

A Sermon delivered on October 22, 2023, at the First Unitarian Society of Ithaca, NY.

## **My Journey to Making Sense of Broken Children**

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I was asked to tell the story of how my religious and professional journey led me to serve as a psychological expert witness in murder cases. I must warn you in advance that some of it is quite emotionally challenging to hear, let alone experience. Over the last 30 years, I have sat across the table from more than 350 killers, in jails, prisons, and courtrooms across the country. I did not start my career planning to do this work. It grew out of my heritage spiritually and intellectually as I confronted children and youth involved in abusive families and socially toxic communities. Being at this podium today is, in many ways, a fulfillment of that heritage, and where it took me in the world of broken children.

Growing up I didn't realize that I was unwittingly getting ready to become a Unitarian Universalist. Because of my devout Italian grandparents I was baptized in a Catholic Church on the lower East Side of Manhattan. But when they died young, my anti-Catholic English mother moved me to the Protestant side of the religious equation, and by the time I was 11 we were Methodists. I started

college at St. Lawrence University in Canton, NY, in 1964, and promptly met the person who would become my best friend for life. His name is Dan Clayton, and he is here today. As I entered college I was a Methodist who planned to become a lawyer, but it was not meant to be, due in large part to two mentors who came into my life in the years that followed.

St. Lawrence University was started in 1856 as a Universalist College—the oldest co-ed college in New York State-- and in 1863, its Theological School graduated Olympia Brown--the first woman to be ordained “with full denominational authority” in America. By the time I arrived on campus in 1964, there still was a UU Seminary there, but it closed soon after as the Presbyterians took over.

The first mentor was the Rev. Max Coots—the distinguished minister of the Canton, NY, UU church. As a freshman I stumbled into Max’s church serendipitously one Sunday morning, and never left until I graduated in 1968. Doing so changed the course of my life. Max had attended Union Theological Seminary in New York City, where he studied with many eminent theologians. This included Reinhold Niebuhr, who inspired me as he had Max, through his best-known book *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, and I wrote my senior honors thesis on the political philosophy of influential theologians (including Martin Luther King, and, of course, Reinhold Niebuhr). Spending many hours as I did in the company of Max Coots was a formative *and* transformative experience in many ways. I taught Sunday School, became a youth advisor at the church, considered the ministry, and even wrote the church’s weekly newsletter, all under his direct and implicit tutelage. When I came to Ithaca in 1968, that involvement continued. My first marriage took place in this church, and since my then wife and I were starting our role as live-in custodians for the church, our first task was to clean up from our own reception, held in the social room.

But perhaps the biggest effect Max had on me was using his position as Chair of the Board of Trustees of Unirondack (the UU summer camp on Beaver Lake in the Adirondacks) to get me a job there as a counselor in 1966. It was there that I met my second life mentor, Dr. Urie Bronfenbrenner—Professor of Human Development at Cornell University (and affiliate of this church). Urie came to Unirondack as a resource person at the invitation of Rev. Dick Gilbert (himself the minister of this church at that time) for a family camp session (at which Urie premiered the work that led to his influential book *Two Worlds of Childhood*). We bonded: I was impressed by his blending of humanity and intellectual rigor, and he was impressed that I wrote a play about adolescent alienation, and cast his daughter Katie in the lead role. By 1970, I was a doctoral student in Human Development under Urie’s tutelage, and received my PhD from Cornell in 1973. From him I learned what it meant to be not just a “developmental psychologist,” but a student of *human development*. I also learned how to be a “public intellectual” in matters of policy and the mass media dealing with issues affecting children and adolescents.

But Urie was much more than simply my “academic advisor.” He was a second father to me, and shared his inner experience of being humbled by parenthood, even as he was acclaimed as an “expert” in child development, and of having doubts about the significance of his “success,” even as he was lionized in his professional life. This was something that stood me in good stead when I faced such struggles in my own adult life. At Unirondack he introduced me to the study of human development, and I introduced him to “inter-generational volleyball”-- and he even built a volleyball court in his side yard and organized neighborhood “intergenerational” games in the summer as a result.

From 1973 to 1993, I was involved in UU congregations in Omaha, Nebraska, in State College, Pennsylvania, and in Chicago. During this time I followed in Urie’s footsteps, and became myself an “expert” in

child and adolescent development as a professor and consultant, studying child maltreatment, the traumatic impact of war and community violence on children, and the ways in which “socially toxic” environments affected vulnerable children. Eventually I visited 47 countries and all 50 US States, in addition to my teaching, research and writing, and received national recognition for my work on child protection. However, looking back on that time in my life, I realize that I was unwittingly preparing for what would become my real life’s work, listening to killers and making sense of senseless violence so that I might serve as a psychological expert witness in murder cases.

Over the years I had encounters with children that prepared me for this role. In some ways, it began with a six year old boy eating his lunch. I watched him on the playground of his elementary school as he ate a banana, then dropped it on the ground. The principal saw this, and told him to pick it up, which he did, then promptly dropped it again. The principal's next command was, "Pick it up and put it in the trash can." The boy did so, but then removed it and once again dropped the banana peel on the ground. The principal followed by ordering the boy to, as he put it, "throw it in the trash can and leave it there!" Once again, the boy complied, and then walked off. He returned a few minutes later, and once again removed the banana peel from the trash can and dropped it on the ground. The obviously annoyed principal finished this little melodrama by telling the boy to "put it in the trash can and leave it there for eternity!" He did.

Not being a clinical psychologist or psychiatrist, I didn’t succumb to the temptation to simply diagnose the boy with “Oppositional Defiant Disorder.” Rather, I looked into his life to figure out the source of the mix of intelligence and obnoxiousness the little boy displayed. It turned out that although he was only six years old, he had already been expelled from three schools. A couple of days later, I followed the boy into the school’s art room, and watched as he took

a piece of paper from the pile on the teacher's desk, picked up a handful of crayons and began to draw. I sat down across from him, took a piece of paper and some crayons and began to copy his drawing. Eventually the boy noticed what I was doing, and looked me in the eye. When he finished the drawing, he took another piece of paper and began a new drawing. Once again, I copied what he drew. We repeated this process three times. After the fourth drawing he said to me, "Now you draw." I drew, and he copied my drawing. That was it. In the days and weeks that followed, his behavior improved, and he made it through the rest of the school year without being expelled.

Why? I learned that he came from a high-powered family with a very controlling mother and an aloof academic father. I came to think that what I showed him is that he could have agency and be in charge without having to be a pain in the ass. Looking back on it, I think that I was able to make sense of his behavior as a sign of his brokenness, not simply dismiss it as obnoxiousness or diagnose it into a neat category. This was the first of many insights that arose as I sat with broken children in the United States and around the world.

While conducting a study of the impact of a *Spiderman* comic book in the mid 1980s that aimed to raise awareness of child sexual abuse, I realized that abused children often require a kind of "job interview" to decide if an adult is ready to hear their disclosure of victimization. While visiting El Salvador on a mission with a group of students, a four year old girl climbed into my lap and snuggled with me. Much as I appreciated the cuddle, it made me suspicious. Why does a little girl curl up in a strange man's lap? I had to consider the possibility that she had been sexually abused. A quick investigation unfortunately confirmed my suspicion (and led me to intervene protectively in her life). This little girl taught me to look beyond such "positive" behavior to consider its origins in traumatic neediness, not simply friendliness. In the wake of the Gulf War in

1991, a little girl in Kuwait shared with me her recurrent nightmare—that the neighbor who was killed by the Iraqi occupation police, and whose body was left to rot in the street, called out to her every night “why don’t you help me?” I learned the wisdom of the conclusion that “traumatic memories don’t spontaneously decay.”

Visiting war zones and refugee camps around the world I came to have a special appreciation for the resilience of girls, and the vulnerability of boys, particularly when it comes to the link between childhood trauma and violent behavior in adolescence and early adulthood. This is a matter of culture *and* biology. Males around the world are taught that while violence demonstrates strength, gentleness signals weakness. Thus, it is better to be mad than sad. What is more, boys are many times more likely than girls to be affected by the recessive MAOA gene that is very efficient in translating the experience of child abuse into aggressive and anti-social behavior. Eight-five percent of abused boys who have this gene end up with such conduct disorder by age 10, versus only 10% in non-abusive families. And, in toxic social environments, 60% of those aggressive 10 year-olds end up as violent delinquents in adolescence. That is why it is no coincidence that the violent broken children I sit with in jails and prisons are almost all male.

I saw this pattern of gender differences in the 10 year-olds that I met in a Palestinian refugee camp outside Bethlehem in 1987. When asked if she was afraid at night when Israeli soldiers raided the camp, a 10 year old girl explained to me that the “little children” were afraid. Her response was to comfort them. She comforted them by explaining that when the soldiers aggressively came into the camp, they were acting under orders to do so, but when they went home they were kind fathers to their own children. Not surprisingly, while most of the boys around her were throwing stones at the

soldiers, she was focusing on getting an education so she could become a doctor to help her people.

What I came to understand when I began more formal work with American killers in 1993, was that most of them were best understood as broken children: untreated traumatized children who controlled the scary teenagers and men they inhabited, and who therefore were especially vulnerable to the social toxicity of the communities in which they lived. Why does this make these broken children so dangerous? Research demonstrates what parents and early childhood educators have long known: *toddlers are barbarians*. Two year-olds—especially *male* two year-olds-- are the most aggressive humans on the planet. They bite. They pinch. They kick. They hit. One researcher (Richard Trembly) puts it this way: If all the toddlers in America woke up tomorrow morning and were six feet tall and weighed 220 pounds, by bedtime tomorrow night many of the parents and early childhood educators of little boys in America would be maimed or dead. We forget the truth of this assessment because little children are so physically weak that their aggressive behavior generally doesn't do much damage. But I routinely sit across from these toddlers when they inhabit six foot tall, 220 pound men who carry the burden of being traumatized due to abuse and severe adversity, and *their* tantrums do a lot of damage. They beat people to death. They kick people to death. They stab people to death. They shoot people to death.

My head and heart are full of examples (many of whom are chronicled in detail in my 2015 book *Listening to Killers* and my 2018 book *Miller's Children*). My job is to reach these broken children, and report back to the adult world of the criminal courtroom, and sometimes even to give them a glimmer of hope that not just the criminal justice system, but they themselves will understand the source of their violent behavior in their childlike brokenness.

I live with the memory of a case in which a 27 year old man— let's call him Robert--had stabbed his female partner to death, in what the media called a "senseless act of violence." He thought it was senseless too until we made sense of it. Growing up, his abusive mother abandoned him serially—she would leave him in foster care for extended periods, and then return, promising to be his mother for good. This happened several times, until he was 12. She then once again returned, and persuaded the foster parent to bring the boy for a visit, which she did. After the second visit, the mother persuaded the boy to bring his bicycle to her place, so he would feel "at home" there. Showing emotional courage and the depth of his neediness, the boy complied. The following week, when he arrived for his next visit, not only was his mother gone, but she had sold his bicycle. Can we begin to imagine the sadness and rage he felt? When he was 22 he found the female partner he eventually murdered. The woman was the same age as his mother (17 years older than he). They were together for five stormy years, during which time he often threatened to leave her. The murder arose from an argument over how to spend their money—for food or for drugs. She grabbed a knife from the kitchen, which he took from her, and stabbed her multiple times. To an outside observer, it seems obvious who he was killing, but not to Robert. When I gently asked if he thought murdering the woman had anything to do with his own mother, he appeared stunned at the thought, and responded, "Man, I never thought of that!" And he hadn't. It's too big a trauma for his traumatized child's brain to deal with.

Broken children often don't make the connections that are obvious to outside adults. It's what therapists do for and with them, and killers typically have not had the benefit of that assistance. Robert is just one examples of the multitude of broken children in adolescent and adult bodies who have found a place in my heart and mind. Three hundred fifty murder cases and counting.



I myself grew up with an emotionally abusive mother, although because I was her first child and her "golden boy," my younger brother and sister took the brunt of her psychological maltreatment. It wasn't until the mid-1990s that I became conscious of the harm that she inflicted upon me, due in large part to the consciousness raising efforts of my wife Claire. This was true even though I had published a book in 1986 entitled *The Psychologically Battered Child*. Once I finally appreciated this truth about my mother, I had to recall the quote from the German poet Goethe that Urie Bronfenbrenner taught me and often quoted: "What is most difficult? That which you think is easiest, to see what is before your eyes." Indeed.

A career prosecutor once told me, that he lives with "the stench of death." It takes a kind of spiritual fortitude to do the work I do— unless you are a cold heartless bastard (which, I think, that prosecutor had become). Given that we are considering the role of spiritual and religious heritage in human development, I must note that in the same period of my life when I was fulfilling my professional destiny as a psychological expert witness, I returned for a time to my Methodist and Catholic roots, because I found that I needed the Christian depth of both. Back in the 1970s, there was a joke told in UU circles that speaks to this: As an interdenominational group of clergy leave an ecumenical meeting, they come upon the Catholic Church in flames. The priest runs into the fire and returns with the crucifix, saying with relief, "I have saved the heart of my church!" As they continue down the street, they encounter the Protestant Church in flames. The minister runs into the building and returns with the Bible, exclaiming, "Thank God, I have saved the heart of my church!" They continue, and find the synagogue ablaze. The rabbi runs into the burning building and returns with the Tora scroll, shouting, "I have saved the heart of my church!" They continue walking, only to find that the Unitarian Universalist church too is in flames. The UU minister runs into the church and returns

with the coffee urn, saying, of course, “I have saved the heart of my church!”

As the Parable of the Lamppost teaches, it is not enough to have intellectual concepts and professional techniques—and coffee hours. Before we can walk into the darkness, we need to hold hands and pray, because at some level we are all afraid of the dark, and need the strength of fellowship and spiritual inspiration to go forward.

For 15 years before returning to Ithaca and this church, I taught at Loyola University Chicago, a Jesuit Catholic university where my Jesuit colleagues were the smartest Catholics on the planet, and I found very satisfying the integration of my academic, spiritual, and social justice lives in one institutional home. There, I attended noon Mass every day I was on campus, and found particularly meaningful taking Communion, repeating this line in the liturgy: “Lord I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.” It speaks to the brokenness within me and the killers I listen to. I was impressed with the Methodists too, for their straightforward belief in actualizing their faith in community, where actions speak louder than words. The three simple rules are: “Do no harm. Do good. Stay in love with God.” For a time Buddhism met this need also by teaching about the inevitability of suffering and wisdom of non-attachment.

Eventually, however, the cultural limitations of all three pushed me away, as the Catholic, Methodist and Buddhist institutional religions resisted embracing the LGBTQ+ and others as God’s children who have inherent value as human beings (and the Catholic Church tolerated child sexual abuse by priests). Eventually I found a way to incorporate what I considered to be the best of these diverse spiritual traditions into my life in a way that led me back to the Unitarian Universalist church home I once knew here in Ithaca, and

here I shall remain while I continue my life's work of making sense of broken children. Amen.

**Closing Words:**

“Take my hand, let us pray, and we will walk into the darkness together.”