

| |
|-----------|
| Home |
| Essays |
| H&P |
| Books |
| YC |
| Arc |
| Bel |
| Lisp |
| Spam |
| Responses |
| FAQs |
| RAQs |
| Quotes |
| RSS |
| Bio |
| Twitter |

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HAVING KIDS

December 2019

Before I had kids, I was afraid of having kids. Up to that point I felt about kids the way the young Augustine felt about living virtuously. I'd have been sad to think I'd never have children. But did I want them now? No.

If I had kids, I'd become a parent, and parents, as I'd known since I was a kid, were uncool. They were dull and responsible and had no fun. And while it's not surprising that kids would believe that, to be honest I hadn't seen much as an adult to change my mind. Whenever I'd noticed parents with kids, the kids seemed to be terrors, and the parents pathetic harried creatures, even when they prevailed.

When people had babies, I congratulated them enthusiastically, because that seemed to be what one did. But I didn't feel it at all. "Better you than me," I was thinking.

Now when people have babies I congratulate them enthusiastically and I mean it. Especially the first one. I feel like they just got the best gift in the world.

What changed, of course, is that I had kids. Something I dreaded turned out to be wonderful.

Partly, and I won't deny it, this is because of serious chemical changes that happened almost instantly when our first child was born. It was like someone flipped a switch. I suddenly felt protective not just toward our child, but toward all children. As I was driving my wife and new son home from the hospital, I approached a crosswalk full of pedestrians, and I found myself thinking "I have to be really careful of all these people. Every one of them is someone's child!"

So to some extent you can't trust me when I say having kids is great. To some extent I'm like a religious cultist telling you that you'll be happy if you join the cult too — but only because joining the cult will alter your mind in a way that will make you happy to be a cult member.

But not entirely. There were some things about having kids that I clearly got wrong before I had them.

For example, there was a huge amount of selection bias in my observations of parents and children. Some parents may have noticed that I wrote "Whenever I'd noticed parents with kids." Of course the times I noticed kids were when things were going wrong. I only noticed them when they made noise. And where was I when I noticed them? Ordinarily I never went to places with

kids, so the only times I encountered them were in shared bottlenecks like airplanes. Which is not exactly a representative sample. Flying with a toddler is something very few parents enjoy.

What I didn't notice, because they tend to be much quieter, were all the great moments parents had with kids. People don't talk about these much — the magic is hard to put into words, and all other parents know about them anyway — but one of the great things about having kids is that there are so many times when you feel there is nowhere else you'd rather be, and nothing else you'd rather be doing. You don't have to be doing anything special. You could just be going somewhere together, or putting them to bed, or pushing them on the swings at the park. But you wouldn't trade these moments for anything. One doesn't tend to associate kids with peace, but that's what you feel. You don't need to look any further than where you are right now.

Before I had kids, I had moments of this kind of peace, but they were rarer. With kids it can happen several times a day.

My other source of data about kids was my own childhood, and that was similarly misleading. I was pretty bad, and was always in trouble for something or other. So it seemed to me that parenthood was essentially law enforcement. I didn't realize there were good times too.

I remember my mother telling me once when I was about 30 that she'd really enjoyed having me and my sister. My god, I thought, this woman is a saint. She not only endured all the pain we subjected her to, but actually enjoyed it? Now I realize she was simply telling the truth.

She said that one reason she liked having us was that we'd been interesting to talk to. That took me by surprise when I had kids. You don't just love them. They become your friends too. They're really interesting. And while I admit small children are disastrously fond of repetition (anything worth doing once is worth doing fifty times) it's often genuinely fun to play with them. That surprised me too. Playing with a 2 year old was fun when I was 2 and definitely not fun when I was 6. Why would it become fun again later? But it does.

There are of course times that are pure drudgery. Or worse still, terror. Having kids is one of those intense types of experience that are hard to imagine unless you've had them. But it is not, as I implicitly believed before having kids, simply your DNA heading for the lifeboats.

Some of my worries about having kids were right, though. They definitely make you less productive. I know having kids makes some people get their act together, but if your act was already together, you're going to have less time to do it in. In particular, you're going to have to work to a schedule. Kids have schedules. I'm not sure if it's because that's how kids are, or because it's the only way to integrate their lives with adults', but once you have kids, you tend to have to work on their schedule.

You will have chunks of time to work. But you can't let work spill promiscuously through your whole life, like I used to before I had kids. You're going to have to work at the same time every day, whether inspiration is flowing or not, and there are going to be times when you have to stop, even if it is.

I've been able to adapt to working this way. Work, like love, finds a way. If there are only certain times it can happen, it happens at those times. So while I don't get as much done as before I had kids, I get enough done.

I hate to say this, because being ambitious has always been a part of my identity, but having kids may make one less ambitious. It hurts to see that sentence written down. I squirm to avoid it. But if there weren't something real there, why would I squirm? The fact is, once you have kids, you're probably going to care more about them than you do about yourself. And attention is a zero-sum game. Only one idea at a time can be the top idea in your mind. Once you have kids, it will often be your kids, and that means it will less often be some project you're working on.

I have some hacks for sailing close to this wind. For example, when I write essays, I think about what I'd want my kids to know. That drives me to get things right. And when I was writing Bel, I told my kids that once I finished it I'd take them to Africa. When you say that sort of thing to a little kid, they treat it as a promise. Which meant I had to finish or I'd be taking away their trip to Africa. Maybe if I'm really lucky such tricks could put me net ahead. But the wind is there, no question.

On the other hand, what kind of wimpy ambition do you have if it won't survive having kids? Do you have so little to spare?

And while having kids may be warping my present judgement, it hasn't overwritten my memory. I remember perfectly well what life was like before. Well enough to miss some things a lot, like the ability to take off for some other country at a moment's notice. That was so great. Why did I never do that?

See what I did there? The fact is, most of the freedom I had before kids, I never used. I paid for it in loneliness, but I never used it.

I had plenty of happy times before I had kids. But if I count up happy moments, not just potential happiness but actual happy moments, there are more after kids than before. Now I practically have it on tap, almost any bedtime.

People's experiences as parents vary a lot, and I know I've been lucky. But I think the worries I had before having kids must be pretty common, and judging by other parents' faces when they see their kids, so must the happiness that kids bring.

Note

[1] Adults are sophisticated enough to see 2 year olds for the fascinatingly complex characters they are, whereas to most 6 year olds, 2 year olds are just defective 6 year olds.

Thanks to Trevor Blackwell, Jessica Livingston, and Robert Morris for reading drafts of this.

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