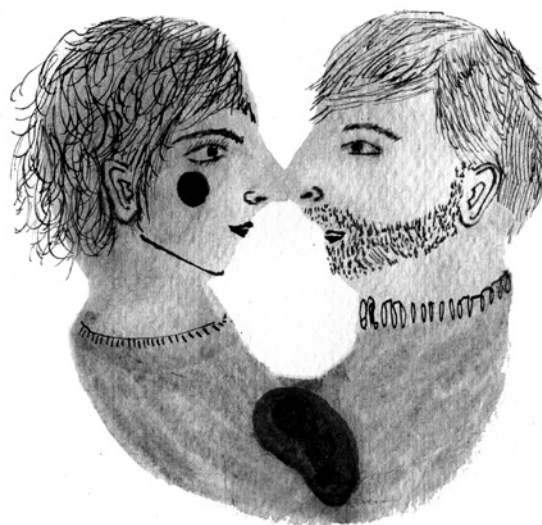


Five Dials



NUMBER 19

The Parenting Issue

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... plus Arthur Bradford, Kevin Baker, and the wisdom of a group of randomly selected nine-year-olds.



Raise Them Up Hippy

By Arthur Bradford

I was thinking about this strange thing my mother did back in about 1975. She was driving in a car with my twin sister and me – two five-year-olds – when she announced that we were going to rob a bank.

‘We’re all out of money,’ she said, ‘but I’ve come up with a plan.’

My sister and I waited dutifully to hear the details.

‘I’ve got a small gun for each of you,’ she said, ‘and some little black masks. We’ll stop at the bank in town, run in there and make them give us money.’

‘Steal their money?’ asked my sister.

‘Where are the guns?’ I asked.

I recall a familiar feeling of dread welling up inside me at that point. It wasn’t anxiety about committing a crime, for we hadn’t done anything like that before. No, my anxious feelings stemmed from the thought that our family was acting weird again. Once more, we were about to go and draw attention to ourselves like a bunch of freaks. Everyone was going to know we ran around naked and ate food that didn’t come from the stores, like strange granola, and drank milk from goats. They would know we were hippies!

As it turned out my mother’s plan fell apart under our questioning, and at some point she announced that we were not actually going to rob anyone. We did go to the bank and get money that day, but we used the drive-up window and a cheque. Apparently we weren’t broke.

I’m a parent myself now, with two small daughters, and as such I find myself re-examining these instances from my youth with a new perspective. What exactly was going through my mother’s head when she told us that yarn? As I parent, I think I finally understand. In fact, I think I understand the whole hippy parenting thing a lot better now. There’s a funny kind of wisdom that hits a person who reaches the same age his parents were back when certain memories were formed.

I don’t mean to suggest that concocting stories about robbing banks is a typically

hippy thing to do, but I do think there was something in the air back then that moved some parents to throw out the rulebook on what constituted proper child-rearing. Many of these hippy parents had been brought up in the new American suburbia where conformity was celebrated, so for them, the goal was to shake things up and raise a generation of free-spirited little children of the earth, a next generation of soldiers in the revolution. Did that actually happen though? I think back on my childhood and realize that we’re raising our daughters in a decidedly less rebellious fashion. I’ll make a sweeping general guess here and say I bet most children of hippies have chosen to eschew the chaos of their upbringings now that they have kids of their own. Maybe that’s our own way of rebelling, or maybe things are more ‘normal’ for our kids because our parents already did so much of the rebelling for us. Although I’m sure my parents would not really qualify as hard-core hippies, they definitely subscribed to the mood of the day among their set of college-educated baby boomers, which was decidedly back to the land. We lived in rural Maine in the 1970s, and the 1970s there were sort of like the 1960s everywhere else. Our mother, in particular, embraced the bake-your-own-bread, make-clothing-on-a-loom aesthetic. Our father worked for the state government at the time and probably wasn’t so enthusiastic about these new trends in parenting, but he tolerated it as much as he could, or he simply tuned out when things got too weird. Perhaps this was one reason they got divorced soon after we were born. Also our mother became a lesbian.

My sister and I attended a school out in the woods that was a grand experiment in education. The experiment was that nobody taught us anything. We just ran around and played all day long. The older kids must have had some sort of curriculum, but there really wasn’t much of a schedule. At lunchtime, when the weather was warm, we’d all gather at the

muddy pond and swim naked. There was a zip wire that ran across the pond and one time one of the older boys fell off it and ripped open his scrotum on a tree branch. That’s what kind of school it was. Well, that’s not true. I supposed we did learn things, albeit unconventionally. If anyone had a problem they felt needed attention, he or she could ring a big bell and everyone had to come together and discuss the issue. This happened almost daily, and I remember one particularly heated argument about a stolen stereo, during which a boy named Donald slammed a chair against a wall. Peace and love, my ass!

One morning at our hippy school one of the mothers drove a van full of kids off the road and into a creek. Everyone was fine somehow and we didn’t even have car seats back then. After the divorce our mother invited other single mothers over to our house to live in the empty rooms. It was a big Maine farmhouse and difficult to heat. The women learned to split wood and shovel out cars buried in snow while we kids hovered around the heating vents under blankets. Someone named Cat showed up in January and wanted to have her baby in our living room. My mother said no, and explained to us later that Cat was always taking advantage of people. That summer my aunt saved the placenta from her second child and served it with eggs to the guys who were fixing the floor. Then there was a party at our house and a drunken artist tossed a cooked crab through my sister’s bedroom window. Her rug smelled for months!

Why are these my memories of hippy childhood? Of course there were many wonderful times, and I remember those too. What about all those colourful costumes we made by hand? And the sweet molasses we ate instead of sugar? But don’t we always hear about how beautiful life was back when the hippies ruled the day? I believe that most of us who grew up around hippies remember the time as happy, but we also recall a sense of anxiety; a general sense that no one was really steering the ship, as it were. There was a lot of talk about free to be you and me and letting kids make their own choices, and how much adults could learn from the wisdom of a child, but did we kids really want to be the decision makers and the teachers?

Back in the 1960s and 1970s people especially liked to use the term *grown-ups* to describe adults. And certain hippy parents wanted it to be known that even though they were older, they were not ‘grown-ups’ at all. My friend Maxine Swann wrote my favourite book about life as a hippy kid. It’s called *Flower Children*, and in it her crazy father ‘Sam’ says:

‘The real problem, the overall problem, is that grown-ups think they are smarter than kids – when the fact of the matter is, the older you grow, the dumber you get. What happens is you start hoarding up opinions. Pretty soon you’ve got an opinion stuck to everything ...’

The quote goes on to say that if grown-ups would only listen to their kids, they might learn a thing or two. It sounds like classic hippy-speak, but now that I think about it, I believe there’s something to it.

At that hippy free-form school I was telling you about we had a teacher named Barry who played a game called ‘Peanut Butter Man’ with us. This game consisted of him chasing us around the school with huge gobs of peanut butter plastered on to his bearded face. When he caught us, we’d get smeared. Most of the kids enjoyed this game, but I found it a little intense and would usually look for a safe place to hide until it was over. My mother recently dug up one of my fall term evaluations from that school, a hand-typed letter that they wrote up for each student. I was surprised to see such documentation had even existed at that school. The last line said, ‘It seems to us that Arthur might need to be silly more often.’ Perhaps Barry was thinking about the Peanut Butter Man when he wrote that line.

I can really picture old Barry hanging out with the character Sam from Maxine’s book. They’d both be smeared with peanut butter and talking about how much we can learn from kids if we just get down on the floor and play their games sometimes. It’s true that once you become a parent you get especially attached to your opinions. I think this is because we want so badly to provide our children with security. It’s really one of my greatest goals these days just to make sure my daughters feel safe.

Recently our youngest daughter ‘Theo’ has become worried that bears will enter our house at night. I’m not sure where she picked up on this idea. There are no bears anywhere near our house. But I work very hard to assure her that this bear invasion scenario is not possible.

‘Bears live in the woods, Theo,’ I tell her.

‘In our back yard?’ she asks.

‘No, different woods,’ I say. ‘Look, if a bear saw you, it would be afraid. It would run away. Bears are scared of people.’

‘Scared of me?’

‘Yeah, right. You would scare a bear.’

This conversation goes on and on, and I realize at some point that I’ll never assure her fully that there’s nothing to fear from our friends the bears. Eventually I see that I’m just trying to convince myself of this fact anyway. I’m sticking an opinion to something, just like Sam said. I wonder what Barry would have told me about fearing bears.

Throughout my teens and twenties I can recall thinking, ‘Why isn’t my generation as rebellious and radical as my parents’ was?’ But now, with a few more years’ perspective, and the responsibility of raising two little girls, I’m not so interested in whatever that rebellion was about. It’s not so remarkable to me that young people were bucking the system and taking off their clothes at Woodstock. I totally get that. What I find remarkable now is that so many of them were doing that with kids in tow.

A few months ago I took my eldest daughter, Elsie, who is three, to watch a friend of mine play with his band at a club. It was a loud rock band and we went to the sound check first, which I thought Elsie would find entertaining. The place smelled of stale beer and the music was absolutely deafening. Midway through one of the songs the drummer stopped and said into his microphone, ‘Hey, you should really put some earphones on your little girl.’ One of the roadies found an oversized set for her and we watched the rest of the sound check in peace. My original plan had been to bring Elsie back for the show that night. I had visions of her dancing around gleefully and riding about on my shoulders. But when I asked her if she wanted to go back she said, ‘No, that’s OK.’ When I went back there on my own that night I saw no one

else with kids. I would have looked like a real dumbass dragging my three-year-old daughter to that place. Since then I’ve learned that many bands schedule mid-afternoon kiddie concerts where they play at a lower volume in family settings while practical parents prance along with their kids. I haven’t been able to bring myself to attend such a concert yet.

We children of the hippy revolution were too young to understand concepts like new frontiers and bucking the establishment back when all that was happening. We just accepted that the world was full of hippy things and if our teachers wanted us all to hop naked through a field, or our mother said we were going to rob a bank on the way to school, that was simply the way it was going to go down. But something about that unpredictable world caused us to seek, well, more traditional atmospheres for our own children – things like mid-afternoon kiddie concerts and organic juice served in little individual boxes as opposed to squashed-up apples, pressed by hand and poured through cheesecloth into a bucket. I suppose it’s not really that we didn’t enjoy all those new paradigms. It’s just that most of those ideas got sanitized as they were incorporated into the mainstream, sort of like the way the gooey bits of the apples got strained out by the cheesecloth when we made our hippy juice. If you want organic foods now, you just buy them at the store. If you want an alternative education now, there’s a whole slew of acceptable philosophies to choose from, none of which encourages swimming naked with the faculty at lunchtime.

That hippy school we attended went out of business eventually, and my sister and I enrolled in the local public school. What a shock that was! I couldn’t even read! We both gradually adjusted to the new school, saying the pledge of allegiance and happily drinking the sugary fruit punch they served at lunch. I can’t imagine sending our daughters to a place like that old hippy school now, but then again I also want better for them than the mediocre public school we attended afterwards.

Maybe my generation has swung back too far in the other direction. We’ve got websites devoted to the latest news in child brain development, and our car seats are so safe it seems like you could chuck

them off a cliff without harming the baby inside. We used to just ride up front with our parents, ready to fly out the window with the slightest impact. Now, while I drive alone in the front like a chauffeur, I look back at my girls strapped into those plastic suits of armour and wonder just what it is we've lost. I put on one of those old *Sesame Street* DVDs and let them watch it as we drive, to ease the worry. I feel like these days it's as if we're all done with the big experiments and now we just want to implement the results. Why didn't those of us who grew up with such outlandish examples of creativity end up better than the previous generations? Why aren't we all creative geniuses, super-free beings, with little happy earth children? Or maybe we should have all ended up helpless, or in jail? Certainly many of our grandparents shook their heads and figured we were a lost cause. But really, we're just middle of the road, some good, some bad, not really any more enlightened than any of the parents before us, if we're being honest. Does it really matter what you expose your kid to anyway? Why not just tell them you're on your

way to rob a bank each morning?

Last summer we returned to Maine with our daughters and stayed at the old farmhouse with my mother, who lives there still. It was nice to show the girls some of the places where I used to romp and play as a child. I especially wanted to show them that old hippy school, where some of my first memories were formed back when I was an age they were now approaching. But of course the school was gone, the crazy wooden buildings torn down to make way for several expansive houses. There was a farm nearby though, a place we used to visit from time to time. It had been preserved as an educational nature centre by some hearty folks, 1960s throwbacks. The place was on the coast and there were pathways down to the salt-water mudflats where I used to dig clams as a kid. I watched with tender pleasure as my daughters ran ahead of me, down to the bay. At the water's edge, they picked through tide pools and soon got covered in the thick, salty mud. The bugs started to bite their skin and my youngest daughter shit her pants. I'd forgotten to bring a replacement diaper so I washed her off

in the silty water and let her run naked through the broken shells and pungent seaweed. Then Elsie, the older sister, said she wanted to get naked too.

'OK,' I said. 'Go ahead.'

She took off her clothes, threw them down in the mud and went off to join her sister. The bugs were really going to town on them. When we returned to the house their mother would likely be concerned at the welts on their skin. It would take a while to get all that mud out of their hair, and I'd forgotten sun block so they'd probably get burned as well. But if it had been 1975 we wouldn't even have known what sun block was, and maybe I would have taken off my clothes too and got covered in mud along with the kids. The problem was, right then, I couldn't help but know better. I knew that after the initial rush and thrill of being covered in that wet stinky mud, there would come discomfort and reckoning. The welts from the bug bites would swell up and the salty, muddy grit would chafe my ass, and I'd be left wondering what the hell I was thinking doing something so childish, so truly silly. ◇

