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Live the message. Words are easy.

READY FOR LIFE

A Good Institution Is a Tool Not the Goal

Tejas Gilbert

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Chapter One

Understanding What Really Matters

Before We Begin: The Responsibility We Take On

Having a child is one of the greatest responsibilities a person can accept.

Before we are permitted to drive a car, we are expected to learn the rules. We study the theory, demonstrate practical ability, and pass a test. The purpose is simple: our decisions can affect not only us, but other people around us.

Parenthood carries consequences far greater and far longer lasting, yet there is no universal examination before becoming a parent. There is no licence, no required course, no single instruction manual and certainly no universally accepted gold standard.

Most of us learn as we go.

We learn from our own parents, our culture, our communities, our experiences, our successes and our mistakes. We listen to teachers, relatives, doctors, friends and sometimes complete strangers. We collect pieces of advice and try to decide what applies to the child standing in front of us.

That does not make parenting simple.

It makes the responsibility even greater.

Whenever more than one person must live or function together, some form of structure develops. Communities develop customs and laws. Institutions develop rules and responsibilities. Families also develop roles, expectations, boundaries and responsibilities.

The forms families take have changed and will continue to change. A child may grow up with biological parents, a single parent, adoptive parents, stepparents, same-sex parents, extended family members, guardians or other arrangements.

For the purpose of this discussion, the label is not the important part.

The responsibility is.

Someone is responsible for protecting the child, setting boundaries, providing opportunities, teaching values, encouraging independence and making countless decisions until that child is increasingly able to make those decisions alone.

Those decisions matter because a child does not choose the circumstances into which he or she arrives.

A child does not choose genetics.

A child does not choose the country of birth.

A child does not choose the family's economic circumstances, language, culture or social environment.

A child does not choose the parents, the neighborhood or many of the opportunities that will initially be available.

There is therefore a large part of every life that is already shaped by circumstances beyond the control of either parent or child.

We cannot honestly put a percentage on it.

Nor do we need to.

The important question is different:

What remains within our influence?

That portion may be smaller than everything we cannot control, but smaller does not mean unimportant.

Quite the opposite.

A relatively small change in the right place can sometimes alter the direction of an entire life.

Parents can influence whether reading becomes normal in the home.

They can influence attitudes toward education.

They can teach organization, punctuality and responsibility.

They can establish boundaries.

They can encourage curiosity.

They can expose a child to sport, music, science, art, debate, technology or service.

They can notice strengths.

They can recognize weaknesses.

They can provide help when help is needed.

They can teach a child that failure is not the end of an effort.

They can model honesty.

They can teach the difference between privilege and entitlement.

They can create opportunities.

And perhaps most importantly, they can give a child the time and attention required to discover who that child actually is.

None of these guarantees a particular outcome.

That point is essential.

Two children raised in the same home can become very different adults. Human beings are not machines into which we enter identical instructions and receive identical results.

There are too many variables.

Temperament, ability, health, friendships, teachers, chance, timing and countless other influences enter the equation.

Parenting therefore cannot be reduced to a formula.

What we can do is improve the conditions.

We can identify the variables within our reach and try to use them intelligently.

That is the same principle that runs throughout an examined life:

Do not spend all your energy fighting what cannot be changed. Examine carefully what can be changed, and then act on it.

Education is one of those areas.

Not merely choosing a school.

Not merely obtaining good grades.

And certainly not beginning the process when an application form suddenly appears during the final years of school.

Preparation develops slowly.

Character develops slowly.

Habits develop slowly.

Confidence develops slowly.

The ability to manage time, handle disappointment, communicate with adults, work with others and take responsibility develops slowly.

By the time a university or selective school sees an application, much of the story behind that application has already been written.

This is why the discussion that follows is not really about discovering a secret formula for admission.

There isn't one.

It is about understanding which factors can reasonably be influenced, when they should be addressed, and how parents and children can work together without turning childhood into a continuous admissions campaign.

The goal is not simply to produce an impressive application.

The goal is to help prepare a young person who can make good use of whatever opportunities eventually become available.

A highly regarded school may become one of those opportunities.

Really Matters

Why Do We Want a “Good” School?

Everybody seems to want their child to attend a good school or university. But before asking how to get there, we should ask a more basic question:

Why?

What is the real advantage of attending a highly regarded institution rather than simply attending a decent one?

The answer is not just education. Excellent teaching can be found in many places. One of the greatest advantages is the community that surrounds these institutions and continues long after graduation.

In India, names such as IIT and AIIMS immediately carry meaning. In Thailand, Chulalongkorn, Mahidol and Thammasat have their own established networks. In the United States, universities such as Harvard, Princeton, Stanford and MIT have generations of graduates connected to the institution and, often, to one another.

That is the power of alumni.

People remember where they came from. Successful graduates return as mentors, employers, donors and supporters. They contribute financially, help build opportunities for future students and strengthen the institution generation after generation.

This is one reason the endowments of some American universities have become enormous. Those resources can fund professors, research, scholarships and financial aid. At many wealthy American universities, the difficult part is first earning admission. Once admitted, substantial financial assistance may be available to students who qualify.

So when we talk about getting into a good university, we are not merely talking about obtaining a famous name on a diploma.

We are talking about entering an ecosystem.

There Is No Magic Formula

The second thing parents and students must understand is equally important:

There is no guaranteed formula for getting into an elite university.

There is no honest checklist that says:

Get these grades. Do these activities. Take these classes. Tick these boxes. And Harvard will admit you.

It does not work that way.

Especially in the United States, highly selective universities receive enormous numbers of applications from very capable students. Many applicants already have excellent grades, difficult courses, impressive activities and strong recommendations.

Admissions therefore becomes partly a matter of judgment.

A student may look wonderful on paper and still not be admitted. Another student may have something in the application that makes the admissions committee stop and pay attention.

That is why preparation cannot begin in the final year of high school.

A child cannot wake up at seventeen and suddenly announce, “I think I would like to go to Stanford.”

The foundation has already been developing for years.

I consider roughly ages thirteen through seventeen among the most important years in this process. These are years when habits become visible: discipline, curiosity, consistency, responsibility and the willingness to work when nobody is applauding.

Parents also make a mistake when they spend ten years simply shouting:

“Study. Study. Study.”

Eventually the child stops hearing it. It becomes background noise.

The answer is not endless pressure. The answer is purposeful involvement.

As the important academic years approach, expectations become clearer. Standards become firmer. The student should understand that these few years require sacrifice because they can strongly influence the opportunities available later.

There is a time to relax.

There is also a time to work.

Wisdom is knowing the difference.

The School Matters — But Guidance Matters More

Parents sometimes become obsessed with getting a very young child into the “best” nursery, kindergarten or primary school.

They spend enormous amounts of money and emotional energy worrying that the child’s entire future depends upon that first school.

I do not believe it does.

By the time university applications arrive, what happened when a child was one or two years old matters very little compared with what happens during the later school years.

Even the reputation of the high school is not everything.

I have seen students from outstanding schools fail to use their opportunities. I have also seen students from ordinary schools rise far beyond what anybody expected.

The difference is often that somebody was involved.

That person does not necessarily have to be a mother or father.

It might be a grandparent. An older brother or sister. A teacher.

A coach. A mentor.

But somewhere in that young person's life there should be someone who is paying attention.

Someone who asks questions.

Someone who notices when standards begin slipping.

Someone who encourages them when the work becomes difficult.

Someone who can sometimes say, "No. This matters."

That guidance can be more valuable than the name written above the school gate.

And then we arrive at the next point.

For students aiming at the most selective universities, excellent academic performance is no longer what makes them unusual.

Good grades are expected. Challenging classes are expected.

They are the starting line.

The real question is:

When thousands of applicants have excellent grades, what makes the admissions committee remember you?

How to Get Into a Good School

I can comment most comfortably on the American school system and, to some extent, the O-Level and A-Level systems. I would not comment as freely on the Thai,

Indian, or Chinese school systems because I do not know them to the same depth.

But one thing I believe is that the basic formula remains similar everywhere.

There will always be caveats. Something that applies perfectly to the American system may apply differently in another country. What I want to do, therefore, is create a general framework: a way of understanding how and why we should try our best to get a child into a good school and, more importantly, what a good education is supposed to accomplish.

The School Is Only Part of the Equation

I have seen parents begin worrying about schools almost from the day a child is born.

Which kindergarten?

Which primary school?

Which secondary school?

Some of that concern may be justified, but I also think an enormous amount of energy is wasted.

In my view, the later school years— and especially high school—matter much more. But even then, I always say that it is not really the school by itself that determines the outcome.

It is the team surrounding the student.

And that team begins with the parents.

Simply paying school fees is not the answer. I have seen parents say, “I am working extra hours. I am working double time just so I can pay these school fees.”

That sacrifice is admirable, but sometimes we miss the larger point.

A parent’s job does not finish at the school gate.

The work continues at home.

The environment at home, the expectations, the boundaries, the encouragement and the example set by the parents are all part of the child’s education.

What Is Education Actually For?

Before discussing school systems, we should remember what education is really supposed to do.

Education should provide age- appropriate experiences and activities that help create a wholesome adult.

Academic achievement is only one part of education.

Character matters.

Attitude toward family matters.

Respect matters.

Creativity matters.

The ability to communicate and express yourself matters.

The ability to see both the individual parts of something and the larger picture matters.

These are the things that eventually help create a complete human being.

Sometimes the so-called Asian “tiger parent” mentality becomes so focused on marks and academic success that this larger purpose gets lost.

From my own experience across different countries and educational systems, one of the things I admire about the American system is its attempt to educate beyond academics. It tries to expose children to many different possibilities.

That does not mean the American system is perfect. It certainly is not.

But the philosophy of developing the whole person is extremely important.

Understand the System You Are In

The first practical lesson for any parent is simple:

Understand the school system where your child is studying.

Different systems identify and develop ability differently.

One thing I have observed in America is that children are exposed to many different areas from a relatively young age.

Someone may show an ability in sport.

Another child may show ability in football.

Another in art.

Another in music.

Another may show an early interest in science.

Sometimes those judgments may even be premature, but the important thing is that children are given opportunities to discover where their abilities lie.

As they move from primary school into middle school and later into high school, those interests can gradually become more focused.

I studied in Ethiopia. I studied in Nigeria. I studied under the Cambridge system. Because of that,

I have personally experienced very different approaches to education.

The difference can be dramatic.

In many American schools, a student may have access to playing fields, running tracks, gymnasiums, swimming, music, theatre, art and numerous other activities.

The message to the child is not simply:

You must become a doctor or an engineer.

The message is closer to:

Find what you are capable of becoming.

Other countries do this very well too—Germany, Japan, China, Singapore, India and many others produce extraordinary talent.

But one way of thinking about broad national achievement is to look across completely different fields: the Olympics, academic Olympiads, scientific achievement, research, the arts and other forms of excellence.

A healthy educational system should allow excellence to emerge in many directions.

Do Not Define a Child Too Early

This is also where parents and teachers must be careful.

A child getting a C or a D does not automatically mean that child lacks intelligence.

I was a very slow learner.

That did not mean I was dumb.

That was simply how I learned.

I was fortunate that I eventually learned how to teach myself. I often found it difficult to relate to the way a teacher presented something.

My own method was different.

I would read something, identify the basic point, understand the principle, and then build my knowledge around it.

That was how I learned.

Other people learn differently.

Some are strongly visual learners.

Some learn much better by listening.

Some need to do something physically before it makes sense.

Some need more time.

A good teacher—and a good parent —recognises that children are not identical.

The question should not always be:

“Why can’t you learn like everyone else?”

Sometimes the better question is:

“How do you learn?”

Give Children Breadth Before Narrowing Them

Middle school is particularly useful for exploration.

Let children try things.

Photography.

Music.

Sports.

Art.

Cooking.

Practical activities.

Reading.

Writing.

Different subjects.

Different forms of expression.

You are helping them discover themselves.

At the same time, teach age- appropriate life skills. Teach children how to summarise a story, how to communicate, how to express an idea and how to respectfully ask for what they need.

Give them boundaries, but also give them appropriate freedom within those boundaries.

Children understand far more than adults sometimes give them credit for.

They need to know where the boundary is.

They also need room to grow inside it.

Be Yourself

There is another lesson that I consider extremely important.

Be proud of who you are.

Your colour should not embarrass you.

Your race should not embarrass you.

Your religion or cultural background should not embarrass you.

Trying to erase yourself in order to become somebody else is one of the greatest mistakes a young person can make.

Walk into the world knowing who you are.

I learned this personally.

As a Sikh growing up and moving through different cultures, there were moments when I was embarrassed. There were moments of teasing and bullying. There were times when even something as basic as a name could make you feel different.

But eventually I understood something very simple:

This is who I am.

And one of the things I remain grateful to America for is that it gave me an environment in which I could succeed while still being myself.

I did not succeed because I suddenly became more intelligent when I arrived in America.

The environment became more conducive to what I could do.

It allowed me to develop.

It allowed me to be myself.

Having studied in different parts of the world, including Africa, that sense of opportunity and talent development made a very deep impression on me.

You can become part of a new country without throwing away the culture that helped create you.

If you are American, be proud to be American.

If your family came from India, Thailand, China, Africa or anywhere else, you can also be proud of that heritage.

Those identities do not have to fight each other.

Parents Create the Environment

Ultimately, this comes back to parenting.

Paying the fees does not make you a father or a mother.

Creating the environment does.

My wife, my family and I created expectations around our children.

We wanted them to understand effort.

We wanted them to understand that things have value.

You work for something.

You earn it.

Then you appreciate it.

Education is not simply telling a child to read a book.

It is creating a culture in which learning, effort, responsibility and achievement have meaning.

Keep a vision for the child.

That has always been my motive.

Give the Child Somewhere Safe to Fall Back

And finally, every child needs somewhere to fall back when life becomes difficult.

That is where parents matter.

That is where family matters.

And, for many people, that is where faith matters.

When someone is in trouble, you want the instinct to be to turn toward family, values, community or God—not toward alcohol, drugs or other forms of escape.

I am not talking about religion as an argument over who is right and who is wrong.

That misses the point.

Faith can simply be the acknowledgement that there are things beyond our control and beyond our understanding.

Be proud of who you are.

Do not waste your life fighting over identity.

Work.

Family.

Values.

Faith, if that is part of your life.

And give the child a strong enough foundation that when the world becomes difficult, there is somewhere safe to return.

Chapter Two

From Individual Strengths to Legacy

A child is special to the family. To an admissions committee, however, that child is one among thousands.

1. Academic excellence earns consideration, but it does not automatically distinguish the student.
2. The central question becomes: What makes this child different?
3. Character, accomplishments, service, references and interests beyond school create distinction.
4. A parent identifies each child's individual strengths: expose, guide, challenge, then allow those gifts to develop.
5. Service and community involvement turn ability outward.
6. Manbir found computers, then earned A+ and Cisco qualifications, learned programming and built achievement.
7. Sukhi developed through debate and writing, then Stanford, computer science and her career.
8. Taj was guided later by Manbir toward Wolfram, mathematics and physics.
9. Never compare children with one another. Help each child maximise his or her own ability.
10. Stay fully present through childhood. At adulthood, release control and let them choose.

11. The lessons pass into the next generation. That is legacy.

**Expectations → Guidance → Actions → Habits →
Independence → Next Generation**

Chapter Three

Character Comes Before the School

People put enormous effort into getting their children into good schools. There may be a place for that, but education is only one part of life. There is much more to building a child than academics.

My recommendation is simple: start by building character.

Teach them honesty. Teach them not to look for shortcuts. Teach them that every action has a consequence. Teach them not to lie, cheat or manipulate. These are not lessons to begin at thirteen, sixteen or seventeen, when suddenly everyone becomes worried about examinations, admissions and the future. By then, many habits are already formed.

Character begins much earlier.

Children observe everything. They learn remarkably quickly. They know what Dad will give them, what Mom will give them, what Grandma will give them, and what behavior gets them what they want. That is why consistency matters.

Temper tantrums should not become a method of negotiation.

A firm “no” must sometimes remain a no. That is not an absence of love. Sometimes firmness is part of love.

If every tantrum eventually produces a reward, the child learns something very quickly: persistence, anger or manipulation gets results. One demand leads to another. What began as a request can eventually become an expectation, and expectation can become entitlement.

One of the most important lessons a child can learn is that very little in life is simply handed to us.

Rewards are earned. Trust is earned. Privileges are earned.

That is life.

Honesty, discipline, responsibility and respect are not Christian values, Muslim values, Hindu values, Sikh values or the property of any particular culture. They are human values. Culture and faith may help give them language and structure, but children first learn them by watching the people around them.

Parents therefore have to be present.

Being present does not simply mean buying things. A new phone, a new car, an expensive school or another gift cannot replace time. Sometimes parents work extremely hard and genuinely believe that providing material things proves how much they care. But possessions cannot substitute for involvement.

A child needs time, attention, boundaries and example.

You cannot compensate for absence forever by buying something better.

These things are built slowly, like building blocks. They do not suddenly appear one morning when a child becomes a teenager.

You can often sense the difference between a home in which parents are actively involved and one in which there is no consistent authority. It is not about perfection. Parents make mistakes. Families argue. Life becomes difficult.

But children need stability.

If parents have disagreements, those disagreements should not make the child the battlefield. Do not recruit the child into adult arguments. Do not make the child choose sides. Give children as stable an emotional environment as possible.

And do not keep a running account of everything you have sacrificed for them.

“I worked twenty-four hours a day for you.”

“I gave up my life for you.”

“I gave you everything, and now you owe me.”

The child did not ask to be born into that bargain.

Parenting should not become a future invoice.

Do what you believe is right because you chose to be the parent. If your child later gives back to you, wonderful. If not, you should still be able to say: I did my responsibility. I raised my child as well as I knew how. The account is settled.

As children become older, parental control naturally decreases. Friends, school, society and eventually adulthood begin to exert greater influence. That is precisely why the foundation has to be laid before those outside influences become dominant.

Authority also has to remain clear.

In my house, my rule was simple: you could enjoy yourself, have friends and participate in life, but there were boundaries. Those boundaries were predictable and consistent.

The exact rules will differ from one family to another. That is not the important part.

The important part is that children know where the boundaries are, know that the parents mean what they say, and know that love does not disappear simply because the answer is no.

So, at a young age, do not obsess over which university your child will eventually attend.

First make them safe.

Give them your time.

Build their character.

Teach honesty.

Teach discipline.

Teach responsibility.

Teach them not to cheat or manipulate.

Teach them that actions have consequences.

And teach them that effort matters because nothing worthwhile in life simply appears out of thin air.

Even things that appear free usually have a cost somewhere.

Build that foundation first.

The school can come later.

Time and Organization

One of the most useful skills a child can learn has very little to do with intelligence.

It is organization.

I learned this through my daughter.

When she was younger, she was accepted into a gifted program. Until then, academically, she had been comfortable. To use the old analogy, she had been a big fish in a relatively small pond.

Then the pond changed.

Suddenly she was surrounded by other highly capable children. She was no longer automatically at the top. The expectations were higher, the workload was greater, and for the first time she felt that she had to compete simply to remain where she had previously been.

The pressure began to affect her physically. She developed gastrointestinal symptoms and recurrent discomfort. Whether she was intellectually capable of doing the work was never really the question. She was.

My question was different:

Was proving that worth sacrificing her health?

For me, the answer was no.

I told her, first, that we were there for her regardless of what happened. This was middle school. It was one period in one part of a much larger life. A grade, a program or a school was not going to determine her value as a human being.

Second, I told her not to put so much pressure on herself. Education matters, but it is still only one facet of life.

Something very valuable nevertheless came from that difficult experience.

She learned to organize herself.

She learned to create folders and subfolders. She learned to separate what had to be done immediately from what

could wait. She learned to look at a workload and break it into manageable pieces.

Most importantly, she learned to organize her time.

That lesson stayed with her long after the gifted program was over.

This is one reason I believe middle school is an excellent time to begin teaching organization deliberately. At that age, we spend enormous amounts of time teaching children mathematics, science, English and history, yet we may never explicitly teach them how to manage the one resource every one of those subjects consumes: time.

Before going to sleep, a child should be capable of looking at the following day and thinking:

I have this class tomorrow. This assignment is due. This needs to be finished tonight. This can wait until Wednesday. I need twenty minutes for this and an hour for that. This is what I intend to accomplish tomorrow.

That sounds simple.

It isn't.

It is the beginning of learning how to run your own life.

The parent should initially help. Sit down together. Make the folders. Build the calendar. Write down the assignments. Break the large project into smaller pieces.

But gradually, the parent should withdraw.

The objective is not to become your child's permanent secretary.

The objective is to teach your child to become his or her own secretary.

There is also an important distinction between being busy and being organized. A student can sit at a desk for six hours and accomplish remarkably little. Another can work for two focused hours, know exactly what needs to be done, complete it and move on with life.

More time does not automatically mean more learning.

Organization means knowing what deserves your attention now.

It means setting priorities.

It means setting goals.

It means learning that everything cannot be urgent at the same time.

And it means leaving room for something else that children desperately need: a life.

Friends matter. Sports matter. Family matters. Sleep matters. Sitting around and doing absolutely nothing occasionally matters.

The purpose of organization is not to squeeze another three hours of work into a child's day.

It is almost the opposite.

Good organization gives time back.

A child who learns this early enters high school with an enormous advantage. Later comes university, work, family, appointments, bills, responsibilities and eventually the complicated business of adulthood.

The subjects change.

The skill does not.

So when I look back at my daughter's experience in that gifted program, I do not think its greatest gift was necessarily something she learned in a textbook.

It taught her how to organize herself.

And that may have been worth more than any individual grade she received.

Test-Taking Is a Skill

There is something about examinations that we often pretend is not true.

Knowing a subject and knowing how to take a test are not the same thing.

Ideally, of course, a student should have both.

But they are different skills.

I have always been a good test taker. Give me an examination and, even when I do not know every detail of

the subject, I can often work out what is important, how the material has been structured and what I am likely to be asked.

That does not mean I have mastered the subject.

It means I understand examinations.

There is a difference.

When I look at a textbook, I do not necessarily see several hundred pages that must all be given equal importance. I am looking for structure.

What is the author trying to teach?

What are the fundamental concepts?

What was introduced at the beginning?

What ideas keep returning?

Where is the author ultimately taking me?

What would I ask if I were writing the examination?

Once you begin thinking that way, a textbook stops being a mountain of information and begins becoming a map.

Take a basic computer examination. Before opening a thousand pages of material, ask what the subject fundamentally contains.

What is a computer?

What is hardware?

What is software?

How do the major components interact?

What concepts must somebody understand before you could reasonably say that they understand the basics of computing?

You have already begun constructing the examination in your own mind.

That is test-taking skill.

It is not a substitute for learning. It is learning how to identify what matters.

I have seen students study hour after hour after hour and accomplish surprisingly little. Their problem is not laziness. Quite often they are working harder than everyone else.

They simply have never been taught how to study for an examination.

They give every paragraph equal weight. They become trapped by minor details. They spend enormous amounts of time perfecting one small area while neglecting the central concepts.

Then the examination arrives and time itself becomes another problem.

A good test taker reads the question that was actually asked, not the question he hoped would be asked.

He notices the wording.

He recognizes what information matters.

He knows when a question is consuming too much time and moves on.

He returns later.

With multiple-choice questions, he knows that identifying what cannot be correct may be just as useful as immediately knowing what is correct.

And above all, he understands that an examination is performed under constraints.

You do not have unlimited time.

That means time management does not stop when studying ends. It follows you into the examination room.

But there is another side to this.

Passing an examination is not necessarily the same as knowing something.

I saw this difference clearly among my own children.

One of my sons is extraordinarily methodical. He can be painfully slow because he wants to understand something properly. He may go over the same thing repeatedly until it satisfies him.

But once he knows it, he knows it.

Wake him in the middle of the night and ask him how something works, and he can often take you through it:

Step A. Step B. Step C. Step D.

Others may laugh and say, “I passed that examination years ago. Don’t ask me now.”

Both passed.

Only one may still possess the knowledge.

That distinction matters enormously.

A student therefore needs to understand what examination preparation is for.

Sometimes you are preparing to perform well on a particular test. There is nothing wrong with acknowledging that. Learn the format. Practice questions. Understand the timing. Recognize patterns. Learn how questions are constructed.

Those are legitimate skills.

But do not confuse them with mastery.

A high score tells me that you performed well on an examination. It does not automatically tell me how deeply you understand the subject.

The strongest student eventually learns both.

Learn the subject.

And learn how to take the test.

Do not spend ten hours doing something that could be accomplished properly in three. But equally, do not

become so clever at passing examinations that you finish school with beautiful grades and nothing remaining in your head.

The examination is a hurdle.

Education is what should remain after you have crossed it.

Independence, Accountability and Identity

There is another part of preparing a child for a good school that has almost nothing to do with school.

It is preparing them to stand on their own feet.

One principle I tried very hard to give my children was independence.

My daughter was never going to receive less opportunity because she was a girl. Whatever support I could give my sons, I would give her equally—and, if she needed more to reach the same independence, I would give her more.

I wanted her eventually to choose a partner because she wanted to share her life with that person, not because she needed someone to support her.

That distinction mattered enormously to me.

I grew up around cultural attitudes in which sons and daughters were not always valued equally. Those attitudes can place terrible pressure on women and can survive for generations simply because nobody stops to ask whether they are right.

I wanted something different for my children.

My wish for all of them could almost be expressed through the position of the hand:

May your hand never have to remain outstretched because you are begging someone to carry you. May you be fortunate enough that, when you stretch out your hand, it is to help or bless someone else.

That does not mean chasing money.

In fact, I taught almost the opposite.

Do not spend your life chasing money. Become capable. Learn. Work. Build something. Conduct yourself properly. Money is necessary, but it should not become the measurement of your worth.

Independence also requires honesty.

My children knew one rule very clearly:

Tell me the truth and I will stand with you.

You may have made a mistake.

You may have done something foolish.

You may be frightened of the consequences.

Come home and tell me.

We will deal with it together.

What I did not want was the first lie, because one lie so easily requires another. Eventually the original mistake becomes less important than the deception built around it.

Love does not mean that there are no consequences.

Love does not mean, “Do whatever you want.”

Sometimes love means:

I am with you. And you are still accountable.

While children are young, they also represent their families. I used to tell mine that when they went out into the world, they were my ambassadors.

That was not intended to make them frightened of embarrassing their father.

It meant: remember that your behavior affects people other than yourself.

Carry yourself in a way that allows your family to be proud of you.

But even that should eventually disappear.

At first someone may say:

“That is Dr. Gulati’s daughter.”

“That is Dr. Gulati’s son.”

Fine.

But that is not where I wanted their lives to end.

Eventually I wanted people to say their own names and know what they had done.

The same applies to ancestry.

Be proud of your family.

Be proud of your heritage.

Be proud of your culture.

But do not live on borrowed glory.

Who your grandfather was may be an interesting part of your history. It is not your achievement.

Who your father was is not your achievement either.

Stand on your own feet, not on your grandfather's feet.

For immigrant families, I think there is another balance worth teaching.

My children could value their Indian and Sikh heritage without pretending that the country in which they were born and raised was somehow less theirs. They did not need to erase one identity to respect another.

That, to me, is one of the great opportunities of growing up in a multicultural society: you can inherit a culture without becoming imprisoned by it.

Take what is worth preserving.

Know where you came from.

But build your own life where you are.

That brings us back to education.

When I say that a student applying to a highly competitive school needs to be a whole person, I am not talking about manufacturing a collection of extracurricular activities.

I mean something much deeper.

Can this young person organize himself?

Can she communicate?

Can he think?

Can she debate an idea?

Can he write?

Can they accept responsibility?

Can they tell the truth when telling the truth is uncomfortable?

Can they lose without collapsing?

Can they succeed without believing they are superior to everyone around them?

Can they carry their heritage without living off somebody else's accomplishments?

And eventually:

Can they build an identity that belongs to them?

There may be hundreds of applicants with excellent grades.

There may be hundreds with impressive test scores.

That is why getting into a good school was never, in my mind, simply about producing another perfect academic record.

The real work begins much earlier.

You are building a person.

And if you build the person well, eventually the résumé begins to take care of itself.

The Four Years That Matter: Ages Thirteen to Seventeen

There are certain periods in life when a few years can shape decades that follow. I strongly believe that the years from thirteen to seventeen are among them.

It is only four years, yet an enormous amount happens during that time.

A child is no longer really a child, but is not yet an adult. The body is changing. Hormones are changing. Emotions can become stronger and harder to understand. At the same time, school becomes more demanding, friendships become more complicated, peer pressure becomes stronger, and questions about identity and belonging begin to matter in a completely different way.

Suddenly, appearance matters.

Hair matters. Skin matters. Clothes matter. How others see you matters. Whether you fit in matters. Young people may spend far more time looking in the mirror, worrying about acne, grooming themselves, comparing themselves with others, or wondering whether they are attractive enough, confident enough, popular enough, thin enough, tall enough, or simply “normal.”

They may not say any of this aloud.

That does not mean they are not thinking about it.

This is why adolescence can be such a difficult period psychologically as well as physically. The young person often feels caught between two worlds. They believe they understand a great deal about life, yet much of life remains completely untested for them.

Relationships also begin to change. Boys and girls become more conscious of one another. Attraction may appear. Young people begin experiencing feelings they have never had before, while at the same time trying to understand what those feelings mean.

This is precisely when a good parent, teacher, older relative or mentor can make an enormous difference.

Young people need someone who can say calmly:

What you are experiencing is normal.

Your body is changing.

Your feelings are changing.

You are not expected to understand everything immediately.

Ask questions.

We can talk about it.

I have always believed that normal human biology should not be surrounded by unnecessary shame.

Puberty, attraction, reproduction and relationships are part of life. Yet many families and cultures become uncomfortable the moment these subjects arise. Instead of explaining them simply and honestly, adults sometimes change the subject, use vague stories or act as though the child has asked something improper.

But what exactly is improper about understanding how the human body works?

When a young person asks where babies come from, there should be an age-appropriate, truthful explanation. When puberty begins, young people should understand that physical and emotional changes are expected. They should also understand personal boundaries, consent, responsibility and the possible consequences of sexual activity, including pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections.

Information does not corrupt a child.

Good information protects a child.

Silence does not eliminate curiosity. It simply means that the answers may come from friends, rumors, social media or other sources that may be inaccurate.

That is why openness matters.

A parent does not have to make every conversation dramatic. Sometimes the most helpful conversation is simply a calm one:

“This is part of growing up. If something worries you, ask me.”

Those few words can remove enormous anxiety.

I recognize this even more clearly when I watch a young person going through adolescence. Something as simple as acne can seem insignificant to an adult, but to a thirteen-year-old it may feel extremely important. The adult sees a temporary skin problem. The teenager may see his entire face, confidence and social standing.

That is when the parent has to remember what it felt like to be thirteen.

Do not laugh at the concern.

Do not dismiss it.

Help where you can, but also give perspective.

I have told my son something very simple:

“These are four years. I know they are not always easy. I want to help you through them. If you can stay focused

during these years, control the things you can control, and keep moving in the right direction, you will come out far ahead.”

That does not mean removing freedom.

It means combining freedom with structure.

A school, family or boarding environment that provides routine, supervision and expectations can sometimes be extremely helpful during these years. Adolescents need room to grow, but they also need boundaries. Complete control is unhealthy, but complete absence of guidance can be equally harmful.

The goal is not to imprison the child.

The goal is to provide rails while they are learning how to steer.

This is also where realism becomes important.

Teenagers compare themselves constantly. They may wish they looked different or possessed some quality another person has. Parents should acknowledge that appearance and social confidence matter to adolescents without allowing those things to define their worth.

You may not be the tallest person.

You may not have perfect skin.

You may not be the most popular person in school.

You may not look like the person you admire.

That is all right.

Work with what you have.

Develop what you can develop.

Character, competence, kindness, discipline, humor, curiosity, education and confidence are built over time. These qualities will eventually matter far more than whatever temporary comparison seemed overwhelming at fourteen.

And throughout all of this, one message should remain constant:

Your family is here.

Friends will change. Social groups will change. Peer pressure will come and go. There will be moments when fitting in seems like the most important thing in the world.

But you should never have to destroy yourself merely to belong somewhere.

Be yourself.

Work with what you have.

Keep moving forward.

And remember that home should remain the place where you can return without pretending.

Those four years pass remarkably quickly.

The job of the parent is not merely to get the child through them.

It is to help the young person emerge from them knowing who they are.

Guiding Without Burning Them Out

Once we understand how much is already happening between thirteen and seventeen, another question follows naturally:

How much pressure should we place on a young person?

These are also the years when grades begin to matter more, examinations become more important, and families start thinking seriously about universities and competitive schools.

The temptation is to push harder and harder.

More tuition.

More homework.

More tests.

More activities.

More pressure.

But preparation is not the same as exhaustion.

If the goal is to help a child succeed, pacing becomes extremely important.

The child needs structure, discipline and expectations, but also sleep, recovery, recreation and enough breathing room to remain curious.

We want them to reach seventeen prepared for the next stage of life.

We do not want them to arrive there already burned out.

That is where our next discussion begins.

The Whole Package

Grades matter. I taught my children to get A's. I expected them to work hard, prepare properly, organize their time, and do the best they were capable of doing.

But grades alone do not make an educated, capable human being.

An A tells you something about academic performance. It does not tell you everything about the person who earned it.

Life is multifaceted. A child must therefore become multifaceted too.

What are we actually trying to develop?

Character. Organization. Judgment. Independence. Adaptability. Responsibility. Integrity. Humility. Communication. The ability to work with other people. The ability to tell the truth even when the truth is

uncomfortable. The ability to make a mistake, admit it, learn from it, and move forward.

And beyond all of that, there is another question that matters enormously:

What did you give back?

It is very easy to spend an entire life perfecting yourself.

You may become an extraordinary musician. Wonderful.

But what else?

You may become a brilliant football player. Wonderful.

But what else?

You may become academically exceptional, earn every degree available, collect titles and achievements, and still miss much of what life is about.

A day has only twenty-four hours. Life has only so many years. If every hour is spent polishing one talent, chasing one achievement, or building only yourself, life can simply pass you by.

From childhood, I believe we should teach a broader perspective.

First, recognize what you have been given.

Call it God if you believe in God. Call it destiny, fate, luck, circumstance, or whatever makes sense to you. But understand that none of us begins life from exactly the same starting point.

Some children are born into caring families. Some are born where education is available. Some live in societies where hard work creates opportunity. Others can work just as hard and still face enormous barriers.

Recognizing that should create gratitude, not arrogance.

And gratitude should eventually create humility.

Nobody succeeds entirely alone.

Your parents matter. Your family matters. Your teachers matter. The society around you matters. The people who gave you opportunities matter.

When a child understands that, something changes.

They begin to notice the student sitting beside them who is struggling.

Instead of thinking only, How do I get ahead?, they may begin asking, Can I help?

That is where giving back begins.

As parents, we should create opportunities for our children to experience this.

Take them somewhere they can serve.

It might be an elderly-care home. It might be helping people experiencing homelessness. It might be an animal shelter. It might be preparing food, teaching someone a skill, volunteering, or simply giving time to a person who needs it.

The exact activity is less important than the lesson.

Life is not only me, me, me.

It is also us.

We are not islands.

We live among other people. We depend on other people.

We benefit from societies that create structure, order, opportunity, and some degree of fairness.

When society works well, all of us benefit.

When everybody begins thinking only, I must get ahead, and I do not care what happens to anybody else, eventually all of us pay the price.

Parents sometimes forget the scale of what they are doing.

You are not simply raising a child.

You are helping create a society.

That child will eventually become an adult. Perhaps a doctor. Perhaps a teacher. Perhaps a soldier, a firefighter, an emergency responder, an engineer, an artist, a parent, an entrepreneur, or something none of us can predict today.

These are the people who will carry communities, countries, and ultimately the world forward.

If we never give children a wider view of the world, we risk producing adults who can achieve but cannot empathize.

And empathy matters.

If we raise children who know how to achieve but never learn how to care, we have done only half the job.

I do not say this only because it sounds good.

Words are cheap. Live it.

I tried to live these principles with my own children.

My children excelled academically, but I kept asking them another question:

What have you given back?

At one point we formed an organization called Senior Net.

Computers were becoming part of everyday life. Email was beginning to replace traditional mail, and many elderly people were being left behind by a technology that younger people were learning almost automatically.

They could type. In fact, many of that generation had excellent typing and handwriting skills because those were once considered essential skills.

But the world had changed.

Now they needed to know how to open an email, send one, print something, and communicate through a computer.

The technology itself was not the important part.

The important part was that an older person should not become isolated simply because the method of communication had changed.

So the children went and helped.

They gave their time.

They taught.

And in doing so, they learned something themselves.

Skills change.

Technology changes.

The world changes.

There was a time when beautiful handwriting mattered enormously. There was a time when essays and written expression dominated education. Then computers arrived. Then programming became increasingly important. New skills will continue replacing old ones.

But some things do not change.

Character does not become obsolete.

Empathy does not become obsolete.

Responsibility does not become obsolete.

Gratitude does not become obsolete.

Communication does not become obsolete.

Giving back does not become obsolete.

The tools will change. The human need will remain.

That brings me to talent.

I always asked my children another simple question.

Suppose you finish high school tomorrow.

You have the diploma.

Now what?

What can you actually do?

What skill do you possess?

What do you love enough to develop?

And just as importantly, can that skill eventually help you become independent?

There is nothing wrong with following passion. Passion is wonderful.

But passion and practicality do not have to be enemies.

I used to tell my children:

First, develop character.

Then develop skills that allow you to stand on your own feet.

Then pursue the things you love.

One of my sons loved computers, so he learned programming. He went deeply into it, eventually working

on projects far beyond what most children his age were doing.

One of my daughters loved debating and political science.

Wonderful.

But I also wanted her to think practically about skills and opportunity. We explored other areas together. We even studied gemology and became Associate Jewelry Professionals together.

The point was never that everybody must become a jeweler or programmer.

The point was:

Know how to do something.

Have a skill.

Have more than one dimension to your life.

One child swam. Another pursued music. One learned piano. Another went deeply into computers.

Why?

Because life is multifaceted.

Studying alone is not enough.

Giving back alone is not enough.

Talent alone is not enough.

You need different parts of yourself to draw upon at different moments in life.

What do you do when you have spare time?

What do you do when you are stressed?

What do you return to when life becomes difficult?

Maybe it is music.

Maybe computers.

Maybe sport.

Maybe art.

Maybe prayer, faith, meditation, or something entirely different.

The specific answer belongs to the individual.

The important thing is to build constructive places for the mind to go.

An idle mind can wander into places that contribute nothing to growth. Purpose, curiosity, interests, and useful skills give a young person somewhere better to direct their energy.

Over time, I watched those different pieces come together in my own children.

Yes, they achieved academically.

One went to Princeton.

One went to Stanford and later MIT.

Another went to Harvard.

I am proud of those achievements.

But the university names are not the real point of the story.

The point is what helped them get there and, more importantly, what kind of people they became afterward.

One of my daughters originally wanted to study political science. At Stanford, another student made fun of her choice and suggested that she did not belong in computer science.

She became angry.

And instead of allowing somebody else to define what she could or could not do, she changed direction, studied computer science while keeping political science as part of her education, and eventually earned an internship at Facebook.

Later she had the opportunity to make her point to the student who had doubted her.

The lesson was simple:

Never make fun of another person's ability.

People can grow.

People can learn.

People can surprise you.

Do not decide somebody's limits for them.

Another thing happened within our family that mattered just as much to me.

The teaching did not stop with me.

One child began guiding another.

Then another carried pieces of it forward.

That is when parenting becomes bigger than one parent and one child.

Values begin passing from one generation to another.

That is legacy.

Not simply degrees.

Not titles.

Not money.

Not fame.

Values that continue after you.

Memories that continue after you.

The way people remember how you treated them.

The way your children remember what you stood for.

The way they eventually pass those lessons to their own children.

Memories are legacy.

That is one of the few things we truly leave behind.

I remember my own parents because of what they did—the good, the bad, the beautiful, the imperfect. That is how human beings remain alive in the memories of others.

And that is why character matters so much.

I wanted my children to know something very clearly:

I will stand beside you when you make a mistake.

Tell me the truth and I will be there.

If you get something wrong, we will correct it.

If you fail, we will deal with it.

If you make a poor decision, we will work through it.

But do not build the relationship on lies.

Love does not mean that everything is acceptable.

Sometimes love means no.

Sometimes love means correction.

Sometimes love means standing beside somebody while still telling them that what they did was wrong.

I will stand by my children.

But I will not stand by dishonesty.

That distinction matters.

Children should know that home is a place where they can tell the truth without losing the people who love them.

That is how trust is built.

And that brings us to what I mean by the whole package.

I do not mean perfection.

There is no perfect child.

There is no perfect parent.

There is no perfect human being.

The whole package means developing as many parts of the person as we reasonably can.

Talent. Skills. Character. Health. Relationships. Judgment.

Responsibility. Empathy. Contribution.

Academics are part of it.

They are not all of it.

Talent is part of it.

It is not all of it.

Character is essential, but even character exists within a larger human being.

We have beliefs, doubts, relationships, abilities, weaknesses, responsibilities, emotions, and experiences.

We are whole human beings.

What is inside eventually expresses itself outside.

And now I am doing it again.

Teelake was not born to me, but that makes no difference to how I understand my responsibility.

I chose him as my son.

He is mine.

End of story.

Parenthood is not only biology.

It is commitment.

It is showing up.

It is accepting responsibility for another human being.

Until he becomes an adult, I believe I have a responsibility to guide him, teach him, set boundaries, correct him, support him, and prepare him.

After that, his life becomes increasingly his own.

That is what parenting is supposed to accomplish.

Not permanent control.

Preparation for independence.

The same principles apply.

Work hard.

Learn.

Develop skills.

Find your talents.

Take care of your health.

Build relationships.

Tell the truth.

Develop character.

Recognize your advantages without becoming arrogant about them.

Help somebody who needs help.

Become useful.

And remember that your life is not only about you.

We do not need to chase money for its own sake.

We do not need to chase fame.

We should chase something much more difficult:

Becoming good human beings.

Citizens not only of one country, but of the world.

That is what I wanted for my older children.

That is what I want for Teelake.

And that is what this entire book has been about.

Not creating a perfect student.

Not creating a perfect résumé.

Not manufacturing a child who collects A's, trophies, admissions letters, and titles.

Creating a whole person.

A person capable of achieving, but also capable of caring.

A person capable of standing independently, but also understanding that none of us truly stands alone.

A person with skills, but also character.

Talent, but also humility.

Ambition, but also gratitude.

Success, but also contribution.

Because life is multifaceted.

And if we are preparing children for life, their education must be multifaceted too.

That is the whole package.

Live It: Parenting by Example

I have always believed in one simple principle:

Live your words. Otherwise, they are only words.

Do not preach what you do not practice.

Do not ask your children to be disciplined while you are undisciplined.

Do not demand honesty while you lie.

Do not demand effort while you make excuses.

Do not tell them to control themselves while you lose control.

Children watch far more than they listen.

They see everything.

So if you want to teach them something, live it.

Try Before You Say You Cannot

One of the things I have very little patience for is giving up before trying.

“It is too hard.”

“I cannot do it.”

“That will not work.”

My answer is simple:

Try.

Try first.

Give your best effort.

If it does not work, learn from it.

Adjust.

Try again.

Then decide.

There is nothing wrong with failing after an honest effort. Failure teaches.

But refusing to try because something looks difficult teaches nothing.

This applies to school, work, health, business, relationships, and almost everything else in life.

Do Not Chase Money

I tell my children:

Do not chase money.

Become good at what you do.

Become dependable.

Become useful.

Develop skill.

Do your work properly.

Treat people well.

Keep your word.

If you are good, people notice.

The word spreads.

That is why two shops can stand next to each other selling almost the same thing, yet one succeeds while the other merely survives.

The difference is often simple.

One gives people a reason to return.

Quality.

Consistency.

Honesty.

Service.

Reputation.

Money follows value much more reliably than value follows money.

Standards Need Enforcement

Rules are rules.

But rules without enforcement are only words.

The difference between a functioning system and a dysfunctional one is often not the number of rules.

It is enforcement.

If standards are applied consistently, people adapt.

If rules can be ignored, avoided, negotiated, or escaped, people learn that the rule is not really a rule.

The same applies inside a family.

If you set a standard, mean it.

But enforcement does not mean terror.

It means consistency.

A parent should not govern through fear.

Fear may produce obedience for a while, but it does not produce character.

Parenting Is Not Tiger Parenting

I do not believe success is simply blood.

It is not environment alone.

It is not being rich.

It is not Harvard, Stanford, or MIT.

It is not shouting louder.

It is not being a “tiger parent.”

There is a method.

Be there.

Teach.

Guide.

Set standards.

Correct when necessary.

Encourage effort.

Make them try.

Show them how you live.

And do it consistently.

It is not automatic.

Good children do not simply appear because they were born into a particular family.

Parenting requires work.

Until Eighteen, You Are My Ward

Until eighteen, you are my ward.

That means I have responsibility.

Not merely authority.

Responsibility.

I have to prepare you for adulthood.

I have to teach you discipline, judgment, independence, responsibility, and how to deal with the consequences of your choices.

But I cannot simply command these things into existence.

I have to demonstrate them.

If I want you to work hard, you should see me work hard.

If I want you to respect people, you should see me respect people.

If I want you to be honest, I must be honest.

If I want you to admit mistakes, I must admit mine.

Live it.

Words are easy.

Carry Them With You

Do not preach from a distance.

Do not terrorize your children into obedience.

Carry them with you.

Let them participate.

Explain why.

Let them see how decisions are made.

Let them experience responsibility while you are still there to guide them.

A parent should help shape the riverbanks while the child is young.

But eventually the water has to flow on its own.

You cannot become the river for them forever.

The Boat and the Water

There is a Thai proverb:

The boat depends on the water; the tiger depends on the forest.

It expresses mutual dependence.

Parents and children are much the same.

The child needs the parent for protection, guidance, structure, and example.

But the parent also needs the child's trust and willingness to participate.

Parenting is not a one-way exercise in power.

It is a relationship.

You lead, but they must travel with you.

The Method Is the Message

My books are not saying:

Go to Harvard.

Go to Stanford.

Go to MIT.

Become rich.

Copy my life.

No.

My message is much simpler.

The method is there.

I have lived it.

Take what is useful.

Apply it to your circumstances.

Try.

Learn.

Adjust.

Persist.

Give your best effort.

Do not make excuses before you begin.

And above everything else:

Live your words.

Do not preach them.

Do not be a hypocrite.

Do not be a terror.

Live them.

Carry your children with you.

Then, when the time comes,
let them flow.