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# The QI Book of the Dead

John Lloyd and John Mitchinson

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## Introduction

*This is a city of shifting light, of changing skies, of sudden vistas.  
A city so beautiful it breaks the heart again and again.*

ALEXANDER MCCALL SMITH

George Street in Edinburgh is one of the most elegant thoroughfares in one of the best-designed cities in the world. Wherever you stand along it, at one end can be seen the green copper dome of a Robert Adam church called St George's and, at the other, a massive stone column called the Melville Monument.

Loosely modelled on Trajan's Column in Rome, it is not quite as tall as Nelson's Column in London but it is equally striking and certainly more beautifully situated. The architect was William Burn (1789–1870) but he had more than a little help from Robert Stevenson (1772–1850), the great Scottish civil engineer, better known for his roads, harbours and bridges – and especially for his daring and spectacular lighthouses. According to the metal plaque near the base of the column, Stevenson 'finalised the dimensions and superintended the building of this 140-foot-high, 1,500-ton edifice utilising the world's first iron balance-crane, invented under his direction by Francis Watt in 1809–10 for erecting the Bell Rock lighthouse'.

## CHAPTER ONE

**There's Nothing like a Bad Start in Life**

*Whoever has not got a good father should procure one.*

FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

**O**ur early experiences shape our character and the way our lives unfold, and a poor start can, of course, blight a person's prospects forever. But there is a more mysterious path that leads from truly dreadful beginnings to quite extraordinary achievement. As the Canadian novelist Robertson Davies put it: 'A happy childhood has spoiled many a promising life.'

Some of the most famous people in history had childhoods that were wrecked by a dead, absent or impossible father. We have chosen eight, but the list could have been twenty times as long: once you start to notice, they sprout up everywhere: Confucius, Augustus Caesar, Michelangelo, Peter the Great, John Donne, Handel, Balzac, Nietzsche, Darwin, Jung, Conan Doyle, Aleister Crowley – all of them victims of what psychologists would call 'inappropriate parenting'.

In the 500 years since his death, Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) has become our model for the solitary genius, the ultimate Renaissance man. The common wisdom is that, like Shakespeare, we know his work in great detail but next to nothing

about his life. This is a myth. In fact, and again like Shakespeare, we know much more about Leonardo than we do about the vast majority of his contemporaries. We know he was illegitimate, the son of a notary in the small Italian hill town of Vinci, and that his mother, Caterina, was either a local peasant or an Arabic slave (recent analysis of the artist's inky fingerprints tends to suggest the latter). His father, Piero, quickly married off Caterina to a bad-tempered local lime-burner\* and the young Leonardo found himself abandoned. His father went on to marry four times and sire another fifteen children; his mother also had new children of her own and refused to treat Leonardo as her son. Worse still, as a bastard, he was prevented from going to university or entering any of the respectable professions such as medicine or law.

Leonardo's response was to withdraw into a private world of observation and invention. The key to understanding his genius isn't in his paintings – extraordinary and groundbreaking though they are – but in his notebooks. In these 13,000 pages of notes, sketches, diagrams, philosophical observations and lists, we have one of the most complete records of the inner workings of a human mind ever committed to paper. Leonardo's curiosity was relentless. He literally took apart the world around him to see how it worked and left a paper trail of the process. This was first-hand research: he had to see things for himself, whatever that meant. He personally dissected more than thirty human corpses in his life-

\* Lime-burners heated chalk in a kiln to 1,100°C, to make quicklime, the main ingredient of mortar (the forerunner of cement) used in building.

It was an important but badly paid and dangerous job. The dust could cause blindness or spontaneously combust, producing hideous burns. On top of that, carbon monoxide released by the process made the lime-burners dizzy. It was an easy matter to fall into the kiln and be incinerated.

time, even though it was a serious criminal offence. This wasn't motivated by any medical agenda: he just wanted to improve the accuracy of his drawing and deepen his understanding of how the body worked (he ridiculed other artists' depictions of human flesh, saying they looked like 'sacks of nuts'). Out of the notebooks flowed a succession of inventions, some fantastical but others entirely practical: the first 'tank', the first parachute, a giant siege crossbow, a crane for emptying ditches, the very first mixer-tap for a bath, folding furniture, an aqualung, an automatic drum, automatically opening and closing doors, a sequin-maker and smaller devices for making spaghetti, sharpening knives, slicing eggs and pressing garlic. It was here, too, that Leonardo recorded his remarkable insights into the natural world: he was the first to notice how counting tree rings gave the age of the tree and he could explain why the sky was blue 300 years before Lord Rayleigh discovered molecular scattering.

Each page of the notebooks looks like an excerpt from a vast handwritten visual encyclopaedia. Paper was expensive so every inch was covered in Leonardo's neat script, all of it written back to front, which means you need a mirror to make it intelligible. No one knows why he chose to write this way. Perhaps as a left-hander he found it easier writing right to left; perhaps he didn't want people stealing his ideas. Whatever the reason, it's the perfect physical representation of his awkward genius. Leonardo didn't really care about fitting in or what others thought. He was a vegetarian when almost no one else was because he empathised with animals (one of his obsessions was setting free caged birds). Despite being commissioned by some of the most powerful grandees in Europe, he rarely finished any project he started. What mattered to him was to be free to do his own thing, to

achieve the control over his life that had eluded him as an abandoned child:

*It had long since come to my attention that people of accomplishment rarely sat back and let things happen to them. They went out and happened to things.*

Most of us picture him as he appears in the one authenticated self-portrait: a sixty-year-old, bald and bearded sage, a loner. But the young Leonardo was something quite different. His contemporary, the biographer Giorgio Vasari (1511–74), was unambiguous: he was a man ‘of physical beauty beyond compare’. And that wasn’t all, he was freakishly strong:

*There is something supernatural in the accumulation in one individual of so much beauty, grace, and might. With his right hand he could twist an iron horseshoe as if it were made of lead.*

And a charmer:

*In his liberality, he welcomed and gave food to any friend, rich or poor... his speech could bend in any direction the most obdurate of wills.*

But cross him and you’d have to deal with his ‘terrible strength in argument, sustained by intelligence and memory’. This is Leonardo the gay Florentine about town, who was anonymously accused (and acquitted) of sodomy, whose teenage pupil and companion was known as Salai (‘limb of Satan’), the precocious artist whose collection of pornographic drawings was eventually stolen from the Royal Collection in Windsor Castle, according to the art critic Brian Sewell, by a distinguished German art critic in a Sherlock Holmes cloak:

*There is no doubt that the drawings were a considerable embarrassment, and I think everyone was very relieved to find that they’d gone.*

The older sage and the racy young Adonis were both products of the same self-confidence. It was driven by study, by his attempt to come up with his own answers, the process he calls *saper vedere*, ‘knowing how to see’. ‘Learning’, he once wrote, ‘never exhausts the mind.’ It was what had sustained him as a child and there were times when it still gave him childlike pleasure. Once, in the Vatican, he made a set of wings and horns, painted them silver and stuck them on a lizard to turn it into a small ‘dragon’ which he used to frighten the Pope’s courtiers. On another occasion, he cleaned out a bullock’s intestines, attached them to a blacksmith’s bellows and pumped them up into a vast malodorous balloon, which quickly filled the forge and drove his bewildered onlookers outside.

Leonardo was brilliant, but he was not infallible. He didn’t invent scissors, the helicopter or the telescope, as is frequently claimed. He was very bad at maths – he only ever mastered basic geometry and his arithmetic was often wrong. Many of his observations haven’t stood the test of time: he thought the moon’s surface was covered by water, which was why it reflected light from the sun; that the salamander had no digestive organs but survived by eating fire; and that it was a good idea to paint his most ambitious painting, *The Last Supper*, directly on to dry plaster (it wasn’t; what you see today is practically all the work of restorers). Also, because his fame in the years after his death was almost exclusively tied to a small body of thirty completed paintings, he was to have almost no impact on the progress of science. It wasn’t until the nineteenth century that his notebooks – and their

revolutionary contents – were fully deciphered.

Leonardo died in France at the age of sixty-seven. The legend has it that his new patron, King Francis I, sat by his bedside, cradling his head as he lay dying. It's tempting to see this symbolically as the abandoned child finally getting the parental love he never had as a boy. But whatever he lacked, he had more than made up for it. As the king said: 'There had never been another man born in the world who knew as much as Leonardo.'



In theorising about the effects of a difficult childhood, Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) heads the field. He wrote a biography of Leonardo in 1910 based around a childhood memory Leonardo recounts in his notebooks:

*While I was in my cradle a kite came down to me, and opened my mouth with its tail, and struck me many times with its tail against my lips.*

From this Freud spins an extraordinary tale of repressed memories of the maternal breast, ancient Egyptian symbolism and the enigmatic Mona Lisa smile – and reaches the conclusion that Leonardo was gay because he was secretly attracted to his mother. This seems a tediously familiar interpretation now but was daringly original at the time. And, as always, Freud does make some good points. Moving on to Leonardo's relationship with his father, Freud suggests that, much as his father had abandoned him, Leonardo abandoned his 'intellectual children' – his paintings – in favour of pure scientific research. Leonardo's inability to finish anything and his childlike absorption in research is a way of insulating himself from the fear-inducing power of his father.

*There's Nothing like a Bad Start in Life*

If Freud felt he had found the key to Leonardo, it's probably because it was a key issue in Freud's own life. Freud wasn't abandoned by his father, but he felt deeply betrayed by him. Jacob Freud was a wool merchant whose business failed when the young Sigmund was only a toddler. This plunged the family into poverty and meant they had to move from the relative comfort of Freiberg in Moravia to an overcrowded Jewish enclave in Vienna. As the eldest of eight, Sigmund was exposed to the difficulties that poverty imposed on his parents' marriage. Young Sigmund resented his father's mediocrity, his inability to hold down a job, and the fact that he had been married twice before. A precocious reader, he soon found other heroes to act as surrogate fathers: Hannibal, Cromwell and Napoleon. At the age of ten he was permitted to name his younger brother, and chose Alexander, after Alexander the Great. Later, he would name one of his own sons Oliver, after Oliver Cromwell. In contrast, he adored (and was adored by) his mother, who called him her 'darling Sigi' even into his seventies. But this maternal devotion wasn't without its problems. When he was two and a half years old, 'his libido was awakened' by seeing her naked on a train. From this, Freud acquired a lifelong terror of travelling on trains. More importantly, he experienced at first hand the most notorious of all his theories – the Oedipus complex: the repressed desire to kill one's father and sleep with one's mother. For his final Greek exam at school, Freud chose to translate Sophocles' tragedy *Oedipus Rex*.

Sex was to dominate Freud's life, in one way or another, from then on. Studying medicine at the University of Vienna, his first major research project involved trying to untangle the sex life of the eel. Despite dissecting more than 400 specimens he was

unable to find any evidence that male eels had testicles. Had he done so, psychoanalysis might never have happened. Frustrated by fish, he turned to neurology and began to formulate the theories that would make him famous. This was important to Freud. As a young medic, he was still preoccupied with the childhood idea of himself as a hero. He told his fiancée, Martha, that he had destroyed fourteen years' worth of notes, letters and manuscripts to obscure the details of his life, confound future biographers and help establish his personal mythology.

It is often claimed, with some justification, that Freud reduced all human psychology to sex, so it is surprising to discover he didn't lose his virginity until he married at the age of thirty. By his own admission, his sexual activity after marriage was minimal (he was convinced it made him ill). His first crush, at thirty, was on the mother of a friend. He much preferred to keep women at a safe emotional distance: he was twenty-five before he had his first girlfriend. The closest he came to love during his first years of university was his friendship with another male student, Edward Silberstein. In fact, throughout his life, Freud had friendships with men, which look very much like infatuations or romances. Often, the intimacy would be followed by a dramatic falling-out and the breaking off of all communication. The most famous example of this is his relationship with Carl Jung. In the early days of their relationship they could spend up to thirteen hours a day walking and talking. But mutual paranoia started to creep in. Freud believed that Jung subconsciously wanted to kill him and take his place, and fainted on two separate occasions when Jung started talking about corpses. For his part, Jung suspected he had sexual feelings for Freud. In 1913 their relationship ended in an acrimonious split that left the 'brutal, sanctimonious' Jung

floundering in a near-psychotic state for the next five years.

For a man who theorised endlessly about the family, Freud was a peculiar and far from attentive father. Rather than talk to his children at meals, he would place his newest archaeological curio in front of his plate and examine it. (He once claimed he read more archaeology than psychology, and his office was stuffed with Neolithic tools, Sumerian seals, Bronze Age goddesses, Egyptian mummy bandages inscribed with spells, erotic Roman charms, luxurious Persian carpets and Chinese jade lions.) To educate his children about the facts of life, he sent them all to the family paediatrician. He believed so fervently that every son is driven towards deadly competition with his father that his own sons weren't even allowed even to study medicine, let alone psychoanalysis. In contrast, he exhaustively psychoanalysed his youngest daughter Anna, who shared with him her sexual fantasies and her forays into masturbation.

Freud suffered throughout his life from depression and paranoia. On the recommendation of his therapist friend Wilhelm Fleiss, he attempted to treat his mood swings with cocaine. Fleiss had elaborated a very dodgy theory that every illness, from sexual problems to disease, was determined by the bones and membranes of the nose and that cocaine could alleviate their symptoms. Freud was delighted with his early results, even encouraging his fiancée to take some 'to make her strong and give her cheeks a red colour'. After a close friend became seriously addicted, he reduced his consumption in favour of cigars, soon developing a twenty-a-day habit. It killed him eventually, but not before he'd suffered the agony of thirty operations for mouth cancer. Eventually, his entire upper jaw and palate on the right side were removed, and his mouth had to be fitted with a plate to allow

him to eat and speak. Undeterred, he would lever his mouth open with a clothes peg to wedge a cigar in. He died three weeks after the start of the Second World War, his doctor easing his passage with massive overdoses of morphine.

In the end, Freud got what he'd craved since his childhood – heroic status and universal fame – but not quite in the way he envisaged. Just as he saw Leonardo's life as a movement away from the sensuousness of painting to the intellectual stimulus of science, so he was convinced that he was, in psychoanalysis, moving away from the neuroses of art in order to found a brave new science. In truth, while anyone who participates in therapy today owes a great deal to Freud's methods, his grand theories don't hold water. He is best read not as an experimental scientist but as a detective novelist who pieces together bits of evidence to come up with a cunning, all-consuming solution. As a psychological storyteller, he has few equals and it's hard not to regret his decision to turn down Sam Goldwyn's offer of \$100,000 in 1925 to consult on a major Hollywood love story. But our real lives are rarely so neat as the stories we tell about them. As Voltaire once remarked: 'Men will always be mad, and those who think they can cure them are the maddest of all.'



Unfortunately Freud never set down his thoughts on another great genius with a grisly childhood, **Isaac Newton (1642-1727)**. Newton was the son of an illiterate Norfolk yeoman who could not even write his own name and who died four months before his son was born. At birth, according to his own memoirs, Newton was so small that he could fit into a two-pint pot and so weak he was forced 'to have a bolster all round his neck to keep it

on his shoulders'. His mother married the Reverend Barnabas Smith when Isaac was three. Smith hated him on sight and refused to have him in the house, so he was sent to live with his grandmother. Like Leonardo, he became isolated and withdrew into his own world, building and inventing. In Grantham, he frightened the townspeople by flying a lantern with a kite attached. He also made a sundial by fixing pegs to the wall of his schoolmaster's house. It became known as 'Isaac's Dial'. He hated school, where he was bullied and usually came near the bottom of the class. Some measure of his unhappiness can be seen in the long list of sins he made as a teenager: 'Putting a pin in John Keys hat to prick him', 'Stealing cherry cobs from Edward Storey' and 'Denying that I did so', 'Peevishness at Master Clarks for a piece of bread and butter' and the revealing 'Threatening my father and mother Smith to burn them and the house over them'.

Reverend Smith died when Newton was seventeen and his mother responded by pulling him out of school so he could farm their land. He hated farming even more than school. It bored him. So, asked to watch the sheep, he would end up building a model of a waterwheel while the sheep wandered off and damaged the neighbours' fields. On one occasion he was walking a horse home when it slipped its bridle; Newton didn't notice and walked back with the bridle in his hands. All he wanted to do was study. His mother gave up and sent him back to school, where he astonished everyone by graduating with top marks.

From there he went to Trinity College, Cambridge. His Cambridge career, while not a disaster, was hardly a sparkling success – probably because he spent most of his time reading Descartes, Copernicus and Galileo, men whose radical ideas fell