

December 2021

## Letter to My Children at the End of the World

Devon McCauley

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.csumb.edu/csp>



Part of the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

McCauley, Devon (2021) "Letter to My Children at the End of the World," *Culture, Society, and Praxis*: Vol. 13 : No. 2 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.csumb.edu/csp/vol13/iss2/5>

This Main Theme / Tema Central is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Journals at Digital Commons @ CSUMB. It has been accepted for inclusion in Culture, Society, and Praxis by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ CSUMB. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@csumb.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@csumb.edu).

# Letter to My Children at the End of the World

**Devon M. McCauley**

Dear Chris and Katie,

You just spent a year in locked in your house with all your schoolwork now homework, because the grown-ups could not put politics aside long enough to save the lives of over half a million people. In one browser window, your teacher is guiding you through a lesson detailing the “successes” of the Civil Rights Movement, and in another, you are participating in a Discord discussion about the numerous TikTok or Instagram videos you just watched about the most recent police shooting of an unarmed and unresisting Black person. Later you might click through an asynchronous lesson on medical pioneer, Jonas Salk, and wonder about the current anti-vaccine protests and the stories of pharmaceutical companies that refuse to sacrifice profits to save lives. At the end of each of these difficult days, I am left wondering: How, in the face of these profound contradictions, will you decide whether to bring your own children into this confounding world?

When I tell you that parenting is just one of many options for your life’s path, I am not telling you anything you do not already know. In fact, you are not wrong to think that it is strange that the generations that came just before you did not always feel free to choose whether or not to have kids. They were simply taught that healthy girls would begin bearing children in their teens, and while boys were given a few years to go off and fight in wars or get an education, they were expected to come home, get married and settle down with a family as well. However,

our ideas of what constitutes a family have always been evolving in response to our environment (Hareven, 1991). Today, families take all kinds of forms, some with children and some without. If the opportunity to have children seems more like a burden, I want you to know that this is a decision that is yours to make rather than a circumstance that life foists upon you.

My mother used to tell me that my face was a “map of Ireland,” and genetic testing overwhelmingly supports her observation. Although your ethnicity is a vibrant tapestry with threads from all over the world, mine is monochrome. While I have had my own hardships in life, I have not experienced the racism and xenophobia that plagues so many millions of people. I see and experience the world from a position of privilege, and I am shielded from many painful truths and granted certain advantages. I believe that I have a responsibility to act against the inequality that benefits me disproportionately and that I must use my voice and my position to elevate others. As my children, you share in that privilege, and I hope that you accept the responsibility that comes with it.

My own childhood left me without the tools I needed to be the mother I imagined for

Devon McCauley is an undergraduate student in Social and Behavioral Sciences with a concentration in Social History at California State University Monterey Bay. Devon welcomes inquiries at [dmccauley@csumb.edu](mailto:dmccauley@csumb.edu).

## Culture, Society, and Praxis

you, but I believed the hype of the diaper and Disneyland commercials. I thought that marrying your dad ensured my success as a mother. He would earn the money, and I would make our home with it. I could never have imagined how the power of your presence would obliterate all fiction in my life. When I held you in my arms, I needed to be more and to do better for you.

Parenting is the hardest thing I have ever done. If I had prepared my education and my finances better, and if I had processed my childhood trauma, I would feel more confident in my role as a mother. I would not be working a job I hate with people that do not appreciate me, cursing myself for giving to them the time and energy that I would rather use to support you. I would get lost with you in your stories without being distracted by the bills I need to pay. I would enrich your education with travel and other edifying experiences. I would provide a home that belongs to us and does not hang on the charity of landlords. I would know that you will not have to take out astronomical loans or work a fulltime job or do both when you should be free to focus on your college education when that time comes. I would know that if we were struck by disaster, I would have the means to take care of us. I do not have these things though, because I did not look past the fantasy of the American Dream when I was making the decision to bring you into the world. I did not pay attention to reality and thought that luck and love would get me through.

If you make the choice to have kids of your own, there are a lot of things you will need to consider; some are obvious, and some will be surprising. The easily anticipated matters tend to be financial and logistic: food, shelter, education, recreation, etc. In your quest to provide all the opportunities available to your child, you may struggle to not overschedule your kids or allow them to overschedule themselves. Between sports,

music, Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, Student Council, and a myriad of other enrichment activities, kids are hard-pressed to find time for homework let alone leisure activities that are essential for their healthy emotional development (Auhuber).

Contemporary culture is awash with ways to diminish confidence and independence in people, young and old. Between peer pressure, social media, and sophisticated marketing, young people especially struggle to understand what is expected of them as they step away from the oversight of parents and guardians. They can easily fall into traps set up to ensnare them in promotional strategies devised solely to establish and maintain consistent revenue streams (Shrubsole). That is frightening, because while the United States Supreme Court has recognized corporations as human, I am hard-pressed to find a corporation that recognizes and respects the humanity of the consumer more than the income that the consumer generates (Totenberg).

To combat commercial exploitation, you will want foster in your kids a healthy intellect, and for that you will need to provide a quality education. Regrettably, our nation is not a world leader in this area (DeSilver). Unless you acquire significant wealth before having children, you will likely live in an area with a strained public education system. Like your dad and I did with you both, you will want to get your child approved to transfer to the best school in your district. If you are successful, you will then have to arrange transportation for your child every day, because that school will be out of walking distance, and school bus routes are unlikely to serve you. Even the best public school though might fail to meet your child's needs. In our case, we were fortunate to have areas in the budget where we could sacrifice for the cost of tuition and supportive family to make up for our financial deficiencies.

## Culture, Society, and Praxis

While the list of responsibilities in raising children is long and detailed, there is one key point that stands overlooked by many. In her powerful 2014 TEDMED Talk, Dr. Nadine Burke Harris details how childhood trauma is a silent epidemic stretching across all socioeconomic groups and that “early adversity dramatically affects health across a lifetime” (Harris 14:25). While I would love to believe that you do not carry personal trauma, no one really escapes it. The divorce that divided your family is a traumatic event. Being bullied or cruelly manipulated by a friend is a traumatic event. “Code Red” and lock down drills are traumatic events. If you do not address your own emotional well-being, you will not have the tools necessary to foster the healthy emotional development of a child. There are echoes of my own experience as a first-time mother in a study in *Frontiers in Psychology* that states, “Unresolved trauma or loss may interfere with a mother's expectations and perceptions of her child, as well as her ability to sensitively respond” (Iyengar). I grieve for the opportunities I missed as a mother still mired in trauma, but I also celebrate the resilience we have all shown throughout the trials we have faced together. For your own health and a healthy attachment for you and your children, allow yourself to heal the brokenness within you, but above all, be ready to fail and practice a kind of love that looks like accountability and self-forgiveness.

I wonder sometimes how many generations thought that they were watching the world come to an end. I imagine that you might have felt that way, huddled in the class supply cabinet with Annika or Jhovanni during a second-grade school lockdown. The world is a spiraling hell storm, and your generation may be the last one that has a chance to stop the destruction before it is too late. You guys have a rough road ahead of you. You can already see that some of the ways you are affected by the failures of your recent ancestors will be found in economic, social, and environmental spheres, but that is just the tip of the iceberg. You are both growing up fast, and there will be many things that I forget to tell you and that you will have to figure out on your own. My hope is that you have a chance to learn and understand enough before you begin feeling overwhelmed by your circumstances. Nothing could have prepared me for how much I would love you and enjoy your company, and while I try very hard to not allow regret to play a dominant role in my life, I struggle with it when I think about how different things could be for us. So, I ask that, before you make a decision about having kids, you consider what the reality of raising children looks like for you and whichever path you take, take it confidently and always know that I am here with everything I have to love and support you.

Love, Mom

### WORKS CITED

- Auhuber, L., Vogel, M., Grafe, N., Kiess, W., and Poulain, T. Leisure activities of healthy children and adolescents. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 16(2078). <http://dx.doi.org/10.3390/ijerph16122078>
- DeSilver, D. (2017, February 15). *U.S. students' academic achievement still lags that of their peers in many other countries*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/02/15/u-s-students-internationally-math-science/>.
- Hareven, T. K. (1991). The history of the family and the complexity of social change. *American Historical Review*, 96(1): 95-124. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2164019>.

## Culture, Society, and Praxis

- Harris, N. B. (2014). *How childhood trauma affects health across a lifetime*. TEDMED 2014. [https://www.ted.com/talks/nadine\\_burke\\_harris\\_how\\_childhood\\_trauma\\_affects\\_health\\_across\\_a\\_lifetime](https://www.ted.com/talks/nadine_burke_harris_how_childhood_trauma_affects_health_across_a_lifetime).
- Iyengar, U., Kim, S., Martinez, S., Fonagy, P., and Strathearn, L. (2014). Unresolved trauma in mothers: Intergenerational effects and the role of reorganization. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 5(966). <http://dx.doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.00966>
- Shrubsole, G. (2012, March 12). *Marketing and advertising that respects children's rights*. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/marketing-advertising-respect-childrens-rights>.
- Totenberg, N. (2014, July 28). When did companies become people? Excavating the legal evolution. *NPR*. <https://www.npr.org/2014/07/28/335288388/when-did-companies-become-people-excavating-the-legal-evolution>.