

Making Sense Out of Bioethics

Setting a Moral Vision as Parents

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When I was recently visiting with friends, a group of young girls was playing in a neighboring yard. Every few minutes, for more than an hour, one of them would scream at the very top of her lungs. A woman in our group finally commented, "When I was a kid, if I ever screamed like that, Mom would have pulled me aside and said, 'Don't you dare raise your voice like that in public!'"

In another episode more recently, I saw two young people, maybe 16 years old, rush out of a home. A girl with pink hair and tattoos was following a guy, yelling at him and saying, "Don't get into that car! Don't even think of leaving!" As he got into the car and started to back up, she began pounding her fists on the driver side window, letting out a series of expletives. Next, she placed herself right in front of the car and began to beat the hood. Then she got up onto the hood and started to pummel the windshield, screaming a barrage of profanities. By this time, other vehicles had stopped. When the girl stepped aside from the car for a moment, the driver sped off. She took off after him, running down the road, waving her arms and yelling hysterically.

In a middle class residential family neighborhood, I was surprised to witness such an occurrence. In discussing it with a couple of bystanders, one offered, "I guess you just chalk it up to their being teenagers." Another countered, "When I was growing up, even teens knew they couldn't engage in a spectacle like that."

Seeing it firsthand made me wonder where the parents were, and whether as a society, we are trending more and more towards "lowest common denominator" standards and behaviors. How concerned should we be when indignation, rage and narcissism replace civility and a common moral code? Not only are young people caught up in these concerns, but society itself seems to be grappling with them ever more broadly.

R.J. Snell gets it right when he says that we shouldn't be "complaining about kids these days, since it's not the kids who are the root of the problem: it is the duty of a coherent society, coherent religion, and coherent family structure to provide a moral horizon. This is the fault of the adults, those who refused the grave obligation to offer tradition to the young."

How is it that we sometimes fail to set a moral vision for the next generation? Kids are endowed with some of the finest hypocrisy-detecting systems in the world, and when Catholic parents, to pick a relevant example, drop off their children at the parish for Catechism, but do not themselves attend weekly Mass, the children cannot fail to notice the disconnect. Similarly, when a Catholic parent continues to live in an irregular marital situation, or picks and chooses from among the Lord's teachings, the mixed messaging pops up quickly on children's moral radar. Consistency and coherence are key parental traits for transmitting robust values to children.

Another is parental fortitude. As children are pulled sideways by schools, false ideologies and other societal forces that undermine family life and sound parenting, setting a moral vision for one's children can be a Herculean task requiring enormous dedication. I often think back to the strength and determination of my parents as I was growing up, battling not only me as a willful teen, but also pushing back against many of these broader currents and challenges around them.

While parents may sometimes deserve blame for the shortcomings of their children, many times they do not. Parenting is no easy endeavor and parents are oftentimes unsung heroes.

When young people witness their parents standing firm and practicing their faith by serving the Lord and others, they are more likely to take their own spiritual and religious identities seriously, becoming empowered to make significant sacrifices for others. They also are strengthened to be able to make intentional moral decisions and to direct their behaviors in ordered ways.

Parents who set a moral vision for themselves and their children build up the life of the family. As kids experience the joys of a family life not governed by the insatiable demands of their own desires, they can contribute to building a neighborhood and a world where narcissism and the "lowest common denominator" are replaced by goodness, generosity, right order and peace of heart.

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