

The Danger and Value of Curiosity

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I feel it a great privilege to have the opportunity of speaking after two such excellent, fitting and really illuminating addresses, because my task is made very much easier. You heard from the first address the note I would like to have struck—I am thankful it has been done so much better than I could—the note of hope. I have a great deal to do with children who are supposed to be rather the off scouring of the more or less hopeless children of our civilization, but I have never yet found a case in which it was not possible to take a completely hopeful view, and, by confidence and belief in the child, by the particular kind of approach that I want to give you one example of, find some way to give the child confidence in himself and than sense of security that Dr. Calver has so much emphasized.

The second point which is such a valuable preparation for what I want to try to put before you is that which Dr. Calver has explained so admirably, of the neutrality, we might call it, of the actual character traits of the children. We have in this world during the last century or half—century, perhaps, had given to us a great many analogies and parallels which we can use as parables for understanding parts of human nature that there was never any chance of understanding before.

In the older view of life and character I think you will agree with me, we were presented, as it were, with a box full of separate items in our children, or in human beings. We were given, as it were, a catalogue. In the older kind of psychology known as Faculty Psychology, we tested the intelligence, we tested memory, we tested one quality or another quality, and in thinking of children one thought of them as being made up of generosity, envy, spite, malice, kindness, aggression, and so on; separate, definite qualities which were good on the one hand and bad on the other. We felt our training of children consisted in helping them to control, to negate and to sit upon bad qualities, and to encourage and to make grow the good qualities.

Modern psychology has very largely altered this conception and has begun, to show us that the human being comes into the world with definite qualities but with certain neutral elements out of which his characteristics are later made; powers, strains in his character that are neither good nor bad, but that turn into either good or bad according to how they are handled by the children themselves and affected by the environment into which they come. We have had in the knowledge of electricity that has grown up during the past fifty or sixty years, a parallel of very great help. Electricity cannot be called either good or bad. It can be used for electrocution; it can be used for driving

trains; it can be used for burning up things and for heating things, for lighting things and for blasting things. That is to say, it is a power that has no character in it. The character it acquires is character that is given to it by the use made of it. We now feel that children come into the world with qualities of something of the same nature, and I want to take as an illustration of what has already been said, one of the very strong qualities with which children come into the world, that of curiosity, and see if we can make, as it were, a rounding off of our morning's thinking.

Children in a community have to be looked upon from two points of view. We have, as grown-ups dealing with children in, communities, to regard the child as a member of the community. We have to think of it in regard to the other children, in regard to our- selves, in regard to the total machine in which the child lives. But we have also to look upon the child as an individual and to think of his qualities and his likes and dislikes in relation to himself, in relation to his future, in relation to his happiness, in relation to his interior harmony. A child studied from the first point of view often looks quite opposite from what he does when you look at him from the, other point of view. So often a child is looked upon by the outside world as being of bad character, but when you turn round and look at it from inside the child's own head, he is seen to be behaving perfectly admirably, rightly.

I give a little example of that in relation to the question of lying because it leads on to the point that I want to make in connection with curiosity. A little boy was brought to me by a very distressed mother who lived most of her time in India, where her husband had a post. She had to leave her children at home with a not very sympathetic sister-in-law. The little boy had been with the sister-in law for eighteen months. The mother had hurried home because of the terrible tales the sister-in-law reported to her about her son: that he was an incredible liar and, she did not think she could keep him longer; the final thing being that the child had been found at a Police Station and had been brought home by the Police. They are respectable people and this was a terrible thing to happen to them. At the Police Station the child had refused to say who he was and did not know where he lived. The mother brought the child to me and I said, "If you will let me see the child alone I may see how the matter looks from his own point of view." We have our own methods of doing that, but they are not the method of question and answer. By a somewhat roundabout way the following story emerged. The child was very sensitive, a very spiritually-minded child with extraordinarily sensitive appreciation of spiritual truth. The sister-in-law was a coarse-minded, very commonplace, kind of person whose values were entirely material. She had two children, one older and one younger than the little boy, and they, again, were of a rude, very crude type, and tormented the little boy because he did not like seeing pigs killed and was uninterested in stories of at blood and thunder type. He did not like killing flies but he did like a whole lot of other sensitive things, like the colour the moonlight was outside his window when he woke up, and the smell of things in the spring. Such likings seemed to be complete nonsense to those among whom he lived. The little boy had found up the hill the house of the doctor of the district, who was a widower and had one little girl. The doctor was nearly always away from home and his little girl was the same type of

child as the little boy. They had become very great friends; the boy used to creep through the hedge and spend a great part of his time in the doctor's house or garden, playing with his daughter. He was said to be truanting, and, of course, that was a secret much too precious for any amount of persecution to get out of him. It was much better to be thrashed for buying sweets he did not like than to betray his one piece of heaven. This went on until he came, finally, to being fantastic and thought he really lived in the doctor's house and not with those he so detested. One day, when the children were playing in a part of the garden he did not remember, the little girl was called indoors, and he found himself out in a street he did not know. He wandered away and got lost. He was picked up by the Police, extremely tired. When asked where he lived, he really had forgotten, for he was frightfully worn out. He slept and stoke, and the Police came and said to him: "You live with Mrs so-and-so." He replied: "I do not. I do not live with her. I have nothing to do with her."

When I got that story from the child and had seen the sister-in-law, I called the mother back and said: "I wish to congratulate you upon possessing a son with a quite extraordinary delicacy of spiritual truth." The child was perfectly correct, his whole heart, mind and quit, his real self, lived, so to speak, if we call living being where our treasure is, in the doctor's atmosphere, and there was nothing whatever about him that had any kinship with the people that his body got up amongst and into bed amongst.

That is an illustration of the kind of thing we discover when we hr-,;in to look at matters from the child's point of view. A child has a very keen sense of reality; a child is only interested in what things really are and in what things really and truly do seem to him to be, not in what they appear to be or are accepted as being.

Now we turn to the question of curiosity. You and I are dealing very largely with children who have come from unfortunate backgrounds, children whose earliest memories are of pain and grief, and of a great many things we wish had not happened to them. I know— probably that is one of the reasons why this subject was chosen—that it is a real difficulty that with a good many of these children there is a tendency to ask questions about the background of the children they are amongst: a tendency to be interested, to be curious, about the surroundings and the lives, the ideas, the minds, and the experiences of other children. It is a thing we find very difficult when dealing with communities of mixed ages, boys and girls. The children often tend to be exceedingly curious about things at moments, which are inconvenient to us. When we put all these aspects of curiosity together we are apt to look upon it as a danger; a tiresome and a difficult characteristic to handle, and to treat it, on the whole, in a repressive way. It is true that there are elements of curiosity, which are dangerous, and I want to give you those first.

Curiosity is a complex quality. It is made up of the following elements: first, our lives are not as exciting as we would like them to be. A great part of our lives has to be spent in, doing very much the same thing every day with nothing very new or very wonderful happening to us; and now that the films have come into the structure of everybody's life, we and our children are apt to

think that somewhere in the world, in some other places and among other people, there are lives a great deal more interesting, more stimulating than ours. This hunger for a thrill, this desire to have something happen to one, which is different and new, is a basic and universal feature. With children, it is a thing which is a gain because, as I hope to show you on the other side of the medal, it is one of our strongest forces for good and for the development of strong character in children. But it is perfectly true that to try to get somebody else's story is a cheap and easy way of getting a thrill, and any who read, for instance, such delightful literature as *Cranford* and the gossipy literature of the past, can see how in any community where very little happens to anybody, the happenings of one's neighbours are one's "cinema." The desire to get a thrill cheaply, to know about somebody else and, again, to be the only person who knows about somebody else, is a desire, which is a fundamental aspect of curiosity.

There is a second equally strong element in curiosity: the desire to be powerful. Generally speaking, the children we are dealing with are children who come from circumstances that are liable to make them feel deprived, and as a consequence have a tremendously strong hunger to put themselves, even for a short time, in a position where they are more instead of less powerful than their neighbours. That is a very useful thing if you are feeling a bit under the weather. Here I am not, of course, speaking of cultivated people, but of those round about six, seven and eight years of age. It is very delightful to know something derogatory about the background of the little boy next door who does his sums so much better than you, so that when you have a bad mark you can whiz per it in his car. It is that kind of feeling that one is a bit above the other, that one knows something a little to the detriment of the other child, which gives children one of the wicked sides of power, one of the feelings or parts of power which consists in being able to put the other person at a disadvantage. If you look round at the newspapers or at ourselves, you will realize that there is a malicious content in all our curiosity with regard to the affairs of our neighbours or even in matters connected with politics. It is very nice to know, for example, about the wicked things done with regard to disarmament in America. It is thrilling to know about the wicked things done in other countries, for it gives us a kind of compensation when the feeling may steal into our hearts that perhaps we are not so entirely clear of these happenings as we should like to feel ourselves to be.

The element of desiring a thrill, the element of desiring to know something about one's neighbours that will put them in a bad light and put us in a good light, are the dangers of curiosity. They are definite and real, and they are aspects, which are common not only to children but to grown-ups, and they are aspects for which we, who are guardians of children, and who want to see a successful community, should be constantly on the look-out.

When one refers to a certain power in the human mind, that is not by any means equivalent, or even near, to saying that power is undesirable any more than the fact that electricity may burn up a household makes it any the less powerful and valuable for lighting and heating houses. If we turn the medal on to the other side and look at curiosity from the child's point of view, I

think we shall find that it is one of the strongest powers there is for lighting and heating the character and the personality of any human being.

You have here, I understand, the great privilege of having children from the first weeks of life right up into adolescence, so that you have the opportunity of watching qualities begin to grow up and develop into their maturer forms. Put yourself in the mind of a small child who is not curious. Supposing you had a toddler round about one year- to one-and-a-half years of age in whom there was no curiosity. Can you tell me any impulse that would make that child grow up? It would eat when it was hungry, it would hit anything that came within reach if it became annoyed, but without curiosity it would stay perfectly put in the pen in which you placed it, or run aimlessly to-and-fro as long as it felt energetic. The child would be at a standstill; there would be no general progress.

It is the hunger to know and understand which makes the baby, first of all, put everything in sight into its mouth. Its mouth is the side of itself it knows best, and it wants to test, just as we want to test in any other way, the feel of a brass knob as against the feel of milk, and register quite nicely in its mind that one is colder than the other and does not taste the same, that it is not possible to push it about with its tongue. It tests a bit of chair-leg or anything else, and finds one is not smooth, and so on. In the small toddler walking round a room, the whole mainspring and desire is to know and understand, allied to the second most powerful desire in all human beings: the desire to gain control over one's environment.

The desire to know is a very gentle, very delicate growth in a great many children. Upon the desire to understand what is happening to them, the desire to understand themselves and their environment, the whole of their future success can be built. For example, people who are feeling kindly towards me every now and again say flattering things about my capacity to get on with children, to do things with them. But I can assure you it is nothing but curiosity. I have an insatiable curiosity about the workings of people's minds. When I see a child in front of me, I do not see a good or bad child, a nice or nasty child, I see a problem, something, which is to me perfectly fascinating. I want to know how the child got into the position in which it is and what it thinks about. It is the hunger to understand and the desire to see how the bits of the problem fit together, which are the very best protection that any individual can have against the onslaughts, depressions and disappointments of life.

If you are curious, you remain like a six-weeks-old kitten of mine, whom nothing will daunt. Whatever happens to it, it will shake its head and come back perkily on two sandy feet, with its ugly face held high in the air, perfectly ready to venture a further attempt to understand.

This curiosity, when it comes up against an adult, is apt to meet very serious harm. We all know how difficult is the "Why?" stage of children. This "Why?" stage can, spread over the whole day until you feel it as a repeating metronome in your head. We all know how difficult it is to be patient with

children when they go on asking "Why?" in regard to what we have told them, maybe, three weeks ago; how hard it is not to be embarrassed or fractious at being asked the wrong questions at the wrong time and in wrong surroundings. So often we would like to do what we do with a kitten when it will investigate our food, give it a small tap on the nose, which does no harm to the kitten but does serious harm to the mind of the child. Of course, by no means is a child to be allowed to use its questions as a means of domination over the grown-up. That must be safeguarded, as everything else, by common-sense. Every child should learn that there are times at which you are free to attend to it and times at which it is being a nuisance and had better get along and do its own jobs. But just as the child's physical needs must be satisfied, so, if you wish your children to grow up into people who can really build a new world and face new conditions, be interested in new forces and bring new energies to bear to evolve successful new solutions to new problems, you must make up your minds that you will set aside a time to satisfy the intellectual hunger of children with regard to the universe into which they come.

That is a big proposition and has a good many bearings. One of the greatest evidences of what I expect older theologians would call "a false state of mind," is to me the feeling of embarrassment, of difficulty and almost of objection to knowledge that we have with regard to the physical processes of our own bodies and our own lives. It always seems to me a strange thing to believe in an Eternal God who is all-wise and, at the same time, to think there are certain fundamental things about His creation which it is better for His children not to know. It is the handling of these children with regard to the fundamental things of life, which are clean and common, wholesome and delightful, if they are handled rightly, that is such a responsibility in the hands of people who are dealing with the upbringing of children. In regard to this problem of the instruction of children, I have not in mind what is called sex instruction, but the instruction of children in general about the whole of the processes of life. For example, it is extraordinary to find people not realizing that to children the farm side of life, the use of dung and manure for the growing of things, the more primitive aspects of the totality of life, is very beautiful and satisfying because it seems to them to fit in with their feelings about life. It is we who miss the many-coloured things, not our children. Speaking from an experience extending well over ten years of children sent to me, usually from bad circumstances, I can say it is not the child's reverence that you need be afraid of; it is our own irreverence. If you yourselves know what you feel and what you know about life, and know it in a way that makes you proud to be human beings, then you will never really come across any fundamental difficulty in being honest and instructive when dealing with children.

In taking up that whole side of life the kind of answer that 5; so often given is one of two extremes. I am not pleading for what is put forward by some very extreme branches of thought that much physiology and all kinds of knowledge should be taught in class indiscriminately to children of all ages, whether they wish to know it or not; that a rear many things should be put into books and handed to children indiscriminately, whether they be interested or

not. I am not asking for that, on the one hand and I am not suggesting, on the other, that you should bring your children up in a way that a small child I know was brought up. You will not believe this, but it is literally true. A worried parent brought to me a child who had been sent to a rather modern school and had come home with garbled notions of all sorts of things. The child was sent to me that I might find out what she had in her mind. I began by saying: "Well, Topsy, what did you have for breakfast this morning?" reckoning, reasonably, that it would probably be an egg. She said she had had an egg, and I asked her if she knew where it came from. She looked at me with a bright and happy smile and said, "Heaven." I agreed that that was so but that there had been a certain number of intermediate steps! I am neither asking for one side or the other, but I am asking you to regard your children's desire to understand as their best equipment and the best weapon that you have for turning out satisfactory men and women. When you have children asking questions, you should try to answer them honestly and simply. Try not to tell a child more than it asks, because the child probably is looking at the thing from a different point of view from yours.

I had another very amusing child a little while ago, who came from an extremely modern household. The parents were quite sure the boy should be taught everything he wanted, in the most complete fashion. He had got out of hand. He came into my room, where we have all sorts of contraptions of one kind and another. I, quite idly, picked up a little water syringe, which was not working as it should. The little person, aged seven, said, "Surely you know the principle of the pump," and went on to explain all about a petrol pump in a motor-car. It was a quarter-of-an-hour before he finished! That child was the son of an engineer and knew considerably more about engineering than I did. Later he said: "Do you know, I was sick the other day." I said, "Oh, were you? I am sorry." "Oh, it was nice. I liked it." Then he added: "There is something I want to ask you," and he went on to explain in some detail the whole experience, concluding with, "Mummy had a tea-party. You see, Daddy had always told me I ought to be very interested in everything; so just as soon as I felt better I ran down to tell Mummy all about it. You know, she did not like it at all." The mother had brought the child to me, saying: "What am I to do with him? He bursts into my tea-party and tells elaborate stories about his physiological apparatus." There you have a mother complaining of a child carrying out exactly what he had been told to do. Grown-ups, of course, have arranged a code they all understand, but it is difficult for children to understand that there are times when certain things can be talked about and certain others cannot. I am not suggesting that that is not a very good code; all I am suggesting is that it is hard luck on the children if you expect them, somehow, to come into the world with a special instinct, which will enable them to know which is which. That is where the difficulty arises. To the child, all things are clean and honest, and it is equally interested in all of them. It is perfectly essential and necessary that cultural standards shall be brought to bear upon children; that they shall learn that certain things are spoken of in certain places and not in others; but they should learn that simply and easily.

Children will never tell their own secrets, the things they care about, in circumstances in which they are not likely to be received with interest and

sympathy. It is by no means difficult, if you are honest with your children and give them the kind of reason that appeals to them, that says: "There are certain things you like talking about at certain times and there are certain things you do not. Grown-ups are like that, but grown-ups have rather more things to think about, and they have certain times when they like talking about things and certain times when they do not." I have always found that it is possible to get intense respect from children if you also give them respect. On that I have some right to speak, because in the Institute of Child Psychology that I represent, we have fifteen or twenty highly neurotic children all together downstairs and their parents upstairs in their own quarters. The children are told by us that this is their floor, and that nothing they do with us will be told to their parents upstairs, except with their permission and asking. The same with the parents upstairs. They are told that their confidence will not be broken with regard to their children unless they ask it. During a good many years in this work, we have hardly ever had a breach of confidence from the side of the children when one child knows something about another because they live in the same street, or because they come from the same school. Two children came from the same school, one because it could not learn arithmetic and the other because it pilfered. I took the child who could not learn arithmetic aside and said: "You know why so-and-so is here?" and I could see he was bubbling over to tell all the others. I put to him a point about his own experience and said, "Would you like me to go and tell all the other children about that?" The child immediately looked quite startled and said, "Oh, you would not do that, would you?" "No, under no circumstances, nothing would make me do it." I answered "And you must respect this other boy's secret as we respect yours." I have never found that trust fail. In the same way, if you keep faith with your children, if you give them the truth as you know it, if you are not afraid to say when you do not know, if you are prepared to respect their spiritual reserves, if you are prepared to give them good reasons for their respecting your reservations, you can always rely upon their carrying them out.

With that, so to speak, hedge or guard around the subject, I would like to leave it with you as a thing that I most profoundly feel: (1) people are, in a sense, past our adventure stages. It is our job to be priests of the generation that has gone by; it is our work to conserve and pass on that which was good in the generation that we were brought up in. It is our extraordinary privilege to be the guardians and helpers of the younger generation, that is going to recast all our principles into new forms; that is going to find new wine-skins for the eternal wine of truth; new wine-skins, beside which our own will look very nobbly and out of shape. It is up to us to so regard this desire to know in children, this hunger to be in touch with what is the eternal truth about facts which were the same in the time of the Diplodocus as now, and which will be the same until this earth rolls itself up and the end of all things comes, if ever it does come. I want to leave with you this feeling: that the one bridge that does exist between the past and the future is the hunger for knowledge in children and the one thing which it is most important to preserve is the courage that comes with the hunger for knowledge, which will stand by your children and enable them to make experiment after experiment with the forces which are eternally putting themselves into new shapes, until, as we fall into

the background, we have the great privilege of seeing arising the beginning of the building of the walls of the New Jerusalem.