

# **Losing and Using our Children**

Amy Laura Hall

Assistant Professor of Theological Ethics  
Duke Divinity School

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From requests for child-free restaurants to a preference for child-free worship, we are a society increasingly inhospitable toward the young. Our "new" economy colludes with this trend in a telling way. "Innovative" human relations experts recommend bowls of candy, nerf basketball, and company birthday parties so that employees can recreate with other adults during the ever-expanding workday. Thus enjoying their productivity, adults can easily avoid contact with the next generation. Our post-modern church "experience" offers us a similarly comfortable setting. After dropping our offspring at the well-appointed nursery, parents may enjoy the "show" of contemporary worship without interruption. Non-parents and parents alike can thus fully appreciate a baptism without any unwanted noise from the baptized. We may dine, fly, work, worship, and play without the cries and demands of dependent life. We all may remain productive, preoccupied, focused and, in a dangerous way, irresponsible.

A society's capacity to be hospitable toward our children is a test of its ability to be hospitable toward dependent life in general. Christians should be troubled by this trend, given that we are called by Christ to care for "the least of these."

I believe that our generation should be particularly concerned given that we face, at this time, a dangerous combination of willful neglect and use. Complaints about ill-behaved, interrupting, unproductive children are gaining force at the same time that we are celebrating the use of embryos, fetuses and children for medical research. While the medical-industrial complex becomes increasingly interested in the usability of our young, a generation coming of age declares its perpetual youth and independence from vulnerable life. We will not care for our children, we will make use of them. Our generation is becoming not only unapologetically negligent. We are becoming predatory.

While I was a doctoral student at Yale, a strange French film called "The City of Lost Children" became a cult classic among the twenty-somethings there. Yale students saw their

own lives reflected in the plight of the abandoned and stolen children in the film. I believe that we should indeed see ourselves in the film, but not merely by identifying with the abandoned toddlers. In this surreal dystopia by Jeunet and Caro (1995), we have some important clues to our predicament, our vice, and what is required of us. For the villain who preys on children is, himself, a lost child, who justifies his vampirism by means of his own abandonment. And, by the end, we discover that the children only escape harm when the heroine of the film agrees to grow up.

The movie opens with a sequence that builds, slowly, toward terror. A young child watches, wide-eyed, from his crib as Santa Claus emerges from the chimney and then, carefully, pulls out and winds up a small toy. After smiling with delight at the toy, the child turns again toward the chimney and watches, with confusion and then fear, as another Santa squeezes out of the chimney, and another, and another, until the room is teeming with Santas, toys, and a distorted, defecating reindeer. The scene ends as the child grabs his plush bear and runs, crying desperately, for the door. His screams become the screams of a wizened, angry man as the scene shifts to a complex laboratory. We there discover that the crying child is connected to the screaming man, each one's skull hooked up to a metal clamp and system of wires. The man attempts in this way to extract the dreams of the child. But, it seems, the child's dreams all morph into nightmares, leaving the child afraid and the man enraged. This two-part segment ends with the man whacking the plush bear against the contraption and then throwing the bear out to sea. We wonder that he did not smash and discard the child.

This menacing film consistently teeters right on the edge of infanticide. Moving out from the laboratory, we discover that it is surrounded by a larger setting of danger. While the angry old man (named Krank) quite literally abducts children, this is a place which, in many ways, loses its young. We discover that all of the adults are either predatory or preoccupied in this ominous, dark city. Nocturnal cyclops track and capture toddlers to trade for technology and a pair of conjoined women command a band of pickpocket children whose names - like Newt and Miette (crumb) - indicate their vulnerability, all while sailors, dance girls, harried housewives and shopkeepers willfully keep about their own work and play. We also find the scientist who genetically engineered Krank ("a masterpiece genius with no soul") cowering below the sea, unwilling to go up and face the "dangerous" world he helped to construct. What Miette says of

one stolen toddler sums up the fate of each child in this place: they are all "too little to bother." The film ends only as Miette herself risks growing up in order to save the other lost children.

Consider these "advances" in medical research with, as a sort of imaginative backdrop, Jeunet and Caro's negligent and predatory city:

Working diligently, scientists have discovered several "promising" uses for brain tissue extracted from aborted fetuses, as well as for the "totipotent" cells of human embryos leftover at fertility clinics. Both sources for medical advance are "too little to bother," save the fact that they are worth our taking the time and effort to remove that which can cure disease. The industry insists that such uses will not lead to abortion for money, and that we will never create embryos for the sole purpose of taking their stem cells. But we may find "compelling" reasons to justify these changes in our current regulations. There is no reason why we will not redouble these efforts to eliminate dependence and suffering. Note also that some reputable scientists anticipate our using embryonic life to "cure" the aging process itself. Nascent life thus becomes, ironically, the fount for perpetual youth.

Some scientists are working toward the creation of human clones that could serve multiple medicinal purposes: as donors for ailing siblings, to alleviate the depression of grieving parents, to solve infertility predicaments unsolvable through presently available procedures. This goes on with apparent disregard for the fact that in pursuit of the usable clone we will create many "faulty" clones who will suffer pain and then die or be put to death. The fact that many scientists are "worried" by this research is small consolation. Look up how researchers reacted mere decades ago to the artificial creation of human embryos. Many researchers and bioethicists acknowledge that it is merely a matter of the time required to perfect the procedure before it becomes an accepted means for producing donors and replacement or "wanted" children.

The pediatric pharmaceutical business is exploding, advancing by way of research on children who stand to gain no medical benefit. For a monetary reward and a nifty certificate of participation, children endure prolonged IV's, physical examinations, and MRI's. We justify this violation of the Nuremberg Code with the claim that we are learning much to help children in general. But many researchers admit that this research will benefit primarily the pharmaceutical companies who sponsor the protocols. And note that much pediatric research serves primarily our cultural demand for productivity and independence. We are ever more willing and capable of drugging our children into compliance. Note, for example, the frequent ads in parenting

magazines for no-drowsiness cold relief that enables working parents to send our sick children to daycare or school. I predict that we will soon see adds for that ultimate drug of pediatric compliance, Ritalin, interspersed with Saturday morning cartoons, thus truly including our young in the "benefits" of our new, pharmaceutically dominated era.

In their film, Jeunet and Caro create a setting worthy of Dickens' London, and the effect on us should be similar. Exposing the precarious fate of children in his time, Dickens inspired one generation actually to come of age in order to care for and protect its children. If Dickens' generation had seen themselves only as poor little Oliver, they would not have enacted laws to prohibit the use of children to further the aims of industrialization. They realized rightly that they must identify with the adults in the novel.

"The City of Lost Children" is a cinematic dystopia for our own time, writing with bold brushstrokes the map of our own trajectory. While we assiduously avoid contact with and responsibility toward those who are "too little to bother," research scientists frighteningly insist that the littlest among us are in fact worth our attention, and use. Scientists are using nascent and vulnerable life in order that we might realize our dreams. Still thinking ourselves as victims and/or the rightful recipients of a technological utopia, we may champion the use of vulnerable life as a way to accomplish the pleasurable, comfortable life that our society encourages us to expect. But Krank's effort to steal from children their youthful dreams turns into a nightmare, and his nightmare is becoming our own. Contrary to the message of our therapeutic culture, it is time to discover "the adult within." *Oliver Twist* and "The City of Lost Children" end as a vulnerable heroine risks herself to save a child. Both Dickens' Nancy and Jeunet's Miette are, in some sense, lost. But neither one uses this as an excuse to turn in on herself and avoid responsibility. Nancy and Miette both have the courage to grow up. Will we?