

### 13: THREE GENERATIONS OF DESTRUCTION

When my oldest son and I arrived to a preschool gym class, I got annoyed when he refused to remove his shoes to join the class. “Look at those other kids,” I told him. “They’re taking off their shoes. Do what they’re doing.”

Hearing the idiocy of my own words broke through my irritation, and my brain suddenly fast-forwarded. I imagined twelve years from now when I could hear my adolescent son say, “All the kids at school smoke weed. Everybody’s doing it.”

*Flash of insight: I am parenting like my mother!*

Since my mother had pushed conformity, I unconsciously defaulted to the only parenting model I ever knew. But as soon as I recognized that, I also recognized I did not want my children to blindly follow someone else’s script—not even mine. I wanted to affirm their autonomy and help them gain a strong, unshakable sense of themselves that would steady them through adolescence’s impulsivity and peer pressure.

I started taking Parent Encouragement Program (PEP) classes based on developmental-psychologist Alfred Adler's theories. He developed a framework for parenting that promoted raising kids with a high degree of social interest, self-regulation, competence and belonging. Over the next four years I made a stunning discovery: parenting is not intuitive.

No one is born with insights into child psychology. No one "naturally" has the skills to handle developmental challenges. If I did not actively seek best-parenting practices, I would be limited to what I picked up from family and friends.

In one class, I learned anger often masks other emotions. I might lash out over spilt milk, for example, but the milk is not the real issue—I might be concerned about my husband's behavior or work stress. As with so many other wellness strategies, I needed to get under my anger and discover its root cause. My first assignment: "Describe a common anger situation with your kids."

My sons were eight and six, so I immediately thought of bedtime. My husband often worked late, so it was up to me to do the dinner-bath-teeth-brushing-reading routine with the boys. But once tucked into bed, they would not settle down and go to sleep. They horsed around, asked for water, or begged for more stories. Eventually, I would lose my temper.

Every night.

“Describe how you felt.”

Tired.

“Does the anger match the situation?”

“NO!” I scratched on the worksheet. While irritation or frustration might have been appropriate for these bedtime antics, I felt more of a slow, seething rage.

“List every reason for being angry.”

I filled in the obvious: “I’m tired, it’s my time, I’m spent.”

“Why are you so angry in this situation?”

“I feel played and manipulated,” I wrote. “The children are inconsiderate and don’t think about anyone but themselves.”

I stopped writing. That last response did not feel true. Selfishness did not fit with my anger. I had to mull over why my anger did not match the situation. I set the worksheet aside and went to bed thinking about that question.

Later that night, I bolted upright in bed, gasping with the real answer: I was jealous of my oldest son!

I knew it was true because I burned with embarrassment. My anger masked my jealousy, an emotion I was too ashamed to admit. It came into my full consciousness and I could see it.

Sitting with this truth over the next few days, I thought about why I envied my son. Everything came easily to him. He brought home report cards filled with As, yet I knew he often did his homework on the bus. A naturally gifted athlete, he excelled on the basketball court, and all his easy successes gave him confidence and made him secure with himself. To top it off, he had the material, emotional, and logistical support—from me and his father!—to pursue what he liked.

He was a happy, unconditionally loved kid with a childhood I could not help comparing to my own.

Everything came hard to me. I was a weak, scrappy student with an undiagnosed learning disorder. I never experienced abundance with food, clothing, school supplies, safety, or love. I had no special talent to feed my confidence. I had failed at bowling, the only sport I ever tried out for.

My mother was an angry, sometimes violent alcoholic throughout my childhood. Even when sober, she would lash out with unpredictable rage, unless we had company at the house—then she became a wonderful, animated, funny person who everyone adored. Even me. Life would have been easier to navigate if she passed out at four o'clock every day, but I could not even count on that.

When I shared this ugly insight with my husband, he said, “I’ve always thought your mother was jealous of you. The first time I met her, I noticed how she

kept trying to direct my attention from you to her. She dominated every conversation, talking about incidental things that did not mean anything to me. She was always like that; I saw the same thing over and over again.”

I had no idea that dynamic existed—but once he pointed it out, I remembered my grandmother criticizing my mother for everything: how she parented, how she kept house, how she was lazy and wasteful. Grandma had lived through the depression, so maybe her huge power struggle with her own daughter stemmed from the same thing: jealousy. She probably resented my mother’s “easy” life, just as my mother resented how I had pulled mine together when she could not—and I resented my son for enjoying the easy path my husband and I had given him.

With one anger worksheet, I discovered a pattern going back at least three generations, if not much, much further. Sudden clarity hit me with an enormous jolt: my grandmother, my mother, and I all envied our kids, and so unwittingly competed with and undermined them.

I felt heartbroken about my mother. She had never reined in her anger, drinking, or verbal and physical abusiveness. She had never taken responsibility for the harm she inflicted on my siblings and me. She must have felt guilty and resentful and frustrated and disappointed every day of her life.

At the same time, I was grateful my son had me, an emotionally tuned-in mother who did not model extreme dysfunction as a normal lifestyle. I wanted and expected I would have a lifelong friendly relationship with him, which I certainly never had with my mother.

From that moment, my bedtime anger vanished. I started watching for destructive past-interaction patterns whenever something came up. Then I would reset my intentions and change my behavior, making my conscious living a wellness choice.

Now when I look at my son, I marvel at what he has become: a secure, confident, nonconformist person. He had and is having an incredible life, doing things that, yes, sometimes raise a tinge of envy. But now when that happens, I just smile. I am so grateful for my ever-growing self-awareness, which is helping me yank out my own destructive roots of envy, live in choice, and be the parent I always wanted to be.