

# **Catching On**

**With A Little Help From  
Karl de Schweinitz**

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*For George  
on the occasion of his  
Seventy-fourth Birthday*

While I was cleaning the garage, I came across one of the books I had preserved for my archive when we moved Mother out of the house where we had all grown up. It was a slim volume called *Growing Up: The Story of How We Become Alive, Are Born And Grow Up* by Karl de Schweinitz. I had kept it mainly because I regarded it as emblematic of what a joke my own sex education had been, and I was delighted to discover that my sister, Betsy, who is eleven years younger than I, also remembered being given it to read in the hope that it would forestall any awkward conversations. I think my own son knew more about the facts of life after pre-school than I did when I was 18.

I believe Mother acquired the book in response to urging from my older sister Charlotte that my brother Dwight and I must not be forced to navigate high school in complete ignorance. Given the fact that Charlotte was good looking and a bit of a rebel as well as popular and extremely bright, I assume she had ample opportunity to learn on the fly. The guys she dated were definitely cool and no doubt more than willing to fill in any gaps in her formal education. I suspect that she felt that our older brother, George, who was two years “ahead of himself” in school, was several years behind himself (not to mention his peers) sexually, and she did not want Dwight and me to miss out on the fun. George later made his own contribution to the cause with an anonymous gift subscription to *Playboy*, which Dwight and I initially assumed was a practical joke from some of the more spirited and liberated members of the football team.

Perhaps Mother consulted with the clerk in the bookstore. I doubt that she would have gone so far as to consult a professional (medical or otherwise), but in any event I am sure she felt that she had found just the thing. As the blurb on the book jacket advises, “*Growing Up*, by Karl deSchweinitz, is for the child himself to read, and may be given him whenever it is believed wise to forestall the wrong vocabulary with the right one.” I have only a vague recollection of the moment when she gave it to me. I am sure there was no contextual commentary or any other form of explanation provided with it. I don’t know whether Dwight had already been given it as assigned reading and, so far as I can

recall, he and I never discussed it or anything remotely related to its subject matter.

The principal sources available to me at the time, aside from my dreams and other information being provided directly by my own body, were the Boy Scout Manual, the dictionary, and overheard conversations (mostly dirty jokes which required interpretive skills I lacked). The most intriguing passage in the Boy Scout Manual – actually it was I believe the Explorer Scout Manual for the more mature Scout – was a warning about the evils of masturbation; but as I recall it was couched in sufficiently coded language that it provided no useful practical information and scant theoretical knowledge. A dictionary is only useful, of course, if one knows what to look for, but I do remember consulting the huge Funk & Wagnalls dictionary we had on more than one occasion. The problem of course is that if one starts at the wrong end of the path, for instance inquiring about the meaning of “prostitute,” one’s imagination is abandoned on a fairly wide playing field. It may have been Funk & Wagnalls that was the source of a long confusion about the usefulness of prophylactics in the prevention of the disease and whether the rest of the world agreed with my mother in categorizing pregnancy as a disease.

So I was probably grateful when I was offered a chance to read all about it in the privacy of my own bedroom. Actually I am fairly certain that by the time I was given the book, my younger sister had already been born, providing a crash course in human anatomy that prepared me for some of the material presented by Mr. de Schweinitz. I was not too interested in his rhapsodies about flowers nor in his tip-toeing excursions into the barnyard. I knew chickens laid eggs and that eggs would hatch into baby chicks if you didn’t crack them and scramble them before they had a chance. We had a chicken yard complete with strutting rooster and a foul smelling shed where the hens deposited their wares, but I never saw any hanky-panky going on. We were careful never to have more than one gender of any kind of pet so I was spared the sight of dogs doing it, not to mention my pet goat. I do seem to recall that a cat we had got knocked up by a neighbor giving us the burden of a litter in need of homes, but that was not an occasion for any explicit discussion of the kind of behavior that can result in such a situation.

My main recollection of reading Mr. de Schweinitz’s opus is the vague sense of horror which coalesced around a personal conclusion that surely it was not actually necessary to insert any

part of my body inside some part of a woman's body in order for sperm to swim upstream and do its job. Surely, please god, you just had to get close enough to enable it to find its way inside. I'll let *you* tell *me* what that was all about.

I have been impressed to discover that *Growing Up* is something of a classic in sex education literature. It was first published in 1928, perhaps a little too late for my mother to have benefitted from it directly, and it went through four editions, remaining in print for something like 45 years. Our copy is a 22<sup>nd</sup> printing from 1946 and is a revised second edition initially published in 1935. Karl de Schweinitz was a social worker and academic whose specialty seems to have been social security history and policy. Among his other books are *The Art of Helping People Out of Trouble* (1924) and *England's Road to Social Security: From the Statute of Laborers in 1349 to the Beveridge Report of 1942* (1943). He served in a variety of administrative positions for social services organizations and was director of the School of Social Work at the University of Pennsylvania. He was a professor at UCLA when he retired in 1958, but he continued writing well into his seventies. His wife, Elizabeth was a collaborator and is credited as co-author on some of his publications, including what seems to have been his final work in 1961: *Interviewing In Social Security – As Practiced in the Administration of Old-Age Survivors and Disability Insurance*. They had two children, and he published *Growing Up* at the age of 41 while he was general secretary of the Family Society in Philadelphia and his son Karl Jr. was 8.

Since the book is addressed to “children between the ages of six and twelve” (according to another quote on the jacket) there is no personal reminiscence from the author about how he came to write it. No doubt his involvement in social work exposed him to all manner of ignorance and its consequences, but the tone of the book is definitely more that of a anxious and sensitive parent than of a campaigning social worker out to cure the world's ills. He surely found his ideal reader in the father who contributed another telling blurb for the book jacket:

When my eleven year old boy finished reading *Growing Up* he said, “Dad, every question I had in mind has been answered by this book.”

Call me jaded, but I sense that the fine art of book marketing with shamelessly fictitious jacket blurbs has not evolved much since 1945. Perhaps this is just a bit of creative copyediting. The

satisfied customer might have reported that after he had his son read the book, he asked if it had answered all his questions, and the son replied, "Sure, Dad." (i.e. "Don't worry. You don't have to get involved in helping me come to terms with my body.")

My first impression on rereading *Growing Up* from a slightly different perspective is that it is a noble, if somewhat misguided and inappropriate, gesture. Clearly the good professor wants to present human sexuality as "natural" in every sense of the word, and he wants his reader to share in the wonder inspired by the workings of nature. It is obviously a product of its times, and one does not have to try too hard to imagine the spectre of Freud haunting the minds of educated parents in 1928 while they also struggle to free themselves from the prudish repression of polite bourgeois society. The anxiety swirling beneath the surface of the text, however, seems to me to run deeper than that. In trying to imagine how a child's mind works and to couch his discussion in terms accessible and acceptable to the mind of a child, de Schweinitz perhaps betrays more of his own anxieties than he might have realized.

First of all, why is it necessary to approach human sexuality by walking backwards? Instead of starting with flowers and gradually working our way up the chain, why not start with how people do it and then take notice of how the same processes are found in living forms all the way down to the flowers? Why not start with love and end with microbiology? Why is it helpful to start with photos of a bull moose and his mate rather than an image of a human couple embracing? Does it really make a kid more comfortable to realize that he ate an unborn baby chicken for breakfast when all he thought he was having was a fried egg? Does it really help to associate sperm with gop that is thrown away when a male fish is whacked open with a knife in preparation for dinner? Flowers are certainly beautiful, but humping dogs are rarely a source of poetic inspiration.

Part of the answer to this may be that the "birds and bees" storyline is rooted in an agricultural culture where a child is much more likely to have seen animals copulating in the barnyard than is to have seen his parents passionately kissing, much less rolling in the hay. I don't have the feeling, though, that de Schweinitz is speaking to the farmer's daughter. I'm not actually sure who ate all that shad roe with which he assumes the child will be familiar. I certainly don't think I've ever had it.

Obviously I do not think it is productive to associate elements of sex with the food chain. I was very aware as I read the book this time of reminders of the brutality of nature. The only missing touch is a description of the mating habits of the praying mantis. But that's just me...

De Schweinitz seems to start with the assumption that the child is petrified. In this he is surely closer to Freud than he would have wanted to admit. The child is frozen peeping through the keyhole. Karl is trying to distract him before he sees too much, by saying, "It's OK; it's OK. Don't look at that. Look at the pretty flowers and listen to the birds singing." What is interesting is that he makes no effort to head off the other traumatic experience when the young girl thinks she is bleeding to death or a boy is mortified by the fact that he seems to be wetting his bed, not to mention the occasional boy who fears he needs medical help because his penis is swelling and hardening. (I was actually one of those boys and was only saved by an overheard conversation, which gave me the impression that this might be a "normal" or at least common physical phenomenon.) One of the replacements for *Growing Up* called *What's Happening To My Body* at least confronts these issues head on and seems to still be going strong 25 years after its initial publication. (This was the resource that enabled me to carry on a family tradition of avoiding any live father-son discussions about sex.)

In all fairness to the author I should acknowledge that his intended audience is clearly pre-pubescent so there was no need for him to deal with menstruation or nocturnal emissions, which clearly would be alien and unnecessarily frightening to a seven or eight year old. He is trying to get a head start and perhaps is not so much assuming the child is already frightened as susceptible to being frightened if his first exposure is couched in the "wrong vocabulary." He concedes that someone who does not understand what is going on might easily conclude that the rooster and the hen are "fighting." Perhaps a precocious seven year old will be able to extrapolate from this insight to put a proper spin on the fights he observes between his parents. He definitely did not get to me in time; but then I don't recall ever seeing my parents kiss or hug much less wrestle, and I certainly knew a fight when I heard it.

What exactly would be the wrong vocabulary? All the barnyard talk reminds me of the classic *Disneyland Orgy* centerfold cartoon in *The Realist*. You want it to seem "natural"

but somehow too much emphasis on animal behavior backfires. That may be one reason he likes fish and songbirds. They seem cleaner and less gross. But of course he has to bring in the dogs and cows and even a bull moose and an elephant in order to deal with the realities of mammalian mating. When he reaches the top of the heap, he is quick to insist that men and women alone among all god's creatures mate with understanding and love. He admits that even humans often don't understand what they are doing when they seek a mate, but somehow the meaning adheres to the behavior even without any consciousness of it. Animals, on the other hand, don't know and don't love. Which brings me back to the question of why one would choose their behavior as the paradigm for understanding our own. I was particularly amused by the fact the he included the example of the sun fish in which the male assumes responsibility for the nest and "usually drives the mother fish away."

The wrong vocabulary is presumably any frame of reference in which sexual activity is not simply a means to procreate and establish a family. I wonder if de Schweinitz really believed he could compete with the Jesuits in his ability to determine the development of a human mind by taking over it early enough. Could any amount of pre-pubescent indoctrination produce a teenage boy whose mental development was able to stay far enough ahead of his testosterone levels that he truly experienced sexual arousal as the desire to have a family? And would any female of the species be sufficiently attracted by that kind of attitude to enable him to realize his dream? Unfortunately we have seen enough evidence from certain cults that the answer to both questions is probably yes, but I don't think de Schweinitz's vision was that clear. The Christian tradition was at least aware that there was something else going on that needed to be suppressed if not exorcised for sex to be purely a means of procreation. I can't help but feel that de Schweinitz was just wishing it away.

Did de Schweinitz actually understand the horror I felt at the prospect of being inside another body when I already had enough trouble being inside my own? Why isn't it sufficient to say to a kid, "You can't imagine how good it feels to make love?" To play the game of "Tell me what the best feeling you can think of is...No, it's way better than that." Why, in fact, does de Schweinitz say nothing about how good it feels? He insists on love but never mentions pleasure.

Some of the jacket blurbs suggest that *Growing Up* is



best shared by reading it aloud to the youngster. By the time I was deemed ready for this information, I had long outgrown the wonderful experience of being read to. The way in which my father read Uncle Remus stories to me is one of the fondest memories of my childhood, and I even appreciated the rare occasions when Mother attempted to comfort me when I was sick by reading to me, even if she knew better than to attempt Uncle Remus and her tastes in fairy tales was not as good as Daddy's. The notion that either of them would ever read something to me about the "little pipe or tube ... called the penis" is grotesque even in retrospect 55 years later. Perhaps genitalia are called "private parts" with good reason. I may have wanted or needed a lot from my parents that I did not get, but sharing such a moment does not seem to be on my list. There may even be a place in the cesspool of my consciousness where such an act would fit into an expanded definition of inappropriately invasive sexual behavior.

On the other hand for me as a parent to remain silent on issues pertaining to sexual development on any grounds was clearly a cop-out. Giving a child a book to read is, of course, a form of communication. Some copy on the front of the book jacket insists that *Growing Up* is "simple enough for a child over seven to read for himself." As I recall at seven I was still working on the further adventures of Alice and Jerry or a simplified rendition of the story of the Billy Goats Gruff. I suspect that I might have had a little difficulty with some of the technical vocabulary in *Growing Up*, but I realize grammar school education had already deteriorated a great deal since 1928 just as apparently normal cuisine had.

Whether giving a child the right book can serve to correct for a decade of unspoken communication regarding the child's body and the physical dimensions of human relationships is another matter. I have always marveled at how a guy could grow up being proud of his penis or even having so much ego invested in its size. Clearly that guy got something I didn't as a kid, and I doubt seriously that it arrived in the form of verbal communiqués from either of his parents. Maybe I'm wrong; maybe there are dads who talk to their little boys about the importance of the penis in defining ones worldview. The problem is that just as a man may not understand what he is doing as he seeks his mate, the chances are he has no clue what he is telling his child every day about his body. It is fairly easy to imagine how a child's imagination is formed these days by the overwhelming barrage

of images assaulting him at every turn, but fifty years ago it seems to me the process was a bit more subtle. Insidious may be a better term, but in any event I have no idea what actually made me feel the way I did about my body and why it was so impossible for me to talk about it that I could share a bedroom and bath with a brother for my entire childhood and never once talk to him about girls or sex.

Obviously *Growing Up* did not do the trick for me. It may have brought something closer to the surface in the horror I felt, and perhaps it did in fact inform me about the reproductive functions of the penis and vagina; but it did not dispel the aura that made my friends at school hesitant to share a dirty joke with me nor did it in any way prepare me for the wonderful moment in my second year of ballroom dancing school when I realized that it felt good to have my arm around a girl.