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Parents trick and treat their children

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Every child has at least two parents, and every parent has at least one child. How each family manages these matches and kindling usually explains some things -- though not all things-- about why children behave the way we do.

The roles of parents and child change over time, but personalities and family history don't. No wonder so much of our literature -- from the Bible, to Shakespeare to Philip Roth -- is about parents and children.

I know of no parents who trained for the job of life-long parenting. None of us were required to take a course, read a book, apprentice to a skilled practitioner, earn a qualifying credential, change a real diaper or live with a teenager.

Most of us just adapted our experience with our own parents as a framework. We jumped in on the assumption that everyone would make it to the other side. Assumptions, of course, are the mother of all screw ups.

I read Henry Bushkin's new book, Johnny Carson, this week.

Bushkin was Carson's lawyer, adviser, confidant, manager, business partner, tennis playmate, mess-fixer, fellow carouser, sycophant, legal thug and not-quite-best-friend for 18 years when Carson was doing "The Tonight Show" from New York and then California.

Bushkin, a just-starting-out-nobody lawyer in 1970, became rich and prominent in these roles. But reflected fame and the Carson lifestyle of easy money and easy women locked up Bushkin's moral compass so that it could only point in his own direction.

During their run, Bushkin negotiated deals that made Carson no-longer-care-about-money rich, which allowed Johnny to escape the embarrassments his chronic unhappiness created without ever resolving it.

Carson went through four wives, and each went through his expanding pocketbook with little impact. He said that he liked being married, a formality that he believed required neither emotional commitment nor fidelity on his part.

He fathered three children, provided for them and paid them little attention.

He spent much of his off-air time either playing tennis or sitting on a bar stool where the wrath of grapes was stored.

Carson learned magic tricks as a teenager to gain the approval and attention he couldn't find in his family. His life wasn't funny, so he told jokes for a living. He was an easy-going "people-person" only on stage. It was his longest and most successful illusion

In 2005 at 79, he died alone of respiratory failure from emphysema, leaving an estate of \$450 million. In his last years, family, business associates and pals dropped out of his life. He lived by himself on his docked boat with a hired crew to tend him.

Carson was a Jekyll-and-Hyde personality—sometimes uncommonly kind and generous, sometimes uncommonly mean and small. Although he spent his life in the public eye, Carson, like John F. Kennedy, was able to keep most of his secrets secret, the biggest of which was who he really was.

Bushkin comes off in his own telling as not as helplessly compulsive a rascal as his client. This is not saying much, but it's still more than what can be said for the guy he enabled.

Why was Carson so good at performing and so bad at just being? Why was he incapable of friendship and love?

In one word—Mom.

Both Carson and Bushkin lay the blame for Johnny's failures on his mother, Ruth, a woman who withheld love, approval, appreciation and support from her children, particularly Johnny, the one who appears to have most needed it. Ruth once said that she didn't like boys, because they were dirty and trouble.

Author Truman Capote, once a Manhattan neighbor, said that Johnny told him that Ruth would fall on the floor and scream at her young son: "I bore you from these loins, and you do this to me! All that pain and this is what I get in return!"

That's a lot of shame and guilt to load onto a kid in Norfolk, Neb., in the 1930s and 1940s. Carson's life-long response was to persist in shameful behavior and feel bad about it.

Homer Carson, his Dad, was this family's Ed McMahon, a stand-off-to-the-side guy who was always around in case he might be needed to shovel the walk.

Nothing Johnny accomplished ever merited Ruth's praise. When he took over from Jack Paar in 1962, Ruth said that she preferred Paar.

While Ruth had a good sense of humor, she never praised her son's comedy. If she laughed, it was not where he could hear it. After she died,

Johnny discovered that she had collected a secret cache of his clippings. Ruth kept whatever pride she felt to herself—in a shoebox in her closet.

Ruth could have done better. When Hugh Hefner, another son of the Midwest, was mortgaging his furniture to raise money to start Playboy, his mother invested \$1,000. “Not because she believed in the venture,” Hefner told E! in 2006, “but because she believed in her son.”

Johnny took after his mother. He dropped the second shoe of this curse on his own wives and children, with similar results.

There’s always a trick-and-treat quality to the changing dynamics between parents and child. In the best of circumstances, the tricks are unintended. Things are said, but not meant. In the worst, the withholding and belittling are done on purpose, for whatever screwy reasons.

Maybe Ruth couldn’t help who she was. Maybe she, too, was a victim. It’s likely that she learned unyielding parenting from her own parents ... and simply repeated the behavior that had warped her. That doesn’t get her off the hook, but it does stick her a little differently.

Family treats never seem to outweigh family tricks even when they do. It’s the same with gaining and losing money; losses always hurt more than gains feel good.

While Johnny blamed Ruth for everything, he never made any effort to fix himself, put his upbringing in a managed context, get to the point where he would not reproduce the damage in his own children and give himself a measure of peace and distance through forgiveness.

Carson never tried to stop or modify the parent-driven behaviors that jeopardized his professional success. He was like John F. Kennedy and Bill Clinton in this regard.

Maybe he thought it was impossible to change his bad wiring. Or maybe it was just too easy to have Bushkin use his money to keep its consequences out of sight and out of mind.

This Halloween, treat your kid to some praise and appreciation. Save your tricks for a deserving audience.