

The Joy of Having Children

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Freeditorial 

There is a God!!

Probably, dear reader, you are wondering how I've managed to reach this conclusion on a question that philosophers, theologians and thinkers have been debating and racking their brains over for centuries without ever reaching a definitive solution. But I have spoken: There is a God!

And now you'll ask me: "What complex and sophisticated reflection has led you to such a conviction?"

And I will answer you: "Look out the window. Simply looking out the

window and seeing a day as perfect as today. A light gentle breeze, a bright but temperate sun, trees swaying softly... In other words, what could fairly be described as a perfect day inviting you to savor the joys of life. Only God could have created it, because if it had been the work of man, you may be sure that something would have come out wrong: either the breeze would be too strong, or the sun would be burning, or... the day would have arrived late this morning... In short, some kind of defect.”

But nothing like that has happened; everything is perfect, and perfection is something only God can achieve. Ergo, God exists.

Thus, with joyous enthusiasm and delighted to have made such an essential contribution to a complex religious dilemma that has been debated for centuries, I was determined to enjoy the wondrous gift of such a beautiful day. And what better way to do so than to take a long morning stroll through my city park?

Before going on, allow me to explain the basic elements of the park in question so that you can recreate it in your mind. Like all city parks, it is centrally located, serving as the lungs of the city for the good citizens who crowd its streets and concrete towers; and like all city parks it has trees, fountains, little dirt paths, ponds, ducks, mothers and children, as well as the obligatory individuals in sports gear jogging past with tortured expressions and gasping for air.

And as I began my placid and happy stroll this morning, the distant murmur of children’s voices reached my ears. I went on walking, with the newspaper tucked under my arm, and I reached a plaza next to a pond, where I could see a gaggle of mothers with its corresponding mob of children nearby, playing and shouting happily.

It looked to me like a gorgeous postcard designed to confirm my religious convictions stated above regarding the existence of God.

As a result of the excitement I felt, after a moment of hesitation, I decided to call Zoilo to share this marvelous experience with him. I told him all about it. He listened to me in silence. It may have been a somewhat grumpy silence

because it was a trifle early for him, but nevertheless, he listened attentively as he always does, and I concluded with a description of the image of the mothers and their children. It struck me that he was still silent when I exclaimed with a telephonic smile from ear to ear: “What a joy it would be to have children!”

After a long pause, Zoilo replied: “The only joy in having children is the one that comes nine months before they’re born.”

"What???" I asked, bewildered. "What are you talking about?"

My euphoric joyride had been stopped dead in its tracks. I don't how to describe it, this time I was the silent one. I didn't know what to say, for the simple reason that I didn't understand at all. What the devil did he mean by nine months?

Do you have any idea? For some time, I've held the conviction that every now and then Zoilo's neural wires get crossed. He is so knowledgeable (because he reads so much) that I suppose it's reasonable and forgivable that a fuse might sometimes blow in his brain from information overload. *The only joy in having children is the one that comes nine months before they're born!* What does he mean by this? How are you going to enjoy children who don't yet exist? And above all, what has it got to do with what we were talking about? So you see what I mean: Zoilo loses it sometimes.

In such situations I've found it best to let him give his neurons a rest, and so after a hasty farewell, I ended the call.

My mood, although somewhat dampened, continued to be positive, and I decided to get a little closer to the large group of happy children and their corresponding progenitors.

As I drew closer I could see that the group was rather more diverse than it had seemed from a distance. For example, there were a couple of pregnant women walking back and forth, with their hands on their kidneys, looking like they were imitating the ducks in the nearby pond.

“It's true,” I thought, “pregnancy must be rather rough on a woman. Her

body is subjected to all kinds of changes, and although I've never been a mother myself, I can understand that the whole thing must be pretty unpleasant. Still, there's no other way around it if you want to have children. The reward is worth it, even if for several months the woman feels that she has lost her waist, her beauty and her feminine wiles. After all, anything worth having..."

It is obvious that the enjoyable part comes later, once the baby comes into the picture, because... well, the less said about the labor the better. I have a friend who was present for the birth of his son and who, twenty years later, is still traumatized by the insults that his wife hurled at him in that horrific situation.

As I was saying, the enjoyment comes later, once the project has turned into a child. And here, beside the mothers and the duck pond, was a good sample of such projects. So, with a big smile on my face, I began to observe them.

A short distance from the group of ladies chattering away happily, were three little tykes sitting in the shade of a tree. They must have been around a year or two old. They were entertaining themselves with some pebbles.

Suddenly, an earsplitting cry shattered the peace of the morning. I looked around in search of the tragedy that had occurred and the owner of the larynx with the power to emit such a scream. Soon I found it: It belonged to a mother who was howling at one of the toddlers.

From where I was standing I couldn't see the cause of the shriek of alarm, and so I moved a little closer. I understood the nature of the drama when I saw the woman who had screamed insert her index finger into her child's mouth and extract a pebble. As if all hell had broken loose, two other women — evidently the mothers of the other two toddlers — pounced on the companions of the first child and, with incomparable skill, repeated the same finger-in-mouth operation with the exact same result, extracting handfuls of pebbles and dirt.

One of the mothers administered a mild spanking on her child, while

another gently struck her child's hand while expounding on the inappropriate nature of his behavior. I am far from certain that the infant, who was bawling prodigiously, was particularly receptive to his mother's well-reasoned arguments.

I looked away from this scene and began observing another group of children — all around seven or eight years of age— who were playing peacefully beside the pond. It was clear that at this age they were well on their way down the long road to maturity, unlike those little snot-nosed toddlers. These kids were on a whole different level. They were giving all of their calm, focused attention to something that I couldn't see because their bodies were blocking it, but whatever it was, it was uniting them all in a delighted spirit of camaraderie.

Suddenly, as if propelled by a spring, they all leapt to their feet together while a duck shot away from their hands in a terrified frenzy. It was absolute pandemonium: A whirl of duck, children and feathers made for a wild and rowdy picture. The duck, all but naked — evidently their game had involved pulling out its feathers — made a mad dash for the pond. The children, although they chased it, could not keep the panic-stricken bird from fleeing to safety in the water.

I watched the mothers observing the scene with amusement, waiting for them to call their offspring over and duly explain to them that cruelty to animals is in fact illegal. But all I heard them say, as they looked on with fond smiles, was: “They're just kids...!”

Only one of them got up and went over to the children with a serious expression. “Ah,” I thought in a fleeting moment of optimism, “at least one of the mothers is going to tell them off!” But I was mistaken. When she reached the children, in a voice that suggested a desire to ensure that every passer-by in the park heard her, she shrieked at one of the kids: “Look what a mess you've made of yourself...!” Never mind the poor duck, who didn't even merit a mention. No doubt when the Boston Strangler began his first sadistic experiments, his mother said the same thing: “*He's only a child...!*” And we all know what that led to.

After this, I began to lose interest in the mother-child spectacle and I took a seat on one of the benches, right there in the plaza, as the morning was so inviting, and I began reading the paper that I had been holding under my arm until then. I went straight to the critical stuff: the sports headlines.

I was engrossed in this extremely important news when another harrowing shriek, this one so sharp that it would have shattered glass if there had been any nearby to shatter, shook me from my reverie. I imagined, as I leapt to my feet, that something terrible must have occurred, and I scoured the environs to determine whether I would need to rush to someone's aid.

But as yet there was no sign of the tragedy that was about to unfold. To keep the story simple, I will limit my narration to a description of what happened and the catastrophic events that occurred thereafter. It began quite ordinarily, with two children engaged in a brawl. One had apparently bitten the other and now the mothers were arguing with the same level of mature reasoning as their children: "But your little brat bit my son!" "Your son started it!" "Why don't you try disciplining your kid once in a while?" "And why don't you try feeding yours before you bring him out in public?"... In short, what could be described as a mature exchange of opinions.

Meanwhile, as I listened to the profound reflections of the two mothers, I was still trying to work out whether the scream had come from one of them or from one of the children when disaster struck. It was likely the attention I was giving to this scene of the mothers exchanging opinions that prevented me from seeing the imminent danger headed my way: two other pipsqueaks, frantically chasing a grasshopper in an effort to catch it, whose line of pursuit was bringing them straight in my direction. The only thing I remember clearly is that I suddenly felt an excruciating blow to my left leg, at the height of the calf, and that a moment later two children were bawling at my feet as a result of having crashed into me. When I looked down at my trouser leg I found, in the same spot where I'd felt the blow a moment earlier, a visible stain that seemed to be a blend of squashed insect remains and a viscous, sticky substance that I deduced had its origin in the noses of the aforementioned children.

I looked up with the intention of demanding explanations for the behavior of these children from their respective mothers, but I was immediately forced to desist when I was greeted by the fierce expressions that the women in question were aiming at me; I might even go so far as to classify them as threatening. Among them were the intimidating gazes of the two women who had been arguing moments before, who seemed to have reached a truce now that they had found a new enemy in me.

To put it briefly, I gave my trouser leg a gentle shake, placed my newspaper under my arm — this always lends one a certain air of respectability — and with all the dignity I could muster took the only sensible action that could be taken in such a situation: I fled the scene.

Still limping as a consequence of the blow, I began a quest to find some part of the park where I would be free of such a diverse and perilous ecosystem of ducks, grasshoppers, mothers and children.

As I departed, the tumult receded into the distance. My leg and my state of mind began gradually to recover, and once again my brain began functioning with its customary acuity.

That was when I began drawing some new conclusions in relation to the question of children. First of all, it is reasonable to conclude that pregnancy and labor have more cons than pros; this is an empirical fact. Furthermore, thanks to my experience this morning I learned that in their first decade of life children may give you the odd happy moment, but they will also give you a lot of trouble and misery, and, above all, suck up all your time like a vacuum cleaner. I thus deduced that the benefits of having children must come afterwards, or otherwise people simply wouldn't have them.

I began pondering that “afterwards” while strolling through the less hazardous areas of the park.

I meditated for some time on this thorny question of having children using the knowledge I'd acquired from observation and the experiences of others, given that I have never had one myself. Obviously, if in their first years they were not much of a blessing, it must be when they reach puberty that they

make up for all the misery and their parents start seeing some emotional compensation.

I thought of my friends who had adolescent children, and tried to remember what they'd told me about raising said children.

I should begin, dear reader, by clarifying a detail for the uninitiated, for which, if you are not yet a parent, you will no doubt be grateful. There are two types of children: boys and girls. Now this may seem a trivial point given that both are equally classified as children, but the fact is they are not entirely the same. Believe me, the differences are much greater than the common term "child" would seem to suggest, because when puberty hits these two seem to go in quite distinct directions.

To wit: If the child is a girl, she'll develop a complex about having a bust that is either too big or too small, being too skinny or too fat, and being too tall or too short; one day she'll wake up crying and the next she'll be in a state of euphoria for no apparent reason; she'll detest her parents because she has nothing to wear or because they don't understand her, or because they're behind the times and won't buy her the clothes and shoes she needs (even if her wardrobe is packed to gills) and thus never be able to attract the boy of her dreams. In short, what anyone would define as a series of quite reasonable grievances against life and her parents.

If the child is a boy it's quite another matter, because the only thing they have in common with girls is the loathing of their parents for their lack of understanding, but otherwise the differences are notable: Upon reaching this age, a boy suddenly loses his ability to speak, being reduced to incoherent babbling and repeating fashionable clichés, often between monosyllabic grunts; his face turns spotty and his heart turns hostile toward his father, who until recently was his idol, but whom he now sees as the main obstacle in his quest to become a man. If he doesn't have the latest video game or scooter he blames his parents, because now he will be unable to show off to his friends, who have become the be-all and end-all of his existence; and although he will primp and preen daily in an effort to impress girls, he senses that he will never succeed in doing so without these indispensable gizmos.

In short, a real joy...

I have to confess that all these reflections were beginning to shake my convictions. I became increasingly lost in my thoughts while I continued on my morning stroll through the park.

This is why I decided that the moment had come to be honest with myself, because it was the only way to resolve the dilemma that was beginning to trouble me. Thus, I boldly dared to ask myself the burning question: *Is it really a joy to have children, or am I mistaken?*

My initial response to this question was one of silent reflection. But in this trance a conversation I'd had with Zoilo long ago on this very topic suddenly came to my mind. He had argued that it was not a matter of joy, while I had insisted that it was. At first it seemed to me that my reasoning was more consistent than his, especially when, with an air of triumph, I put to him the question: "If it isn't a joy, then why does nearly everyone have them?" I suspect that because my argument was so sound he reacted with a reply that was as incomprehensible as it was absurd, merely, I supposed, because he didn't want to admit defeat. Judge for yourself, this is what he said: "Do you know what a computer program is?" That was a rhetorical question, of course, so there was no need for me to answer. And he went on: "Well, every living thing is directed by a genetic computer program that shapes and guides our behavior. The only objective of this program is the continuation of the species, and so it compels us to have children, and to love them so that we'll raise and look after them, and once we've fulfilled these functions our cells age and die, leaving behind the next generation, which will do the same thing. That's all. Pleasure or reason have nothing to do with it. They are tasks programmed before we're born, designed to keep the species going. The joy you mention is merely the instrument that the program uses to ensure your cooperation."

The truth is that I didn't really understand this answer, although I remember his words exactly and I assure you that this is precisely what he said. Just as I did, I imagine you will find this reflection of Zoilo's about as clear as an ocean mist, as a moonless night, as a walk through a dark tunnel... by which I mean, utterly incomprehensible.

But then, suddenly, I saw the light. I was struck by inspiration on that tranquil morning in the park. I'd worked it out: Now I know when children are a joy! As we've established, it isn't before they're born, or at the moment of their birth; it isn't during their childhood when they consume the lives of everyone around them, or during puberty (a period that, incidentally, Mother Nature, if she were really as wise as they say, would have done well to eliminate from our development process). No, they're not a joy in any of these stages, but afterwards, when they get married or find a partner and move out of their parents' house.

At first I was stunned by the brilliance of my own reasoning. It seemed almost as sound as my reasoning earlier on the existence of God. Of course, the joy comes when they leave the nest! Why hadn't I recognized this obvious fact until this moment? No doubt it was the peace and quiet in that part of the park where I was now walking that had inspired me.

I decided that my revelation warranted another phone call to Zoilo to share it with him. But an instinctive sense of prudence led me to decide to mull over this new idea a little longer; I didn't want my friend to tear it down at once and make me feel like an idiot.

So I continued my stroll while I ruminated on my theory, and then I realized: My hypothesis, like the Titanic, was soon springing leaks everywhere. It was like arguing that you should wear a pair of shoes two sizes too small so that your feet ache, with the sole purpose of having the pleasure of taking them off later and putting an end to the pain. Why would you make yourself suffer with the sole objective of feeling pleasure when that suffering over? Really, even for me as the progenitor of the theory, it seemed a little absurd, and I'm afraid that Zoilo would deduce this in a second. Better not call him.

The day was getting hotter when I decided to head for home. I have to confess that I was feeling a little despondent. And suddenly, I don't know why, those mysterious words that Zoilo had spoken earlier that morning came back into my mind: *"The only joy in having children is the one that comes nine months before they're born!"*

I'd have to reflect on this one; I'm sure it must mean something. I'll think about it tomorrow...

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