

In Praise of the Power of Love

By Art Carey in column, "This Way Up" ([Philadelphia Inquirer](#) – March 26, 2006)

When T. Berry Brazelton was a student at Princeton University, he was a member of Triangle club, the musical theater troupe. Since Princeton was all-male in those days, female parts were played by men in drag.

Brazelton had a knack for it. And when the Triangle lads would go on tour, young lovelies would gaze longingly at Brazelton and ask, "Oh, Berry, how do you do women so well?"

"Why, that's easy," Brazelton would say, with his charming Texas drawl, "I just watch and study you."

It may have been a pickup line, but it set the pattern for Brazelton's remarkable career. The man who has been called "the most celebrated and influential baby doctor since Benjamin Spock" has many talents, but foremost among them is his ability to observe.

Through keen and patient observation, Brazelton has revolutionized our understanding of babies. They are not inert lumps of clay. They are not identical. To an amazing degree, they come into the world with their hard drives preprogrammed. And from the get-go, they are resourceful, clever, determined survivors who will let you know just what they need.

Brazelton was in town recently, and I had the privilege of spending several hours with him. I was eager to meet him, not because I needed advice on toilet training or how to get my child to sleep, but because I regard him as a "public elder" and wanted to tap his wisdom.

Brazelton is 87 and a delight. He has a grin that makes you grin, a laugh that makes you laugh. Like the late Fred Rodgers, he exudes palpable goodness. He's a carrier of glee.

He lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he continues to teach. He's a professor of pediatrics at Children's Hospital Boston, the primary pediatric teaching hospital of Harvard Medical School, and a professor of psychiatry at Brown University. He has written 40 books on pediatrics and child development (including the best-selling [Touchpoints](#)) and has worked tirelessly to promote the wellbeing of children, parents and families around the world.

His accomplishments and honors fill pages, but when you're with him, he makes you feel like the only important person in the room is you.

"I've had a lovely life," he told me. "I grew up in Waco, Texas, and got out of there and have been on the run ever since."

Brazelton's talent for dealing with children was encouraged early on by his French grandmother (growing up, he felt neglected by his mother, who doted on his younger brother). At the age of 9, Brazelton knew it would be his life's work

Now he has six grandchildren of his own.

"Virtually every study of child development shows that youngsters lucky enough to have loving grandparents are destined to be winners," Brazelton has written. "All research on single parents shows that the future of children is correlated with support from grandparents."

I invited Brazelton to pretend to be my grandfather and give me advice. He declined, asking me instead about my son, Ted, a senior at the University of the Arts.

"He's a kindhearted, gentle boy," I said. "I worry about the world roughing him up."

"You can't protect your son from life's hard knocks," Brazelton said. "But you can help him develop a sense of resilience."

Brazelton knows about resilience. His father was a superb athlete. On the way to the Olympics in 1912, he struck his head while practicing a dive. The injury damaged his thyroid, destroying his sense of taste and smell.

His health steadily declined, and he died of a heart attack at age 49, when his son was only 19. Suddenly, the boy who had grown up privileged had to work to pay his way through college and medical school.

Brazelton used the word again when he described some of the atrocities suffered by children in Yugoslavia and Cambodia, places Brazelton has visited on relief missions.

“How can you maintain your optimism in the face of such inhumanity and horror?” I asked.

“I look beyond the tragedy,” Brazelton said, “to the resilience of people.”

At a relief camp in Zagreb, a frazzled psychologist came up to Brazelton and asked, “What do you do when you burn out?”

“I go see a new baby,” Brazelton said. “And that gives me hope, absolute hope.”

Brazelton is still in awe of the “miraculous competencies” of the newborn. They display a “raw hunger for making it with the people around them.”

Babies are instinctive masters of philotropism – a turning toward love. That drive never abates, Brazelton said. No matter what our age, we all yearn for attention, appreciation, acceptance, approval.

“What’s the best thing parents can do for their children, and grandparents can do for their grandchildren?” I asked.

“Love ’em, love ’em, love ’em, and love ’em,” Brazelton said. Shower them with “unmitigated love ... love where you don’t hold anything back or wish things were different.”

Brazelton did not bestow any sage aphorisms or philosophical nuggets. At first I was disappointed. But then I remembered this: Twice during our conversation, Brazelton copied down things I said that he thought worth remembering. I was flattered and impressed.

Then I realized: Brazelton is so good with children because he’s still a child himself, full of wonder, awe and joy. “I love people, he told me. “I need them more than they need me.”

Brazelton is still curious, still watching and learning, still seeking, humbly, to understand.

And so, wise professor that he is, he conveyed what I was after not by telling but by showing.