

Time Out on "Time Outs"

Is one the agent of their own fate, or does one believe themselves at the mercy of fate? There is a well known and well tested way of assessing personality development known as "locus of control." Locus of control, developed by cognitive psychologists, simply refers to "the degree to which persons expect that ...reinforcement [and other outcomes] of their behavior is [dependent on their] behavior or personal characteristics versus the degree to which [they expect it is due to] chance, luck or fate...powerful others, or is simply unpredictable." Not surprisingly, those who see themselves as the primary agent in their own lives have a much higher probability of being creative, high achievers and able to cope with stress. They are said to have an internal locus of control. Those who depend on outside sources for the definition of their lives, the "externals", are much more likely to be conformists and subject to maladjustment. As parents, internals are more warm, accepting and nurturing, externals colder, rejecting and demanding.

Now, let us switch from the cognitive to the holistic perspective. Perhaps the basic premise of holism is that the whole is more than the sum of the parts. Holism not only wishes to inquire into the nature of the parts of a system but of at least equal importance, into the relationships among the parts. It is the synergy that defines the whole, and the synergy is created of the parts *and* their relationships. It is important to note that this synergy is, by nature, indefinable and unpredictable. Indefinable because it is always being created anew as the parts and their relationships evolve. Unpredictability may best be understood by exam-

ple. Grasses do not imply flowers and cells do not imply organisms. Yet, in each case the former is unmistakably linked to the latter as a connected evolutionary process. Science recognizes this in the well respected fields of Chaos and Complexity Theories, aptly named the science of wholes.

Many have seen these qualities of synergy leading directly to spiritual inquiry and discourse. Indefiniteness and unpredictability necessarily leave one open to the moment, to the arising creative expression. They force us to drop our agenda of what should be and recognize what is, including ourselves as part of what is. For this reason, the Perennial Philosophy has expanded to include holism along with the core (not cultural) teachings and wisdom of all religion and philosophy in its attempt to describe what is essential for self knowledge.

Of course, there is much more to holism and we shall see it in action when we talk of Natural Learning Rhythms, a holistic appreciation of child development that honors all aspects and capacities of the child. For now, let us simply take these two very different approaches to the human psyche and attempt to understand what they imply about time-outs.

Of the first, cognitive psychology, we simply have to ask: Where is the locus of control in the decision and enforcement of time-outs? It seems obvious that time-outs are an imposed external monitoring system and designed to control behavior. In short it is a behavior modification technique, an approach good for dogs, perhaps, but questionable for humans. Indeed, it was the revulsion attendant to treating humans in the classic conditioning approach of

stimulus-response that gave rise to the deeper inquiry of the cognitivists in the 1970's. It is accurate that you can condition a child with bribes and coercion, but to do so reduces that person to their lowest capacities. It rarely, if ever, brings forth understanding, responsibility and other desirable capacities that make life worth living and which are elements of an internal locus of control.

Holism goes much further, specifically condemning rewards and punishments as detrimental to a child's health and growth. In the words of the great philosopher and educator Krishnamurti, "Rewards and punishments make a child dull. Using rewards causes pain by conditioning the brain and confining intelligence to the will of an authority. This does not cultivate intelligence." We must also ask what happens to the parent or teacher who is that authority administering the time-out.

In most instances of which we are aware, time-outs lend weight to authoritarian relationships. The adult has assumed the power and control and the child must submit. Authoritarianism in this case is not to be confused with the natural authority of guardianship and guide that parents and teachers naturally have with the children. In fact, it is often the breakdown of this natural relationship that leads to time-outs, and other forms of coercion.

Our experience strongly suggests that time-outs are the adult's response to internal conditions of frustration and helplessness that arise when children "act out." This method of discipline became popular for two reasons. First, they often do intimidate children to modify their behavior. Second, they seem to invite the adults to act "responsibly"

by taking action before their anger takes possession of them and they enacted more draconian measures.

From the holistic perspective, in neither case is genuine relationship served. Forcing children to modify their behavior teaches them very little about themselves. They do not gain any understanding of why they acted as they did, or why it was so terribly offensive. An 8 or 10-year-old child left by himself to ponder his misdeeds simply does not have the requisite capacities to appreciate the subtleties of his motivations or reasons why his needs should be sublimated to those of the class and teacher. They often feel ostracized and might well turn submissive (often mistaken for "good children") or resentful. Of great importance, they have lost contact with the elder and are left to wander in an isolated land without guidance.

Perhaps, more subtly, an opportunity to use the powerful energy that caused the "acting out" has been lost. Adults often make the mistake of assuming they know the motivation for the child's behavior, or ignore the motivation question completely. A child who has just witnessed a bitter fight between her parents before coming to school has quite different motivations for her behavior than one who has just overloaded on sugar and cartoons for breakfast. To relate to them with the same technique is erroneous. Real care for the inner nature of the child would call forth different responses for meaningful learning to occur. Were that opportunity taken, both teacher and student could develop a deeper appreciation for one another. Many creative responses to the situation could, and in our experience, probably would arise. A relationship with genuine care for one another often

is the inevitable result of this individual attentiveness. And people who care for one another find ways to align themselves to allow meaning and learning to happen.

An often ignored fact is that the teacher also suffers. Checking their frustration impulse by removing the stimulus begs the question of why they became frustrated to begin with. Many of the teachers with whom we have worked feel obligated to complete the lesson plan, or to not let one child disrupt the learning of many. Many have said they wish they could spend time with each individual child but there are simply too many children to have the time to devote to one or two. These are noble considerations. However, displacing these frustrations on the children by controlling them does nothing to solve the problem. It simply masks the wound. Frustration grows, as the real needs of both students and teachers are not satisfied. There has not been a reevaluation of the school ethos to include interpersonal guidance and a commitment of the resources it takes to engage that successfully. There has not been an investigation of the effect of the expulsion of the offending child on the learning of the others. Classrooms all too often become places where children are managed to insure the ingestion of a curriculum.

Parents and teachers are not supposed to be wardens and police officers. They have, in our opinion, the most important job on the planet. Every effort should be made to insure that they engage their children, and each other, with the highest integrity and opportunity for the deepest learning. This explicitly means that they must develop relationships of honor and care; that they must learn to trust one another. Time-outs sim-

ply do not allow this kind of relationship. They impose isolation. They leave children on their own to "figure it out". They ask children to understand things beyond their developmental capacities. They lead to sublimation and submission to outside control, not appreciation. They put teachers in the authoritarian position and when they fail, as they will with some children, lead to either greater punishments or more severe forms of expulsion.

It is only fair that we consider the case where the teacher has judiciously decided that a child needs to spend a bit of time alone to regain some perspective. We do concede that for certain children in certain instances this might be beneficial. However, its value is rare and then only if framed in such a way that is not perceived as a punishment or used as a technique to slide around a difficult situation.

Natural Learning Rhythms, offers detailed insights into the effects of time-outs. This essay is too confined to describe all of those insights. However, a few brief remarks might well serve to make the point.

Natural Learning Rhythms, by dint of years of field work and study, has come to see that all the talents, capacities, tendencies and behaviors that children express are organized in the service of Ultimacy. There are Organizing Principles in each developmental stage through which this is accomplished. The Organizing Principle is a force that determines the general ways in which human energy, capacities, inclinations, and interaction are structured and act. The goal of the Organizing Principle is Ultimacy, and the energy, capacities, inclinations, and interactions it has to work with are developmentally and contextually bound. Further, each Organizing Principle needs de-

velopmentally sensitive nurturing environments to bring forth its optimal expression.

Each developmental stage in the Natural Learning Rhythms taxonomy ends in the suffix "being." Being means "nothing essential is missing." Thus each stage is seen as whole unto itself, yet part of a greater whole and of course, the whole of the child is the indefinable synergy. This requires that we participate with the child in this moment of being, accepting the wholeness of it and in connected relationship. Natural Learning Rhythms strongly suggests that when we do this with developmental sensitivity the self actualization of both elder and child is served.

BodyBeing, the first developmental stage described in Natural Learning Rhythms, begins at conception and holds dominance to approximately 9 years of age. Its Organizing Principle is Rightful Place, and its secondary Organizing Principles are strength and boundaries. The child needs to know that she belongs, where she belongs and with whom she belongs. As her world matches her inner need to experience Rightful Place, she finds strength and the ability to both create and respond to healthy boundaries.

As with all Organizing Principles, Rightful Place is an essential foundation to realize Ultimacy. All learning is enhanced to the degree that Rightful Place is nurtured and inhibited to the degree it is not. If a child is denied Rightful Place they will organize their talents and capacities to secure it. If, with personal guidance, it is provided for them then they will extend their natural curiosity to ever greater environments, with strength and a remarkable ability to learn and respect boundaries.

Each child must be seen as the individual he is so that the support is meaningful to him. Characteristics of the stage, such as its inherent egotism, dependence on sensation based information, development of the body, and so on can, and ultimately should be carefully considered. When satisfied the need for time-outs, and techniques in general, disappears. Like certain allergies disappear when diet is changed, so certain behaviors and the need to remedy them disappear when psycho-emotional diets are changed.

Natural Learning Rhythms states that it is actually detrimental to teach children boundaries from an external locus of control. BodyBeing children actually organize and describe their world by the boundaries they perceive. From the simplest distinctions between hot and cold, to the sophisticated mental maps they continually create, BodyBeing children are sensorially categorizing and classifying this very large physical and emotional world in which they find themselves.

However, BodyBeing children are sensation oriented, which means that the more pleasant a sensation, the more it is sought. The more unpleasant, the greater the avoidance. The rub occurs when the elder knows a boundary is necessary for health and it goes against the child's desire for pleasant sensations.

In Natural Learning Rhythms' view, this is exactly the frontier the child needs to explore to develop boundaries that make sense in her world. All children are born into a different world and nature has left much to be filled in to insure successful bonding and growth. This is not a test of wills. It is an exploration of frontier boundaries that insists on the development of relationship and

the transmittal of values. It is a golden opportunity for elders to nurture the intrinsic capacities and the inherent well being and health of the child, and for the child to stimulate care and guidance in the elder. It is a sacred Dance.

Time-outs do little to serve this process. They teach that place must be earned, and create insecurity via the tension it takes to earn it. They teach that guidance can be withdrawn, a sad contradiction of Robert Frost's brilliant line (here paraphrased): "Home is where they always have to let you in." They bring into question the Rightful Place of the children witness to its use. In short, they force the Organizing Principle to be concerned with that which should be given and prevent it from moving towards that which is most creative and satisfying. The child begins to look over his shoulder rather than up and out towards exploring the world.

There is much more that can be said about this stage of development, but we feel it necessary to speak briefly of one other developmental Organizing Principle and how time-outs are perceived by the child in that stage in order to bring our discussion to proper conclusion.

FeelingBeing, the second developmental stage lasts from approximately 9 to 13. There is a gestation period between all stages. Thus, ages are approximate and children in transition have unique characteristics and concerns that need to be considered separately. Fieldwork, the touchstone of all Natural Learning Rhythms insights, shows that the child enters FeelingBeing by 9. This is supported by the fact that universally all humans are known to become aware of their own mortality by age 9. This shatters the egoistic preoccu-

pations with the body and sensation and signifies a new way of ordering the world for the child.

The Organizing Principle for FeelingBeing is Trust. No longer able to be buoyed by the belief that she is the center of the world the child is now unmistakably dependent on her relationships with family and community as the matrix for health and well being. This is much more than a physical dependence, but rather is the need to learn and develop trust and trustworthy relationships. It is a delicate, vulnerable moment. If handled poorly prejudice, environmental insensitivity, clannish allegiance, fear of diversity and other socially disruptive behaviors are often the result. When handled well, social discrimi-

nation and ability, honesty and perhaps even feelings of devotion and compassion have the best chance to develop. The secondary Organizing Principle is reciprocal cooperation. When the child feels she can trust, she reciprocates with cooperation.

The age is saturated with new breadth to feelings. For instance, there is a new compelling concern with justice. To the FeelingBeing child, justice is a newly forming sense of whether people are emotionally engaging with others appropriately and whether situations are engaging people appropriately. They search their world for justice and feel trust for the people with whom they experience it.

We can see a rare occasion where

a FeelingBeing might be able to appreciate the justice in a time-out. We suspect that the time it would take to explain the time-out might better be spent exploring other ways to rebalance the difficult moment. For instance, FeelingBeing children are often occupied with fairness. We have had great success exploring the fairness in the situation and allowing the response to arise from the synergy of our interaction. It is simply a matter of understanding the developmental characteristics and working with them to mutual benefit. This approach engenders trust and thus leads to greater social consciousness in both elder and child. And that, of course, reduces the odds that such problems will occur in the future.