless children needed to wear them, as we see today many a 2-year old who may need and wear glasses.

As we understand mistakes of the past, we learn that beliefs and traditions must be reconsidered and brought up to date. We can't run a village or a city, let alone a country, forever with some unchanging laws. We can't rule a state in the name of religion and without a parliament. And parliaments cannot remain stagnant; rather, they must be at work constantly to introduce better laws that would suit our times. **For the past 25 years, I've regretted outloud** that we've most neglected our glorious Holy Book exactly where it offered its one of a kind prediction; for not only the *Torah* has allowed for the laws to be corrected and updated, but it has also shown us the way to do it. We can confirm the above in the following precious command (*Deuteronomy*, 17:8) where it says, “When faced with a matter too hard for you to judge, bring it to the assembly of the judges of the day (the Sanhedrin) and ask them for guidance. Do as they advise, and do not waver from their command.” Yet, for the past 3300 years, this command has been enacted only once, and that was about 2000 years ago under the supervision of Hillel Ha-Zaken. No doubt, the Jewish people, like the followers of other religions, have had more than their share of problems over the past 2000 years. But due to sectarian divisions among us, the common will to act has been absent. What can be done about it? First, we need a better understanding of the laws; and next, as the saying goes, we should “have every homeowner clean before their houses for the whole city to be clean,” that is, we need to take necessary action on the individual, family and public levels. Else, crying out aloud for the day when our children and grandchildren remember us for our ignorance and misperceptions, and for repeating our past mistakes.

On the other hand, however, today in the United States, a child may sue his or her parents on grounds of negligence, under-qualification, or a lack of proper child-rearing conditions, take them to the court, and demand monetary retribution. It's even possible that the child may be taken away

from his or her parents. Well, as the saying goes, **“Not that salty, not this tasteless!”** Crying out aloud from extremism.

They asked a girl for her name. She answered, “Unsolicited Water.” They asked, “How come? That’s too strange!” She answered, “Because my parents always say in my presence that they had asked for a boy, but sadly, I was born a girl.” What a shame. Indeed, many parents badly need to learn things, and far more than their children do. Some of them do not know what horrible effects humiliating a child and discriminating between the boys and the girls can leave on the child’s mind, and they are unaware of what beauties they exchange for ugliness. The poet **Iraj Mirza** said,

**In the other lands, a woman’s a friend of man,
While in this sad place, she’s a burden to him.
But isn’t a woman but another human among us?
Can’t she tell between the good and the evil?**

I asked the late Mr. Elias Ghodsian, a quite knowledgeable man, “Why have they discriminated between boys and girls so far and at so many stages?” He replied, “I’d be more surprised why the situation isn’t worse than it is, when **it’s said in a certain book** that ‘the angels in heaven cry for her father when a little girl is born.’” Given such a culture, what more could you expect? Such writings that don’t agree with modern knowledge and understanding are fundamentally unworthy of our attention and should be ignored, whereas some people continue to rely on them. Alas, the tongue is too short and the pen is too restrained to say what needs to be told, for I’ve suffered a pain which only who has suffered likewise could understand.

**It won’t serve us well if the secret is revealed; otherwise,
There isn’t much news in the mystic school of the wise.**

What surprises me in particular is that today, despite the freedom of expression, ladies continue to put up with much scornful humiliation and do little to get rid of them. Since for me, and the women,

**To say what cannot be said, it is
A task left to the heart, not the tongue.
I need more eloquence, another speech,
Different terms, another language,**

**To tell the story of my ills,
My frailties and my miseries.**

Not every parent deserves to be one. I doubt if everyone understands that education, an understanding of the subjects, and the natural respect between a child and his parents, even practicing the religion without understanding the spiritual side of its commands, these don't depend on fear and punishment. I remember a classmate of mine, whose psychotic father, a Mr. K. used to tie the poor child to a tree trunk and beat him with a wet and thin branch, a wooden whip called *tarkeh*, to make him study for school and respect his father. This mad man, unworthy of the title of "father", once said in my presence that "if my son wakes up late in the morning, be it the cold of the winter, I'd empty a full ewer of water over his head." The child suffered so much cruelty in those brutal hands, until one day we found him stuttering. He was never cured. Alas, then and now, people have seldom understood that the truly powerful is who can establish balance within the family or in the teaching space, not who spreads the reign of force and terror.

My dear friend, the late Mirza Agha-Jan Omrani, recalled at about the age of 90 that, "During the early days of school, when I couldn't read a sentence, the teacher took his pencil, placed it between my fingers, that 6-year old child, and pressed on them so far as I almost fainted out of pain. Beginning the next day, I never went back to school, and forever, I remained frightened by schools and teachers." One critical point lost to many teachers and ordinary people was the damaging effect of physical punishment on the body and soul of the individual, especially the psychological wounds which resulted from the cruel practice. Perhaps such brutal punishments were imposed on human beings because people in the past dealt most of their time with animals, and e.g. exploited animals for transportation. Apparently, they couldn't tell the difference between a human being and an animal, and as they used the whip to tame a beast, they also used it to induce fear and obedience in people, instead of drawing on kindness and encouragement as the means of persuasion. They wanted to force the oppressed person into obedience out of fear, unaware that human being is the servant of kindness, not something in need of fear. The last thing a human being needs is a philosophy of "the paradise and the burning hell!", better known in English as the "carrot and stick" policy!

It should be noted that despite the public ignorance about matters of psychology, the Persian elite scholars and knowledgeable poets have many a time pointed out such issues, as the verses below indicate:

O, **brother**, you are but the **thought**, and
The remainder of you but **bones** and roots.
Your **thoughts be a flower**, and you're a **garden**, but
Let them be a **thorn bush**, and you'll become a **fireplace**.

Despite the immense progress made so far, to date if you bring up psychological problems before many people, they'll retort that "you are the crazy one!" However, in recent years, a scholar among a select few named Dr. Farhang Holakouee, seized the opportunity and used the modern means of broadcast at his disposal to take some important steps in public awareness, leading to a big change in the general population's notions in this area. As such, the Persian-speaking communities are indebted to Dr. Holakouee's kindness and his illuminating and effective efforts in this matter.

May we appreciate our strong points, including the boundless and selfless kindness of our parents, and may we learn our lesson from the many shades of ignorance of the time. Those who think that stagnation and avoiding change would "preserve our identity", they don't notice that the river owes its transparency to its constant change and flow, whereas the swamp should blame its thick muddiness and crowded weeds on its perpetual stagnation.

Let's abandon the traditions which do not agree with modern knowledge, so that our children won't be remembering their parents for their ignorance, as we do to our ancestors. For as a poet said, **The tale of our good and ill shall be written / For Time has its own pen, book and house of records.**

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To receive copies of this and other essays and writings by Norman Gabay in English and Persian, including his book entitled *An Invitation to Reason*, and *The Glossary of the Kashani Jewish Dialect*, please visit the following website: BabaNouri.com.

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