

## The Wisdom of the Children

After seeing the incredible effect of new babies on groups of adults in churches and the like, it occurred to me that we tend to think of ourselves as our children's teachers, mentors, guides to the narrow way of virtue and all. But, really, they have so much to teach us, so much. And not just the infants, but every stage of childhood and adolescence has remembrances for us, opportunities for us adults to revisit our emotions, our motivations in life. The inspirations, from our youth to our babies are ones we need to listen to and maybe even apply to our own journeys.

We begin—or began—all of us, in total innocence, all unknowing of the challenges we would face later in life. The trust, the radical self-centeredness of babies, are gifts of remembrance for us. They seem so helpless, don't they? But not really. It's just that they have total faith that they are loved and will be taken care of, unless they learn differently later. By virtue of being born from us, they create a bond that calls to our nurturing natures to take care of them.

Wouldn't it be fun to be able to cry and have people come running to figure out what's wrong, anxious to make it all right for us? Wouldn't it be so comforting to arrive at a destination enwrapped in loving arms and then be passed from one loving set of arms to another?

I have seen the effect of new infants on a church congregation. Intellectual folks who don't seem interested in fighting back tears during a sermon suddenly melt when given a baby to hold. Mothers and fathers beam with pride and sigh with relief as their little burdens are passed along and they get a break from care. Little huddles form after the service as the adults interact with these small wonders. And the babies? They absorb it all. They have no issues with receiving love, not yet. They know how wonderful they are, and how wonderful we adults are, even if we don't. Infants have no expectations—just unconditional love and trust. Just from their existence we know we are loveable and loved.

In celebration of the baby effect, I wrote this poem for the dedication of one of our little bundles of joy a couple of years ago. I think it illustrates the impact of infants pretty well:

### *Grace of Life*

Cornsilkened hair

Skin like angel breath

Touching, tasting

Embracing life's depth

Cooing baby babble

Sing a tune of light

A moon-shaft lullaby

For our dreaming night

You are here to love me  
She whispers and squeals  
Worship me as you are  
I will love you for free

Powder blue eyes  
See deep into our hearts  
I know you, she says  
I know Who You Are

Innocence takes flight  
On infant angel wings  
I'm not afraid to live  
So spread your own wings

And soar with me  
On thermals of grace  
Keeping our hearts open  
To see God's face

Ah, everything seems so idyllic then, until.....toddlerhood! The first cry for independence is heard, but it's not consistent yet. The small one is mobile, but still wants to know that we grown-ups are around to rescue her. "I can do it myself!" she says. "But I still need you." They want to wander on their own, but only to the kitchen, ok? They know what they want and they know how to get it.

How many of us are that assertive (in perhaps a more polite way than most toddlers)? All too soon we often get messages that we don't deserve to get what we want, that we can't do things by ourselves ("Oh, I could never learn to play the piano/sing/figure out differential equations.")

The toddler shows us that making messes is good, that making mistakes is how you learn. That when you fall down, you can cry if you want, but you get up and go play some more. And play, and play! Don't forget to play! And how do you learn? By repetition, of course! "Play again, Daddy." Watch the same Barney movie ten times to learn all the details. Put those shaped blocks in the holes twenty times, just to make sure it works every time. Most of us couldn't manage that level of concentration in repetitive work without dying of terminal boredom. How do they do it?

And then the next minute, our toddler is tired and has no attention span whatsoever. Living in the moment is the way to be (how many New Age gurus have told us that?). Toddlers are masters and mistresses of the everlasting Now. I want my food now, my blankie now, my toy now, because I'm still very important, not quite as important as I was as an infant, but I still have

incredible self-worth. How did so many of us adults lose ours? Watch a toddler and wonder. Listen to the toddlers and know our own worth.

Finally, we can let go of our little one and all the responsibilities of one-on-one care, just a bit, because we've got a preschooler, a discoverer of miracles, a magician in his own right.

Although this age group has to start seriously dealing with separation anxieties (happens to younger ones, too) and the growing feeling that maybe they won't always be taken care of, until about 4 1/2 they are uninhibited, natural beings. This was the age in which my son asked the question "Which is faster, Mommy, the speed of light or the speed of time?" Don't tell my son I told you this (he's sixteen now), but it's also the age that he loved to run around the house in the nude, on a regular basis. Wouldn't it be fun if we could do that, with the windows open?

Let's look through their eyes for a few moments, from a little snippet I found on the Internet:

When I look at a patch of dandelions,  
I see a bunch of weeds that are going to take over my yard.

My kids see flowers for Mom and blowing white fluff you can wish on.

When I look at an old drunk and he smiles at me,  
I see a smelly, dirty person who probably wants money and I look away.

My kids see someone smiling at them and they smile back.

When I hear music I love,  
I know I can't carry a tune  
and don't have much rhythm  
so I sit self-consciously and listen.

My kids feel the beat and move to it.  
They sing out the words.  
If they don't know them, they make up their own.

When I feel wind on my face, I brace myself against it.  
I feel it messing up my hair and pulling me back when I walk.

My kids close their eyes,  
spread their arms and fly with it,  
until they fall to the ground laughing.

When I pray, I say thee and thou and grant me this, give me that.

My kids say, "Hi God! Thanks for my toys and my friends.  
Please keep the bad dreams away tonight.  
Sorry, I don't want to go to Heaven yet.  
I would miss my Mommy and Daddy."

When I see a mud puddle I step around it.  
I see muddy shoes and dirty carpets.

My kids sit in it.  
They see dams to build, rivers to cross and worms to play with.

These little people may be the symbol of our healthiest self. They imitate our words and actions. If you are observant you will see yourself. This continues of course as they get older but they are more subtle and have more influences. They love adults and big kids and babies and old people. Everyone is their friend. They express anger and fear, joy and love, freely without thinking about how they should be.

I found this lovely story on the Internet, too, and it illustrates the budding altruist in our preschool children:

Author and lecturer Leo Buscaglia once talked about a contest he was asked to judge. The purpose of the contest was to find the most caring child. The winner was a four year old child whose next door neighbor was an elderly gentleman who had recently lost his wife. Upon seeing the man cry, The little boy went into the old gentleman's yard, climbed onto his lap, and just sat there. When his mother asked him what he had said to the neighbor, the little boy said, "Nothing, I just helped him cry."

Would that we had the eyes and heart of a preschool child!

And then they go off to the excitement....and pressure of school. Learning through play in Kindergarten, then hitting the reality of worksheets in the first grade. And then there are the lessons of the playground, lessons about friendship, about bullies, about being included or excluded.

Mom and Dad aren't there to run to anymore, at least not for six hours a day. There are teachers to please and things that you can pass....or fail. Limitations on wonder start to creep in. Many during this time start feeling a bit orphaned emotionally. There's a certain melancholy realism in some of the ages mixed with a continuation of innocent optimism. They become a little more like us. Yet they continue to work hard, try to find time to play, try out new activities to see what they want to be when they do grow up.

We can call them the sweet and sour years of life. They manipulate a lot in order to learn how to get their wants and some needs met. They are mini adults. They are learning to be human, which is somewhat sad really, in a way. What we might learn from them is to know that we are all indeed loveable and loved, and continue to pass that on even when our children seem too old for a goodnight kiss.

So this mixture of child and mini-adult heads into adolescence with some of her optimism gone and now the upheaval of puberty hits. The illusion that adults are gods has disappeared, it would seem. As much like toddlers as they are, early adolescents exercise a different sort of independence. Now we can't always be there to catch them when they fall.

You know what they've discovered, besides their own raging emotions? That the adults don't know everything. That the adults have actually messed up the world in a lot of ways. And you know what they're going to do? They're going to make the world better, somehow, some way, because they don't yet see all the limitations they'll face when they try to do that. The idealism, the grandiosity!

Yes, it can seem so unrealistic, so simplistic when we are faced with the complex problems of the world. But if we don't believe we can change things by fighting the system, then we will never take action and find out if we can. It's only when we decide, like these young people do, that the authority figures don't necessarily have all the power, that we can do something; it's only then that we make the attempt, no matter what the odds.

Without such cockeyed idealism and contrariness, no substantive change would be possible. Sometimes it's good to be a rebel. Imagine what it must have been like dealing with the young folk in that mythical Garden of Eden long ago. God had his hands full with Adam and Eve:

After creating heaven and earth, God created Adam and Eve.

And the first thing he said was, "Don't."

"Don't what?" Adam replied.

"Don't eat the forbidden fruit." God said.

"Forbidden fruit? We have forbidden fruit? Hey Eve, we have forbidden fruit!"

"No way!"

"Yes, way!"

"Do NOT eat the fruit!" said God.

"Why?"

"Because I am your Father and I said so!" God replied, (wondering why he hadn't stopped creation after making the giraffes).

A few minutes later, God saw His children having an apple break and he was not happy.

"Didn't I tell you not to eat the fruit?" God, as our first parent, asked.

"Uh huh," Adam replied.

"Then why did you?" said the Father.

"I don't know," said Eve.

"She started it!" Adam said,

"Did not!"

"Did too!"

"DID NOT!"

Having had it with the two of them God decided that the best way for them to learn was to make sure that Adam and Eve had children of their own.

Thus, the pattern was set and has never changed! ;)

I think the reassurance in this story is that rebellion may be built into us, and as annoying as it can be for us as parents, it has also been the attitude that has gained and preserved our human freedoms.

As our youngest adolescents begin to make their way through high school, they do end up tempering their grand dreams (almost a shame, really) as they struggle for the final separation

from the family they have always known. The call to freedom, the call to wander, to find themselves and how they want to be in the world becomes ever stronger. And they want to push against us to try out their wings. Scary for parents, and scary for them.

But they often have new focus later on in adolescence. We start to see them focus on who they want to be, a woodworker, a writer, a scientist, a musician, a teacher themselves. They see the limitations on what they can accomplish in the larger world, but they aren't as discouraged as many of us are. Not yet.

And we can remember, from their beginnings, with their whole adult journey ahead of them, that our journeys never end. That we can try to be something new, a scientist, a writer, a woodworker, a musician, a teacher. Why do we have to lose that sense of being able to learn and pursue what really jazzes our souls?

Children are our greatest teachers, our most visible mirrors. They are instruments of our growth just as we are to them. The difference is that they just are themselves and don't have an agenda of what they want us to be or learn like adults do. Perhaps there's a lesson in that attitude, too. Perhaps we have too many expectations, about them, and about ourselves.

Yes, we have responsibilities, to ourselves, our partners, our children. But our biggest responsibility may be to integrate the gifts that our children are here to remind us of, and make sure we are taking care of our selves, the way our parents were supposed to take care of us when we were young.

Let's think of something new we can try to expand our minds, our souls. Mine was poetry, yours could be anything that excites your mind or touches your heart. We are all trying on new ways of expressing who we are in this moment, let's try on another one.

Let's take action to change the world, even if it's just in our own neighborhood, our own homes.

Let's give it our best shot, whatever we do, knowing our limitations, but working toward our strengths, discerning what these are through experimentation, trying different things out.

Let's rediscover the emotional sensitivity of the elementary child trying to negotiate a place on the playground. Let's empathize with those who seem to be on the outside looking in.

Let's roll in the grass now and then, examine a butterfly at close range, lie back and see cloud shapes in the sky. Let's wonder why the speed of light and the speed of time might be different, or the same. Let's sit and help someone cry in silence.

And finally, let us remember, as we hold another new baby in our arms, the safety and innocence that we can still claim, if we choose. We are all, all right. And we all deserve love and a kiss goodnight.