

# Sacred Playgrounds



## For Parents & the People who Care for Children

A case for investing at least the same attention and resources to inspire and mentor adults, parents and childcare providers, as we now give to the care and education of young children.

When the soufflé flops we toss it out.  
We can't do that with kids.

If we want to become good cooks, we play, practice, try new things. The same is true for parents and the people who care for children. They need safe and inspired places to explore and discover what it means to take the future by the hand.

Childhood and adulthood are a continuum, a developmental journey defined by the experience of taking each step along the way. We master one stage only to find another filled with undreamed of possibilities waiting to be discovered. Mentoring healthy children is one of those doorways. It is the most complex, creative and transformative challenge anyone will ever face, far more demanding than winning the British Open. No one emerges the same as they begin. If so, they missed the point completely.

When learning to walk, ride a bike, swing a golf club, drive a car, just about anything, it helps to have mentors, people who model how to handle sharp turns. Parents and the people who care for children need models, playmates and safe environments (playgrounds) to master the art of relationship. Inspiration and support must be local, affordable, engaging and real.

Why? Because child development is dependent on adult development. If we don't nurture and support adults we aren't going to have healthy creative children. It is just that simple.

## Kids are Not the Problem Part II

Mentoring the people who care for children is not an option, not a luxury, something for a privileged few. It is our greatest challenge, our deepest responsibility. Beyond meeting the needs of children, supporting the people who care for them, neighborhood by neighborhood, all across the land, represents a magnificent opportunity for personal and social transformation. That's very exciting, very empowering, not at all what we've been told. If I have heard it once I have heard it a thousand times. "Look how inadequate parents are. Children are much better off in the hands of paid professionals."

I sat across the table from a fifty-year veteran of public education, a former superintendent of schools for two major cities and presidential advisor to more than one administration. He flipped through a stack of reports, colored red and blue, mostly red. Red indicated classes not reading up to grade level.

"The Huston school system is bankrupt," he said, "and by implication all others like it are bankrupt, too. The system is broken and the teachers aren't qualified to fix it." Computers, he said, are the only hope.

Isn't that just great! For generations we have been told to turn our kids over to institutions and then, when all four tires fall off the system like an old jalopy, they sell our kids to Microsoft. Selling computers to preschoolers and globalization are great for multi-national corporations but terrible for real people, families and local economies. In his book, *The Case Against the Global Economy*, Jerry Mander suggests a return to the local. For children, local means real parents and real community.

Stop pointing the finger at schools or at well meaning childcare centers. We (parents) are responsible for our children. Kids do come with instructions and we are it. Rahima Dancy spelled it out in her wonderful book, *You are Your Child's First Teacher*. Parents and the people who care for children are the most important people in the world. The future of the planet rests in their hands. Each is a teacher. What we teach is who we are.

Child development depends on adult development. The way we respond to our husbands and wives, the way we talk on the phone or speak to another in a moment of conflict, the way we hold our fork, the things we say about grandma when she is not around, the way we vacuum the carpet, the food we eat, how we pet or kick the cat, this is what Johnny learned in school today.

## Kids are Not the Problem Part II

Childcare, preschools and schools in general were never meant to replace parents. Ideally these important support systems are "playgrounds" for children, "play" being the optimum state for learning and performance and "ground" being a place or environment where expansive growth takes place. For adults, the same playgrounds are living laboratories. Children come to experience and explore the state of play, and in that state discover who they are. Adults come to these same "playgrounds" to discover and develop in themselves qualities and capacities they have never seen before. Both come to learn, to experience, and discover, each exactly what they need at their particular age and stage of development. The adult-child relationship, planted in a rich, supportive learning community, provides the playground for children and adults to discover and express through direct experience the miracles that they are.

Caring for children is a developmental, transformative process. Experience is the teacher. If we love our children, their presence in our lives, watching and learning from our every move, transforms the adult-child relationship into a spiritual practice, a wake-up call to live this moment as richly and fully as we possibly can for ourselves and by implication, for the future of humanity.

Beside my desk is a whimsical illustration. The text reads: "In my dream the angel shrugged and said if we fail this time it will be a failure of imagination and then she placed the world gently in the palm of my hand." This is our most important responsibility and challenge: to be, moment by moment, the very best we can be for ourselves and because children are watching, becoming what they see. We can not fail.

After all, what are friends for? They provide the safety and the challenge to be our very best and are there when we fall. By falling I don't mean failing. Falling is what blocks do when stacked too high. Falling means pushing the limits of our experience to discover something new. Falling means growth and learning, not failing to be perfect. We may fall all the time as parents, educators and childcare providers. Kids will laugh and help us up. We fail ourselves and children when we stop growing, stop being curious, stop living lives of passion and wonder.

## Kids are Not the Problem Part II

Forget being perfect. Forget feeling guilty for all the missed shots. Now is the moment you have waited for all your life. Make the most of it. And by doing just that, you naturally mentor and model the same qualities in children.

Imagine that the most respected person you know was coming to dinner. Traditionally that might have been the King, Queen or Pope. Today let's say it's the President of the United States or your mother in law (just kidding).

If the Dalai Lama were coming to dinner I would want a clean house, to prepare a great meal, dress nicely, be calm, intelligent, witty, be sensitive, aware and very present. Who is more important, my family or the Dalai Lama? Why would I do anything less for the people I really love than for a celebrity?

If I were being authentic, honest, I would want to be my best every day, out of care, respect and affection for the people I really love, not put on a charade to impress the neighbors. That is the gift that real love brings. Love awakens the best in us. Like a flower we blossom for the joy of blooming and the beauty of this experience encourages others to blossom too, but this is not the reason we shine.

No one can be their best without mentors and a support group. We all need great models, a playground and trusted playmates. Here it is again, the word "playmate." "Play" is the state for optimum learning and growth, a "mate" is a partner, friend, pal or companion fully invested in learning and growing together. Parents and the people who care for children need playgrounds, safe learning communities to stretch their limits, to fall and discover the miracle that they are, each and every one.

The process of becoming fully human is a true spiritual practice. Community is the playground, the sacred environment where this inward journey unfolds.

By sacred I mean this inward flowering. For example, art is not the object, painting, music or sculpture. Art is the inner experience one feels relating to the object. Sacred geometry, art, architecture or nature are creations specifically designed to evoke and cultivate this inner flowering.



## Kids are Not the Problem Part II

The very thought of coming to a sacred place awakens a different quality of body and mind. Medieval cathedrals were designed with this in mind. The outer awakes and develops the inner. The spiritual journey is discovering and unfolding the treasures buried within. Temples, mosques, churches and shrines are designed to awaken this inner journey. What greater expression of the sacred than your own reflection shimmering in the eyes of a child, or in the eyes of a stranger sitting next to you on the bus, or the feel of sand squishing between your toes?

To remember and see the sacred in all things, especially in ourselves and our children, we need community. The experience of belonging to real community wakes us up, as if the Dalai Lama were coming to dinner. The experience of being together in this sacred playground develops in each a quality of care and attention that is far less likely to drift back to sleep. Wakeful attention is the essence of true intelligence and we need real intelligence to meet today's real challenges.

If we don't raise creative, healthy, empathic, knowledgeable adults we aren't going to have healthy creative children. Mentoring and supporting adults who parent and care for children is not optional. It is not a luxury, something for a privileged few.

"The angel shrugged and said if we fail this time it will be a failure of imagination and then she placed the world gently in the palm of my hand."

Together we transform ourselves and the world.  
This is the moment. We cannot fail.

*Michael*

Next time: Who's parenting the parents and the people who care for children? Where does this happen? What does this look like? How does it feel?

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