

Born to Win

It's in Your Genes

by Ronald L. Dart

It's always refreshing when science catches up with common sense. For a long time, specialists of one stripe or another argued that what makes us *who we are* happens as a result of heredity. It's just all in the genes. You have no more choice in the matter than anything. Whatever nature deals out of that deck of cards—that's what you're going to be. Or another generation—they would argue, "No, no, no. It's all a matter of environment. It's all learned behavior. We get the bare minimum out of our genes—just some instincts and a few things we've got to have—and after that everything is shaped by environment. That makes us what we are."

Now, at the same time, I think most of us would have intuitively believed that it's a matter of heredity, environment, and experience that shapes our character. You know, you grew up thinking...okay, yeah, I've got heredity. Yes, I've got environment. And I've got experience. All that stuff has gone together and it's made me the kind of person I am today. *Now*, with the Human Genome Project making such enormous progress, we are learning that the commonsense evaluation was pretty much on the mark. Matt Ridley, writing in *Time* magazine summarized the emerging story. And it's a fascinating tale, indeed. The article's entitled *What Makes You Who You Are*, and he says this:

This is a new understanding of the fundamental building blocks of life based on the discovery that genes are not immutable things handed down from our parents like Moses' stone tablets, but are active participants in our lives, designed to take their cues from everything that happens to us from the moment of our conception.

Matt Ridley - What Makes You Who You Are

Now, I can almost hear someone saying, "So?" I understand the reaction, but what this can mean to parents and educators and health-care workers may turn out to be as profound as anything that's come down from science in recent years.

I carried a mistaken assumption about language, for example. It's very plain to anybody that looks—as any fool can plainly see—that humans are the only creatures capable of a complex language. They're the only creatures that can really speak. And I kind of assumed that, well, it was the size and the function of the brain that made the difference—along with lips and tongue and palate. In other words: We had the tools; we had the brain; and, consequently, we could do it. Whereas the other critters didn't have all that stuff. Well, it turns out that there are genes that, as Ridley puts it, open and close a window during which the learning of language takes place. And I'm talking about, now, the *idea* of language and language as a structured way of communicating. He says there's a window. The genes open it up and then they close it. But just having the gene is not enough, he says.

If a child is not exposed to a lot of spoken language during the critical learning period, he or she will always struggle with speech.

Matt Ridley - What Makes You Who You Are

Now, that's really fascinating. It's funny, but when the facts start coming down a lot of things start coming together. Intuition will tell you that a gabby family produces gabby children, but *now* we know there's a set of genes that account for that. Maybe all that the people are doing now is putting names on things that we really already know, but I don't think so. I think they're going beyond that. One thing scientists have long understood is that close interaction with a child in his early years has a very large effect on basic intelligence. In other words: If you spend a lot of time with a child—you communicate back and forth and involve yourself with the child—they turn out to be smarter than if they're left almost entirely alone. That's fairly obvious. But then when you understand that intelligence is measured in very large part by *verbal* skills, than this whole thing begins to make even more sense. That in the process of teaching your children how to speak, how to communicate...and again it's not something that you exactly *teach* your child. It is something the child *learns* from you by being around you, by being talked to, by talking back, and by hearing your conversation with other people.

And children do hear this stuff. I harken back to my own childhood and realize how much time I spent sitting, listening to my parents talk—Mother talking to Dad, them talking to aunts and uncles or next door neighbors—because this was pre-television and people sat around the porch and talked about *stuff*. And I would listen, and I would absorb, and I'm sure that during that time I was learning a lot about language. And, of course, I began to learn a lot more about grammar, spelling, and all the rest of that stuff as I begin to read. All that stuff happens, and the earlier it happens to you, the better off you are.

Now, it's a very small step from this to realizing that a single mother trying to raise a child by herself is at a *disadvantage*, for conversation in the home is necessarily limited. In other words, she's got no one to talk to except the child and, probably, a lot of times she's tired and worn out after a day of work, and a lot of conversation doesn't take place.

So human beings are genetically predisposed to speech, but it seems there is a window in which it is designed to take place—in other words, the *learning* of speech and language is designed to take place. Now, in case you're wondering, "Well, how come it is, then, that we're able to learn *another* language later in life?", it's because languages are all grammatic. In other words, there is just a common grammatical structure across languages that enables us to translate from one language to another. And once those concepts—those skills—are learned, they can be transferred to other languages.

Well, just as we are genetically predisposed to speech. I think we will also find that a man is genetically predisposed to *religion*. So, just as we are predisposed genetically to speech. I think that we will also find that man is genetically predisposed to religion—that is, to look for God. And one suspects that there is a window during which that predisposition is the strongest. And I think that's why, when you go back and look in the Bible, you'll find God speaking to Israel (or Moses, actually, speaking to Israel) and telling them:

Deuteronomy 6

NIV

⁴ Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.

⁵ Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

⁶ These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts.

⁷ Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.

⁸ Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads.

⁹ Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

In other words, begin from the *very earliest time* with your children: when you get them up in the morning, when you put them to bed at night, when you sit at table with them, when you're walking along the road side with them; *talk to your children about God*. For there is an opening in their minds at that age—not only to learn about language, but to learn about God. And human beings *are* predisposed to learn about God. There is something inside of us that drives us toward *meaning* and toward God and toward learning about God. Thomas Lickona, writing in his book *Raising Good Children*, observes this:

[Children] learn to make choices by having choices. Because they don't become problem-solvers unless they have a chance to rely on their own resources and solve their own problems. Because the ultimate goal of all our parenting is not to control our children but to help them become mature adults who can make their own decisions and lead their own lives.

Dr. Thomas Lickona - Raising Good Children: From Birth Through the Teenage Years

How do we learn this stuff? We learn it by doing. And as we do it, we begin to somehow (and this is the thing that is so striking in this article I read) that somehow or other this goes back and triggers things. There are genes that open up windows for learning how to do certain kinds of things. But there's a time, apparently, when they start closing again. And the things that we do have an effect on the genetics switches down there, and how they open and close doors for us to learn things, do things, and be things. Once again, there is a window in which problem-solving skills are developed, and it makes the way we interact with our kids *crucial* when they are in that window of opportunity. I think scientists will find that men are predisposed to learn an *ethical system of behavior*. Matt Ridley opined that:

Theologians may develop a whole new theory of free will based on the observation that learning expands our capacity to choose our own path.

Matt Ridley - What Makes You Who You Are

He may be right. It wouldn't be the first time that science forced theologians to rethink some things they thought were written in stone. And it wasn't the Bible that was wrong, but that theologians were wrong *about* the Bible. It's happened before and it *will* happen again. One of the most powerful, recurring themes in the Bible is that *man has a choice*; and what science is doing is uncovering the mechanism by which that takes place. In Deuteronomy 30, verse 11, God speaks to Israel and says:

Deuteronomy 30

NIV

¹¹ Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach.

¹² It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, "Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?"

¹³ Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, "Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?"

¹⁴ No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.

Do you realize what this is telling us? It is telling us that God put his law inside of the genetic code of man. What we have got to do is learn the code.

Deuteronomy 30

NIV

¹⁴ No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.

¹⁵ See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction.

¹⁶ For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in obedience to him, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess.

¹⁷ But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient [*In other words, if you miss this opening that God gives to you; if you turn away.*], and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them [*Because man will worship something.*],

¹⁸ I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.

¹⁹ This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live

²⁰ and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

So we have a choice. Some theologians have known this for a very long time. Perhaps science will now help the rest to catch up.

The *Time* magazine article headlined a fact that was surprising to me. They said this:

Girls raised in fatherless households experience puberty earlier. Apparently, the change in timing is the reaction of a still mysterious set of genes to their environment. Scientists don't know how many sets of genes act this way.

Matt Ridley - What Makes You Who You Are

Now, it was not a surprise to me that it's important to have a father in the home. I was just surprised at the *physical* reaction in girls to his absence. I wouldn't at all surprised at a psychological or emotional change, but we're talking about a *physical* change that takes place because there is no dad in the house. Now, whatever you may think about this or the cause of it, it underlines how important it is for society to protect marriage. And we have not done very well about that for a long time now. There was a time when society, I think as a whole in our country, was *eager* to maintain marriage; made divorce hard; urged parents to stay together. But, years ago, all that began to change, and marriages have been coming apart ever since in their droves.

The list of things that go wrong with kids when there is no dad in the home gets longer and longer all the time. You run into it in newspapers; you run into it in magazines. Now, every time some bright academic comes up with a new theory about how to run society, and we try it, we eventually run into the law of unintended consequences. Somehow, things come down on us that we just didn't expect to be that way. Child welfare was a wonderful idea. There are a lot of children out there living in poverty, Some of them are going hungry. We mustn't let that happen. So we created Aid to Dependant Children and we started giving money to unwed mothers who had children. The result: an *explosion* of illegitimate children, which we are *only now* beginning to remedy with welfare reform, and which we did not expect. Did you realize that, under the law, single mothers had an incentive *not* to allow a father

back into the home? Did you realize they had an incentive to have *more* kids with no dads? Sure, here they are—they're living in an apartment; they keep having trouble meeting the bills. If they have one more kid, they get x number of dollars more per month. Why not have another kid? It pays. And it's not the kids' fault, but more illegitimate children are brought into the world.

One of the things that creates a sense of awe is how many of society's ills were addressed in the laws of the Bible—laws Israel was supposed to teach their children from their earliest years. Remember: Teach your kids the law. Teach them when they get up in the morning. Teach them when they go to bed at night. Talk about with them when you're walking by the wayside. Talk with them at the dinner table, the breakfast table, the supper table. Be sure that your kids have instilled in them a sense of the moral and ethical awareness taught by the Bible. That's good for the family, good for society, and (oh, by the way) it's also good for the kid.

Ridley's article underlined something I've *known* but perhaps not articulated very well. Human beings, like human bodies, are not made; they are *grown*. We commonly refer to living things as "creatures" when, in fact, only the originals were created. Everything since has been grown. We can change the color of a flower by how much sunlight we allow it, by how much we fertilize, what we used to fertilize it, and how we water it. What makes us think that what we put into a man will not change his makeup the same way? Somebody years ago wrote a book about the fact that "as the twig is bent so grows the tree." The idea being that, as you bend a child in its childhood, that's the shape of the tree that you're going to get out of this downstream. Now, common sense tells you this is true. Genetic science is now beginning to catch up to that.

Adam and Eve, in the Garden of Eden, made a choice. There were two trees there. They could eat either one as they chose. They could eat of the Tree of Life and live forever or they could eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. They chose to know—that is, to experience—good and evil, or good and bad. Theologians have for many generations assumed that somehow, in that event, human nature was *changed* by that choice. But, in fact, nothing in the human genome was changed. The capacity for all that stuff that followed was there from the start, waiting to be shaped and molded by the choices that Adam and Eve—and all their children to follow—would make.

One of the things I think that, really, if you're careful and study the Bible, you will notice—if you read the Genesis account carefully—you will see it is not *man* who was changed; it was *his environment* that was changed. And now, with the full understanding of the human genome beginning to open up, we can see that there was no reason to assume that, at the "fall of man", that human nature—that is, the basic makeup of people—was changed at that point. The genome was the same. All the same DNA was there. All the chromosomes were there. Nothing was changed at that level. The possibilities for two different ways of life were there *from the very beginning*. From that time forward, the human genetic code has responded to that change with good and with evil.

How many things are there, do you suppose, that are affected by the choices that we make? That because of the way we are made, because of our genetic code and the response of the genetic code to conscious choices...how many things are there in that category? Well, how do children learn to love? Is it because there is, in our genetic code, a little switch that makes love possible? And is it possible there is a window in which we *learn* to love? That kind of makes you want to hug your kid when you think about it, doesn't it? And I suppose one day we will learn that that is where the switch is thrown that teaches the child to love.

But didn't we already know that? I would have thought that we knew that right from the start. And I was just reading this morning an article in a paper that talked about how suicide is much higher among teens who have experimented with sex than it is among teens who have not. In fact, girls are *three times* as likely to suffer depression if they have had sex as they are if they have not. And, as I read the article, I was struck by the fact that, while it was recognizable what was going on, no one seemed to want to really *deal* with what was going on. And what's going on is children are being taught *all kinds of stuff* about sex and they're not being taught a thing in the world about *love*. Girls are having sex with boys

for, what, attention? For being held? For...I don't know? Why are they doing it? Because it's exciting? Because they feel that they'll be rejected if they don't?

But the fact of the matter is: love is a part of sex, and sex must never be given when there is no love. But how does school *teach love*? They don't seem to be very well-equipped for it, do they? They're now beginning to teach abstinence programs in schools, and some of the people who believe in...I don't know what they believe in...but they're fighting the abstinence program. The fact of the matter is, though, that the abstinence program probably doesn't necessarily deal with the other side of the equation, either, because how do you weigh and measure love? How do you get in the laboratory, put it in the scales, and say, "Now, here's love and here's no love, and here's how you manage the difference of them"? They're intangible, and yet we now know that there are functions in the genetic code of man that make it possible for us to love, where other creatures really don't.

So what are we supposed to do with that, and how do we teach our children to love? Do you suppose it's possible that it's like speech—that when we are very young, when we are very small, there is a window of opportunity to learn how to love? And if we miss that opportunity, we may never get it again.

It breaks my heart to think that three times as many teenage girls who have had sex are attempting suicide as those who haven't. (It breaks my heart that *any* of them are.) And you really wonder at the dynamics of it. Is it because they went into the experience expecting love and found none, and they said, "Well, is this all there is to it? Where is this going to go? Is this what *love* is?" And, of course, that's *not* what love is. But how can they be told, and how can they be taught? How do children learn to love? And another side: How do children learn to hate? How do they learn to steal? How do they learn violent behavior?

You know, it's long been thought that mistreatment and abuse of children tended to create antisocial adults. Well, what we now know is that there is a gene that makes a person *susceptible* to mistreatment, and that gene is only found in a minority. Even then, only some of them become more antisocial with mistreatment. And they don't become that way at all if they are not mistreated. In other words: It's not the gene that makes them what they are. It's a gene that makes them a bit susceptible to it—a few of them—and then mistreatment takes them down that road. And the majority of them, who don't have this gene, do not become antisocial no matter how badly they are mistreated. And that simple fact explains an awful lot of the difference between people who go through similar experiences.

There *are* differences among us, but everyone has a choice. Paul, writing of the Roman said this. It's in chapter one, verse 17:

Romans 1

NIV

¹⁷ For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written [*Habakkuk 2:4*]: "The righteous will live by faith."

¹⁸ The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness,

¹⁹ since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.

Now, listen to what Paul says:

Romans 1

NIV

²⁰ For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine

nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.

Now, I don't believe, frankly, that he is talking about merely a neutral, ordinary man with no special knowledge of any kind—he just simply looks at creation and sees, “Oh, there's God”, right there in creation. I don't think so. I think it's because of something God has placed in man to *look for God* and understand God from the things that are made, leaving him with no excuse for the way he lives his life.

Romans 1

NIV

²¹ For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.

²² Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools[.]

He has a lot of bad things to say about people who went down that road, and in the end he said we get to the place to where:

Romans 1

AKJV

³² [...] knowing the judgment of God, that they which commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but have pleasure in them that do them.

They not only *do* the things, they take their entertainment in them. Now, people aren't *made* this way. They aren't made wicked, evil, rotten to the core. They are *grown* this way. There's an old, familiar scripture (and I'll give you odds you've heard it before). It's in Proverbs 22, verse six, if you want to look it up. It says this:

Proverbs 22

KJV

⁶ Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.

Now, a lot of people look at that and they say, “I don't get it. I trained up my child. I worked hard on my child and he still went the wrong way.” Let's look at this from a different angle. Training a child does not take away his choices, but it does make changes in his genes that will stay with him all through his life. If you walk into those windows, if you open those doors and walk through them, if you take your opportunity to teach your child, you are going to make changes in his *fundamental makeup* that will always be with him through life. It may not take full effect until he's an old man, but it will always be there. Just as you have to take advantage of that window to learn language skills, so you have to take advantage of the window to learn moral and ethical skills, as well—and to learn about God, the meaning of life, and where all this is *finally* going. And I think this is what salvation, in the end, is about.

For many of us, the twig was bent a long time ago and we grew up twisted. It would take a miracle to put all that right again. And the fact is, it's a miracle that God holds out to us. There was a man named Nicodemus, who came to Jesus by night and said to him:

John 3

KJ2000

² [...] Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that you do, except God be with him.

³ Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto you [*Which is another way of saying, "I'm going to tell you the truth."*], Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

You realize what he's talking about? He is talking about giving a man a complete, new start; a new shot at everything; a healing of all the old wounds; a straightening out of all the old, twisted trunks in the body. And it's something that, in the end, cannot be weighed. It cannot be measured. It can't be quantified. *It's a miracle.* And it's a miracle that turns losers into winners.

Until next time, I'm Ronald Dart.

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