

What David Bowie's Childhood Can Teach Us About Madness

We live in a crazy world which seems to be getting crazier by the minute. The reason is that the number of crazy people in the world is on the rise. Rates of suicide, mental illness, alienation, schizophrenia, loneliness, drug abuse and many forms of addiction are all seemingly out of control.

Why are we so unhappy? Why are we so screwed up?

This is such a huge and perplexing question that it would be madness to try to answer it in a few hundred words. This being so, let's look at the lessons that the life and especially the childhood of David Bowie can teach us.

The British psychologist, Oliver James, has spent several years researching Bowie's childhood, arguing that it has lessons that are applicable to all of us.

Bowie's family was marked by madness. Three of his mother's sisters were psychotic, as was his half-brother. It was hardly surprising, therefore, that Bowie's early albums are fixated on the theme of madness and his own fear of succumbing to it. The root cause of this madness, in Dr. James' judgment, was the cruelty of Bowie's maternal grandmother, Margaret Burns, who physically and psychologically abused her children and grandchildren.

Having emotionally abused her own children, Burns was abusive to Bowie's half-brother, Terry. When rebuked by her for some misdemeanor, Terry would smirk out of nervousness. Burns would then challenge him to laugh again, and when he nervously did so she would smack him across the ear to teach him not to laugh at her. According to Dr. James, "such abuse is the single strongest childhood predictor of schizophrenia – more so, even, than sexual abuse."

In 1967, suffering the cumulative effects of emotional abuse and being unwanted, Terry had his first psychotic episode, seeing Jesus Christ appearing in a blinding light and telling him he had been picked for a special mission. This incident would later be immortalized by Bowie in the line "a crack in the sky and a hand reaching down to me" in his song, *Oh You Pretty Things*.

*Look out my window and what do I see
A crack in the sky and a hand reaching down to me
All the nightmares came today
And it looks as though they're here to stay.*

Terry spent the rest of his life in and out of mental hospitals until, in 1986, he threw himself under a train.

According to Dr. James, Bowie's brother's childhood was "a textbook case of the causes of psychosis."

"There is now overwhelming evidence that childhood maltreatment is the major cause of emotional distress," Dr. James continued. "Maltreatment means such things as emotional abuse (cruelty, favoritism, malice), sexual and physical abuse, neglect. The best study showed that nine out of ten maltreated children had a mental illness by age eighteen."

Although Dr. James has his own theories concerning the manner in which adults can find healing from the destructive consequences of bad parenting, the bigger question is how to address the widespread problem of child abuse.

The answer is deceptively simple, though universally ignored. Bad parenting is caused by selfishness, and selfishness is the default position of the culture in which we find ourselves. Words such as *virtue*, which is merely another word for *selflessness*, the antithesis of selfishness, are banished from the vocabulary as being too moralistic or, worse, too religious. Modern education does not teach virtue, preferring to emphasis the child's "rights" over his responsibilities. In

consequence, we are raising a generation of narcissists who are temperamentally unable to give themselves to others. Such people, if they have children, will be bad parents, thereby condemning their children to all the psychotic baggage that selfishness causes.

The lessons that David Bowie's childhood teaches us is that virtue begets virtue and vice begets viciousness. If we will not teach virtue to our children, we will be creating a culture that becomes ever more vicious.

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