Single Woman With 3 Young Children Unaware She Subject Of 984 Judgments Today

8/07/15 10:24AM

Nichols unknowingly endures more than a dozen speculations about her qualifications as a mother during her walk from her car to the entrance of a local bank branch.

LINCOLN, NE—Oblivious to the thoughts and looks directed toward her as she shopped for groceries, stopped by the post office, and ran several other errands with her three young children, single mother

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Nihilist Parenting

thank you for your help ronni, nyx, chad, marisa, jennamay, esther, andrea, anais, becca, scotty, ronnie, gayle, joey, kelly, molly, spencer, maresi, rita, eileen, spark, susan c, natalya, nelle, david, joanna, travis, damien, dad, and mary

To take a nihilist approach to parenting could mean not equating the acknowledgement of pain and stress with a pathological 'focus' on pain--in other words, not pressuring your child to ignore whatever they can frankly see and feel for themselves. Or not demanding children echo positive things in order to prove that you are a good parent creating a good family complying with performed positivity. In this figuration, pain and other 'negative' experiences do not have to be treated as mistakes to be neutralized ASAP, or as signs of failure, but can be explored for what they mean in context and what they're like.

It could mean confirming that you, and everyone, has different perspectives on reality and 'the truth', and that these differences have reasons and origins, i.e. differences in perspective are not just a question of bad or stupid people deviating from the correct central story. It could mean bringing your own honest vantage point into your relationship, instead of defaulting to what a 'good' parent's vantage point must look like.

You don't have to refuse dogmatically the use of any value system (if this is even possible); it is sufficient to allow acknowledgement that value systems and values are living things, neither universal nor self-evident. Values and means of evaluation necessarily change all the time as life changes. Little is gained as a parent by clinging to the supposed stability of an imperative to optimize.

Most importantly, we have the power ourselves to *create* working, evolving value systems rooted in our actual lives. The state and cultural christian beliefs about the family may dominate the landscape of this country, but we don't have to grant them authority over the meanings of things in our own most intimate relationships. We have the ability to disassemble them, or assemble something different, or both, or neither. We don't have to come up with some perfect approach that will defeat dominant cultural forces in some once-and-for-all way. We do already, though, have the ability to engage with them from multiple sides.

Nihilist parenting can mean not finding the 'best system', can mean knowing your choices likely will not be 'the best', and ignoring the whole question of 'the best' at will. Instead, you might focus on finding what qualities you want to cultivate or avoid, for reasons specific to your actual experienced life.

For example, this can look like merely declining to reproduce nationalism, declining to pretend that recycling and cloth shopping bags will do anything whatsoever to stem the tide of mass extinction, declining to devalue your own observations, or declining to create the expectation that we will someday (or already) live in the best of all possible worlds.

You've already hit the mark of what you're supposed to say--I love you--but why stop there? But when you fail to stop there, suddenly it becomes clear you've partly been doing something else all along: a type of play with qualities and quantities that has left the realm of the normative performance. Suddenly, propelling forward through the positive imperative centered around 'love', you end up in an experiment of amplification for its own sake that distorts to the point of destroying the centrality of the original operation. Your child still 'loves you', but in hyperbolizing the conversation has discovered a means of decoupling their 'love' from the *imperative* of love.

Conclusion

Nihilist parenting could mean, in the words of my friend, a single mom, "Just not pretending you have answers you don't actually have." It could mean characterizing your answers to problems honestly: as merely your own answers, as working experiments based on past experiments, and not as 'the' answers.

It could mean inviting your kid to participate in the process of reasoning out problems, and doing it together. Or it could mean refusing to problem-solve together and giving your reason why you won't, and then accepting that from their vantage point, which doesn't need to be unified with your own, this will just seem unfair.

Introduction: h0pe

Becoming a parent or full-time caretaker for a child melts your life. It breaks apart your habits, assumptions, goals, and your sense of yourself. It changes every aspect of your life, from your physical environment to your body, from your temporal and spatial orientation to your moment-to-moment rhythm of registering priorities. It usually changes the nature of every other relationship in your life, with other adults, family members, friends, strangers.

This textured, fracturing experience, echoed in so many words by most parents I've ever talked to, is so all-encompassing and ever-changing that parents I've talked to find it hard to summarize. The most you can say is that the whole experience is relentlessly ambiguous and mutable. Yet in the U.S., consumer culture and other tidal cultural forces impose a different, much more rigid set of concepts and experiences over the surface of parenthood.

These are narratives of wholly stable relationships, hopeful futurity, spontaneous uncomplicated love, and, in theory, perfecting an 'investment' in a good future. Most of all, the popular thematics of american parenthood strictly center around monolithic, constant joy and life as a unified vector progressing into the future by way of being a good (and if possible, only ever good) parent. When I talk to parents, they readily describe the psychedelic dissonance of experiencing both these two things: on the one hand, constant disoriented confusion and ambiguous change, and on the other, a culturally imposed (and often legally enforced) story of simplicity, ultrapositivity, and relational non-change.

Should you need to reconcile the contrast between these stories, the good news is that there is a type of nihilism that can be used to fend off a romanticized mode of parenthood, and detour around a perfection-centric notion of childhood.

Nihilism can be the name for a way of keeping out of the clutches of hope and of related imperatives to optimize your life/your child/your relationships/anything in particular.

I want everyone to be able to refuse to optimize themselves and their worlds. I have never found another way out of america's totalizing economic-conceptual-paradigm (you know: the idea that everything and anything is understandable as an 'economy' and that economics determines all meaning) except for this refusal. If you want to pursue understanding any of your experiences without defaulting to economics-as-the-realest-reality, I suggest you explore what it means to not optimize.

I also want everyone to be able to reject compulsory optimism, compulsory positivity, if they so choose. I want anybody at all to be able to refuse the imperative to accept and internalize *positive stories*, or even any stable stories at all. A person might want positive stories sometimes, and I don't begrudge anyone that, either: but I also want people to be able to trash them at will, especially parents and especially-especially moms.

Utility and necessity, the demands of a crisis situation, can hijack your life and turn even the smallest moments into a desperate frenzy. When the stakes of life are high, e.g. when you find yourself responsible for protecting a small vulnerable person in an indescribably cruel and fear-soaked arena, when you are isolated and under immense pressure, nihilism can allow you to find a tangle of branching, twisting, perverse possibilities, truly varying in their qualities, instead of funneling you into the singular doom of compulsory hope.

When I see the word *hope* I fill in the O in my mind with the Obama brand campaign's "h0pe" letter O, and I think of the way the political parties manipulate people by playing with our trauma, fear, or desperation. I think of the way the Obama administration in particular manipulated people's racism-induced distress for the benefit of the banks, the U.S. military, and murderous health insurance companies, to name just a few beneficiaries. I will always associate the word *hope* with Obama for this reason, and I know this is pretty corny but in this zine I will indicate that you should be thinking about the role of *hope* in forcing compliance with positive political visions by replacing the O with a fancy 0.

It's been uncharacteristically difficult to finish this zine: in writing it I relied heavily on the perspective of a number of moms, mostly single moms, and we have lately been subject to a kind of environmental psychosis and escalation of what I guess is just simple misogynist terror.

An optimizing, or even just optimistic, story presented to a child can be outright rejected, but just as often will be embraced, such that in the child's use a positive narrative can easily become hyper-inflated, expanded, free-associated or multiplied to the point of having its initial pillars of internal coherence shredded through this very multiplication. As in the following story someone told me (and I've experienced other versions):

Mom: I love you.

Child: I love you the most, most, mommy, If I had to say how much I loved you it would take ten million trillion billion years to say it enough times, it would take infinity times infinity times infinity years to say even one time how much I love you mommy, I would be an old man, I would need a thousand gallons of magic, I would turn into a wizard, I would have to go back in time to forever ago to start infinity telling you how much I love you mommy, I would need nine thousand castles full of wizards that have a billion hearts, if I had to tell you how much I love you....
(*etc trailing off for five more minutes*)

Children, especially young toddlers, can compulsively avail themselves of addative and exponential forms of engaging with meaning; these usually fail to adhere to the simple unity of *the best*--unless they adhere to it so obsessively that the adherence circles around and becomes disruptive again. Children have the capability of shredding meaning--not usually through rejecting it nor through critique, but through hyper-adopting and hyper-expanding upon initially presented meaning. Where adults optimize, children often hyperbolize.

Hyperbole is not a rejection of the optimal story, but it can easily become a destruction of the story's rational basis for coherence. Maybe this is not a good example because the normative idea of 'love' is itself hyperbolic, has hyperbole built into it, but what's important to me is the nonsensical free-association that accompanies so many children's nominal embrace of a positive narrative.

The subtle underpinnings of such an office are humanist beliefs about the universality of love, the family, and 'childhood'. These beliefs in effect uphold hard limits on what elements of childhood or child raising can be acknowledged or admitted into a family's narrative. Moreover, it isn't usually enough (for CPS or for a nervous public of onlookers) that as a parent you stay out of the weeds of 'bad parent' signifiers; parents are under intense pressure to perform, visibly and tirelessly, 'good parent' tasks.

Good parents, at the minimum, ought to impart the idea that life is worth living; that a legible form of parental love first of all exists and also is stable and infinite; that family bonds are natural and consistent; that it is possible to engage with the world from some semblance of consistent meaning.

Beyond that, good parents are seen to funnel their own sense of self-worth, success, stability and dignity through their children (but not excessively), as through their own personal appearance and the appearance of their property. Good parenting bears some relation to the idea in real estate development of "pride in homeownership": combed hair, cut lawn, good grades, manners, achievement, above all, legibility. Embodying good parenting in america is less a question of sheer conformity than of willingness to make a visible effort--the quality of your desires (your 'unique individuality' or culture or subculture) is often irrelevant as long as you are a mobile vector clearly going somewhere (participating in the pageant of meritocracy and plugging your kids into it consistently).

Yet children themselves are often inalienably chaotic. Their behavior, and even their very factual perception of what is even occurring around them, is frequently wildly disorienting even for adults; being in contact with it "opens a void of existential confusion," as another single mom friend put it. They not only experience *other things*--we really have no idea what--but they cause a constant potential disruption, like a loose thread that can unravel all those around it.

In the last six months, many of the moms whose perspectives helped form this zine have been beset with pollution-induced life-threatening illnesses, assaults, family court lawsuits by abusive dads, financial siphoning/threats/intimidation of moms by the same, flagrant hiring discrimination, privatization-rooted chaos in our kids' schools, a generally terrorizing public sphere, and now finally the last nail in the coffin of the U.S. judicial system being fully under the control of a theocratic cult.

The U.S. has the fifth highest rate of maternal mortality in the entire world, and Louisiana, where I'm writing from, is the highest in the country. The senator here last month made the following defense:

> *...If you correct our population for race [*explicitly meaning if you don't count black moms*], we're not as much of an outlier as it'd otherwise appear... Sometimes maternal mortality includes up to a year after birth and would include someone being killed by her boyfriend...In my mind, it's better to restrict your definition to that which is the perinatal, if you will — the time just before and in the subsequent period after she has delivered. [*this restriction actually doesn't change the statistic either; we'd still have the most deaths*]*

... Cearly, racist charicatures play a significant role in normalizing Louisiana's yearly cascade of preventable deaths. Great positive stories: the staggeringly gruesome problem isn't really all that bad; healthcare isn't *that* dysfunctional for the people who count; "someone being killed by her boyfriend" could ever possibly be seen as a separate issue from reproduction.

Constructing a positive story is always critical to political power, and it routinely demands selectively ignoring massive suffering and death. The more brutal things become, the more insistent politicians and corporate interests are that they can provide h0pe, and that we must accept it, or we are the proverbial 'part of the problem'.

Much has been said over the past century about the way politicians amp up people's fear and paranoia in order to take power (and most commonly this discussion said to be about 'fascism') but this is just the other side of the same coin. The h0pe lands better if there is a threat, an emergency. The crisis means that you have an obligation to submit to unified priorities, to optimize your strategy and foreswear anything thematically associated with ambiguity--paradigmatic disengagement, indulging in alternate angles of evaluation, criticism, naysaying, 'negativity'...

We are all subject to this template of optimism as power; it filters into even the microscopic scales of our lives. Parents I talk to describe immense pressure (frequently outright coercion) to internalize and reproduce a 'the world is an economy and the economy is the world' paradigm, to mumble constant allegiance to compulsory h0pe, to embody optimism and the optimizing of everything they do, to buy into the notion that you can actually (and must) *optimize your child*, and ideally also to participate in the annihilation of any other concept of parenting that could exist or ever has existed.

An insistence upon 'the traditional family' as optimal grow tank for children has always played a key role in stripping reproductive autonomy from my landcape. Nothing else will do; none of the probably thousands of social structures in which people have grown up throughout history are *optimal* except this very best one, and therefore none are acceptable. Even if this perspective is drawn from an extreme example, arguably a kind of fanaticism of *the optimal*, this is presently a very influential fanaticism in america; moreover, many subcultural enviromnents which strongly oppose the sanctification of 'the traditional family' repeat its same frame--funneling reproductive life towards and only towards alternate *optimal* terms (whatever they are) for the sake of the future.

In america, the governance of families and children uses terror and the notion of crisis to enforce the idea that *there is nothing else worth imagining outside the one path toward the best*--indeed, that to abandon *the best* is actually evil. What kind of mother *doesn't* "do the best she can"?

This text is an exploration of parenting against 'the best'. It turns out this rejection is handily available via a form of nihilism.

Finally, it's important to say that I am a trivial person. Most of my life consists of the mundane tasks of single parenting. This grants my perspective neither virtue nor inherent legitimacy, but it's still just a fact and is relevant to my arguments. So bear it in mind when reading. Also, fuck academia.

What does it mean if children (and therefore childrearing, parenting, and associated pillars such as 'love') are not even consistently one thing? What does it mean if children do not necessarily or always embody or 'represent' futurity, a bond of shared love, hope, God's love, fulfillment, an evolutionary imperative of 'the species' survival,' a material 'investment' in the future, or any of the things they may indeed represent to various people? What does it mean to be willing to acknowledge variety and ambiguity in the realm of reproduction and relationality?

In fact, the lack of apprehensible consistency or stability of meaning or identity in even one child is frequently evident to a child's own caretakers. "When you stare into an infant's face, you actually are staring into the face of chaos," said a mother from a past generation. Preverbal infants and nonverbal children surely tend to fit differently into any subjectivity-based framework than verbal adults.

Often, cultural environments are quick to fill the void left by an infant's nonverbal existence: the hurried application of hyperbolically gendered clothing, names and nicknames, and a host of products imposing a sort of abridged pantomime of the adult world even onto the youngest infants is a huge industry. Before a newly born person can ask in any language, "who am I?", the normal family ideally has already imposed a thickly coherent and consistent answer, however frequently negative. If you look into this for yourself, you may find that the elimination of ambiguity often appears as the more dire undertaking than even the elimination of 'negativity' from narrative.

In the U.S., a bounded realm of acceptable ways to relate to children is of course literally enforced by Child Protective Services and other forms of law enforcement. There are laws that define what children 'are', in the name of their protection (and for the purpose of preemptively totalizing and calculating accountability for any potential crimes children or their parents may commit).

However, outside of the goal of preventing abuse and violence towards vulnerable people, this enforcement mechanism is built upon an underlying faith in a unified or unifiable meaning of the child and concept of parenting. Child Protective Services does not merely prevent physical abuse or neglect of children (and its lack of success in doing this is the subject of open debate and rage in many regions of the U.S.) but also enforces cultural norms about the space, diet, temporal routine, social reproduction, education, cast of characters, hair and clothing care, and even furniture that childrearing necessitates.

I am more interested in asking, via nihilism: what if raising a child is not inherently meaningful? What if 'life', contrary to what anti-contraception proponents believe, is not always a meaningful thing, let alone a good thing? In other words, what if we can't determine the meaning in any universal way--and therefore don't sort the phenomenon into a 'good' or 'bad' category universally? Again, this would require opening up to the idea that reality is in fact occurring differently for different people and that this is not a problem to be solved, but is an angle to be embraced.

Hyperbole

There is an american cultural mythology of perpetual optimism supposedly (if not actually in all cases) built into the form of normative reproduction and the secondary choice to raise children. While it is entirely possible and abundantly practiced to conceive and give birth to children with no particular faith in their or one's own futurity, and no particular beliefs about what their existence 'means', the imposition of these conclusions is endemic to the circumstance of childcare in america.

What are children? I have never understood how this question could really be answered from a universalizing vantage point. You might say that they are people, but we don't have much of a consensus on what people are. Depending on the context, children are people understood as (and treated as) anything from wild animals to morally superior, saintlike beings, from prized status symbol possessions or literal slaves to abstract symbols of function and normalcy.

Despite the endless variety of answers grounded in actual events in the contemporary world, this topic often carries a kind of magnetism, a charge that draws people closer than ever towards the temptation to answer universally. It should be self-evident that there exists an unapproachable infinity of narratives used by people across the planet to understand their own lives; yet sometimes in America there also exists a resistance to extending this principle of variety to include the 'meanings' of children. There is often substantial fear involved in non-universalizing, as if to not universalize is the same as to discriminate maliciously or to abandon.

Good Vibes Only

'Nihilist' is a word which seems, in some strains of American media and culture at least, to function as a shorthand, a vague boogeyman of negativity: one which is by definition antithetical to the presumed/enforced thematic purposes of raising children or having a family. Children are to be popularly understood as symbols of futurity and hope; "nihilism" is for most people colloquially just a slightly dramatic term for "hopelessness."

By now I have gathered that in raising a child, I am understood to be engaging in a hopeful act, looking ahead to a better future, or at least any future at all. We are supposed to be not only accountable in many specific ways (on pain of criminal charges) to this hypothetical future, but also subject to pressure to prioritize it above "the present" (unless operating in the shadow of a specific rationalization for why it's OK to "be in the moment," i.e. where doing this can be shown as actually being an optimal way of investing in the future) or, for that matter, "the past".

There is an affective and emotional imperative wrapped around these conceptual directives, too. Holding the future as a priority is also widely enforced in the terms not only of h0pe, but also of "love." This love is ideally a particular strain flavored most strongly by voluntary (and not just voluntary but spontaneous, irresistible) sacrifice, the complete lack of limitations or conditions ("unconditional" as they say about "motherly love" in particular) and an imperative to endless affirmation and optimism.

I have many times heard people who say "I never want to have kids" be immediately accused as "nihilist". I have often heard the same said of anyone who points out the seemingly obvious fact that our world is drowning in gratuitous suffering, torture, extreme violence, and market-fueled devastation; and that therefore the thought of bringing a vulnerable person unconsensually into this hellish scenario could be at least partly evaluated as a terrible event for that new person.

To acknowledge this, to point even hypothetically or partially to the inbuilt cruelty of being brought into this place, is, I have found, likely to be termed "nihilist". In the realm of reproduction, any 'focus' on nonpositive dimensions is perceived as something like a pathology. "Why focus on the negative?", I and other single parents have been asked at the slightest 'complaint'.

Nor is there generally space to acknowledge that already millions of babies are born in the U.S. not because anybody felt a surge of h0pe or a life-affirming desire to give selfless love, but in fact because abortion and birth control have already been defacto inaccessible for millions of people here for decades. Even for those who do have this access, ambiguity can always exist in these 'choices' as it does in any other supposedly agential decision one makes.

But, the notion that nearly all parents are parents because *they've made a rationally considered, conscious, voluntary choice to undertake a commitment to a positive future steeped in beauty and love* is profoundly baked into our cultural and legal environment. I know that this is a generalization, but if you doubt it, I suggest experimenting with how you talk about parenthood with random americans, and check out the responses you encounter. Even if we see plainly around us that not everyone displays these motivations for becoming parents, most of us tend to feel that they *should*.

Indeed, in the protestant-dominated cultural landscape of the U.S., non-parents (perhaps excepting those who are perceived as socially undesirable or unfit to reproduce e.g. due to racism, xenophobia, homophobia, or carrying connotations of poverty or addiction, or numerous other reasons) are certainly subject to pressure to embrace reproduction and 'the family' in the name of 'not being a nihilist'. As I will delve into later, though, those of us raising children ourselves are subject to a different program of pressure (and sometimes literal policing) related to making sure we have the correct affective orientation towards parenting. Not only our social behavior and care for children are subject to this scrutiny, but also our imaginations. It is a matter with both cultural and legal stakes to make sure people 'love' their children, and love them correctly--optimally.

The standard narrative of parenting in the U.S., especially as mothering but not exclusively, entails the spontaneous, love-soaked voluntary choosing of procreation, the 'gift of life'. All the pain it will inevitably entail (for everyone involved) is to be washed away in the simple, spontaneous flood of unconditional love. Whether or not you are a parent, if you deviate from this characterization at all, and I recommend testing this through interactive rhetorical experimentation, there is a high likelihood you will be called something like "nihilist" (or just "fucked up and negative").

Optimal Effectiveness

There are several important consequences of a cultural environment in which meaning and function are sacrosanct to people, whether or not they are taken as universal, but especially in that case. One is that acts which are nonfunctional or meaningless are maligned and discouraged--to put it another way, everything that's done, every impulse anybody follows, is subject to a scanning for its meaning, and then, usually, whether this meaning is good or bad.

Reproduction, having and raising children, is (in the abstract) aggessively jammed into the 'good' bin in the most visible cultural environments in america. By contrast, as an example of a specious counter-impulse, it's worth mentioning that I have heard anti-civ anarchists criticize raising children as a 'vanity project' (and beyond this, have heard them play into historically quite racist 'population overgrowth' hysteria). Whether this remark is fundamentally misogyny-driven or not, I think it's unsurprising that even many people aggressively opposing states' and corporate power have adopted the concept of rational-self-interest-style voluntarism and combined it with the template of *optimal effectiveness*.

In my book it's completely true that reproduction is not by any possible measure 'the most effective' thing a person could do to stop mass extinction. There has also never been any point in debating to what degree reproduction is or isn't 'compatible' with environmental (or any other system of) priorities, and there is even less point now that abortion access is widely criminalized, i.e. cannot even thinly be characterized as 'always a choice'. Once you pick a singular priority, a polar goal, the dimensions of the world which have complex interactions with that goal must be easily flattened or just subtracted from the picture, by way of effectiveness-optimization.

Some ideological tendencies related to anti-civ have tried to rescue or rehabilitate reproduction, e.g. by writing long bibliographies or creating entire ritualized shells for the activities with the mission of 'proving' how they really are meaningful or useful after all--for political-strategic ends, for some validated experiential dimension to life, for the advancement of human knowledge (whatever the fuck that even means). The fact that reproduction, something which has long been a widely nonconsensual phenomenon (and even where it is consensual is largely if not entirely irrational and ambiguous) must be calibrated as to whether it is or is not part of 'optimal effectiveness' tells more about the ubiquitous template of *optimal effectiveness* itself than it does about reproduction.

The fictional unification of meaning, purpose, identity and affect resulting from the imperative to optimize fend off 'nihilism' in the sense of fending off a void of meaninglessness many people fear. But if some labels, situations, or actions really are meaningless, isn't it preferable to confront this rather than abscond to a system of meaning produced by abstract entities who claim power?

If you have a child (or are a child), the theocratic-cult-run-state reaches deep into your physical and emotional life in ways that are qualitatively distinct from the ways it touches others. If people (are forced to, or spontaneously) associate children with futurity and 'hope', and if this association is indeed mandated via both cultural and legal structures, then anything thematically contaminated with "hopelessness" must be shunned.

A single mom friend described this phenomenon in its cultural incarnation as "the posi-vibes-only crowd." If you go to walmart or a similar store, you will find that the phrase "good vibes only" and similar slogans are plastered over most objects one might purchase for the tasks related to parenting--diaper bags, bibs, car seats, furniture, kids' clothing.

The muddled, nonspecific sorting of actions and attitudes into "good vibes" and "bad vibes," the sorting of the world into a binary matrix of positive vs. negative, is almost inescapable in the realm of parenting. It is important to observe that not only are these vague 'good vibes' considered centrally important affective ingredients in a child's world and in a parent's relationship to children, but by the same token, vague 'bad vibes' are widely understood as particularly harmful for children. (Assuming that "bad vibes" must be avoided for the good of the children includes the premise that they *can* be avoided.) By the american paradigm, to not-optimize is never understood as anything beyond *the failure* to optimize, i.e. *making a mistake*, and mistakes are increasingly understood primarily as the sources of irreparable emotional harm to a vulnerable child.

The supposed equivalence between 'acknowledging pain' and 'focusing in a pathological way on negativity', the idea that to engage phenomena such as 'pain' is inherently to *be* 'negative' or 'nihilist' (or mentally ill), it should be noted, tends to come primarily from the 'posi vibes only' imperative; I will return to this later.

In the words of a woman I talked to who was a single mother of a child with disabilities in the early 1960s:

> *If you bring a person into the world... this world... where the only two things that are really guaranteed for anyone in this world are that you will suffer and that you will die, and you are putting a person in that situation without it being possible to ask them for permission... They have no say in it. So I've always thought... At the very least you have to admit, that person really doesn't owe you anything at all.*
> *Your kids owe you nothing.*

Optimize Your Baby And Your Brain

To 'optimize' is to find the single best of something--rejecting a chaotic tangle of alternate, non-best possibilities, and embracing a product, a modality, or a story which is maximally 'good' for the given circumstances. There cannot usually be multiple 'best' options. There is one, and everything else signifies only the *failure to find it* or the *failure to commit to it*. The options cannot have multiple meanings; if there is admissible ambiguity or a negative aspect to something, it cannot be the 'best'.

Most people living in america are familiar with a relentless cascade of both state and market-based suggestions (and sometimes imperatives) that people 'optimize' things in their lives--wealth, 'quality of life', emotions, physical bodies. Live your best life!

Proposed means of achieving these optimal states vary, of course; the underlying commonality is the idea of the *best* as single, and as requisite. In the for-profit american model of treating mental illness, one can easily find urgings and instructions to "optimize your brain". In the pregnancy and birth industry, the implicit goal of so many products, treatments and consumer choices is to "optimize your baby".

Nowhere is the idea of the 'best' more mandatory and more emotionally charged than in the realm of babies and children.

There's a massive, centuries-old moral imperative attached to the assumption that we optimize both children and their worlds. What kind of parent, indeed what kind of person, do we imagine declines the process of identifying and actualizing *the best* for their child? Attaining 'the best' is one of the imperatives of the whole notion of parental love.

I'm going to digress to say that I got a few hostile responses when I wrote an abstract for this zine, which I originally intended to submit as a paper to a conference. Most of these focused on a character sketch of what it might mean about me as a mother or for my relationship with my daughter to be undisgusted by the negative charicature of 'nihilism'. I told this story to a single mom friend, who instantly replied, "If he was a mom, though, he would understand it's real nihilist out here."

The idea that truths are in fact multiple is important in a nihilist approach to parenting. This idea is usually heavily mocked and written off in the way that people dismiss 'postmodernism' (related to the phobia for 'nihilism' or anything that opposes positive unification of purposes and meaning). But I don't see how it could ever be possible to fight off the power of the state (or 'science' or other economies) to overcode children and parenting without recognizing that these things do not in fact have some unique legitimate access to 'the truth'.

In order to refuse the orders to optimize myself, my parenting and my kid, it is necessary to recognize that the order comes from specific entities who have specific interests opposed to mine. The claim to 'the truth' is just the claim to legitimate power. I would encourage other parents to take this claim for themselves, and better, recognize that children can also make this claim. Vantage points vary and these variations can actually be made to matter.

The 'frank relation to what is there' does not always lend itself to 'professing' the results. Nor does it lend itself to unification with other people in commonly held belief. The committee's notion of 'truth' in the above paragraph includes the possibility of conflict among the variety of truths as they exist for a variety of lives, as expanded upon (elsewhere) in their conception of 'civil war'. Their texts are not put forth as a way to 'prepare their followers for belief' but to find others who happen circumstantially to have common visions of our (dying) world.

Nihilism may forefeit the power that comes from accepting optimization as an end unto itself. Nihilism, in introducing the idea that even value itself has questionable value, that the use of usefulness is probably contingent on constantly changing factors, or that even force-multiplier-optimism's sharp narrowing of meaning is only accomplished by an infantile act of near-arbitrary blind selection, does not lend itself to action nor to success in the same way as Powell's approach. But in the context of parenting, of creating and maintaining a bond with a person circumstantially very different from you across a long span of time, recognizing meaning in your own terms or being open to co-constituted meaning with your children is, I believe, directly, open-endedly empowering.

Things change and will keep changing: centering your own vantage point, what you actually see happening and what you think it means, directly expands the choices you have as a parent. It also might change how you experience the qualities and problems embedded in whatever choices you end up making.

It could mean the abandonment of the (military) purpose, the abandonment of the need to multiply force, or the need to use force at all. With this abandonment, the optimistic narrativizing element is orphaned and becomes visible as a process of exaggeration, fabrication, or lying by omission. It could then mean the abandonment of the war campaign, but it could also just as easily mean a nonsensical amplification of the acts of war.

Abandoning optimization as a paradigm also does not have to mean abandoning reckoning with power. There can also be a non-unifying and non-progressive-vector-seeking way of approaching the question of power and of struggle within/against forms of it.

For parents, looking from your own perspective at what you see happening first and foremost, even if distressing, also gives an immediate and tangible form of power: maybe not enough to fully dislocate the grasp of the state/medical economy on defining your life, but enough to create a foothold.

If the various economies lay claim to the ability to determine the ultimate truth of what matters in a child or in a relationship, these can be undermined by asking the 'nihilist' questions which engage surrounding ambiguity, and also by laying claim to the ability to define events yourself, locally and contextually. The Invisible Committee, in their ongoing endeavor to popularize discourse about and encourage acts of anti-state or anti-capitalist rebellion, gives the following distinction between these avenues toward defining 'truth':

The big lie is refusing to see certain things that one does see, and refusing to see them just as one sees them. The real lie is all ... the explanations that are allowed to stand between oneself and the world. It's how we regularly dismiss our own perceptions. ... Truth is not something one would strive toward, but a frank relation to what is there. It is a "problem" only for those who already see life as a problem. It's not something one professes but a way of being in the world. It is not held, therefore, nor accumulated. It manifests itself in a situation and moment to moment. ... Truth is ... a vital contact with the real, an acute perception of the givens of existence. ..."Proclaiming the truth" is not at all recommended. ... The common opinion must be rejected: truths are multiple, but untruth is one, because it is universally arrayed against the slightest truth that surfaces. ('NOW', the invisible committee, 2017)

Nihilism is for Toddlers

I used to take genuine offense when people would tell me I was "a nihilist". It happened all the time over a period of years. I had only the vaguest idea of what the term 'meant' in the context of philosophy, and I had nearly zero interest in what all 'nihilism' historically had meant.

It tended to be evident from the way that people circulated the term as a dismissive label that its usage overwhelmingly had little relation to western history or thought, anyway. It was a popular referent, thrown around in every situation from the planning of political tasks to household grocery shopping.

I always responded reflexively: of course I'm not a fucking nihilist! I fully believed this. I was also defending myself against some combination of these things:

- Your perspective is (too) negative
- Your perspective lacks elements of hope/zeal/faith in a project, a future, or in *possibility* wholesale
- Negativity is always 'lazy', as in the adage 'it's easier to critique than to create'
- Your perspective spills outside the bounds of what can be considered useful or relevant, i.e. effects a kind of destructive dilution of immediate priorities (sometimes termed "postmodern")

And most damning:

-Your ideas potentially imply that some or all actions may be "pointless"

I truly didn't believe any of those things were true about my perspective--but I agreed (at the time) with the thing about "it's easier to critique", and pretty much embraced the generic usage of the word 'nihilism'. I myself used the term in this same way: to dismiss what I felt were excessive or overly nuanced dimensions and ideas. In theory, this was intended to defer more subtle discussions for a more appropriate time, but in actuality it had the effect of just brushing them out of the way.

At the absolute minimum popular definition, 'nihilism' is understood as mere 'negativity': but negativity specifically associated with a posture of *not trying* or *not actively pursuing change*. In the past, this was the totality of my own definition of 'nihilism' as well.

A friend challenged my use of it one time:

> *...and he was talking about nihilism and it upset me the way he used the word so liberally. it has been extended into the realm of Axioms, beyond critical engagent: that's a cop out! what's not seen* as *effectual, no matter the content and direction of each potential action, is called nihilistic.*
>
> *i want the word to not be used anymore. the goal is to produce a function, or else you are a nihilist. it's now a formal criticism. its been neoliberalized: forget the quality of your desires; what's important is that you carry the function out. your agency is stripped bare, but your agency is all you have. the result is atomized inertia. a constant velocity going nowhere, but free from the nominal (and therefore practical) accusation of darkness, backwardness, and associated negations.*

This email exchange was the first time I ever observed anyone question the 'nihilism' shorthand or make the distinction between 'quality' and 'function'. The 'quality of your desires,' determining what 'qualities' exist within your desires, would be an ambiguous question, a realm in which there is no optimal point. But if your attention lingers in this realm, you are accused of 'nihilism' not even because you specifically obstruct anything but simply because you do not 'carry the function out'.

To carry the function out is to find 'the best' path in terms of *effectiveness* (the most common counterpower analogue to a quantifying concept of economics)--submit to the economy and to whatever road it has rationally determined to be optimal. Anything else is nihilism. If I do not focus on becoming a vector towards 'the functional'--that is, anything that can even be loosely rationalized as functional and optimal, the content or context being indeed surprisingly irrelevant--I am diluting and muddling the inertia, and I am nihilist.

Once this figment and its effects had been traced, it was impossible to unsee my friend's point. I began to notice it everywhere--"nihilism" thrown around readily as a formal criticism with no specific meaning beyond 'negative, nonfunctional'. I began to notice how, indeed, a vague imperative to *utility* had massive unspoken and usually unexamined importance to people around me. Utility... agency... *a constant velocity going nowhere but free from the nominal accusation of darkness.*

"Optimism as a force multiplier" is, in my experience and that of many moms I spoke with, very much buried in a conventional notion of parenthood, from anti-abortion-rights to liberal 'mom empowerment' discourse. Children are good, love is good, you love children, you are good, your child will hit all the milestones, avoid all the pitfalls, and grow up successful. If these things don't happen, it indicates that you didn't focus singularly enough on making it happen and believing it would happen.

None of these notions bear much relation to the actual chaotic experience of scraping out a life, let alone making sense of your life, or your child's process of making sense of existence. Childhood (meaning legally--arbitrarily--the first eighteen years of your life) is full of accidents, unexpected changes, bizarre inversions of perspective, stress, struggle, and factors neither 'positive' nor 'negative' but still qualitatively influential.

Events take place in specific environments which are distinct from each other. All people are wildly different from each other and sometimes a lot is at stake in these differences. Each moment is different than the next. But none of that matters in the rubric of optimizing life.

Nihilism, by the definitions used so far, is incompatible with this form of optimism not because it is 'negative' but because it is non-unifying. Built into a nihilist approach is the impulse to examine the qualities of desires and actions, the textures, ecosystemic interactions, and emergent consequences beyond the bounds of a strictly defined purpose. Refusing to assume that any event has a particular ultimate meaning, in itself, undermines the progressive quest for success and perfection.

In order to unsettle the basis for strictly unifying 'belief', a relatively minor loosening of 'perpetual optimism' is all that is needed. In order to undermine perpetual optimism, nihilism does not even need to mean dogged, fixated 'pessimism': the mere absence or deferral of unifying optimism is enough to change the whole process--into what, it now depends on the qualities in play.

A nihilist inversion of Colin Powell's optimism could mean decoupling events from the possibility of a unified meaning, or any determined and stable meaning; allowing a margin of ambiguity to seep around our understanding of events.

To explore the concept of strength through shared visions of value, and of universal or consistent meanings (whether conveyed in the form of symbolism or through proscribed courses of action) let's look at this quote by Colin Powell, former Secretary of Defense for President George W. Bush:

> *In the military, we are always looking for ways to leverage up our forces. Having greater communications and command and control over your forces than your enemy has over his is a force multiplier. Having greater logistics capability than the enemy is a force multiplier. Having better-trained commanders is a force multiplier. Perpetual optimism, believing in yourself, believing in your purpose, believing you will prevail, and demonstrating passion and confidence is a force multiplier. If you believe and have prepared your followers, the followers will believe…*

To follow this modality would be to embrace the idea that events and circumstantial environmental factors first of all definitely *have meaning*, and secondly, *have not multiple meanings, but one meaning only, the optimal meaning* for a given purpose.

Establishing neat, coherent, narrative is the core of this act of optimistic belief. Consistency and coherency are requisite for this imperative form of optimism: beyond outright invention of narrative elements (such as Bush's famous tale that "Saddam Hussein definitely has weapons of mass destruction"), achieving coherency always involves focusing a selective lens, or sanding off the rough edges of your story.

It is true, in my experience, that there is incredible power in such a vision: the more positive and grandiose, the more power. Whether the 'quality of the desires' are megalomania, hyper-rationalized economic calculations, or a terrorized sense of necessity, is fairly irrelevant.

The power is wrapped in a kind of fetish of the vector itself. It is going somewhere, it is expansive, it believes it can 'win', and for that reason, context and the material world is immaterial. Usefulness in the vector funnel justifies itself by being unidirectionally useful, and the ambient or ecosystemic consequences of a given useful act don't register as relevent.

There has existed in my world (even outside of the realm of my life as a parent) a huge, usually unconscious concern with the problem of things or people being 'nonfunctional'. An obsession, almost. Even when the functions being pursued make no obvious sense or are tautological, they tend to be popularly understood in terms of *meaning* or at least in terms of the need to reward good honest efforts someone has made towards reenforcing some, almost any, rubric of 'meaning' in general. (Note that I'm not knocking people's impulses to do stuff; I'm just fascinated by the shunning of ambiguity wherever it exists.)

At a certain point in grappling with the significance and ubiquity of *nihilism* as a mere slur, my curiosity got stirred up such that I searched 'nihilism' on wikipedia (lol). There I read the following wikipedia disambiguation:

Nihilism (/ˈnaɪ(h)ɪlɪzəm, ˈniː-/; from Latin *nihil* 'nothing') is a philosophy, or family of views within philosophy, that rejects generally accepted or fundamental aspects of human existence,[1][2] such as objective truth, knowledge, morality, values or meaning. [3][4] Different nihilist positions hold variously that human values are baseless, that life is meaningless, that knowledge is impossible, or that some set of entities do not exist or are meaningless or pointless.[5][6]

... Nihilism has also been described as conspicuous in or constitutive of certain historical periods. For example,[11] Jean Baudrillard[12][13] and others have characterized postmodernity as a nihilistic epoch[14] or mode of thought.[15] ... In popular use, the term commonly refers to forms of existential nihilism, according to which life is without intrinsic value, meaning, or purpose.[18] Other prominent positions within nihilism include the rejection of all normative and ethical views (§ Moral nihilism), the rejection of all social and political institutions (§ Political nihilism), the stance that no knowledge can or does exist (§ Epistemological nihilism), and a number of metaphysical positions, which assert that non-abstract objects do not exist (§ Metaphysical nihilism), that composite objects do not exist (§ Mereological nihilism), or even that life itself does not exist.

I stepped into a puzzling dilemma after reading this wikipedia page. Up til this point I had always privately assumed was abundantly obvious that no one could possibly defend the idea of *intrinsic* value or *universal* meaning or *provable* existence for most stuff. I had always taken these ultramild, open ended, vague premises as an easy given and had made the assumption (very comical in retrospect) that they were more or less shared by everyone with whom I had any shared discourse. Of course this perspective was probably not shared by the bulk of people I meet in my life in the U.S., but surely by many of the people I was close to.

SO mild, I thought! Such a gentle, non-determining definition! Not that value is impossible, just the idea that it isn't intrinsic or universal! Not that meaning is never present, nor that shared meaning is wholly unachievable, just that it's obviously pretty mutable and frequently drizzles out the bottom of the ice cream cone. And all that objective truth horseshit, "in this house we believe science IS real" and economics and the all seeing eye of google maps: did you actually have to be a frigid european to hate it, to think it was idiotic and clearly not worth saving?

Now, I fully realize that the ways lots of individual people use the word 'nihilism' is not concurrent with the wikipedia definition. But I'm taking the hypothetical premise that they could be, at least associatively. If there is a shared cultural reflex in which all 'negativity' is obsessively labeled, there is a shared association between the need to label negativity as a problem and the specifics of the label used. If people merely mean 'negative' with the word nihilist, but the charge of negativity is leveled so often and with an obvious but undefined weight behind it, it amounts to the same thing.

The idea of *actual* universal systems of meaning and value had always seemed so absurd to me that I had been blind to how fundamentally important these ideas were to many people around me. So, what did it mean if rejecting even these simple little premises amounted to some basic definition of "nihilism" after all?

At the same time, I was experiencing how the inevitable mutability of meanings of mere words cannot be more eloquently illustrated than by a toddler, circa 2 to 3 years old, which was then the age of my daughter. A prolific orator, she and many others like her had the incredible power of annihilating the meanings of words, shredding, dissolving and finally eating them like a black hole creating the spaghetti effect on peripheral chunks of matter. Her verbal output looped from BBC-like precision to birdlike chirping in a matter of moments; songs and newspaper headlines alike cycled through her and were regurgitated in uncannily

I *definitely* see how hard these envisioning activities are and how they could require experimentation, willingness to take huge risks, and collective support; how any one of those elements could likely entail not just daydreaming but a fully grandiose imagination. Grandiose imagination can get ugly fast, but I can understand how that ugliness could really be a small price to pay in the desire to poke even a small hole in a world that's shredding your loved ones.

And most importantly I guess, I can see how having one's own, personal 'positive vision' of any alternative to a predetermined machine is not a solution for many or even most people. Having personal, internal visionary escape is only even technically viable for a few. For everyone else, visions are meaningless, valueless, functionless unless they are in some way actionable; in order to be actionable, they probably need to be shared.

This was all why I did not believe I could be 'a nihilist'--I was not at all committed to undermining the impulse to enshrine *effectiveness* as the most meaningful pole; it felt easy to accept this impulse in the world. I have always had a high tolerance for people's positive narratives in the context of political or post-political resistance to capitalism, and indeed in the personal lives of random people, because I saw these things as either necessary tools for amplifying ambitions people had decided were meaningful--or just as means to cope with hell. I have often actively supported people's attempts to find their own *optimal effectiveness* of different kinds. After all, it still seems like lots of people need to establish contextual and shared meaning, value, or goals. At a minimum, it seems like an unavoidable phenomenon.

Meaningless, *valueless*, and *functionless* are terms that many people embrace for their own actions and visions, often while still acting and visioning anyway. But, the vast majority of people I've observed (and again, my vantage point has been admittedly very limited) do not take this approach. Instead, people tend to want to construct shared value, pumped full with enthusiasm and likelihood to inspire faith.

Shared visions (from here on the term 'visions' will be used to unify the shared setting-up of meaning, value and function) can have incredible strength. If you are going to take the trouble of constructing a shared vision for a particular purpose, it follows that you would be concerned with optimizing your vision, your 'effectiveness'.

Function

What does it mean to produce a function? Or to "articulate a positivity," as some people in search of political agency have put it? In order to believe I'm/you're/anyone is generally obligated to *produce a function*, there first has to be a concept of function, of effect to be caused, of value to be produced. There must be a notion of a potential positive usefulness which transcends individual contexts and floats like a harmonic line of possibility running through everything.

While in the past I did not even fully perceive the general imperative to be 'functional,' 'useful,' 'effectual,' and never did believe in it as a universal imperative, it makes sense to me in some basic way in many situations to seek effectiveness and usefulness and to prioritize finding them. The world is a landscape of war; I've never noticed any neutral resting place from which 'meanings' and 'functions' could be infinitely mutable through sheer decontextualized imagination or voluntary impulses alone. Everyone and everything in this world seems subject to heavy, deep forces and usually the imperative of survival necessitates finding some kinds of conditional strategies with which to fight back.

I have always understood why, in a berserk world overflowing with horrific things, people who hate this situation would want to be not just 'against' horrible things but would want to be 'for' something else--therein constructing the 'something else' and a progressive rubric of how to get there.

I can see why you might probably need to pursue imagining another world, a future or a parallel world or a broken internal fragment, or at least would feel the need to envision the first steps in that direction. I can see needing to get specific about these moves, and being skeptical of abstractions and of theories that purport to give a grand coherent directive without a textured specific vision. I can see how people would instead gravitate to visions that are in some way co-produced and under continual fleshing-out.

intelligible yet funhouse-warped forms at every waking moment. She invented things, and unhesitatingly disassembled everything else. Together, we talked and sang all day long, and anyone who has taken care of someone at this age must have some sense of what this uncanny power is like and what it does to everyone else's field of language and overall sensibility.

The implications of this power are not always recognized. Toddlers in america are medically evaluated according to a rubric of developmental normalcy, progression, advancement, and what historically was called retardation. This rubric is underpinned by the idea that deviation from it indicates the need for a medical intervention of some kind (don't kill me; I'm not arguing against this, just exploring it) such as autism or lead poisoning. Speech must recognizably appear at a certain time; by another certain time, it must be correct, free of 'mistakes' in pronunciation and grammar.

Recall that due to the belief that science is something other than culture, is something other than a big art project, it has a sort of lease on the concept of reality (and truth) which must be permitted to undercut all the other dimensions of children's speech. At this juncture, the medical dimension is the most important, the most real, and to not optimize your child's engagement with this dimension is usually a literal crime.

And yet, on top of this all-important plumb line to reality, young children can be incredibly effective at not only establishing their own conditional systems of meaning, but also ripping major, if conditional, holes in many attempts to engage them in terms of any supposedly universal structure. With their use of language, with their penchant for hyperbole and with their effortless mastery of the most powerful rhetorical move ever to exist--the act of missing one's point--they manage to deflect, at least on the level of interaction, attempts to funnel them towards a consistent or optimal structure of meaning.

A toddler's cheerful mood is not the same type of h0pe even if she says "I'M FULL OF HOPE!" This distinction is easy to understand if you recognize that she will arbitrarily change the meaning of any word at any time. Or, really, not arbitrarily at all, but in response to any number of other factors being experienced at that time. Toddlers' speech provides a clear example of the principle of meaning being created conditionally by context, and changed as context changes.

Toddlers model a proactive, responsive orientation towards determining meaning, when they determine it at all. It seems clear (to me, anyway) that everyone else uses this same orientation, too, whether they admit it or not. But according to wikipedia, this is nihilism.

To qualify as 'nihilist' by association, apparently, you don't even have to obsessively refute the idea that 'meaning' (and thus 'meaningful action') is *ever* possible; all you need to do is permit openness to the idea that meanings are unstable, changeable as context changes, various, and sometimes, for sure, absent.

I realized that according to wikipedia, then, my 2-year-old was a nihilist. She maintained a strong skepticism of most human values with which she was presented. Rarely giving an outright refutation, she preferred to simply demonstrate the changeability of meanings by changing them abruptly, interpollating statements as simple as "the sun is shining" with near-infinite shades of ambiguity, or abandoning any principle of meaning entirely. "Objective truth, knowledge, morality, values, or meaning": my daughter was by no means 'innocent' or ignorant of these things at all--these concepts wrapped around her and infused her life as they wrap around all of us. But particularly during that time, she related to these ideas, as to many abstract concepts, with similar interest and disinterest, with similar hunger and impatience, and ever-changing, context-dependent variability, as with a sheet of bubble wrap.

Baudrillard wrote in *The Transparency of Evil*, in reference to the impending era of corroded centralized subjectivity: "All things are ambiguous and reversible". It's hard for me to see how such a vague statement could even be very provocative. All it sounds like to me is a statement to the effect of *Stuff's all real weird.* Or just *Shit happens.*

I get why people could take issue with a guy bothering to write a bunch of books only to pretty much say *Stuff's all real weird*, or could take issue with focusing that intently on how vaguely crazy it is when shit happens. Beyond that, it's wildly un-intuitive to me to be provoked by the idea that *Hey, who even knows?*

But apparently all that stuff is "nihilist." In the environment in which I live, most extremely in the realm of parenting a child and secondarily of imagining political visions, ambiguity is suspect at best, and reversibility (i.e., of meaning) is flat out not recognized as an existing phenomena.

Childrens' speech is only of interest in how well it does or doesn't conform to their trajectory of functional progress. All my daughter's rhetorical finesse is reduced to positive/negative stats of brain development 'milestones' and then into the economy of success/failure as a parent.

All signifiers are supposed to route back to the established, shared meaning, whether it's communist, christian or science-generated beliefs (but it's pretty much always economies). Actual reversibility of meaning is considered not possible in these realms, and embracing the existence of ambiguity of meaning is understood as ignorance of what's important, in other words as pathological negativity.