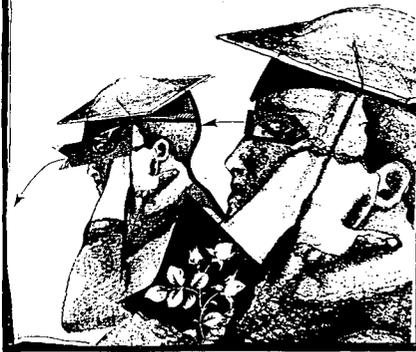


EDUCATION



Anna Mycek-Wodecki



The Weight of Bricks

by Janet Scott Barlow

Are we all going crazy? A few months ago, I read a newspaper column containing information so shocking yet unsurprising, so awful yet predictable, that I was overcome by emotional vertigo. Then, seemingly out of nowhere, I thought of John and Lawrence, two children I knew long ago, and disorientation was replaced by generalized depression. The lesson of John and Lawrence is that the past indeed is prologue.

From 1965 through 1969, in the years between getting married and becoming a mother, I worked as a teacher's assistant in the preschool/daycare center of a private, well-funded family services agency, one that employed an array of highly credentialed teachers, social workers, and psychologists. The agency was in an integrated urban neighborhood, next to a large university, and on the edge of a ghetto, which meant that the school drew children of all races and nearly every ethnic and socioeconomic background. There were children of university professors, of firemen, of welfare mothers. There were children of full-time college students who were also part-time hippies. There were Arab and Israeli children who got into fistfights during the Six-Day War. There were Haitian and Greek children who started school knowing not a word of English (and learned the language with breathtaking

speed).

For me, a young woman with an affinity for children but no experience with them, no systematic knowledge of them, and no preconceptions about them, the four years I spent in that preschool would be a disorganized crash course in the ways of kids, a time when I learned many things rapidly, through a reverse version of cause and effect. That is, my learning was inefficient but indelible. It was as if I had been ushered into a laboratory filled with bricks and invited to explore the law of gravity. Inevitably, I wound up dropping bricks on my foot. The trouble with experiential knowledge is that, for a while anyway, you learn more about the weight of bricks than about the principles of gravity. Of course, the beauty of experiential knowledge is that when some physicist comes at you all theoretical and technical, you can say, "Hey, have you ever dropped a brick on your foot?" As a form of insight, the lowly object lesson has an inescapable purity.

I also discovered a few things about adults in that environment, but in that instance, sequential knowledge was not a factor. My most important discovery — it was news to me at the time — was that adults as a group have an infinite capacity for rationalizing and justifying, in the name of children's welfare, all kinds of self-serving adult behavior that is contrary to children's welfare. And that's where John comes in.

The late 60's were the period of the black power movement, and there was much talk among the agency staff about how to "deal with" the issue of black power with the children, how to "communicate" the concept and "support" it. It is a strange experience to be, as I was then, 21 years old and professionally inexperienced, and to encounter experts in the field of child development whose thinking takes the form of urgent debates about how best to teach street politics to a group of preschoolers, some having serious emotional problems completely unrelated to race, class, or ethnicity. It is so strange an experience, in fact, that it can color for life one's feelings about experts.

The black power discussions, like everything else during those years, went on and on, month after month. And one day in the midst of all that, John, a child whose charm was the product of perfectly combined intelligence and in-

nocence, showed me a picture he had drawn. The picture was a collection of random shapes, all of them colored black, that were arranged on the page to look like they'd been shot from a cannon. When I asked him about the drawing, John, who was black, said, "It's a picture of black power." As I was studying the picture, John lifted his hand from behind his back and covered the first drawing with a second, this one of exploding orange-colored shapes. "That's orange power," he said. Another drawing, "Here's green power." Another. "Blue power."

When I related that episode at the next staff meeting, several teachers responded that John's drawing had exemplified his "confusion." And to minimize his "confusion," John was to be aided in being less "literal." It was almost funny: *Hey, isn't that a brick on your foot?* The plain fact was that John, four years old and by nature delightful, needed politicizing about as much as a day in springtime needs politicizing, and I had made another discovery about adults: they will fail at the business of helping children if they are unwilling to be made fools of by children.

Literalness, I would find, was to be encouraged or discouraged in children depending on what they were being literal about. Even more memorable than John is Lawrence, another "literal" child. But the difference between them was that John's literalness was organic to his age while Lawrence's was not.

After more than twenty years, I still remember every detail about Lawrence, including the color of his sneakers, the shape of his hairline, and the belt he cinched so tightly through the loops of his jeans that I wondered how he breathed. Lawrence was a child without resistance to physical impulses. When in doubt, which was always, Lawrence sought motion. He was fruitlessly confrontational, very intelligent, and extremely unhappy.

Among Lawrence's many burdens in life was the issue of religion. His parents, both college professors (that's no dig at college professors, but it seems somehow relevant), had told him from the time he could talk that there was no God and that religion was a "lie," an idea dreamed up by people unwilling to accept the finality of

death. That was their right, of course, but they had taught unbelief to Lawrence not as an alternative kind of belief but as a cause, a battle against pervasive human stupidity. Lawrence was taught everything as a battle against pervasive human stupidity, and thus, his little belt squeezing his tiny middle, he was sent out to negotiate the terrifying and glorious territory of early childhood with nothing but the pathetic instruments of offended adult intellect.

Since he was a boy on a mission (that's all he had—his parents' missions), Lawrence discussed the nonexistence of God often and loudly, whereupon certain of his Baptist or Catholic or Jewish classmates would tell him, gravely and with frightening (to Lawrence) confidence, that he was in for sorrow if he kept that stuff up.

For parents who would take a scorched-earth approach to religion, secular myths are easy targets and quick work. So it was no surprise that as the holiday season rolled around, Lawrence told his classmates what his parents had told him: Santa Claus did not exist; he was an invention, a "lie," and the magic of Christmas morning wasn't magical at all because "your mom and dad do all that stuff."

Well. If it is possible, based on my experience, for five-year-olds to discuss the existence of God with a degree of tolerance and self-control, the same cannot be said of their discussions about the existence of Santa Claus. Except for the few who simply eyed Lawrence with concern and horror, as if he were dancing on the edge of a cliff, the Santaphiles in the group were all over him, and they were merciless—merciless enough to drag me, the grown-up, the teacher, the *law*, right into the middle of things. (It says something about either the power of religion or the mentality of children that while I was asked repeatedly to settle *The Existence of Santa Claus*, I never once was asked to settle *The Existence of God*.)

The Santa debate raged—raged!—all through Christmas, and finally a girl named Elizabeth decided to give Lawrence double trouble by combining a frontal assault with an end run. She told Lawrence that Santa Claus existed because she existed, that God had made them both, that the two of them,

Elizabeth and Santa Claus, had come straight from the mind of God, and for that matter, so had Lawrence, and as for his mother who was supposedly out buying his Christmas presents, God had made her too. In one fell swoop, Elizabeth had made God responsible for everything Lawrence could see—like his mother, like Elizabeth—and everything he could not see, like Santa Claus, and the effect of her maneuver was to render Lawrence, for the first time since I'd known him, motionless. He was at that moment the most defenseless child I have ever seen.

But there was a valiance in Lawrence, and he wanted to rally. What he actually wanted, of course, was to be allowed to believe in Santa Claus (and, quite possibly, in God), but he was not going to be defeated just because he'd been denied. So finally, all twitching limbs and emotional nerve endings, full of the kind of urgency that can only be fueled by anxiety, Lawrence shouted that God had not made *him*, that he was the product of "an egg and a sporn," that he had grown inside his mother and Santa Claus was nowhere on the scene, he was positive of that, because he could remember everything, all of it: it was great in there, inside his mother, and he had a little window for looking out on the world, and a stove on which he made his pancakes, and books, and a television set . . .

A pre-birth apartment. That's a cozy fantasy, one nearly any young child could come up with. But Lawrence was not any child. He was a boy forced into desperate fantasy because the entire world of things unseen had been denied him. And I thought: Oh, Lawrence, if only your parents at least had allowed you Santa Claus, maybe you wouldn't have to invent prenatal pancakes, and maybe I wouldn't have to be your classmates' trump card in a debate over prenatal appliances. For around me, 14 children—all but Lawrence—were screaming, "Mrs. Barlow! Lawrence says he watched TV inside his mother! Tell him he didn't! Tell him he *didn't!*"

Lawrence was cornered again. And because he already had paid so dearly for being deprived of so much, because he'd been given the hopeless task of assaulting, with inferior weapons, ideas he could never disprove, his eyes

showed the fear he felt of being robbed yet again, this time of in-the-womb television, which was the only substitute for the comforts of God and the pleasures of Santa Claus that his beleaguered mind and stifled spirit could find.

It was with those memories of John and Lawrence that I reread the column that had caused my disorientation, the one I couldn't quite believe though I was sure it was true. Thomas Sowell was discussing the teaching of "death education" in public schools, even among first graders. Apparently there had been other reports on this "movement" but I had missed them. So I found myself reading for the first time, and then reading again, about six-year-olds who must "make their own coffins out of shoeboxes," and assignments requiring children "to decide which member of their own family must die, when the whole family cannot be saved."

It's as if educators had asked themselves, "Wonder how sadistic we can be?" and then succeeded in finding out. What could be crueler than an exercise in which children are required to mentally kill off a member of their own family? What but the creation of emotional chaos could be the purpose of group coffin-making? (There is emotional destructiveness even in the choice of materials: Children, you will now consider your own death. And you will consider this occurrence in the dimensions of . . . a shoebox.)

Some children cry during "death classes." That is, they suffer. Are their tears not a message, an object lesson, a brick on the foot of either their teachers or their parents? Not always, not often enough. Some things never change except to get worse, and yes, we're all going crazy. Twenty years ago, John's teachers were intent on eliminating his guileless literalness, and Lawrence's parents were determined to destroy any form of guileless nonliteralness. And today, six-year-olds are crying while making shoebox coffins (the perfect assault on guilelessness), and adults are still unwilling to be made fools of by children. What's new is that now adults are also unwilling to be shamed by children.

Janet Scott Barlow covers popular culture from Cincinnati.

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