

The Two Hardest Jobs on Earth

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Back in the 1980s, I recall seeing a U.S. government-compiled list of the 50 most difficult jobs. At the time — and, for all I know, this might still be so — the #1 entry on the list, the job that was considered the most difficult in America, was waiting tables in a restaurant. I can't remember what the second most difficult job was, but I was impressed that some government think tank had actually spent time, money, and effort to come up with that list. Each entry in this Top 50 compilation (or, perhaps, Bottom 50 would be more apt) was accompanied by a short explanation of why its ranking was deserved or justified. Examples of the criteria included minimal pay, lousy working conditions, lack of benefits, low satisfaction index, risk of bodily danger, etc.

That list of hardest jobs is a useful structure for discussing the topic of this Commentary, which is the two most challenging life-experiences undertaken by the bulk of human beings.

Here we are at the Carnival of Life on Earth, and the midway has all these different rides we can go on. The obvious metaphor, of course, is that what I'm calling "Carnival rides" are the equivalent of different life-experiences. Classic Carnival rides such as the roller coaster, tilt-a-whirl, spinning teacups, bumper cars, merry-go-round/carousel, and ferris wheel, among others, contain elements that are akin to ordinary (or extraordinary) human experiences. Some of these rides or life-experiences are effectively universal, meaning that every human being goes on them. For instance, Illness is a ride that everyone takes. So is Aging, assuming we live long enough. Nobody who spends any significant time at the Carnival escapes the Illness ride. The fact that none of us (or almost none of us) would willingly choose to go on the Illness ride — or any of the many other rides at the Carnival that involve palpable suffering — doesn't matter. We take that ride anyway. It comes with the territory of being at the Carnival.

Other rides are voluntary. For example, Bungee Cord Jumping Off a Bridge, Parachuting from a Flying Airplane, or Deep-Sea Diving are rides that must be chosen. Some people whose sense of physicality is particularly adventurous want to go on those rides, so they do if they can. Other people can't imagine those rides being pleasurable or fun, so they don't choose them. Different rides for different temperaments.

There are more rides at the Carnival than any human being can possibly go on in a lifetime. Heck, there are more than anyone could go on in 20 or 100 lifetimes, and the permutations are endless. Each life has its own custom-tailored set of possible rides that the individual may take by desire, by choice, by luck (good or bad), by fate or destiny, even by accident or chance circumstance. We're afraid of some rides, which paradoxically makes it more likely that we may take them at some point. The greater the terror we feel about a certain ride, the greater the possibility that the scary ride will somehow find its way onto our dance card, however perverse that may seem.

OK. I could flesh out the structure of the metaphor in more detail, but I'm sure you get the drift. Now imagine that certain Carnival rides contain elements of ambition, duty, and/or effort. In other words, fuse together the idea of the "ride" with the notion of a "job." That's true of many life-experiences. They're not just rides we go on for the hell of it, or just for fun, or simply because life has decreed that we must. They may be that, but they're also challenges to achieve a certain, hoped-for end result, to be judged on the basis of outcomes as well as our satisfaction with the overall experience. Not all life experiences come with those attributes, but many do. That's part of what makes them like jobs.

If we consider humanity as a whole, which is to say, most people most of the time, which are the supremely difficult, challenging life-experiences/rides/jobs? What follows is my assessment of the short list, the two most difficult life-experiences for human beings. At the end of the commentary, I'll add parenthetically my choices for #3 and #4.

As a preface, please note that my list will not include certain rides at the Carnival of Life that are clearly awful. For instance, prolonged physical torture at the hands of other people or being violently murdered don't make the cut. Why? Well, for at least a couple reasons. One is that most human beings don't go on either of those rides. I'm trying to highlight rides taken by the vast majority of those in attendance at the Carnival, the ones that get the most traffic, and torture or violent death are not sufficiently universal to qualify. Also, those rides tend to be short. I suppose torture could last for weeks or months, but violent death is generally a very brief experience. I'm looking instead for rides that last a long time and embody an element of performance based on ambition and sustained effort. You know, *jobs*. Simply dying is not a job. Being murdered is not a job, either. Whether tragic or not, it's something unavoidable that simply happens to some people.

So, without further meanderings, here is my assessment of the Two Hardest Jobs on Earth for human beings.

#1: Raising Children

In my estimation, *raising children*, otherwise known as *parenting*, is far and away the most difficult job human beings routinely take on. In fact, I regard child-rearing as orders of magnitude more difficult than the second-place job on my list (which you'll read momentarily).

Please note, I don't consider the experience of making or producing babies as part of this. First off, parenting doesn't require that children be one's own, i.e. the product of natural gestation and birth where the baby contains the shared genes of the parents. For some people, parenting is indeed a function only of biology, and those couples might not be willing to parent a child who was not "their own," but this territorial attitude is by no means universal. What interests me about parenting is not the origin of the child, but the awesome commitment taken on to raise that child over many years, presumably all the way to adulthood.

Second, any idiot can make a baby, without even the intention of doing so. It is almost ridiculous understatement to say that nature has built us in such a way as to enhance the attractiveness of the usual method for making babies (i.e., sexual union), thus maximizing the chances for pregnancy and offspring. But rising to the occasion of raising that kid (or any kid) is the proverbial "horse of a different color" as an entirely different proposition.

I'm not suggesting that pregnancy and childbirth aren't meaningful experiences. I'm absolutely certain that both of those rides are profoundly meaningful to many women, and, though generally to a lesser degree, to many men as well. But producing a baby is an experience that takes less than a year — nine months being the industry standard time-frame of gestation for humans — and even giving birth, for all its peak intensity on the physical and/or psychic levels, is measured usually in mere hours, and never more than a day or two. Also, ambition and performance seem less relevant with pregnancy and birth. Certainly, some women work very diligently to make their pregnancies perfect, so as to give their unborn child the best chance possible of a good, healthy start. But even if they don't, pregnancy and childbirth have their own biological momentum.

Why does human parenting deserve the rank of #1 on my most difficult job list? Stated in the simplest possible terms, parenting human offspring from infancy to adulthood is an impossible job. No one can do it as well as he or she might hope. Give it your all, commit yourself to the task with complete devotion and all the attention, consciousness, and love you can muster, and your kids are still going

to be screwed up, either from the get-go or by the time they're grown, and usually both. That's just how human beings are — nobody's perfect.

Human beings are among a relatively small number of big-brained animal and large-bodied plant species that use what in biology is called the "K-type" reproduction strategy. That is to say, we have large but very few offspring that are not ready for independent life at birth and require care, feeding, and protection for an extended period of time before leaving the nest. In humans, this period is anywhere from 15 to 20 years, and sometimes longer than that when certain intangibles come into play.

By contrast, the vast majority of species employs an "r-type" reproductive strategy. They have many babies that leave the nest immediately and must fend for themselves. Take frogs, for example. They don't parent at all. The female frog lays up to 20,000 eggs at a time which are fertilized by the male as they are laid. At that point, the job of the "parenting" frogs is done. The fertilized eggs that come to term hatch as tadpoles. Maturation (i.e., metamorphosis) takes from a week to a year, depending on the frog species, but more than 99% of the tadpoles will never reach adulthood, some by perishing from natural causes, but most from being eaten by predators.

Since we humans have so few offspring that take decades to mature, the main job of a parent is to nurture — children must be fed for a long time — and to physically protect them from harm. Along with those tangible responsibilities are the training to develop skills that will help prepare children for adult participation in society — physical, mental, ethical, and moral training — and the most mysterious intangible of all, love.

Willingly or not, parents take on those four tasks: to nurture, protect, train, and love their children. All the duties are easy at times, often joyously so. The problem arises because parenting is 24/7/365 job for 20 years. Who among us is able to feel loving or act lovingly every minute of every day for 20 years? No one I've ever met. Similarly, who is so wise as to know precisely where the boundary is in every situation between caring protection that will insure safety and stifling restraint that will cause harm or inspire rebellion? Again, no one I know.

I wouldn't speculate as to the numbers of parents who endeavor heroically to provide the best parenting possible, but I'm sure the figures are impressively large. No one is perfect, however, and the demands of raising children are simply too complex to allow perfection from any person. Parenting cannot be reduced to a formula. Beyond our imperfections, however, is the additional element of human perversity. Children will sometimes reject, defy, or disdain even the best parenting.

Every human life comes with its own built-in melodramas. How the emerging person is treated in infancy, childhood, and beyond matters in determining how those melodramas will take shape and play out, so I'm not at all suggesting that the quality of parenting is irrelevant. But parenting cannot remove the melodramas from the child's inherent make-up. Children have their own wills, their own paths, their own warp and woof, and no amount of parental input can fundamentally deter those imperatives from their wild-card role in shaping personhood.

All this — and much more that I lack the skill and wisdom to write about — make raising children the most challenging and difficult ride here at the Carnival of Life Experiences.

And what of those of us who do not have children of our own or otherwise participate in long-term parenting? In 1976, the percentage of American women who had reached their mid-40s still childless was only 10%. By 2014, that figure had risen to 48%, shockingly close to a majority. The rise of the feminist movement toward gender equality may explain some of that, as well as dicey economics. Especially given the state of the world, with nearly eight billion of us testing the limits of Garden Earth, many very sound reasons exist for limiting any further expansion of humanity. The ancient refrain of "Be Fruitful and Multiply" needs to be laid to rest.

I have personally fathered no children. I might add the joke tag, "as far as I know," but I'm about as certain as I can be that none of my sexual liaisons resulted in a child. My reasons for remaining childless were neither philosophical nor pragmatic. Parenting was just never on my Bucket List. I am career-driven more than family-oriented.

I did participate briefly in formal parenting on two occasions with a young child of successive lovers — one boy and one girl, each time for a number of years. Both of those children are now adults, and I know from interacting with them long after the fact that they regard me as a meaningful and positive father figure in their early upbringing. So, I have some parenting experience. I wouldn't suggest, however, that my experience amounts to "going on the Parenting ride."

In similar fashion, I have also never gone on the Second Most Difficult Ride at the Carnival:

#2: Marriage

Ah yes, *marriage*, that most hallowed of institutions. The very idea of marriage makes me want to break into song:

*"You must remember this
A kiss is just a kiss, a sigh is just a sigh.
The fundamental things apply
As time goes by.*

*And when two lovers woo
They still say, "I love you."
On that you can rely
No matter what the future brings
As time goes by.*

*Moonlight and love songs
Never out of date.
Hearts full of passion
Jealousy and hate.
Woman needs man
And man must have his mate
That no one can deny.*

*It's still the same old story
A fight for love and glory
A case of do or die.
The world will always welcome lovers
As time goes by."*

Those lyrics are from the song "As Time Goes By" — featured prominently in the 1942 movie **Casablanca**, starring Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman. While the song may be justifiably famous, the conflation of romantic/sexual love with marriage that it presents is not inevitable, and, in some ways, is not even sensible. While that assumption may be common in modern society, the linkage of romance to marriage — as if the first should lead to the second and be made permanent by it — is a relatively recent development in civilization.

Throughout the history of culture, these two special connections between a pair of individuals often intertwined, but generally were considered distinctly separate experiences. Each was its own ride at the Carnival, rather than being two phases of a single ride.

Romance and passion are powerful fantasy-projections onto an idealized other that heightens the sense of an alienated or partial self yearning for completion (as in the notion of soul-matedness). Love affairs are a blessing/curse from the gods. The visitation by cupid is a particularly benign and one-sided representation of cosmic intervention, in that any full-blown love affair will invoke many dark side elements as well. Whether ethereal or aggressively physical, love is a wild-card.

In stark contrast to the unpredictable rollercoaster ride of romance and passion, marriage was historically an intentional human arrangement, usually proposed by the families of the couple rather than by the two participants themselves, and undertaken for various practical reasons, typically for economic gain, to solidify social standing, or to perpetuate a lineage. The relationship was a business deal, a legal contract between two individuals to secure the bedrock of family and social order, and the intimacy required for procreation was understood to be a necessary and dutiful part of the job description. Love affairs were understood to be, if not inevitable, at least probable, and were conducted outside the marriage, often in clandestine ways, so as to maintain decorum and respect for the sanctity of the contractual partnership.

Now that marriage has been fused with (or “wedded to,” if you’ll excuse the bad pun) romantic and passionate love, the ride has taken on new and disturbing dimensions. What was once a workable proposition — and may still be so for certain people — is now a nearly impossible job. First off, conditions have changed over the past century; nowadays, at least in America, even achieving the pragmatic goal of economic well-being for a family is much more challenging, what with the necessity for two incomes. Then too, because of relaxed attitudes toward dutifully staying together, marriage no longer provides the social anchor it once did. The percentage of marriages that end in divorce is now 50%. That is but one factor in the Burma Shave roadside sign cascade of factors that contribute to the social instability of our times. One might think that marriage could function as a refuge, a safe haven against the insanity of life in modern civilization — the fortress of the small “us” against the larger “them” — but that doesn’t seem to be the case.

But romantic love is the extra wild-card. What makes marriage so much more difficult now than it was in earlier epochs of civilization, I’d suggest, is that the demands of building of a small social and secure social unit come with the additional challenges of maintaining an ecstatic romantic and sexual union. In other words, marriage is no longer just the effort of partnership; it also requires the amazing magic trick of fulfilling in the long term a fantasy that is designed to be transient and fleeting. The average half-life of a romantic infatuation and/or sexual liaison is about 18 months. That’s not to suggest that certain couples may not remain in love for much long periods of time, but 18 months is the center of

the bell curve for the life-span of chemical attraction. We have to move out to the far wings of the curve to find couples who are still in love after 20 or 30 years, since these make up only a tiny percentage of marriages. And many marriages founder when the fantasy of romantic love fades away for any of the myriad reasons that it does.

Intimacy based on infatuation lives and dies on momentum and inertia. By contrast, long-term understanding and acceptance of another person, and the frequent renewal of affection that requires, is hard, sustained work. In addition to numerous skill sets, it demands not only the commitment of both partners, as well as the willingness to re-commit time and again, but also considerable help from reality. Effort alone is not enough to sustain a marriage; good luck is an essential element in the longevity of a marriage. Unhappy circumstances are often enough to crush a modern marriage. Where once the great tragedy was being trapped forever in a loveless marriage, the modern dilemma is the possibility of multiple attempts in succession, one marriage after another, all of which may fail.

We live in a world where heart-based connections to another person are simply not dependable. Disappointment with others is so commonplace as to be practically inevitable. How we handle this very difficult truth — with equanimity or bitterness — is an important element in achieving authentic adulthood. We can't reach Valhalla if we feel victimized. While betrayal through infidelity may be a common disappointment in marriage, the question of exclusivity is not really the central issue. Some marriages survive multiple affairs, and so-called "open marriages" may succeed as well.

Admittedly, certain marriages, especially younger ones, may be fatally wounded by the revelation that "specialness" in intimacy is an illusion, and that one could conceivably love many different people. Letting go of that fantasy is part of individual maturity in life and is by no means the primary cause of separation or divorce. If marriages were vulnerable to only one or two causes of failure, they wouldn't be so damned hard to perpetuate. The truth is that even seemingly robust marriages can be undone by any of a thousand different causes. The fact that some marriages renew while others degrade is very mysterious and not easily explained.

Deep understanding of oneself and the partner, while noteworthy and meaningful, are not sufficiently powerful to insure that a marriage will hold together. Good intentions are not close to enough to guarantee continuing trust. The human psyche is so complex and circuitous in the delineation of areas of privacy versus sharing that violation of one's own or the other's boundaries is virtually impossible to avoid. Sometimes all it takes is one inadvertent transgression to irreparably damage the feeling of safe togetherness. Usually in

such cases, however, the build-up of transgressions is smaller-scale but cumulative, so that trust is eroded rather than wiped out in one fell swoop.

Do some marriages succeed? Of course, but even those are unlikely to survive unscathed. Despite the presence of scar tissue, however, healing can occur. It's not guaranteed, of course, for true healing requires grace, and we do not always heal from every wound. In love, however, hearts that heal after breaking are stronger than hearts that have never broken. Some marriages weather the inevitable storms of disaffection. Then too, it's probably correct to assume that longevity in remaining together "until death us do part" is not the only measure of marital success. Some marriages that end in divorce might still rightly be considered successful, and, conversely, some marriages that persevere are wretched failures.

I'd go so far as to say that "success" and "failure" are probably too simplistic and one-dimensional to apply as marital judgments, since human relatedness operates on so many levels and different realms that assessing an overall outcome is probably a fool's errand. The issue isn't really success or failure, *per se*, but rather the extraordinary challenge of achieving and maintaining satisfaction with the experience, during and/or after.

And so we come full circle: Marriage, like raising children, is easy to undertake but astonishingly difficult to do well.

Other rides here at the Carnival are also subject to serious or vexing difficulties, such as Living in a Body or Dealing with Others in Society, but I know of no core life-experiences that are categorically as difficult as Raising Children and Being Married. As someone who has examined both rides carefully but gone on neither, I marvel that so many people take them on, sometimes apparently without the slightest hesitation. I can't judge whether that's conscious or compulsive, courageous or foolhardy, choice or destiny.

No doubt all the variations exist.