

Chapter X: “Chips All In” Parenting

David Brooks’ critique of Amy Chua suggests a broader problem with “enlightened authoritarianism.” Who defines “enlightened”? Benevolent dictators are, theoretically, wonderful. But absolute power generally corrupts absolutely, so dictators are seldom benevolent. And even well-intentioned smart people make big mistakes. (The Titanic wasn’t designed to sink on its maiden voyage.) So, actual dictatorships usually don’t work out too well.

Some dictatorial parents, like Amy Chua, provide their children a reasonably balanced childhood, though, as Brooks notes, such parents often over-stress certain dimensions while neglecting others. But some dictatorial parents go for broke, pushing their children to become the world’s greatest something-or-other. Pushing your chips “all in” is dangerous enough. But pushing your child’s chips “all in” seems reckless. The results can be devastating, even when your child “wins” your bet.

Tiger Woods’ dad drove Tiger to epic golf heights, but Woods subsequently tumbled from Mount Olympus to become the punchline of Leno and Letterman jokes, arguably because Woods lived such an unnatural, unbalanced childhood. Did Woods’ father “succeed”? Is Tiger Woods happy with his life?

How about Andre Agassi? An Olympic gold medalist and eight-time Grand Slam champion, Agassi made hundreds of millions in prize money and endorsements. But Agassi “always hated tennis ‘with a dark and secret passion’ because of his overbearing father” who was “violent by nature” and used his child to hustle money from suckers, including NFL legend Jim Brown.¹ As a toddler, Agassi was forced to hit anything and everything with ping pong paddles taped to his hands. At 6, he was practicing tennis 240 to 300 minutes daily; the next year, he was battling a machine his dad customized to fire balls 110 miles an hour at him.² Even after Agassi became rich, successful, and a heart-throb pop star, “hating tennis was a deep part of my life for a long, long time,”³ and he was often a depressed wreck. “I don’t ever remember really not hating [tennis]... I was just living in a hell.”⁴ He dropped out of school in 9th grade, used crystal meth throughout most of 1997 because “I get an undeniable satisfaction from harming myself and shortening my career,”⁵ and lied about his drug usage to escape suspension. After he hit bottom personally and professionally, Agassi decided to give tennis another chance – for himself, not his father – and rose to the top of tennis again. Whereas Agassi’s father always considered school a

waste of time that could be spent productively on the tennis court, Agassi clearly regrets missing out on an education because he founded an award-winning charter school, Agassi Prep, “conceived from Andre’s belief that nothing has a greater impact on children’s lives than the education they receive.”⁶

The morning after I wrote about Agassi, former Spanish tennis star Arantxa Sanchez Vicario was in the news exploding the myth she had a happy family life and accusing her parents of stealing virtually all of the \$58 million she earned from tennis: “The myth of a united and happy Sanchez Vicario family was just that: a myth... [My mother] is a woman of a strong character, for whom discipline and victory were above all else, while I on my side might have needed some loving words... My father has enjoyed full authority to decide on and to manage my wealth... I was given a monthly sum the use of which I informed him about... They left me with nothing.”⁷ Sanchez Vicario says her “faithful companion” was a stuffed bunny: “He was the only witness of the many tears I shed day after day, when going to bed, before sleep overcame me. Then, with my pillow wet with tears, I fell asleep with him in my arms, seeking a certain protection and above all, consolation.”⁸

Yo-Yo Ma’s parents come from the “enlightened authoritarian” Amy Chua school of parenting and forced their son to become a virtuoso cellist, except they preferred violin while 4-year-old Yo-Yo wanted to play the big bass. They compromised on the cello. Ma says, “I had a very focused childhood. You know, it was music, there were languages, there was, you know, theory, harmony.”⁹ Asked at what age he first appreciated playing the cello as *his* life interest rather than his parents’, Ma replied “49.” Nearly a half century after taking up a bow, Ma finally embraced the cello after realizing the opportunities being a world-famous cellist gave him to pursue his many other interests, including interacting with people, teaching, and exploring other cultures. Ma has since taken his cello in fresh directions with his Silk Road Ensemble, Appalachia Waltz, and Goat Rodeo Sessions. The world is lucky to have Ma, but he spent decades questioning his parents’ single-minded vision of his future.

If childhoods that lead to international acclaim and immense wealth can feel like mixed blessings, how horrible it must be to have your parents devote your childhood to a single activity and fall short! For every Woods, Agassi, and Ma there are hundreds, possibly thousands, whose efforts to fulfill their parents’ dreams floundered somewhere along the path to greatness. “Robo QB” Todd Marinovich was bred to play quarterback in the NFL: “Marv Marinovich, Todd’s father, created a monster basically from the cradle. He was doing calf exercises with Todd when he was an infant.”¹⁰ Marinovich got very

close – starting his USC career with a Rose Bowl victory – before seeking refuge from the pressure in drugs, just as Agassi did. Despite cocaine problems that got him suspended from USC, he was drafted by the Raiders but was later tossed out of the NFL for more drug violations. A 38-year-old Marinovich was arrested with “a gram of powdered methamphetamine, a metal spoon and a hypodermic needle.”¹¹