

TIME-OUT ON TIME-OUTS

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Is a person the agent of her own fate, or does a person believe herself at the mercy of fate? There is a well known and well tested way of assessing personality development known as assessing the *locus of control* in an individual. Locus of control, developed by cognitive psychologists, simply refers to the degree to which people 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, fate, or powerful others. 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 accepting and nurturing, externals tend to be colder, rejecting, and demanding.

Now, let us switch from the cognitive to the whole-child perspective. Perhaps the basic premise of the whole-child view is that the whole-human is more than the sum of the parts. From the perspective of nurturing the whole-child, we must inquire into the nature of each part of the human-system *and* 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 are continually evolving. Unpredictability may best be understood by example. 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.

Many have seen these qualities of synergy leading directly to spiritual-inquiry. Indefiniteness and unpredictability necessarily leave one open to the moment, to the arising creative expression. Together, the

unpredictable and indefinite aspects of life 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 attempts to describe what is essential for self-knowledge to emerge by including the wisdom at the core of all religions and philosophy.

Natural Learning Rhythms is a whole-child appreciation of child development that respects all aspects and capacities of the child. For now, let us simply take these two very different approaches to the human psyche (cognitive vs. whole-child) 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 and modify behavior. In short it is a behavior modification technique, an approach that works well with animals, perhaps, but is questionable for humans. For example, it is accurate that you can condition a child with bribes and coercion, but to do so reduces that child to his lowest capacities. Bribing a child 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.

The view of whole-child development 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 that parents and teachers naturally have with the children. In fact, it is often the breakdown of this natural relationship that leads to the use of 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, *time-outs* often intimidates the child to modify her behavior. Second, time-outs seem to invite the adult to *act responsibly* by taking action before anger takes possession of them and the adult enacts more draconian measures.

From the whole-child 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 alone to ponder his misdeeds simply does not have the requisite capacities to appreciate the subtleties of his motivations or reasons as to why his needs should be sublimated to those of the authority. The child often feels ostracized and might well turn submissive (often mistaken for the *good child*) or resentful. Of great importance is that the punished child has lost contact with the elder and is 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 that 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-cereal for breakfast. Real care for the inner nature of the

child would call forth different responses for meaningful learning to occur. Were that opportunity taken, both adult and child could develop a deeper appreciation for one another. Many creative responses to the situation could arise. A relationship with genuine care for one another is often 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 adult in the situation also suffers. Checking his/her frustration impulse by removing the stimulus begs the question of why the adult became frustrated to begin with. For example, many of the educators 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 do nothing to solve the problem. It simply masks the wound. Frustration grows, as the real needs of both the student and educator 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 simply do not allow this kind of relationship—they impose isolation. The isolation of time-outs leave children on their own to *figure it out*. The child is required to understand things beyond her/his developmental capacities. Time-outs lead to sublimation and submission to outside control; they

put teachers in the authoritarian position and when they fail, as they will with some children, lead to more severe punishments.

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 the time alone is not perceived as a punishment or used as a technique to slide around a difficult situation.

The whole-child development approach of 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.

Whole-child development has as its primary and overarching goal the optimal well-being of all who are involved (adult and child). Phrases such as *self-knowledge* (Socrates), *homo-mundus* (Jung), *fully functioning human* (Rogers), *intelligence* (Montessori) all point to the full-actualization of the whole-human.

Natural Learning Rhythms, through research and field-work, has come to propose that all the talents, capacities, tendencies and behaviors of the child are organized in the service of optimal well-being. 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 in each stage of development is optimal well-being—and the energy, capacities, inclinations, and interactions it has to work with are developmentally and contextually bound. Further, each organizing principle needs specific nurturing environments to bring forth its optimal expression.

In order to acknowledge our whole-child orientation, each developmental stage in the Natural Learning Rhythms taxonomy ends in the suffix *being*. Our use of the term *being* means *nothing essential is missing*. Thus each developmental stage is seen as whole unto itself, yet part of a greater whole. The whole of the child is the indefinable synergy of all parts. This requires that we participate with the child in this moment with connected relationship. Natural Learning Rhythms strongly suggests that when we stay in connected relationship with the child's developmental needs, the optimal well-being of both adult and child is served.

BodyBeing, the first developmental stage described in Natural Learning Rhythms, begins at conception and holds dominance through approximately 8 years of age. Its organizing principle is to develop a sense of *Rightful Place* in the child. The secondary organizing principles of this stage of development are a healthy relationship to *boundaries* and *personal-strength*. 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 personal-strength and the ability to both create and respond to healthy boundaries.

As with all the organizing principles in each stage of development, Rightful Place is an essential foundation to actualize optimal well-being. All learning is enhanced to the degree that Rightful Place is nurtured and inhibited to the degree if it is not. If a child is denied Rightful Place they will organize their talents and capacities to attempt secure a place. If, with personal guidance, rightful place is provided for the child then she will extend her 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 that he is so that the support is meaningful to him. Characteristics of the stage should be carefully considered (such as its inherent egotism, dependence on sensation based information, development of the body, etc.). 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 maintains 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 categorizing and classifying this very large physical and emotional world in which they find themselves.

However, BodyBeing children learn through sensation exploration of the world. Sensation-based exploration of the world means that the more pleasant a sensation, the more it is sought; the more unpleasant the sensation, the greater the avoidance. The rub occurs when the elder knows a boundary is necessary for the child's health yet, the type of boundary chosen goes against the child's desire for pleasant sensations.

In the Natural Learning Rhythms' view, this is exactly the frontier that the child needs to explore in order 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. At this frontier child and adult meet to forge a life with the best opportunity to realize optimal well-being. This is not a test of wills. It is an exploration of boundaries that insists on the development of relationship in order to transmit values. Relationship is a golden opportunity for elders to nurture the intrinsic capacities, the inherent well-being, and the health of the child. This type of relationship helps the child to stimulate care and guidance in the elder. It is a sacred dance in which everyone wins.

Time-outs do very little to serve the process of developing optimal well-being. Instead, time-outs teach that *place* must be earned and their use tends to create

insecurity via the tension it takes to earn it. Time-outs teach that guidance can be withdrawn. Casting the child into isolation is a sad contradiction of Robert Frost's brilliant line (here paraphrased): "Home is where they always have to let you in." The use of time-outs brings the child to question his or her sense of Rightful Place. In short, isolating the child forces her to move into self-protection and prevents a movement towards that which is most creative and satisfying. The child begins to look over her 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 8 through 12. 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. The fieldwork that Natural Learning Rhythms insights are based upon has shown that the child often enters the development of FeelingBeing by 8 years of age or so. This is supported by the fact that universally all humans are known to become aware of their personal mortality by age 8½ or 9. This shatters the egoistic preoccupations with the body and sensation and signifies a new way of organizing 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 well-being. This developmental stage is occupied with the need to learn and develop trust in trustworthy relationships. It is a delicate, vulnerable moment in the child's development. If handled poorly prejudice, environmental insensitivity, clannish allegiance, fear of diversity and other socially disruptive behaviors are often the result. When handled well, social ability and honesty have the best chance to develop. The secondary organizing principle during this age of development is the ability to reciprocate with

cooperation. When the child feels she can trust, she reciprocates with cooperation.

This age of development 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. The child searches her world for justice and feels trust for the people with whom she can experience it.

We can see a rare occasion where a FeelingBeing child 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 a concern for fairness. We have had great success exploring the fairness in the situation and allowing the response to

arise from 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 awareness in both elder and child. And that, of course, reduces the odds that such problems will occur in the future.

Natural Learning Rhythms describes the stages of childhood through the age of 23. At no time do time-outs appear to serve the organizing principle, nor, optimal well-being. Techniques, in general, can only work in a limited number of situations for a limited number of children for a limited amount of time. Natural Learning Rhythms is not a cookbook method of techniques, but a living understanding that demonstrates how relating to children serves well-being for both adult and child. Problems are not bad or wrong. Instead, problems are opportunities to create relationships that give us a new way of looking at the problem and of relating to one another in ever deeper and more meaningful ways.

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