

Those Lucky Sharks



Shark Babies

This article is about the relationships between children and their parents. Human parents typically spend years raising their offspring, unlike shark parents, who do not care for their young after birth. Sharks have different procreation and parenting practices. Male sharks impregnate females quite aggressively, and the females have the scars to prove it as the males bite into the females to ensure an unyielding copulation. While a few shark species lay eggs, most sharks follow the mammalian pattern of the females carrying their young for 9 to 12 months. However, no sharks care for their young. Sharks are simply born hardwired to swim and hunt. **The closest thing to shark child care is that females deliver their young in shallow areas where food is plentiful.**

Human babies do not have the luxury of knowing how to survive on day one. It is commonly assumed that humans cannot become fully independent until their late teens or early twenties. Humans have more complex brains and bodies than sharks and have many more skills to master. Sharks only need to swim and hunt, but humans must develop communication, logical, emotional, spatial, cultural, cognitive, occupational, educational, interpersonal, and many other skills. Humans must learn to drive on the right side of the road (except in places like the British Isles and Japan) and other civilized behaviors. Sharks are so predatory that most species eat other sharks. Sand shark embryos take sibling rivalry to the extreme as they eat other embryos in the womb. **The next meal is the only priority for sharks, while most humans hunger for more.**

Sadly, some human parents act like sharks and abandon their children either immediately or shortly after birth. Some parents keep their children but raise them with a single shark-like fixation on survival of the fittest. Other humans attempt to teach their children the full range of human skills but give up at some point before the children are grown. The range of human care for children is vast, from shark-like to sensitive, loving parentage. However, based on their upbringing, most parents try their best to prepare their children for adulthood.

I was compelled to write this after reading about the passing of two of my sports heroes, Jerry West and Willie Mays. Despite their unparalleled athletic skills, both won their ultimate championships only once. While playing for the New York Giants, Willie's team won the 1954 World Series. Jerry West only won one NBA championship as a player with the Los Angeles Lakers in 1972. Jerry's teams were perennially confronted by the Boston Celtics and Willie's by the New York Yankees and the Brooklyn Dodgers. How do these hard-luck sports icons relate to raising humans?

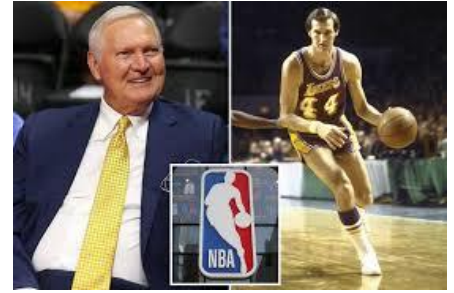


They both achieved greatness despite difficult childhoods. Jerry West grew up in Appalachian poverty and was routinely beaten by his father. Aside from suffering racism while growing up in segregated

Alabama, Willie Mays' mother left his father when he was three, and two aunts raised him. Willie attended an Alabama industrial high school and was trained to be a presser for a laundry.

My two heroes had difficult childhoods, but there is one significant difference. Although Willie's parents separated when he was three, his two aunts nurtured him emotionally and spiritually. From his humble beginning, he became the effervescent "Say Hey Kid." Unfortunately, Jerry's father was so abusive that he once slept with a loaded shotgun in the event he was forced to kill his father. West described his childhood as "tormented" and said he never learned how to receive or give love.

A December 20, 2024, *New York Times* article described Jerry West as a tortured genius. He was said to be "One of the world's greatest basketball players; he thought himself to be a loser." After his playing career ended, he became a successful coach and team executive. His silhouette of a man driving toward the basket is the official logo for the NBA. Nevertheless, his wife of 46 years said he "was the saddest man she had ever met" when she first met him. Despite his success, he fought the demons of depression all his life.



The Relentless and Impossible Task of Raising Children

Raising human children is difficult. Procreation is easy; the difficult part is the 18 or 20 years that follow. Parents must work, manage a household, maintain a marital relationship, and foster the growth of children who arrive as naked, hungry blank slates. Moreover, while feeding and clothing children is challenging for some, this is not the most challenging part. Interestingly, many less affluent parents impart more meaningful interpersonal and emotional skills to their offspring than their wealthier counterparts.

Many parents focus their parenting skills on basic physiological needs, such as food, water, clothing, and shelter. These are all requirements but are only a foundation for childhood development, not an endpoint. The psychologist Maslow developed a hierarchy with five levels of need, and this is the first level.

After the basic physical needs of a family unit are met, Maslow said the family needs access to health services, employment, social stability, and a stable family situation. These needs are challenging for many economically strapped families in the USA. However, for many Americans, this need can be met.

Maslow's third level of need is for love and belonging. Many less affluent families never fully achieve the first two levels but find friendship, intimacy, and a sense of connection in loving relationships. Conversely, many families who easily reach the lower levels never find a sense of connection to other family members or the rest of humanity. However, achieving the need for love and belonging seems to be a prerequisite for the final two levels.

The fourth level in Maslow's hierarchy is self-esteem. Many people denigrate self-esteem. When someone highlights this as a goal for Americans, many depict the objective as a pipe dream or a unicorn fantasy. Self-esteem is embedded with self-confidence, a sense of achievement, and respect for others. Many people, like Jerry West, struggle with this human need, even though their objective achievements may indicate otherwise. However, many shark people still believe self-esteem is an unnecessary luxury.

According to Maslow, self-actualization is humans' ultimate need. Morality, spontaneity, creativity, acceptance, and meaning are at this level. It seems naive to believe that the first four levels must be achieved before reaching this Nirvana. Some can accomplish some aspects of self-actualization without the other four levels. For example, a person could be highly creative from a family of nasty miscreants. This type of creative person might be a monster, yet he can still be creative. Likewise, a poor person could be highly moral despite lacking employment or a family.

Despite a few conceptual limitations of Maslow's hierarchy, its higher levels resonate with most people, especially adults. Most of us crave love, belonging, achievement, creativity, self-awareness, and a meaningful existence. The nuclear family is the primary launching pad to reach these higher levels. However, the global competitive economy can suck out the prospect of achieving self-actualization in adulthood when we perceive ourselves as interchangeable objects, follow the dictates of management slavishly, and are alienated from our work.

Speaking of human achievement, discussions about artificial intelligence (AI) start with the statement that AI will revolutionize our lives because it can sort through information rapidly and make associations that would take humans thousands of years to make. However, these discussions usually end with the statement that "AI cannot be self-aware or have the genuine emotions of humans." AI can mimic human morality, friendship, and intimacy, but these characteristics are mechanistic. Humans hungering for love, social interaction, and a meaningful existence will likely turn to AI as a substitute for genuine human interaction. It is also likely that both parents and children will turn to AI when their families cannot provide them with genuine emotional sustenance.

The challenges for human parents are daunting. Even the miracle of modernity, AI, lacks the skills to achieve self-actualization. Yet, parents are still expected to provide their children with physiological, security, and loving foundations and prepare them to achieve self-esteem and self-actualization.

We cannot choose our parents, but we can forgive them

I almost think we're all of us Ghosts...It's not only what we have invited from our father and mother that walks in us. It's all sorts of dead ideas, and lifeless old beliefs, and so forth. They have no vitality, but they cling to us all the same, and we can't get rid of them. – Henrik Ibsen

Parenting styles do not emerge from nothingness with each generation. Parents raise their children in the context of their life situation and generally use the same rearing practices as their parents. Some may raise their children exactly as they think they were raised, while others with an unhappy childhood will try to raise their children very differently. Regardless of how parents decide to raise their children, their primary frame of reference is their own childhood.

Unless parents are exposed to or learn "good" parenting techniques, self-actualization will be challenging for their children to achieve. Parents who do not expose their children to love, intimacy, patience, respect for others, a consistent morality, and other aspects of self-actualization are likely to produce another generation lacking the skills to succeed fully in life. The primary task for parents is to raise children to emerge from their family cocoons as independent, fully functional butterflies. Children should not exist as objects for parents to relive or redo their own childhoods.

So, why am I harping on this idea that humans need love, belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization? My response is simple. Many are quick to blame all our difficulties on the government, corporations, rural idiots, urban crime, billionaires, "the Deep State," immigrants, globalization, etc. However, if we study individual cases of extreme dissatisfaction (e.g., lone wolf assassins, criminals, etc.), we almost always find a child raised in a dysfunctional family. This is also true in cases of suicides and other self-destructive behaviors.

Dysfunction can be caused or intensified by various psychological disorders. Learning disorders, autism spectrum disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity, addiction (a chronic disease of brain reward, motivation, memory, and related circuitry), schizophrenia, and oppositional defiant disorder can cause behavioral problems. These disorders inevitably spill over into the relationships among and between family members. Moreover, **these disorders are often found in the parents as well as the children.** Ideally, a family should be a cocoon

and refuge for positive childhood development. However, when dysfunction is undiagnosed or ignored, the family becomes either an inescapable blame game or fractures into a thousand pieces.

What can be done about dysfunctional families? The first task is to recognize that there is a problem. How can the problem be solved if most people deny that it exists? Unfortunately, there is a common difference between “good” and “bad” families. **The good ones eventually recognize significant problems, and the bad ones continually hide from them.**

The parents who do not provide their children with a pathway to self-actualization generally do not seek self-actualization for themselves. How can they promote something they do not understand or believe to be nonsense? When challenged by their maturing children, they rationalize away the issue and usually make the situation worse. Children who lack a roadmap to a more creative, meaningful life often become depressed or angry adults.

If parents and children collectively recognize some of their roadblocks to better relationships, they can improve each other’s lives. They can work their problems out themselves over time and/or use family counseling. I believe one of the ultimate goals of this process is forgiveness. Both the parents and the children need to forgive each other. Everyone should recognize that raising children in a modern, fragmented society like ours is very challenging.

Most of our ancestors lived on farms four or five generations ago and traveled by horse and buggy. Life was simpler in the 19th century, but they had the same needs for love, belonging, self-esteem, and acceptance. It is commonplace to say that life was better when it was simpler. There is some truth to this. However, history reveals to me that life was tough despite the simplicity of the 19th century. Life spans were shorter since childbirth was more dangerous, and diseases were like forest fires that eventually burnt themselves out. Mandatory education typically meant an 8th-grade education for most children in rural areas. Until Roosevelt’s New Deal, many working-class Americans worked themselves to death.

Our recent ancestors had difficult lives, especially those who emigrated from countries with wars, famines, and civil unrest over the last two centuries. In the 21st century, we must discard outdated ideas about child rearing and reprogram ourselves to foster love, self-esteem, and self-actualization for future generations. Our material life has improved over the centuries despite excessive negativity from some media channels. We can be less destructive to our planet, society, and families. **We are not sharks; we are humans with many new opportunities if we dare to reach for them.**