FROM THE PASTOR'S DESK

7th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME - February 19, 2006 B

GIVE POOR PARENTING A TIME OUT

I had the following piece as my column three years ago. I assume very few of you remember it. It deserves a rerun for it has much wisdom. Please share it with parents still raising children. The column consists of excerpts from an interview that the editors of the magazine *U.S. Catholic* did with Barbara Coloroso.

Coloroso, a former Franciscan nun and parent, has served as a classroom teacher, a laboratory school instructor, and a university instructor. She has written *two international bestsellers: Kids Are Worth It! Giving Your Child the Gift of Inner Discipline* (Avon Books, 1994) and *Parenting Through Crisis: Helping Kids in Times of Loss, Grief and Change* (Harper Resource, 2001) and *provides resources on her Web site* ***www.kidsareworthit,com.***

Coloroso is an internationally recognized speaker and author in the areas of parenting, teaching, school discipline, nonviolent conflict resolution, and reconciliatory justice. She is an educational consultant for school districts, the criminal justice system, and educational associations in the United Sates, Canada, Europe, South America, Asia, New Zealand, Australia, and Iceland.

In her work and as a mother of three, Coloroso's goal is to raise kids with inner discipline and inner virtue. "I want to teach kids to stand up for values and against injustices and not be easily led."

Barbara Coloroso holds kids in high esteem. She believes in them and knows what they're capable of. This profound respect for children underlies all her work with parents, teachers, and school administrators.

The following are excerpts from some of the questions *U.S. Catholic* asked Coloroso.

What do kids really need from their parents?

We have to look at what our goal is in parenting. Is it to control and make children obey us? Or is it to empower and influence them? My goal is to empower and influence them in a way that they will become responsible, resourceful, resilient, and compassionate human beings who know how to think, not just what to think. We need to raise children who can stand up for values and against injustices, who are not easily led, who don't do things to please others.

All my work with parents and kids is based on ***three philosophical tenets****. The first is, "Kids are worth it." They're worth the time, the energy, the resources it takes to help them become all that they can become. Second, "I won't treat them in a way I myself would not want to be treated." I went through the nine major religions of the world and found that tenet in each one. It's not new stuff; this is of the ages. The third tenet is, "If a technique works and leaves my dignity and my child's dignity intact, I'll use it."*

I'll take anybody's technique, and there are a lot of them around, and bounce it off those three philosophical tenets. If it won't bounce, I don't care who said it or what kind of research is behind it, I'm not going to use it.

The goal is to give your child the gift of inner discipline. That takes years and years of giving kids responsibilities and letting them make choices and decisions that have been guided by you with limits and boundaries that grow smaller and smaller over time.

Does this approach come naturally to parents? It seems that many parents go about raising kids in a reflexive rather than reflective manner. What was done to them, they continue to do.

We all have a parenting toolbox in our heads, compliments of the parents who raised us, the community we grew up in, and the culture we live in. People who grow up in vital, functioning, healthy families and communities can reach into their parenting toolbox and pull out a hammer; and it will serve them well. Those of us who came from less than vital, functioning, healthy families will often reach in for a hammer and pull out a hatchet, and we make a mess of whatever we're trying to do.

My role as a parenting educator is to help people replace the family heirloom tools that aren't working and keep the ones that are good—because if you're functioning today, something went right. If we don't replace the ones that don't serve us well and replace them with something that works, when we're tired and worn out and frustrated, even though we said we wouldn't hit our kid, that comes out as a reflex.

What should parents do when they do react with the wrong tool?

When we've blown it, we need to pull back and say to our kids, "I've made a mistake."

Won't that undermine your authority?

On the contrary. If you say, "I need a time-out here to calm down and to come up with something that makes sense—and I will," you accomplish two things. You teach that when you make a mistake, you own it and fix it. You don't blame it on your kids or others. And you also model how when they make a mistake, they can own it and fix it.

Now if every day you're saying, "Kids, I've blown it," you better get help. Because sometimes you need help to break out of the old patterns.

Is there a difference between punishment and discipline?

We often use those terms as if they're synonymous, and they're not. Punishment is imposed from without, arouses resentment, and basically teaches kids to respond with fear, fighting back, or fleeing. People often think that if they don't punish, their children are just going to run wild. But there is a middle ground called discipline. The Latin roots of discipline mean, "to give life to learning," and that's our goal.

What's different about discipline?

Discipline accomplishes four things that punishment will never do: It shows kids what they've done wrong; it gives them ownership of the problem; it gives them ways to solve the problem; and it leaves their dignity intact.

Can you give an example?

Our son in grade three did something that wasn't on the approved behavior list on a field trip. He broke the beaver bait jar at the Natural History Museum. I was pleased that he wasn't punished. He wasn't paddled, which is still allowed in my state and 23 other states in this country. He wasn't sent to the principal's office, he didn't have to write 550 times "I will never break a beaver bait jar" and he didn't get banned from the next field trip.

What did happen?

His teacher wisely said, "Joe, you have a serious problem, I know you can handle it." Joe had to write a letter to the Natural History Museum. He had to replace the beaver bait jar, and before he could go on another field trip he had to have a written plan of how he would handle his feet, hands, and mouth creatively and constructively on the next field trip.

I tell you, replacing that beaver bait jar was a trip unto itself—beaver bait is female beaver urine, So you can bet he'll never break a beaver bait jar again! The Saturday morning he went with the game warden, he got up early and happily got his little knapsack ready. Then wisdom went out the window and all I've got left is wit the game warden very patiently explained to Joe how he had to collect female beaver urine. Joe's eyes got huge, and he looked at me, looked at his dad, and said "I have to do that?" I thought the game warden's comment was classic: "Well, I didn't break the beaver bait jar."

So what happened here? ***He was shown what he had done wrong, given ownership of the problem, given ways to solve it, and his dignity was left intact.*** *Did he have fun? Yes. And this really burns people who are into punishment. How dare a kid have a good time fixing the mess he's in!*

What about when misbehavior turns more serious?

Many communities and schools today are moving toward zero tolerance policies, which I think represents zero thinking. If any kid does anything wrong, he or she gets punished rather than disciplined—sometimes severely punished.

When the incident involves mayhem, or the potential for mayhem, I continue to advocate discipline, but I ***add three "R 's" to it: restitution, resolution, and reconciliation,*** *which constitutes reconciliatory justice. In other words, you have to fix what you did, figure out how you're going to keep it from happening again, and heal with the people you've harmed. That third step is not a part of Western culture, by and large, but it's in all of our faith traditions.*

How does this play out in the home?

OK, say a 5-year-old bops his younger brother over the head when his little brother won't share a toy. Liz Loescher from the Conflict Center has a motto, "Conflict is inevitable, violence is not." And so you say to the older boy, "It's all right for you to be angry; it's not all right for you to hit your brother. You need to take a time-out-to calm down. You can calm down in your rocker, your room, or on my lap."

You give them choices?

I always like to give kids three choices. You give a strong-willed child two choices, and they'll try to figure out which one you want them to do and they'll do the other just to spite you. So I give them three. Rocker, room, or my lap. And the lap option really upsets people who are into behavior modification because it seems like a reward. But as Catholics we should be models of God to our children, and God is always there, in the good times or the rough times. So parents, be there when they need you.

Does the choice technique work?

Well, a really strong-willed child may say, "I'm not moving." And I just look at that kid and know that

in parenting. And I'll say, "You know what? That's a

really good place to calm down too. I hadn't thought of that one."

That works because the goal is to get the child to calm down, not to get him to go where I told him to go. The goal is to teach inner discipline. So when the time-out is finished, the process begins.

There's more?

Many time-out programs are just going through the motions—the time-out, the "I'm sorry," and that's it. That's not enough. I even had a woman tell me her son was on a great time-out program. "He hits his sister and goes and sits. I don't even have to tell him any more." And I wonder, "Who's conning whom?"

Now, once the child has calmed down, the work starts. If you threw a toy across the room, now is the time to pick it up. If you wrote on the wall, now is the time to clean it up. And some offenses are hard to fix—like shunning another person, or verbally or physically abusing someone. In those cases it starts with an apology, "I'm sorry." But that only goes so far.

I saw one elementary school teacher explain it well to her students. She took a block of wood and hammered a nail in it. She said, "Every time I hit this I want you to think of a time you shunned or verbally abused or physically abused somebody." She pounded away at the nail. Then she pulled out the nail and said, "This is the 'I'm sorry.' But," she asked, "what are we going to do with the hole that's still left in the wood? When you abuse another person or shun, them, you make a hole in that other person that 'I'm sorry,' doesn't fix."

So what's the next step?

The second step is for the child to figure out how he or she is going to keep it from happening again. All children will typically say, "I won't do it again." But what I want to know is what you will do when you want your brother's toy and he doesn't want to give it to you. And this is where our teaching comes in. Giving life to learning.

And the third step is the one that is so critical and often left out of most time-out programs. Over and above restitution, you must go to the person you've harmed and offer something to them to heal them.

So I say to the older one, "Your brother didn't get off to such a good start today getting bopped over the head. What can you do to help him have a better day?" And the older boy says, "He likes being pulled in the wagon." So here's the 5-year-old pulling the 3-year-old in the wagon, the 5-year-old knowing his own goodness and the 3-year-old knowing his brother's goodness. And they're healed—only to go back and fight later in the day, because it's normal for kids to fight.

If we could go through those three steps in our judicial system and in conflicts with our neighbors, there would be so much more healing.

And they need signs of affection?

Kids need a smile, a hug, and humor every day in rough times. In the days after 9/11, I saw many articles about whether we can get our humor back, if we can ever laugh again. Laughter is very healing, so we need to laugh with our children.

How do you convey optimism while grieving?

I'm not talking about a rose-colored-glasses type of optimism here, where everything is all right with the world. Optimism doesn't deny anger, frustration, sadness, or intense sorrow. It is willing to give each one its due, but only its due.

I marvel when people say America lost its innocence on September 11. That was lost a long time ago. It's our sense of safety that's been lost. And in that sense we need to be able to get through our dark night of the soul, get up in the morning, fix our children breakfast, and say to them, "We're going to make it through this." And we will get through it, though we may never get over it.

There's a difference?

"Getting over it" and "closure" are words we need to be rid of anytime there is a major loss. People say, "How do I help my children handle a divorce?" I tell them they're using the wrong word. You handle losing your mittens. You get through a divorce. And you don't get over it.

My daughter put it so beautifully after her cancer. She said, "That's a big ugly thread in my tapestry, but I won't let it frame my life." We all have ugly threads in our tapestries, they just can't frame our lives. That's the kind of optimism we need to model and teach to our kids.

Reflection Questions

What spoke to you most in the above article? What challenged you most? Was there anything said that you disagreed with? Share with your spouse or another parent.

Have a blessed week,