



Raising a Pandemic Baby

By Oyunga Pala



I return from a two-week trip away from home to find my little daughter at the door as I enter the house. I bend down to give her a hug but she is not too keen on it. I was expecting her to grab my leg and declare how much she missed me while I was away. Instead, she is only briefly interested in my suitcase before she runs back into the living room. I hear her mother calling after her, “Come back baby, come say hello to Daddy properly.”

I have come to accept that my daughter is not like those kids on YouTube videos who wait expectantly behind glass doors and start jumping up and down in excitement at the sight of their fathers returning home. It is one of the first lessons I picked up as a parent. Children are different. My relationship with my children is not predicated on the things that please me. The power to parent lies in accepting your children as they are.

I remember when my daughter was only seven months old and we were moving to Amsterdam from Nairobi. We arrived at Schiphol airport in the early morning and made our way off the plane. I had her strapped to my chest in a baby carrier, facing forward. A middle-aged white woman in front of us in the queue kept turning back and making faces at her, trying to tease out a laugh, a smile, something. My daughter did not respond to her gestures. I could not imagine what was going through her little brain and wanted to tell the stranger to tone it down.

“She just got off her first transcontinental flight. She is calibrating new information.”

When she started going to day-care in the new country, her teacher said to me one evening when I arrived to pick her up: Your daughter does not show much emotion. Which I thought was odd. She was one of the few foreign nationals in her class, and I noted the emphasis placed on having her integrate into Dutch schooling life. We arrived home and my little girl burst through the door bubbling. At night, at 2am, alone in her cot, my wife and I heard her giggling. She giggled sporadically and then broke into a long laugh. It was a laugh of joy, drawn from her belly. One of the most beautiful sounds to wake up to in the middle of the night.

She was only a year and a half old and she had already learned how to close up in those spaces where she felt unseen.

In my former life, as a single man and a mainstream newspaper columnist, I used to be that chap who gave great parenting advice. Now I am the father of two little girls, trying to raise them in Europe, the epicentre of the pandemic, and I realise now why no one follows their own great advice. Experience has transformed my attitude to one of subordination to the insights of children and the young people around me.

Know Your Children As They Are is a book by Caleb Gattegno, one of the most influential educators of the twentieth century. The book begins with this statement.

Parents love their children. But do they understand them?

We are often blind to the emotional needs of our children just as our parents were blind to our needs as children.

Time was the one positive consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Gaining it. The city of Amsterdam shut down and the authorities encouraged us to work from home. We used to complain that our busy lives did not allow us to spend quality time with our children. Now, for some fathers, the lockdown period was like extended paternity leave.

The first month of the hard lockdown late in the autumn of 2020 required radical adjustments. Cooped up in the house for long hours, I worried that my daughter was watching too much television. Our outdoor life was limited. We were still too new in the country and did not yet have a circle of friends with children. The Dutch winter too was new to us.

I started taking my daughter to the park daily. It was usually empty and when there were other parents, they kept to themselves. We were living in a 1.5-metre-social-distance society. I would trail my little girl around the playground, on the lookout for littered hazards like discarded cigarette butts, examining what grabbed her attention. Sometimes, there were other children in the park, with only adults as their playmates. This was new for me but by following my child's lead, I began to focus on what held her interest and worried less about my expectations of the ideal environment for child's play.

Charlie, a good friend of mine, once said over lunch, "Fatherhood is confrontational," and I found myself mulling over that statement. Indeed, I have had to confront my own past and the need to dominate as a parent.

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I initially approached parenting with a written script of best intentions. Parents of multiple children confess that the first child is usually a bag full of nerves. We over-index on all fronts, trying to be model parents. When the second baby arrives, we are a little more resigned to the reality and worry less about what we cannot control.

Dr Gabor Maté is the author of *Hold On to Your Kids: Why Parents Need to Matter More Than Peers* and a respected voice in the fields of addiction and trauma. Drawing from his own personal experience of fatherhood, he talks about the challenges of fathering his son. Not having known how to be there for his son, he reasoned that he needed to wait for his children to become older so that he could engage with them intellectually.

Dr Maté asserts that the first three years of a child's life are foundational. How many fathers are absent in the early stages of infancy only to return bearing gifts and engaging in remedial parenting in the hope of catching up on the lost years over a series of fun weekends? Dr Maté explains that children have an attachment need and in the absence of a nurturing adult to latch on to, they tend to fill the void with a peer group.

So, how do we remain aware of the emotional needs of young children in the midst of a pandemic that is upending our lives?

I have had to recall my past and return to a time when everyone believed Armageddon had arrived. I survived a previous pandemic in my youth - HIV/AIDS, the bogeyman that loomed over my teenage years. My parents never talked about AIDS in the way we talk about COVID-19 to the young. AIDS was a private illness but its manifestation and the death that often ensued were public. HIV/AIDS came shrouded in moral language and its victims, it was said, were merely succumbing to the inevitable consequences of their immorality. But when the innocent started to die, loyal and faithful wives and newborn babies, everyone became a victim. The culture of shaming matured into one of silence and benign denial.

In the death notices in the obituary pages of newspapers, a phrase would become commonplace:

“Passed away after a long illness bravely borne, surrounded by loving family members.”

We became the generation of condoms, safe sex, VCT centres, (Voluntary Counselling and Testing) and HIV statuses, fated by our hormones to be a high-risk group. Condoms, once associated with family planning clinics, became at once symbols of responsibility and immorality in a society that warned its young to suppress their urges and abstain from sex. But most people did not trust the government and were unwilling to accept that an encounter with a virus that had no cure meant an inevitable death.

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The HIV/AIDS pandemic was exacerbated by the storm of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) imposed by the IMF and the World Bank to mitigate the economic crises of the 90s. The late Malawian intellectual Thandika Mkandawire compared the economic period that Africa endured under the SAPs in the 90s to the Great Depression of 1930s America. I lived through the collapse of the Kenyan economy, the disruption of the middle class, the decline of standards in higher education and the pulverisation of the public health systems. Citizens were hung out to dry and poverty became widespread as the middle class crumbled under the weight of a new disease.

By the end of the 90s, HIV/AIDS had wrought devastation in all areas of our lives.

Rural villages in my home county of Siaya became haunted spaces where frail grandmothers raised orphaned grandchildren. The funeral came to occupy a central place within the community, a place from which to draw strength in the midst of perpetual grief. Three decades on, it is near impossible to find in my country a family that was not affected, either directly or by association. Yet, in the beginning, no one thought it would last this long.

Our parents did not talk to us about how to live. They only whispered about the shame of dying.

I check my twitter notifications. Polycarp Otieno, also known as Fancy Fingers, is about to drop an album. Polycarp is the fourth member of the popular music group Sauti Sol, an afro-pop band from Kenya. The other band members, Bien-Aimé Baraza, Delvin Savara Mudigi and Willis Chimano have distinct, established vocal styles. The affable Polycarp built his reputation as the band's talented guitarist, content to be in the background. No one had heard him sing outside a chorus. Polycarp has broken his decade-long silence with a delicately crafted debut album titled *Father Studies* about his journey through fatherhood, dedicated to his son. His voice is rich and his lyrics are stirring.

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I was drawn to the image on the promotional poster. Polycarp has his son, Sulwe, strapped to his back using a length of cloth that we call *shuka* in Kiswahili. It is a traditional African woman's way of carrying a baby, common among mothers of young children. That image of Polycarp and his son is one of the most symbolic and sincere pleas for conscious fatherhood that I have seen.

Polycarp emerged out of silence determined to tell a different story about fathering and celebrating his commitment to the role.

The COVID-19 hard lockdown was for many first-time Kenyan fathers an unofficial paternity leave. With social life cut off, men had to confront the reality of a baby-nurturing life that we had been socialised to conveniently evade using our professional and social obligations, in keeping with our gendered roles as providers.

The young fathers that Polycarp represents appear to be navigating this crisis differently. They are talking about fatherhood loudly, with their chests. They are using art to make sense of it and writing their own stories about the ongoing pandemic. They have simply refused to turn to despair.

I wish our parents had been open to the power of the arts in a crisis.

I hear more young Kenyan men talking about the kind of fathers they would like to be, moving away from the previous standard of exaggerated machismo to one of conscious parenting. It is true what they say: Hurting people, hurt people. One has to be willing to break the cycle.

This generation of babies born during the coronavirus pandemic will have to unearth the stories of grandparents and parents who died suddenly and were hurriedly carted away in body bags to be disposed of as potential biohazards by men wearing protective hazmat suits.

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Unlike in the AIDS era, this should not be the single story of the pandemic. Young people should continue to re-imagine their worlds and paint them in radiant colours.

Polycarp Otieno seems to embody Mother Teresa's enduring message,

"If you want to change the world, go home and love your family."

I know that I too have to navigate this epoch differently as I prepare my children to meet the future. One that is bound to be occupied by new variants, lockdown syndromes, pandemic exhaustion, vaccine boosters, racial profiling, testing and death.

But I remain hopeful, because our artists are not sleeping through the pandemic.

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