

Chapter 2

The Costs and Benefits of Obliviousness: Growing Up in the 1950s

I was born in 1947, so I spent most of my childhood in the 1950s (and thus my adolescence in the 1960s) as a member of what is commonly referred to as the “Baby Boomer” generation. The name comes from the fact that after the relatively low birth rate associated with the Great Depression of the 1930s and the disruption of World War II (when more than eight million served in the military forces), with the end of the War and the return of the troops and prosperity, there was an explosion of births. From 1945 to 1946, the number of babies born in the USA jumped from 2.8 to 3.5 million per year and peaked in 1957 with a figure of 4.3 million [1]. It then held relatively steady for years to come as the siblings of the first wave of Baby Boomers were born and joined the swollen ranks of their older brothers and sisters (my younger brother was born in 1951 and my sister in 1958).

The year I was born, the hospital in which my mother delivered in Manhattan was so crowded that her bed was in the hallway. By the time I started school, a building boom was underway to accommodate the escalating number of children showing up to be educated, and from then on I and my age-cohort were treated to a mixture of hastily erected temporary classrooms, new buildings, and split sessions (half the students started early in the morning and finished by lunch, while the other half started after lunch and finished in the late afternoon). This was to continue through elementary school, into junior high school and on into high school, only to be followed by similar experiences in college, when institutions scrambled to increase capacity and the number of campuses increased dramatically.

This demographic reality had a significant effect on the shape and texture of the second half of the twentieth century [2]. It had implications for the economy (rapid growth) and culture (Woodstock), as this market opportunity generated all kinds of enterprises that in the 1960s focused on youth-related activities, in the 1990s focused on adult vacations, second homes, efforts to improve middle-age sex, and as the twenty-first century moves forward a focus more and more on retirement-related matters (a good time to invest in the “Mick Jagger Retirement Home,” where the issue will indeed be whether or not you “can’t get no satisfaction”).

But all that was in the future when I was a child, growing up in the 1950s. It is more than self-indulgence to reflect on childhood (and parenting) in the 1950s, however, because I believe it is a useful and important exercise, in part for what it

can tell us about the utility of positive psychology in attempts to understand human lives. After all, many people consider the 1950s to have been “the happy decade.”

During the 1950s, I lived in what I thought to be an average family, in an average community. By the standards of the time, I thought we were middle class, despite the fact that neither of my parents had graduated from high school, and we went through some hard economic times when my father was unemployed. This belief that we were middle class nonetheless is not remarkable by virtue of the fact most Americans (then and now) consider themselves middle class. In a recent poll, about 90% of us identified ourselves as middle class in one way or another (with 2% saying that they were in the “upper class” and 7% saying that they were in “the lower class”) [3]. Indeed, one of the economic triumphs of the post-World War II era was that “working class” families (with blue- and pink-color jobs) could aspire to and even realize what were traditionally the hallmarks of middle class life – for example, cars, vacations, and the possibility of sending their children to college.

When I was growing up we always had food on the table. Although I lived in a public housing project in the early 1950s, it was at a time when that was a privilege for aspiring and upwardly mobile families entering the middle class, and by 1956, we owned our own home. We had a car and a television set. We went to the movies from time to time. We went on vacation every few years (to visit relatives). But from a modern child’s perspective, we might appear to have been poor. We didn’t go out to eat more than twice a month. Our house had only one bathroom. We had only one car and one television set, and we bought clothes mainly each September at back-to-school sales. From the time I was 13 years old, I had a paper route to earn spending money, and we played ball on the street in front of our house.

My children belong to a different world, not just because of the fact that when they were little I made much more money than my father ever did while I was a kid. Having been born in the 1976 and 1982, respectively, as children my Josh and Joanna and my step-son Eric lived in a different world than I did because the social environment is very different from what it was in the 1950s. The world of my childhood is nearly unfathomable to them. They cannot really believe what my life was like as a kid growing up in the 1950s in the New York metropolitan area. They have difficulty understanding the nostalgic pride with which I talk about the relative simplicity of those times. TV had entered our lives, but with only four channels and no VCR or DVDs. When we played on the street it was in canvas sneakers, not leather running shoes. We had board games such as Monopoly and Scrabble, but no video games.

When we thought about the world, it was in simple, child-sized terms, not with the apparent sophistication of today’s kids. The people across the street got furious if you accidentally hit a ball onto their lawn, but no one thought of suing anybody over it. The man down the street did some crazy things (like dressing up one New Year’s Eve as the New Year’s Baby, and then getting into a car accident in his car and getting arrested), but we did not know that he was an alcoholic. It was not until I was 20 years old that I understood the meaning of the fact that when I was 3 years, my mother and I had gone to live with her parents for the better part of a year (more on that later).

When they were young, I sometimes tried to explain to my children what life was like when I was a kid, and was left feeling a bit like a dinosaur trying to explain

what life was like before mammals when I talked to them about the old days. They know about divorce first hand. They could not grow up without becoming aware of rape and murder and the other staples of the daily news: about AIDS, drugs, genocide, and sexual abuse. It was not until I was an adult professional that I realized with a bolt of clarity that the girl down the street *must* have been sexually abused and that the older brother of my friend up the street *must* have been gay. Neither “sexual abuse” nor “homosexual” was a concept with which many children of my era were familiar (unless perhaps they had first hand family or individual experience, and even then they may not have realized what they were experiencing in many cases).

One day in the late 1980s, my kids and I were driving in our car in Chicago, reenacting a routine many parents know well. My daughter was speaking for the realities of her times. I was trying to explain what was gone and what was missing, whatever benefits may have accrued in the changing times. I suppose I had assumed the instructional mode into which we parents often sink when making a point with our offspring. Finally, my daughter put all nostalgia in its place: “Dad,” she said with a rhetorical flourish, “it ain’t the 1950s anymore.” Indeed it isn’t.

It is not the core themes and concerns of childhood that differ from age to age and place to place. Rather, it is the cultural, psychological, and social messages and tools that children have available to them as they go about the universal business of growing up. The nature of these messages and tools can have an effect on that process of growing up, however. While many are merely shifts in cultural style, some are positive rather than negative. Some do ennoble; others do degrade. Some promote social order; others promote chaos. Some are good; some are bad.

Some result in young adults who want to serve humanity and carve out a spiritually meaningful life for themselves, like the kids I read about who raised money in their school to help Hurricane Katrina victims a thousand miles away. Others result in teenagers like the ones I watched on a “reality” program on television who to a person said their goal in life was “to be rich and famous.”

A positive psychology of childhood seeks to understand how and why character and happiness and the capacity for joy flourish in some children and languish in others. There have always been both kinds of kids in America. The issue is whether there was something about the 1950s that affected the ratio between the positive and the negative in kids’ lives, between the toxic and the nurturing, and thus the balance of positive power in the social environment.

Amidst all the confusion and the temptations and the blind alleys of modern life, we can always gain clarity by asking the positive question, “does this contribute to my character development?” In answering this question as in every other developmental issue, we must always remember that context matters, indeed often overwhelmingly so. Rarely does the process of cause and effect work universally in matters of human development. Rather, it operates in the context established by family as family itself operates within the context of neighborhoods and community, of socioeconomic systems, of culture, of gender and ethnicity, of prior experience, and of historical circumstance. This is the fundamental lesson we learn from scientific research on human development. When we look at the development of children and ask, “does x cause y?” the best scientific answer is almost always “it depends” [4].

It depends. That is one of the most important messages from modern developmental science, and it provides the foundation for an ecological perspective as laid out by my mentor, developmental psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner beginning in the 1960s [5, 6]. Urie's books *Two Worlds of Childhood* (1970) and *The Ecology of Human Development* (1979) pioneered in making the case for the paramount importance of context in shaping the workings of developmental influences, influences that are found in the child's biology, the child's psychology, the child's family, the child's schools, the child's community, the child's society, and the child's culture.

A direct implication of this ecological perspective is the fact that rarely if ever does a single influence determine the course of a child's life, *for better or for worse*. Whether these influences be negative – “risk factors” – or positive – “developmental assets” – it is extremely rare that a single influence is decisive [7]. Rather, it is the accumulation of risk factors and the accumulation of developmental assets that generally describe the level of social toxicity and social robustness, which when coupled with the forces of human biology tell the story of a child's development.

Knowing this can help guide us as I proceed with my reminiscence of growing up in the 1950s because I want to find a path between nonreflective glorification and anachronistic criticism. As the talented novelist and editor Peter de Vries put it so well a generation ago, “Nostalgia just isn't what it used to be” [8]. Looking back on it, with today's informed eyes, I know life in the 1950s was neither a fully realized time nor a social utopia. Acknowledging that it was a glass neither full nor empty, was the glass half empty or half full?

The answer, I think is “yes, half full and half empty,” but with a twist, one that Martin Seligman builds upon in his analysis of the roots of authentic happiness. His reading of the research tells him that the best way to look at the glass is the optimistic solution: to overestimate the positive and underestimate the negative *even if this is at odds with “objective” reality* [9]. The surest path to depression is the pessimist's approach – to do the opposite by underestimating the positive and overestimating the negative (*or even accurately assessing the negative!*). This, I think, is a key to the benefits of 1950s obliviousness: depression was at lower levels because the culture was optimistically underestimating the negatives and overestimating the positives! There is a bumper sticker that says, “If you're not outraged you're not paying attention!” True perhaps, but sadly true. Knowledge may be power, but ignorance can be bliss, and obliviousness very reassuring.

I want to see what was good and true about that era, as a way of recognizing in place some of the key elements of positive psychology. At the same time, I want to have a perspective that will allow me to identify and articulate the secret wrongs, the unspoken pain, and the lack of awareness that were as characteristic of the era as well as its simple benefits and pleasures. I want to use this reflection on growing up in the 1950s as an opportunity to consider the pros and cons of what I consider to be the hallmark of the 1950s, namely “obliviousness.”

We can start with the positives. How do they work? Consider the case of the Minnesota-based Search Institute's research on what they call the 40 Developmental Assets, an important element in understanding positive psychology [10].

Based upon their research with many tens of thousands of kids across the country, the Search Institute created a list of positive influences on development. The 40 assets are grouped into eight categories: Support, Empowerment, Boundaries and Expectations, Constructive Use of Time, Commitments to Learning, Positive Values, Social Competencies, and Positive Identity.

If you look at what is included in the “Boundaries and Expectations” you find a very 1950s agenda, for example, “Family has clear rules and consequences, and monitors the young person’s whereabouts.” And, “School provides clear rules and consequences.” And, “Neighbors take responsibility for monitoring young people’s behavior.” And, “Parent(s) and other adults model responsible behavior.” And, “Young person’s best friends model responsible behavior.” And, “Both parent(s) and teachers encourage the young person to do well.”

The emphasis on the old fashioned concept of kids being embedded within a positive structure of adult authority is clear here, but it is also evidenced in other asset clusters. For example, within Constructive Use of Time we find the following asset: “Young person spends three or more hours per week in sports, clubs, or organizations at school and/or in the community organizations.” Among Positive Values we find “Young person accepts and takes personal responsibility.” Within Positive Identity we find “Young person reports that ‘my life has a purpose,’” and among Support is “Young person receives support from three or more nonparent adults.”

It is all very 1950s, but it still works! The more of these assets kids have in their lives, the more likely it is that they avoid commonly acknowledged problems like substance abuse and violence. Based upon studies involving about 150,000 6–12th graders, the Search Institute found that with respect to violence, for example, only 6% of kids with 31–40 assets demonstrate a problem with violence, but among kids with 0–10 assets the figure is 61%. The results for substance abuse parallel the findings for violence: 38% for those with 0–10 assets vs. 1% for those with 31–40 use illicit drugs, and for problem alcohol use it is 45 vs. 3%.

On the positive side, for kids with 0–10 assets, the rate of school success is 7%, maintaining good health is 25%, and for delaying gratification 27%, whereas for kids with 31–40 assets, the corresponding numbers are 53, 88, and 72%. All three of these positives represent old fashioned values that are validated by modern research, in the sense that good things flow to people who succeed in school, who cultivate health, and who are able to postpone gratification for later payoffs. All three are linked to the foundations of positive psychology as seen from the perspective of Seligman and others who have researched the origins of enduring happiness and fulfillment in life.

One of the negative correlates of too few assets discovered in the Search Institute’s research is the link to sexual activity prior to age 15. This might seem simply like a bias, in the sense that the age of sexual onset is *only* a matter of values, meaning that younger and older onset of sexual activity are not fundamentally different in the meaning and impact on child development, but only reflect the social conventions of a particular time and place. While that may be true (and certainly for parents and most other adults in the 1950s it was a matter of value), it is more than that, at least in North America, because research reveals that becoming sexually active prior to age 15 is correlated with a variety of other measures that

clearly have negative consequences for human development. These include lower levels of academic achievement and higher rates of unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases, multiple sexual partners, and involvement in other risky behaviors, such as substance use and delinquency [11]. For early onset of sexual activity, the numbers are 34% for 0–10 assets and 3% for 31–40 assets [10].

While much has changed since the 1950s in the lives of kids, what parents say they want for their children is mostly the same now as it was then. Over the last 10 years, I have had occasion to ask parents all around the country, “If you could choose to give your kids good character or \$1,000,000, which would you choose?” They are unanimous in choosing “good character,” at least in public (which means at least they know the right answer to this question, even if they don’t know how to achieve it or actually do things in and with their families that work against achieving that goal). The links between having Developmental Assets and demonstrating the components of character is clear in the Search Institute’s research. The more assets kids have in their lives, the more likely that they are living up to the kind of ideals their parents and teachers hope for.

An inspection of the rest of the 40 Developmental Assets (see them at <http://www.search-institute.org>) reveals a great deal of congruence with life as it was lived in the 1950s (at least in the mainstream of the middle class families to which 90% claimed membership). This is not surprising, given the Search Institute’s founder, Peter Benson. I know Peter, and he is, in many ways, a 1950s kind of guy – solid, prosocial, and living a life of purposeful commitments to community, family, and youth development.

Some of the assets are clearly “post 1950s” concerns – most notably, “Young person has knowledge of and comfort with people of different cultural/racial/ethnic backgrounds.” And most of these assets are timeless as aspirations, e.g. “Young person can resist negative peer pressure and dangerous situations.” But many of them are assets that the social environment supported better in the 1950s than it does now, with the myriad of powerfully corrupting forces, temptations, and demands that distract kids from attending to things like doing their homework, reading, being optimistic about the future, staying home on school nights, and interacting with your family. In this sense, the 1950s were a more positive time in which to grow up, even though some kids in the 1950s did not have these assets or the positive attributes they predict, and many kids today do have the assets and the positive attributes. Long live the 1950s...at least in this respect.

As I said before, I want to see what was good and true about that era, as a way of recognizing in place some of the key elements of positive psychology. At the same time, I want to have a perspective that will allow me see to the secret wrongs, the unspoken pain, and the lack of awareness that were as characteristic of the era as well its simple benefits and pleasures. I want to use this reflection on growing up in the 1950s as an opportunity to consider the pros and cons of what I consider to be the hallmark of the 1950s, namely “obliviousness.” Perhaps I can start with some thoughts about growing up in general, with a special focus on the ways in which positive elements nurture children, knowing full well that terrible things do happen to children and their parents, the challenge of which I will return to in the next chapter, when I deal with trauma.

What is the concept that permits a transition from the pros of the 1950s to the cons? I think it is the fundamental issue of acceptance vs. rejection. Human beings evolved to thrive in conditions where they are accepted and languish when rejected. This is one of the few “universals” in child development. Rejection is about actions that send a message “you are not good” and thus offer a negative definition of self to a child. As anthropologist Ronald Rohner documented in his 1975 book *They Love Me, They Love Me Not* [12], and in hundreds of studies since then, rejection is universally a psychological malignancy, an emotional cancer that cuts across societies and cultures to disrupt development and distort behavior. Children and youth thrive on acceptance, and 25% of all the bad behavior and disrupted development observed in children the world over can be attributed to the experience of rejection in place of acceptance [13].

Thus, one way to assess the pros and cons of the 1950s as a positive environment is to focus on the whos and whys of acceptance and rejection: who was accepted, who was rejected, and why. I think it is clear that acceptance in the 1950s was enhanced by many of the fundamental conditions of life. More kids lived in two parent families, and this alone tends to increase acceptance because it spares kids from asking a series of questions that often do get asked – even if secretly – by kids for whom parental absence is an issue. These questions include, “Why didn’t my father love me enough to stay?” and “Why didn’t my mother love me enough to stay married to my father?” and the more general “What’s wrong with me?”

Seligman is aware of this, noting that “children of stable marriages mature more slowly in sexual terms, they have more positive attitudes toward potential mates and are more interested in long-term relationships than are the children of divorce,” (p. 188) [9]. Of course, what seems to be at stake here is just what we mean by “stable marriages.” Because people were more likely to “stay together for the kids” and to hide their adult problems from their kids (“the children are watching”), even marriages that were deeply troubled (as I eventually understood my parents’ to be) were perceived by children as “stable.” As the decades passed, however, the transparency of marital problems between parents became ever more evident – through increasingly true-to-life portrayals in the mass media to which children had access, changing mores that encouraged parents to be more open with their children, and the fact that more and more children actually experienced the divorce of their parents.

Beyond families, the general level of social competition in the 1950s was lower than it is now in many ways (at least for groups not experiencing overt discrimination based on their identity). This promoted acceptance. Even though poverty existed, the overall level of economic inequality in the society was so much lower than it is today. This promoted a sense of acceptance because there was less evidence in your face that some people were better than others because they were more successful economically. Consider as an example the fact that today the ratio of CEO to worker salaries is about 250 to 1, whereas when these data were first collected in the mid-1960s it was 25 to 1 (and presumably was at least that low in the 1950s) [14].

What is more, the nature of day-to-day life was much less dependent upon being able to buy “cultural equipment” such as media technology, expensive clothes, and enrichment experiences. As a result, it was easier for kids (and adults, for that matter) to feel accepted because they had what was normal. When no one has a cell

phone, a DVD player, an iPod, and cable TV, no one feels left out (and thus rejected) for not having these things. It was easier then to be “normal.” I think often of a boy I interviewed in the mid-1990s who asked me, “Dr. G when you were coming up, were you poor or regular?” If these are the choices, then being poor means being “irregular.” This is much more a contemporary problem than a problem of the 1950s when most of us were in the same boat, even if some of us had better seats.

At least on the surface, and in the direct experience of most children, the 1950s were generally less socially “toxic” than the present [15]. Social toxicity refers to the extent to which the social environment is psychologically poisonous, in the sense that it contains serious threats to the development of identity, competence, moral reasoning, trust, hope, and the other features of personality and ideology that make for success in school, family, work, and the community, all the elements that Seligman identified as core components of positive psychology.

Like physical toxicity, social toxicity can be fatal in the form of suicide, homicide, drug-related and other life style-related preventable deaths. But mostly, it results in diminished “humanity” in the lives of children and youth by virtue of leading them to live in a state of degradation, whether they know it or not. It is the antithesis of what positive psychology aspires to foster in kids and their parents, teachers, and neighbors.

What are the social and cultural poisons that are psychologically equivalent to lead and smoke in the air, PCB’s in the water, and pesticides in the food chain? We can see social toxicity in the values, practices, and institutions that breed feelings of fear about the world, feelings of rejection by adults inside and outside the family, exposure to traumatic images and experiences, absence of adult supervision, and inadequate exposure to positive adult role models. These feelings and experiences arise from being embedded in a shallow materialist culture, being surrounded with negative and degrading media messages, and being deprived of relationships with sources of character in the school, the neighborhood, and the larger community.

Were the 1950s less socially toxic? It’s hard to know for sure, of course. At the very least I think we can say that there were more intact social systems around families in the form of neighborhoods and schools to cover up and compensate for whatever families lacked themselves. Today, the fragmentation of these social structures allows social toxins to reach children directly, without effective buffering by powerful protective adults. The explosion of communications technologies also plays a role, both allowing the rapid spread of socially toxic cultural forces and sometimes exaggerating their existence and impact. This is because the staid “news” of an older era has been replaced by a no holds barred approach that relies upon fear mongering, salaciousness, celebrity worship, and obliterating the boundaries between “mature adult” topics and the access of children and youth to everything under the sun (and under every rock as well). This is what I see most clearly when I compare growing up in the 1950s with growing up today, and this difference speaks to the pillars of positive psychology and how they are or are not promoted in the social environments in which human development takes place.

The 1950s offered many children a socially benign environment. The structure of benevolent adult authority was relatively intact, at least when compared with the

world of twenty-first century America. Adults were adults and kids were kids. The social contract between children and adults was intact and in force: Children will live in their world (under the direct supervision of empowered adults); adults will live in theirs (mostly out of sight from the innocent eyes of children). Adults were in charge and in return took responsibility for protecting children.

There was a high level of public trust; at the beginning of the 1960s, when asked to respond to the question, “Can you count on the government to do the right thing most of the time” some 80% of American adults said, “yes” [16]. Now it is less than 20%. There were only three networks at the time, and television was a trusted force for mainstream reasonableness. This was the time when the late CBS news anchor Walter Cronkite became “the most trusted man in America.”

When compared with what had happened before and what has happened since, there was a high level of family stability: 90% of kids lived in two parent families, compared with 68% in 2002 (and only 24% of all households were composed of a married couple with their own children) [17]. As we shall see shortly, all this close-by stability in the lives of kids did not mean that life was free of fear when it came to the world beyond the home, the safe neighborhood, and the safe school (which, of course, for some children weren’t safe either, as our belated recognition of child maltreatment, neighborhood violence, and bullying at school have brought to societal consciousness).

The positive side of the 1950s derived from the socially benign character of life for most Americans, as evidenced by the many ways in which the 40 Developmental Assets were nurtured, encouraged, supported, and even demanded by the institutions and ethos of that era. The negative flows from the fact that the various isms and prejudices that embody rejection were still in full flower in the 1950s, and this contributed to an obliviousness that hurt those who were not inside the mainstream circle.

Racism was still an overwhelming force in communicating rejection to racial minorities – most notably African-Americans, who were still legally left out and actively rejected until the Civil Rights Movement broke down some barriers in the following decade (a process that was not even complete with the election of Barrack Obama as President in 2008). Religious sectarianism was still strong in the 1950s; it was not until 1960 that a Catholic could overcome this prejudice and John Kennedy could be elected President. Even in the twenty-first century, it seems implausible that an atheist or agnostic or Buddhist or Hindu or Muslim could manage that feat. But the fanatical rage of the “Religious Right” was not visible on the national scene for the most part in the 1950s. Most of the sociocultural rejections of “traditional American values” were mostly unchallenged in the 1950s, and that is one of the costs of obliviousness in that era that must be reckoned with along with the sources of acceptance for those who were inside the mainstream circle of the time.

Even for those of us who were inside the mainstream circle the issue of obliviousness cut close. For example, hospitalized children in some communities could only be visited once a week by family members. No one seemed to be aware of the negative effect this had on children (and parents). Schools were committed to a “one size fits all” approach (and few people seemed concerned about or even aware of differences in “learning styles”). Communities were set up for the convenience

of two parent, one breadwinner families (and few seemed to think about how unwieldy, inconvenient, and unwelcoming this was to single parent or two breadwinner families who could not take care of their business – such as banking and shopping and dentist appointments – between nine and five Monday through Friday). There was less interest and awareness of our inner lives in general, including children, in a way that now seems sometimes almost barbaric. I have a family story that captures this well.

When I was 11 years old, my mother gave birth to my sister Karen. She was a difficult baby, and she developed colic. This meant she started crying every day in the late afternoon and did not stop until sometime in the evening. Since my father – a musician – worked evenings, he was not there during the difficult hours each day. Being the hyperresponsible 1950s boy that I was (making tea for my mother every night was one of my jobs and scrubbing the kitchen floor each Friday was another), I helped with my sister – carrying her around, sometimes for hours at a time.

But my mother bore the brunt of my sister's colic, of course. This came to a head late one afternoon after my dad had left for work, when my mother went up stairs and returned a few minutes later with a packed suitcase. Handing me the baby she said, "take care of your sister," and walked out the front door. There I was, an 11-year-old boy holding a screaming baby, while my mother walked out the door with her suitcase. She returned 15 min later – after she had gotten as far as the corner and had herself a good cry. But these events are not the point of the story.

The point of the story is that this event was always defined within my family – and as I related it to others – as a *positive* story, a testimonial to what a mature and responsible child I was. It was a story almost emblematic of the oblivious 1950s, when people just carried on and did not recognize, let alone dwell, on the dimensions of their inner lives. The story was even told many years later a couple of times when I was being introduced as a professional child psychologist before giving a lecture on child protection, with words to the effect that "and ever since then people have been asking Jim to take care of their children."

I used to interpret that story as a badge of honor, something of which I was proud. It was my wife Claire who helped me see – and thus feel – the horror of this story. How must I have felt to be left holding the baby while my mother walked out the door? For decades, the answer to that question was "I have no idea what I felt then." It was not until Claire offered me another interpretation that I began to have any access to the feelings of that 11-year-old boy in 1958. I must have been terrified, but there was no room for that feeling then – and in the decades that followed until I began to open my heart and reclaim my childhood as the ethos of the post-1950s era began to penetrate my psyche. The 1950s did not prepare kids to be introspective. They cultivated obliviousness instead.

Of course, not everyone is as primed for obliviousness as I was. Some individuals have an extraordinary sensitivity that transcends the blinders that a culture of obliviousness tries to place on their heart's eyes. Others, like me, are particularly prone to obliviousness because our neurological system makes it difficult to develop empathy, to appreciate intuitively the point of view others, read body language, and understand the emotional dimensions of communication.

Back in the 1950s, when I was growing up no one had a name for this pattern and certainly did not recognize its roots in brain function. Back in the 1950s, no one was able to tell me that I existed on the border of Asperger's syndrome. Asperger's in men like me (it is more common in males than females) includes difficulty in friendships, communication problems and an inability to understand social rules and body language. It is understood now to be along the continuum of neurological sensitivity and impairment that ends with autism at its extreme end [18].

Until recently, this condition was not known outside the obscure work of the Austrian psychiatrist and pediatrician Hans Asperger (who first "diagnosed" it in the mid-1940s, and after whom the term is named) [18]. It wasn't until the 1980s that the term was introduced to the English-speaking world, and over the decades since has found a significant place in efforts to understand why some of us develop as we do, "clueless" to some of life's important emotional realities. As I mentioned before, it wasn't until I was 20 that I realized my parents had been separated when I was 3; it wasn't until I was past 60 that I realized I verged on Asperger's. I had long appreciated that I experienced the world differently from most people. Claire had helped me see this – as she had many other things. I had heard and used the term as a psychologist. But I had resisted the realization that there was a personal connection to my life.

It was not until I sat and watched the film "Adam" in 2009 that it all came together for me in a shocking realization that the pattern of internal and social experiences that I had been experiencing all my adult life, when put together brought me close to the conditions of Asperger's. In the life of main character in "Adam" I could see enough of myself to finally make the connection (although it was clear that my condition was far less extreme than Adam's).

Of the characteristics said to be common in Asperger's, I think the following apply to me particularly: Above average intelligence, difficulties in empathizing with others, problems with understanding another person's point of view, hampered conversational ability, and "specialized fields of interest." But I have had a lot going for me that has obscured this problem, and some of the obscuring is related to growing up as I did in the 1950s.

For one thing, I was exposed to a lot of "social skills training" (which clinicians now believe is one way, perhaps the only way, to improve the functioning of people with Asperger's as a substitute for learning the ropes of human relationships the way "normal" people do) [19]. My parents and my teachers taught me how to behave, inculcating "good manners," "polite conversation," "being responsible," and "participating in prosocial activities." There was a kind of 1950s ruthlessness to this, of course: my shyness and tendency to get easily overwhelmed by a lot of social contact was not an acceptable excuse for social withdrawal. When it came to participating in the social life of my community, school, and neighborhood, it was sink or swim. My mother particularly was of the "suffering builds character" school of child rearing – as were most parents in the 1950s.

In part because of the social skills training I was exposed to "inadvertently" as a child, and the fact that my "specialized" expertise was in human behavior and development (not astronomy or mathematics) I learned to "pass" as a child, even

becoming a leader among my peers (from starting a club of kids in my neighborhood in elementary school to being elected vice-president of my senior class in high school to serving as president of my undergraduate student government). This social skills training allowed me to succeed in the professional world and in the few friendships I developed and (barely) maintained. Instead of focusing on something like astronomy or numbers (an Asperger's dead giveaway), I have cultivated an intense interest in people – even though I have always had a studied detachment about them. I am a good academic psychologist: my professional success is testament to this.

Once I realized that I have Asperger's traits, I began to see many otherwise puzzling attributes in a new light. For example, I think it is somehow connected to the way I respond more to "fictional" emotional accounts of human lives than "documentary" ones. Reality seems emotionally pale to me in comparison with dramas. I now realize this is because the fictional accounts provide more vivid clues to me on what the action means emotionally, whereas often the documentaries assume that the viewer will have an intuitive empathic response. Thus, the fictional accounts coach and prompt me, so I know how to respond in an emotionally appropriate way.

I also understand better why I get so tired being in social situations, and sometimes seem aloof when not officially "on" (for example at cocktail parties and receptions). It is exhausting to have to "act," and it is exhausting to be engaged in trying to figure out the socially appropriate response to people because I don't "get" the spontaneous feedback that normally guides a person in social situations. When I am "on stage" (teaching, lecturing, consulting, and telling stories), I am lively, funny, engaging, and full of sympathetic emotion. When I am with young children or dogs I thrive. But adults? Not so much. Having Asperger's traits explains to me how and why there seems to be a neurological basis for my alternating between being aloof and "on" in adult social situations, and generally comfortable with situations in which I can share my childlike inner life with youngsters and canines.

They say that because of having trouble understanding the emotions of others a person with Asperger's may be seen as egotistical, selfish, and uncaring. This is mostly not true of most of "us." I know it is not true of me. Let me make it clear that my intentions are good: I believe I am "a good person." At heart I am a person of light and spirit. I am kind, generous, compassionate, caring, and giving to the degree that I can "figure out" what the kind, generous, compassionate, caring, and giving thing to do would be. But translating my good intentions to socially appropriate good actions is intrinsically a challenge for me, and I fail at it the more "intimate" the situation – for example, as husband, father, and friend. I mostly get better at it as I get "trained" to know the "right thing" to say and do; I'm actually much better at it now than I was years ago. Growing up in the 1950s ironically fed my intrinsic obliviousness in private, while at the same time, it prepared me to transcend it in my public life. How 1950s is that! But there was a profoundly social dimension to the obliviousness cultivated in the 1950s as well.

Where else did it have an effect? It hid the savage costs of racism from even well-meaning White people. It hid the costs of sexism from even well-intended men. One of the worst things it did for kids was to ill-prepare them for the reality of

same-sex orientation in adult life. Through the 1960s and early 1970s, even the professional psychological community was part of the problem when it came to meeting the needs of gay and lesbian individuals for acceptance (from parents, teachers, peers, and the larger community) [20]. Although it took decades of advocacy to do so, the professional psychological community has acknowledged that whatever we may call the bias against homosexuals, there is no scientific foundation for it [20].

In the 1950s, homosexuals were virtually invisible in public life, despite the fact that most experts think that about 10% of adults were at their core, naturally gay and lesbian then, as they are now. Then, few of us would even recognize a gay or lesbian person if we were in the same room with them – which, of course, we were, little did we know. One of my best friends in college hid his homosexuality from me and the rest of our otherwise tight group of male friends. It pains me to this day that he did not think he could trust even us, his best friends, with the secret. My pain was made intolerable when I learned that some years after we graduated and lost touch he had committed suicide. His invisibility and our obliviousness cost him dearly.

Today, there is less of this invisibility, less of this obliviousness, and the available evidence indicates that this is very much for the better. Research has shown that there is nothing intrinsically unhealthy about being gay or lesbian. The American Psychological Association and the American Psychiatric Association have (finally) validated this fact and argued against therapeutic interventions based solely on sexual orientation [20].

In addition, it turns out that the sexual orientation of parents is trivial in its importance to successful family function when it comes to producing competent, prosocial, well adjusted, and happy offspring. Research demonstrates that other characteristics of parents are much more important in shaping personality and behavior than their sexual orientation. Gay and lesbian parents have been shown to succeed or fail as parents because of other characteristics, characteristics that are unrelated to sexual orientation (and on average, lesbian parents seem to produce kids who are ever better adjusted and more competent than children of heterosexual parents) [21]. Of course, this assumes that the societies and communities in which they live have given up the stigma against gay or lesbian parents, and do not harshly punish them or their children for this irrelevant fact of their sexual identity.

Even professional validation of the normality of same sex orientation did not end homophobic actions, of course. A study of high school students published in 1998 found that in comparison with heterosexual kids, gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth were five times more likely to miss school because they felt unsafe, four times more likely to be threatened with a weapon at school, twice as likely to have their property damaged at school, and three times more likely to require medical treatment after a fight at school (despite the fact that they were four times less likely to be involved in fighting at school) [22]. And, it is still true that openly homosexual individuals are barred from serving in the US military – and they continue to be discharged once their “secret” is officially acknowledged (this even as some military leaders have joined progressive political leaders in arguing for an end to this policy). Bias against homosexuals continues even amidst great cultural progress.

This is evident in the “Secret Lives of Teenagers” study my colleagues and I conducted with students from Cornell University when I taught there for 10 years starting in the mid-1990s [23]. The students were asked about many aspects of their lives – what they thought, what they felt, what they did, and what happened to them – and then asked if their parents were aware of these facts about their lives. With respect to sexual orientation, the results revealed that few parents were aware of their offspring’s homosexual orientation. Ten percent of the males revealed that they realized they were gay during high school but 60% said their parents never knew. Among females, 10% revealed that they realized they were lesbians during high school but 90% said their parents never knew. This, I think, is evidence that adolescents with same sex orientations may have feared rejection from their parents in the majority of families, and certainly did not have relationships that would allow open communication on a deep personal level. Of course, overall things are much better today for homosexual humans than they were in the 1950s, when the costs of obliviousness exacted a terrible price from so many perfectly normal souls.

If the traumatic impact of 1950s’ obliviousness is exemplified by the experience of gays and lesbians, its benevolent impact is evident in the fact that with each new year after the 1950s ended, children’s visual access to scary stuff increased, whether it be horrific violence of war and crime, parental incapacitation, family break up, the clay feet of political leaders, or the sweaty details of sexuality. One of the big challenges families faced in the 1950s was to convey basic emotional messages to children regarding both sexuality in general and their sexual orientation in particular. At its worst, this teaching often conveyed the message, “sex is dirty and disgusting... save it for someone you love.” At its best it taught “sex is so important and so powerful that it is best saved for someone you love and are committed to.”

To this end, consider this: when eminent sex researchers Masters and Johnson (who studied the “plumbing” of human sexuality as no one had before) were asked about the best form of sex education, they did not recommend graphic sex videos. Instead, they replied with words to the effect that “it is your parents doing the dishes together in the kitchen and mom leans up against dad and he puts his arm around her and she gives him a kiss on the cheek” [24]. There was a lot of that going on in the 1950s – on television and in real-life kitchens.

The message was clear: if you learn about sex in the context of loving commitment, the matters of “plumbing” are easy to learn. But, if all you have is technique divorced from an understanding of the role of loving commitment as a context for sex you will need remedial education to achieve a mature adult experience (and this will likely be manifest in a negative autobiography and stunted spiritual development). I think time has borne out the wisdom of this message.

Whatever the many sexual “hang ups” that parents and other adults taught kids in the 1950s – and there were far too many – this was a time when kids were more likely to learn about the core issues of sex in the way that Masters and Johnson recommended than they are today, when for so many kids the pressing concerns are the fact that your mother and/or father is sleeping with someone who is not your parent, and you are bombarded with explicit sexual messages couched in aggression or shallow materialism to sell products on television, in the movies, in music, and on the internet.

A study led by David Brickman found that young children (age 6–8) who watch prime-time television are substantially more likely to start having sex when they are 12–14 years old than if they don't: "The study found that for every hour the youngest group of children watched adult-targeted content (which also included movies, reality shows, and sports – anything that aired during prime-time viewing hours, 8–11 p.m.) over two sample days, their chances of having sex during early adolescence increased by 33%" [25]. Many prime-time shows are highly sexualized (like one of my favorites CBS's – "Two and Half Men" – that I would never have wanted my children to watch). Even if they aren't, they tend to portray the clay feet of adults, which contributes to breaking down the adult authority that can and does serve as a disincentive to early sexual behavior (as was seen earlier when we looked at the 40 Developmental Assets).

On another note, research suggests that experiences within the family that affect a child's understanding and expectations regarding physical pleasure and pain can affect their sexual development. For example, research reveals a small (but statistically significant) association between physical punishment of children by parents (particularly "loving" parents) and an inclination for sadomasochistic sexual practices in adulthood [26]. And, sexual experiences between adults and children within families can affect subsequent sexual orientation and practices. One of these was open in the 1950s – namely corporal punishment by loving parents. The other was a secret, a very dark secret: researchers working on the issue of child sexual abuse in the 1950s claimed that the prevalence was somewhere between one in a million and one in seven million [27]. Today, the common estimates cluster around one in ten, not because there is more sexual abuse now, but because it was shamefully hidden then. Here is an area where obliviousness was very costly indeed, as is evident in the searing testimony of many adults who were silenced as child victims and have paid the price for that silence ever since.

Another social toxin from the 1950s was the emergence of a low-grade fear of annihilation that was rarely acknowledged in public, but which was an undertone to the generally positive spirit of the times. An ancient text from the Zoroastrian tradition in Persia states, "To live in fear and falsehood is worse than death," and the threat of atomic war provided the impetus to a subterranean culture of fear.

In 1936, when my mother was 12 years old, she and her friends sat in front of her row house in a working class neighborhood of London and the conversation turned to death. "I wonder if I will be alive in 1940?" she wondered, frightened that a serial killer known as "the man with the staring eyes" would make her his next victim and that the Italian invasion of Abyssinia (Ethiopia as it is called today) would escalate to another world war. Her father having fought in World War I less than 20 years earlier, that conflict was a vivid memory in her family. Talking about it 70 years later, my mother now realizes that news of the impending war in Europe was feeding her anxiety about death and that it provided the emotional power of the closer-to-home fear of the killer on the loose.

By 1940, my mother was spending nights in the bomb shelter in the back yard of her family's house and finding her way through the rubble of London under siege from the German air force. In 1943, she forged her parents' names on her application

to join the Royal Air Force and became part of the British national security state mobilized to fight the Nazis and protect her homeland.

This carried on into my own life. In 1954, when I was 7 years old, and living in New York City, my teachers drilled us to expect atomic attack at any moment. The import of their words remains with me half a century later: “If you see a bright flash in the sky you must duck under your desk immediately before the blast can blow out the windows of the classroom” (“and decapitate you” was left unsaid, but was clearly implicit in the threat). As a result, I carried around the conviction that the next flash of light in the sky I saw would mean the long awaited atomic attack from the Soviet Union on the American homeland.

After all, the most trusted adults in our lives warned us about this “fact” through these often repeated “duck and cover” drills, and underscored the grim reality of it all by giving us dog tags with our blood type and names on them – “in case.” The 1952 film “Atomic City” contains a scene in which a young boy sitting at the kitchen table says to his mother who is doing the dishes, “Mom, if I grow up...” His uncertainty about the future was on our minds as children too. One way we responded was by indulging in military fantasies. After school and on weekends, my friends and I played “army,” in our play reflecting the increasing militarization of American life that came with the Cold War.

Then in 1962, when I was 15, the Cuban Missile Crisis brought me once again to a sense of impending doom. American and Soviet forces were on a state of high alert, and subsequent revelations of documents and first-hand accounts by government officials on both sides reveal that the world was literally on the verge of an exchange of nuclear weapons. It was well-grounded fear, not panicky paranoia that drove my parents and our neighbors to stock up on groceries and discuss the relative merits of various types of bomb shelters – particularly those that could be built in the back yard versus those that could be fashioned out of a corner of the basement. In the years that followed I was eager to attend West Point so that I might join the Army to serve my country and protect the homeland in the great struggle against the Evil Empire. I failed the physical for West Point, and so joined Army ROTC in college, continuing on a military track until I had a pacifist awakening one night when I played the role of “the enemy” in a mock battle and I realized what all the words of glory hid, that it was about killing and being killed (but that’s another story).

Four decades after the Cuban Missile Crisis, and in the wake of 9/11, my own young adult children worried about going to New York City or Washington, DC on holidays for fear of a terrorist attack, and I worry about returning to the Middle East again where I have been often since the mid-1980s for fear of unwittingly becoming a victim in the struggle there. Once again, homeland insecurity seems of paramount importance as a public issue: a survey done in July 2005 found that Americas rated the threat of terrorism as the nation’s number one problem [28].

Despite the challenges parents of the 1950s faced with the rise of atomic war as a threat, I believe that they had an easier time of it when it came to protecting children, than I did as a parent in the 1980s and 1990s, than do parents in the world of the twenty-first century. For one thing, the flow of information to children 50 years ago was under relatively tight and mostly benign control. To be sure, this control had a

down side (e.g., in its narrow portrayal of females and ethnic and racial minorities and the absence of people with other than heterosexual orientation). But on the plus side, television was effectively censored when it came to the sweaty details of gross adult sex and vivid violence.

There was a strong sense that “children are watching,” which meant that adults should forego the pleasure and titillation of explicit sexuality on the screen. Of course, this censorship limited the ability of television and the movies to deal with some adult subjects, but in retrospect I don’t think the cost was too great. Themes of sexuality, infidelity, debilitating illness, depression, suicide, and murder could be presented, but in a manner that seems muted, dignified, and subtle by today’s “let it all hang out” standards.

There was violence, but it was highly stylized and sanitized. The “bad guys” were only moderately nasty, and the “good guys” subscribed to a strict code of honorable conduct. In the television environment of the 1950s, even the child of a negligent parent was at little risk sitting in front of the television set, because the narrow range of available images and themes was tightly controlled by the adults who made and broadcast the programming. The same was true for movies. There was a systematic cover up of the dark side of American history, of course: no images of how the Native-American population was slaughtered, how African-Americans were lynched, how women were victims of domestic violence, how children were abused and neglected, how animals were treated with callous cruelty. But in addition, there was a kind of security here.

But this sense of security, it turned out, was in some ways false. For example, research on the impact of televised violence indicates that its effect on increasing aggressive behavior by child viewers is equivalent to the effect of smoking on lung cancer – namely that it accounts for about 10–15% of the variation [29]. In this sense, violent television is a social toxin. The rise of toxic television began almost coincidentally with the start of broadcasting itself, although there can be little doubt that the TV of the 1950s was benign by today’s standards, at least in the potentially traumatic and toxic nature of the images it presented.

The media technology of the 1950s also worked to the advantage of children. Special effects were primitive and not likely to produce the kind of visual trauma associated with contemporary images. The cumbersome quality of visual recording technology – limited for the most part to film – reduced to negligible the possibility that real-life horrific events would be made available visually to the television and movie viewer, including the child viewer.

Today, the ubiquitous availability of video recording means that much of what is horrible to see will be made available for the seeing, and usually by children as readily as by adults. Consider the horror of the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 versus the attack on the World Trade Center 60 years later. The former was visually witnessed by a relative handful of children; the latter was seen via videotape by virtually every child in America – over and over again, in many cases. Repeat this for every violent and traumatic image over and over again, from the big events such as plane crashes to the little events such as ritual beatings purveyed over local television news as well as over You-Tube and other internet sites that cater to kids.

This exposure to traumatic imagery is one important feature of the social toxicity which compounds the problem of parents and other caring adults in helping children deal with growing up in the age of terror. But it is not the only element.

Studies from around the world and in North America as well document that parents who are able to see and hear the feelings of their children, and respond respectfully and warmly to these feelings are most likely to produce emotionally healthy children [23]. Is this any more true in the age of terror than at any other time? I think the answer is a qualified “yes.” Let me explain. The challenge of raising successful children does contain universal elements, but all parenting takes place in a particular social and cultural context, and the exigencies of each human ecology shape the tasks parents face and how they successfully translate their love into effective child rearing.

One of the more interesting findings to come out of research directed at children in the wake of 9/11 was a small study conducted by the people who produce the Sesame Street program for television – The Children’s Television Workshop [30]. The investigators asked about 100 children, ages 6–11 years to fill out a booklet called “All About Me.” The children wrote essays and included pictures. The older children, 9–11 years old also used disposable cameras to take pictures of important settings in their lives such as “the wise one” and “the safe place.” Ironically, the children reported more fears and anxiety about violence in June 2000 than they did in the weeks immediately following the 9/11 attacks. How could that be? The authors speculate that in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 parents were in a heightened state of awareness about the need to attend to their children’s emotional lives, and as a result were more likely to ask about and listen to their children’s inner lives. As one of the researchers (Susan Royer) put it: “Most importantly, when things are ‘normal,’ children seem to feel most alone and helpless in their fear, and unlike Code Orange times, parents can be clueless about kids’ anxiety, and kids know that” [30].

This study is quite consistent with psychological research over several decades as well as the insights of psychotherapists and parent educators: empathic parenting is both crucial to the well being of children and in short supply on a day-to-day basis [4]. Director Steven Spielberg acknowledged in an interview that he approached making the 2005 film “War of the Worlds” differently because of 9/11 than he would have before [31]. But there was more to the interview than this point. Spielberg recalls the 1951 science fiction film “Invaders from Mars” as the most disturbing of the many such films he viewed as a child. Why? Because in the film aliens tamper with a young boy’s parents – implanting devices in their necks that allow the aliens to control and manipulate them and in so doing turn them away from their child. As Spielberg sees it, this is the primal fear of childhood, that your parents are not your parents, that they will turn away from you because they are under the control of alien forces. This is why “Invasion from Mars” worked. It is why Spielberg saw it five times. I saw it twice, and it left indelible memories for both of us. The 1950s were a time of relatively stable family life – whatever their faults, your parents were likely to continue to function as your parents. In today’s world, this reassurance is missing for most kids (even those who do live with their parents) and the primal fear that Spielberg spoke of is an all too real one for children and youth.

Having said that, though, and although it pales in comparison with today's issues, the 1950s could have been a scary time for sensitive children, what with the repeated warnings of the impending atomic doom that we received from our parents, our teachers, the burgeoning science fiction movie genre, and some of our political leaders. What we needed then (but mostly did not receive) and what children need now (and may well be more likely to get in our much more psychologically sophisticated era) was and is intelligent empathy on the part of parent, and teachers, and every other adult in the lives of children, for that matter. This bodes well for a positive psychology of childhood.

Whatever the modern age is, it is not oblivious in the sense that we were in the 1950s. Perhaps one reason that mainstream psychologists in the 1950s did not study happiness and other positive themes in their research was that they took these things for granted. They bought into the foundation for optimism: overestimating the positive and underestimating the negative, seeing the objectively half full glass as subjectively full. But this optimism came at a price, the price of obliviousness. Awareness may be painful in many ways, but it is the only path to enlightenment. Challenge can be growth inducing, even the ultimate challenge to awareness, namely trauma. If it is met with a positive psychology, even trauma can contribute to the flowering of the best of the human condition, as we shall see in the next chapter.

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