

Retreating Whimper of a Chihuahua Mom: The Saga of my First Seven Years as a Parent

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Abstract

In this paper I share my experiences of the first seven years and beyond, as a parent. I have divided my paper into three segments where in the first segment I talk about the initial three years of parenting, my experiences and learning here helped me pace myself for this journey. In the second section, I talk of being a parent to a four-to-six-year-old. The last segment talks about the more recent past as well as my present time as a parent. For each segment, I highlight how my experiences with my child defined and redefined my parenting style and practices. Also, I try to emphasize that parenting is a fluid exercise with continuous goal setting, strategic withdrawal as well as role reversals that cannot be clearly put within set boundaries. Overall, I have taken a humorous stance to talk about this unique experience that is life-changing in more ways than one.

The liberty to choose is the biggest of all freedoms. Or so I believed and lived by till I became a parent. I chose to spend my twenties in academic pursuits, procrastinating marriage for the same. I chose to marry at the ripe old age of thirty-two, I chose the person I married, for various obvious and not so obvious reasons, including his genetic pool. Six months into the matrimony, I chose to go for procreation (of course, my spouse was an equal and active participant in this one). During my pregnancy, I chose to go for an elective cesarian. All these were well analyzed and thought-out choices, putting enough effort into the decision making. I had a baby, and I chose its name. That's pretty much the last time I exercised my right and liberty to choose, my free will, without any sense of self-doubt.

Birth to Three

Parenting is an overwhelming thing for sure. Right from the moment one discovers the that one is pregnant, more importantly, right from the moment the world discovers that you are expecting; it is a full-blown circus. Right from my parents to the nosy aunties of the neighborhood, for that matter, even my much-younger, never married, obviously never-pregnant cousins had advice for me! Though I had reasonable doubts about my role as a parent, but I always had a very clear concept of what I will not be as a parent, I definitely didn't want my baby to turn out like me. I have been a very demanding, problem child so my parents'

parenting style was out of question. They, most definitely, did it all wrong. I believed that I am going to go for a very democratic parenting, having my child participate in all the decisions concerning him. From early on, for nearly all things and decisions, I started looking for non-verbal cues to check if he liked or disliked something, if his 'vote' was there or not. So, if he didn't like Three Little Pigs but did seem more engaged and happier with Hansel and Gretel, then it was time to tell him about wicked stepmoms and evil witches. Well, he 'voted' for it, right? Bathing in the morning didn't seem to bring as much 'joy' as did bedtime baths, so night bathers we became as we had a 'voice vote' for that. Then, somewhere in the initial days of my journey I read a then-popular book 'Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother' by Amy Chua. It was evidently an empowering experience for me, I took notes and had a broad framework of what all I will definitely not do as a parent. Also, it was the time that the seeds of doubt in myself as a parent were sown in -maybe I am being too liberal as a parent? Maybe I was taking this democratic parenting a bit too far? Maybe that's not what Alfred Adler meant? Maybe Ms. Chua knows what she is talking about, after all Chinese kids are so gifted, well behaved, and academically brilliant? So, should I next be turning to Pavlov's dog for inspiration or Harlow's monkeys? Or maybe, I should get a Bobo doll like Bandura? Or was Freud correct about his stages all along? These and many more

were the tumultuous array of thoughts in my head. You see, my battles were all internal. By this time, I did not have anyone at home questioning me about my job as a parent, no nosy mother-in-law, no interfering husband (for reasons unknown to me, he believed in me, still does), none of the colleagues and friends questioning me about what I was doing. People around me believed that I knew what I was doing and was apparently executing this ‘grand parenting plan’ to a T. Whereas here I was, doubting and second guessing myself at every step.

Another significant and overwhelming feeling that took over around this time was the loss of the sense of self and ownership. In those initial years, it seemed to me that my child owned me, completely. He decided when I sleep and wake up, if and when I go out for a drive, even my bathroom breaks were at his beck and call. I couldn’t and wouldn’t do or think of anything that didn’t include the little one. Of course, I was very lucky to have enough help to give me ample space and time (especially my child’s grandparents who were totally hand-on), and it was not a diktat from above and nobody asked me to follow this line of thought, definitely not my child but there it was. I lost a sense of control and decision making, I let go, completely. My weight spiraled out of control (I am still struggling with it); it was an emotionally draining time for me. I don’t know if I was depressed, post-partum but it didn’t feel so, and I never consulted a doctor. I was, most certainly, very happy and grateful. I guess, I was culturally trained to be a mother like that, not consciously, but at a very subconscious, subtle level. Books, television, movies, advertisements, family, society, all have been putting up mothers on this pedestal forever and in my quest of doing it right, I think I was doing it all wrong.

Four to Six

The first three years of me as a parent had definitely set in a sense of deep-seated doubt about my style of parenting. At every step my offspring set out to challenge, question, and cancel me. My four-year-old was proving to be my arch nemesis. At so many levels, he was

turning into a mini-me and I wasn’t too pleased about it. Around this time, we moved continents and it was the best thing that happened to my parenting and me. I put my child in a Montessori play group where he thrived. Our lives there exposed both of us to a culture of novel experiences, way different from what we had been used to. All three of us, my child, my partner, and I were ready and receptive for this welcome change. Every day, I could literally feel that a change of place as well as our efforts towards deliberately putting ourselves out there were doing us plenty good. Our everyday experiences were redefining our relationship as a parent and child. There was a sense of freedom that accompanied my parenting skills now. I felt that while in India, I had set up a model of parenting for myself, governed by my personal experiences as well as my limited interaction with other mothers, which I was finding harder and harder to stand by. In US, I was exposed to so many different kinds of parents, a huge variety of parenting styles and some of which my old self would have been left scandalized by the ‘utter disastrous things passing off for parenting’. To be fair, I realized an essential fact that parenting is not what my books will teach me, it is definitely not the list of dos, don’ts and ‘never will I ever’ that I had prepared in my head, rather parenting is what works practically for each family. I didn’t feel the need any more to fake it till I make it to the list of ‘best-possible parents’, a list which, again, existed in my head only. ‘To each one his own’ became my mantra. What works for my neighbor, or my cousin, most definitely doesn’t work for me, but that doesn’t make either of them a bad parent. Over the years, I became less judgmental and more forgiving towards myself. This has been an emancipating experience and has brought about an ease of being myself even while being a parent. If I messed up today, well, life happens, and tomorrow is another day.

Seven and Beyond

Soon after his seventh birthday, my much larger bundle of joy told me that ‘Death Metal’ is his favorite genre of rock music. This was a watershed moment for me in more ways than

one. First, we don't listen to rock music at our home (my partner does, sometimes, and always using headphones, still, it's his fault!); secondly, I didn't know that he knew the meaning of the word 'genre' (he knew, I checked and quizzed him). Lastly and most importantly, we hadn't yet discussed existential questions regarding life and death. It was this moment that dawned the reality our family dynamics to me. Whatever I knew, whatever I rigorously trained for, whatever I believed in, was futile. It wasn't about me anymore. For a person who consciously decided to embark on this journey of parenthood, I was full of ideas and theories regarding what kind of parent I will raise myself to be. Oh no, I never thought I was raising a child, the child simply reflects all that I am as a parent. Right? That's how it works? 'No Mam, it doesn't'- my little, pink, squeamish bundle told me, early on and has been repeating it day in and day out.

Now, we, my child and I, have made a paradigm shift from democratic parenting to enlightened leadership, with him providing the quintessential leadership. He directs this parent child equation and I hope and pray he does this well. This is an ever-changing dynamic, parenting is fluid, with enough flexibility and sometimes it entails a struggle for power and authority. Honestly, I am not sure if I can define our relationship in words anymore. The only thing I am certain about now is that I love him and as he charts the course of his destiny, I fervently hope that I prove to be a parent who loved her child well. That's the only expectation I have from myself-to love my child well and to love him enough.