



> An extract from **Pebbles of Perception**

Chapter Twenty: Having Children

Writing books is the closest men ever come to childbearing.

- Norman Mailer

If you have ever been on an aeroplane and been close to a whinging boy, your reaction will likely depend on whether you have children yourself. The childless among us will be wondering why the obviously incompetent parents can't get the annoying critter to shut up. The parents among us will be just happy that he's not our child.

Whether to have children is certainly one of our most important life choices. For many the choice of whether to have children is easy. Either they are in the majority who have a natural urge to procreate, or they are at the other end of the spectrum and don't see what all the fuss is about. Everyone has his or her own motivations based on life experiences and expectations. Unfortunately for many there is no choice. While adoption or fostering may be an option for

some, there are far too many people who don't get a chance to have children of their own.

The Family Choice

What if you don't have a strong desire either way? What should guide your decision?

Unfortunately this is one of the few areas where there is no realistic trial run, and vicarious learning is not an option either. Having children is an "all-in" endeavour. It is unusual in this respect. Parents and childless adults alike simply can't fully appreciate the *relative* merits of their respective situations. They can only know one state, and any judgements on relative merits are by definition incomplete.

We can't appreciate in advance that raising children requires so much hard work. The responsibility that accompanies raising children is a heavy one. For a long while our children are totally dependent on us. Despite the importance of the decision, we receive little if any preparation and no practical way of understanding the degree of personal sacrifice. Little thought, little preparation and no training. Hardly a recipe for success.

Having children:

- tests our patience, our endurance, and, after consecutive sleepless nights, our very sanity
- recasts, and often severely strains, our other relationships, in particular our relationship with our partner
- puts us under financial pressure and can thereby hold us in jobs we dislike
- widens our range of emotional experiences from the highs to the lows

- severely curtails spontaneity
- heightens our senses so that we instinctively smell, see or hear danger, even when it's not serious.

You may then ask why we voluntarily put ourselves through such a decades-long marathon. The biological urge to procreate is so strong that the 'choice' is not completely voluntary. And indeed it is sometimes accidental. As the saying goes, before having children I had three theories on the subject, now I have three children and no theories. As a father I can only relay my own experience thus far. To cut to the chase: despite all the sacrifices I wouldn't have it any other way. Now you can argue that I would say that, given our psychological bias to love what's ours. But it goes beyond that. Some of the most deeply satisfying moments of my life have been experiencing our children:

- having fun together
- doing things for each other
- joyfully lost in an engaging activity
- laughing or singing
- showing natural love and affection
- developing their own distinct personalities and capabilities.

And there is much more. Through our children we can get a strong sense of purpose and focus. The loving bond between parent and child is one of the strongest there is. This is why the loss of a child is possibly the greatest loss of all. We would do anything to protect our children, although I use the word "our" guardedly. In truth children are their own unique persons and in

no way belong to us, in the “ownership” sense of the word. They may be in our custody, but they are never in our control. The time will come for our children to leave the nest. It can be heart-wrenching to see them go, but go they must. Writer and poet Khalil Gibran put it well:

*Your children are not your children
They are sons and daughters of life's
longing for itself.*

For most people the decision on whether to have children will come naturally to them. Nature does its thing. We should however be mindful of our motivations. We may want to think twice if we are having children to “lock in” a partner, add another achievement to the list, mind us in our old age, or simply follow what we see most others do. The ticking biological clock is another powerful motivator, with the fear of regret sometimes driving the decision (though the possibility to freeze eggs may provide relief in some cases).

Before having children we should consider whether we are emotionally mature enough to make, and follow through with, such a consequential decision. Are we up to the challenge? To treat our children well we need to know and respect ourselves.

Just as important as the choice to have children, is the choice of who will be there by our side. We need all the support we can get. Single parenthood is especially difficult, but perhaps not as hard as parenthood by feuding partners. Having wider family support available to parents is a real blessing. Kind grandparents can be wonderful role models for children, a source of non-judgemental encouragement.

Dispelling Some Myths

We are at our happiest when we are bringing up children. “In the moment” studies of happiness have shown that the opposite is frequently true. Our happier times seem to be before and after kids. We remember our time with children more favourably than our actual experience at the time.

It is selfish not to have children. Society can be intolerant of those who choose to be childfree. Voluntary childlessness is frowned upon. Society is jealous of the “dinky” double-income no-kids professional couple with their exotic annual holidays. Deriding childfree couples is hypocritical. We celebrate free choice in almost every other sphere, and we should be willing to do so when someone decides that there is more to life than Darwinian procreation. Indeed, many childless teachers, politicians, community and religious workers have dedicated their time to serving broader society, and done so with a passion and fervour that might not have been possible if they had had children of their own.

We will always be great parents. Yes, we all think that we can be perfect, but we have our moments. The loud angry father shouting at his teenage son, well, that’s you in a weaker moment.

Babies sleep more soundly when the baby monitor is turned off. Fathers do.

Parenting

What then is our goal as parents?

Two important things are: (i) showing unconditional love, and (ii) fostering our children's self-esteem. The goal is that our children know they are loved and know they are capable.

If we can release young adults that have inner confidence in their unique capacity to live life fully, we should be able to reflect with pride as they go on to be positive and productive members of society. With this parenting privilege, we will have loved and we will have left a legacy.



Having and raising children is not a fair-weather pursuit, yet those who have them wouldn't have it any other way. Our ability to fully control whether we have children is open to debate, but the choice to love them, no strings attached, is ours alone.