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## *Don't Always Blame Parents. Or Praise Them, Either.*

By Laurie Fendrich

The saying “the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree” ignores the many apples that roll far, far away from their trees. Most parents, aware that some offspring apples can roll too far away, try to raise their children with something more than a laissez-faire approach. Even relatively lax parents—not to mention Amy Chu-spawned tiger moms or college students’ “helicopter parents”—assume that they have significant control over the kind of adult their child becomes.

But how much control do parents really have? Turning the question on its head: How much responsibility do parents bear for the adults their children become? Do any of the competing theories about child-rearing acknowledge that there’s an element of the crapshoot involved?

Consider the sobering (and that’s an understatement) example of Marcus Aurelius—the last of Rome’s “five good emperors”—and his son Commodus, whom he appointed co-emperor three years before he died, in 180.

Composed near the end of his life, while he was stationed near the Danube trying to fend off various Germanic tribes, Marcus’s *Meditations* explains his lasting fame more than anything he did while emperor. The *Meditations*, which were almost certainly intended as private ruminations, combines aphorisms, ethics, and metaphysics in a cocoon of spirituality. How they survived and then made it into the modern world of letters isn’t clear. In any event, the first printed edition of the text appeared in the 16th century.

I stumbled across Marcus’s *Meditations* several years ago, while browsing in a used-book store. I bought the book because I liked the title and because, as a serious Latin student in high school and a political-science major in college, I was—and am—fascinated by classical civilizations. Moreover, I like dipping into the *Meditations* whenever I sense the approach of what Churchill called the “black dog” of depression. *Meditations* has the capacity to soothe the anxieties accompanying the constant and rapid changes inherent in modern life, and more important, to put a brake on intense feelings about things over which we have no control. By putting everything human into the perspective of the cosmos, Marcus gently chastises human beings for presuming that they have real control over things. By his account, we control only one thing—our own thoughts.

Marcus was an exceptionally good man (if we forgive him that Roman habit of persecuting Christians). Commodus, on the other hand, was wicked in the extreme. How did the virtuous Marcus Aurelius end up with a son as vile as Commodus? In *Marcus Aurelius: A Life* (2009), Frank McLynn says that despite Commodus’s having an honorable father and the very best tutors—including an instructor in ethics—he was, from an early age, lazy, self-indulgent, and mean.

Although Marcus apparently realized as much, he wishfully thought that his son would change once he assumed the purple robe of the emperor. Cassius Dio, a contemporary, thought that Commodus’s nature was simplistic and cowardly; he blamed the son’s wickedness on Commodus’s companions, whose “lustful and cruel habits” affected him so strongly that they became second nature.

Whatever the cause, Commodus has been described by historians as selfish, self-absorbed, egotistical, paranoid, lecherous, lascivious, debauched, obscene, buffoonish, venal, scandalous, petty,

vindictive, and, above all, cruel. He was famous for summarily executing anyone he perceived as an opponent. He loved playing gladiator and was known for extraordinary savagery—even by Roman standards—toward animals in the arena. (Everything was arranged so that he was never in danger.) He took special pleasure in torturing people who had deformities. One might think that a psychopath like Commodus would have been dispatched in a coup. But he possessed a knack for intimidating the senatorial class, placating the army, and satiating the mob. He held the throne for more than a decade before finally being assassinated.

What role did Marcus Aurelius play in the creation of the viciously hedonist personality of his son? Some propose that by being away at the front when Commodus was young and malleable, Marcus absented himself at precisely the time when children’s characters are built. But it was common for Roman boys with military fathers to not see them for long stretches. Others argue that having watched most of his children die in their infancy and early childhood (especially his other sons), Marcus spoiled Commodus. (It’s worth observing that in Book I of the *Meditations*, Marcus lists “lenience” as one of the virtues he admires in his own adoptive father, Antoninus Pius.)

Yet Commodus wasn’t so spoiled that he didn’t go to the front, at his father’s command, and fight alongside him. Whatever his flaws, up until Marcus’s death—when Commodus first tasted the sweet absoluteness of an emperor’s power—Commodus appeared, at least, to understand the restraints of civic duty. He hoisted the flag of absolute indulgence only after Dad was dead and gone.

Are there any lessons to be drawn from the story of Marcus and Commodus? Some may think that the way a Roman emperor raised a child has little relevance to ordinary people today. But to my mind, the story points to an unsettling possibility for all of us. Our contemporary discussions about the need to “set high expectations,” “establish limits,” “provide confidence through love,” and “facilitate academic and career achievement” (those words are lifted randomly from people who write about raising children) are really mostly fluff. The slings and arrows of necessity, temptation, and character will come at children from sources over which we have no control. It’s both humbling and practical to remind ourselves that circumstance and chance weigh heavily against whatever homilies we try to enforce as parents, imperial or not.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup><http://chronicle.com/blogs/conversation/2012/09/10/dont-always-blame-parents-or-praise-them-either/>