

The Spriritual Practice of Parenting
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Children's Story

by Leo Tolstoy (from Robert Coles' "How to Raise a Moral Child," p.10):

I've told this story before, but as Julia reminded us last week, stories have power particularly when they are repeated and we come to know them by heart, to own them, to possess the ability to repeat them; when they become touchstones and emblems for things we know to be true. For me, this is one of those stories.

Here's how Tolstoy tells the tale:

The grandfather had become very old. His legs wouldn't go, his eyes didn't see, his ears didn't hear, he had no teeth. And when he ate, the food dripped from his mouth. The son and daughter-in-law stopped setting a place for him at the table and gave him supper in the back of the stove. Once they brought dinner down to him in a cup. The old man wanted to move the cup and dropped and broke it. The daughter-in-law began to grumble at the old man for spoiling everything in the house and breaking the cups and said that she would now give him dinner in a dishpan. The old man only sighed and said nothing.

Once the husband and wife were staying at home and watching their small son playing on the floor with some wooden planks: he was building something. The father asked: "What is that you are doing, Misha?" And Misha said: "Dear Father, I am making a dishpan. So that when you and dear Mother become old, you may be fed from this dishpan."

The husband and wife looked at one another and began to weep. They became ashamed of so offending the old man, and from then on seated him at the table and waited on him.

Sermon:

One of the congregations I visited during my sabbatical has four pledges it asks its members to make when they join the community. One of those is simply to commit to 15 minutes of quiet a day. They don't specify what you do with that time, but they hope you make that into the beginning of a spiritual practice -- by being silent, or meditating, or reading. The point is, at the very least, they want you to have some spiritual practice, even just these 15 minutes.

In our own tradition, as we began exploring last winter and will again this month, spiritual practices can take a lot of different forms. Today we'll look at one such practice. We'll explore the spiritual practice of parenting.

Early on when I was in the throes of adapting to being a new parent, the question was thrown out at a gathering I attended. The question was, "What was your spiritual practice?" I had to pause when asked that. You see, before Leila, I'd had a few, faithfully pursued spiritual disciplines. That changed after she was born, when those disciplines went out the window and routines of even basic self-cultivation seemed impossible.

So that day, I waited anxiously as folks went around the circle answering the question a colleague had posted. When it came round to me, I said, half in jest, that my new spiritual practice was Leila. It turned out, however, to be true for me.

I remember the day after Leila was born. Early that first morning, her doctor came in. I'd never met him. I chose him based on his reputation, and I had simply cleared with his office that he would accept our as-yet-unborn daughter into his practice.

He arrived even before breakfast that first day, in the quiet of the hospital's early morning, to see her. Although I'd never met him, it was clear from the get-go that he was not interested in me. After quickly introducing himself, he turned his attention completely on her. As unconcerned as he was with me was how focused and attentive he was to Leila.

It seemed amazing. Here was this glob of human baby, swaddled in the bassinet beside my bed, and it is safe to say there is no better word for what he did then than that he *beheld* her. He leaned in close and beheld her. He slowly unwrapped her covers and clothes, talking a little in gentle tones as he did so, and he was in her world only.

My mother says that doctors, good doctors, develop an intuitive sense. That after years of practice, they can know what is wrong with a patient without being able to say why. I thought about that when Leila's doctor looked at her. I thought about how he might be paying quiet, close attention to what signs there were for all the things he'd seen before that say a child is in danger or at risk. But I thought also that here was a man who was present to children in a way I hadn't ever seen quite like this before.

The way Leila's doctor was present to her has become a kind of refrain for me. I would often find myself doing the same thing he did, just watching her, trying to read her face, understand her spastic movements, and later the garbled sounds that were her first attempts to speak. My spontaneous spiritual practice became about being simply and completely present to her in the way her doctor had been that first morning. Of course, there were checklists of things to do, particularly after I returned to work, and the house had redoubled in its cry for care and cleaning, but I'd note the cry to multitask, breathe deeply ... and let it pass. This was my child. This was our holy child, and I was wondering, as Sophia Lyon Fahs says we do, "Where and how will this life end?" but even more, "How will this life unfold and to *what* end?" I felt like

the keeper of a cranky, floppy, mysterious, miracle child, and I still do. Moreover, I realize that being present to her is still my biggest, most enduring, regularly scheduled spiritual practice.

I don't think I'm alone in this. Child psychologist Wendy Mogel, in her book *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee*, sought a framework for understanding healthy family life. She doesn't find that framework in her training as a psychologist -- not entirely -- and so she finds herself turning back to the Judaism in which she was only very loosely raised. There she finds, in traditional Jewish teachings, a vision that feels whole and hearty. These are teachings that, for her, put these everyday relationships in more sacred light, and more clearly set them as part of a spiritual life and practice.

Mogel, for instance, takes seriously the idea in Judaism that all things are given to us on loan and what the obligations are on us for accepting that loan. She writes: "God has made everything available on loan and has invited us to borrow it to further the purpose of holiness. This includes our children. They are a precious loan, and each one has a unique path toward serving God. Our job is to help them find out what it is" (p.43).

Whether the God language resonates with you or not, in this model, part of our beholding of our children is to watch for whom it is they are becoming or are being drawn to become. Ideally that means we have some responsibilities to be midwives to their becoming, whether that is by opening up worlds of possibilities, encouraging them to take risks, weighing in with concerns about what might derail them, sharing our own experience, or helping to dust them off when they fall into one pothole or another on life's road. Hopefully it does not mean imposing our own sense of what life we wish we had lived, or would make us proud among our circle of friends or family. "You may give them your love, but not your thoughts," as Kahlil Gibran wrote. "You may house their bodies but not their souls, for their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams."

Can we just admit what maturity, for a moment, what incredible *spiritual maturity* is required to be this kind of parents? How hard it can be to be present to the children in our lives, observant, in touch with our own unresolved issues of pride or narcissism. How important to have worked on filling up our own emptiness so that we do not have to pass those hurting places on. Moreover, in a busy world, to make and protect the time to be simply in their company and on their timetable. Myla Kabat-Zinn, a practicing Buddhist, says, "We are becoming managers of our children's lives rather than really loving, connected human beings in relationship to [them]." Being the other kind of parent or friend to a child means choosing another way.

All of which is perhaps why to behold and be present to our children in this way is a spiritual practice and a *discipline*. It does not mean putting them at the center of our lives or *alone* there. Mogel, for one, is clear that children do not actually like being kings and queens (or despots) in our world. They have a sense that they do not belong there.

What being present to our children does mean is being countercultural about time and busyness and activity for activity's sake. It can mean doing a lot of personal work before they arrive, and even more after they arrive to be a mature spiritual companion to them. And it

certainly requires being present to ourselves too in loving and nurturing ways. You can almost never offer what you don't have, which of course is why loving our neighbor as we love ourselves can be both a blessing and a curse. *Our children, then, require that we love ourselves as a regular discipline of the spirit so we can love them well, too.*

The surprise for me is what amazing challenges and gifts come our way when we are present in this manner. We think we are being guides to *their* unfolding, and we realize quickly instead that they are the world's spiritual trainers, sent to shape our flabby selves up. For one, they keep us exercising the muscles of this free and responsible search for truth and meaning. They often begin that workout without notice, most often in a long line at the store right before the checker rings you up, or out of the darkness of what you thought was an uncontroversial G-rated movie you took them to. "Why did she die?" they ask, taking a break from their popcorn. "Where will she go when she dies? Why were those people so mean to her?" And the workout begins.

Moreover, it doesn't end. Why isn't life fair? Where was I before I was born? Why can't I see God? It is almost as if they have been coached on all the hard questions, all the ones we may have forgotten to ask or found inconvenient to struggle with and long ago laid aside. The most entrenched atheists are bound to be asked to dance with God before their kids reach the age of 5, and the most protective parents will realize children have fine-tuned antennae for suffering and the need to make sense of it. Welcome to the theological gym.

Many families admit when they first come here, in fact, that they were pushed to come because they are not sure how to answer those tough questions raised by the newest resident theologian. Some are hoping the expert can handle it. The truth is, however, as most of us discovered, our kids do not necessarily want the minister's or director of religious education's answers. They want our truths. And the questions they ask are only intimidating if we think we need to have all the answers, but we do not. We just need to show them it is okay to engage the question as best we can, help them find the vocabulary, and encourage them in this kind of questioning by sharing where our own has taken us. We have only to help equip them with conversations and struggles, some of which will take them a lifetime to wrestle to the ground.

So they get us to struggle to ask and answer again life's biggest questions, and there is one last piece of the spiritual practice of parenting that emerges out of our being present to the children in our lives. It is the challenge to have integrity, for one's actions to match one's words or values. Let me give you an example.

This summer, Leila and I woke one morning and went downstairs for our ritual cup of tea and hot chocolate (me the tea and she the hot chocolate). While we waited in the kitchen for them to heat, we both caught the movement of something dark and small across the living room floor. We looked at each other, and, instinctively knowing to be quiet, stepped into the living room.

There, seated in the middle of the floor, taking the room in, it seemed, was a small, dark gray mouse, maybe no more than 2 inches in its half-seated position. It sat there calmly,

seemingly taking the whole room slowly in. It didn't move or seem inclined to. So I walked around to our sun porch, took a black metal mesh wastebasket, and walked up to the mouse and caught him (or her) beneath it. It didn't react much.

Over the next hour, we stuck paper underneath the cage, put a bottle cap filled with water inside. We didn't know what he liked, so we stuck in a strawberry and a carrot and a square of cheddar cheese. The mouse sniffed at it all, walked around the cage, crawled up the side, but seemed rather calm. He also, we noticed, twitched a strange twitch. I stayed quiet about that fact, but Leila asked about it. After some persistence on her part, I came clean with what I thought might be going on: "I think he has some neurological problem, Leila." Not surprisingly, that didn't end the line of questioning, so I told her -- I told her about how there is poison behind the walls in the kitchen and basement and that I expected that our mouse had eaten some and was not doing well, and that he might die.

Despite some rallying and moments of spunk, our mouse did seem to slow down over the couple of hours we watched him, and that twitch was persistent. However, there was a complication. You see, my mother-in-law was due to arrive, and she is not big on animals and especially not mice. So I tried to talk Leila into releasing our friend into the wild, "where he could be free."

The problem is that our children, if we haven't messed them up, are natural logicians and natural empathizers. Nurturing that sensitivity, protecting it, even as we teach them to face life's hardships and harsh realities, is also part of the spiritual practice of parenting. So she asked all the right questions. Who would take care of him in the back yard? (No one.) How could we protect him from being eaten? (We couldn't.) And what would happen to the animal that ate him if they did get him; wouldn't they get sick too? (Right-o.) She was right. On all counts. If this mouse had inherent worth and dignity, if justice, equity and compassion were virtues and principles we lived by, if there was this interdependent web, we had no right to put said mouse out on the lawn to die or suffer alone or be eaten and poison the world.

So instead, we made Mouse Hospice at 11 Claremont Avenue. We also read up on the way mouse poisons tend to work and tried to entice our patient to eat the spinach that might have saved him from the poison-induced vitamin K deficiency that most likely is what ultimately took his life. Leila's grandmother had to stomach our mouse in the house, and Leila and I (*and I because of Leila*) did the right thing that day.

Whether by demanding a mouse find a safe place to die or by carving for us a dishpan when we have forgotten the law of love and need to be recalled to it, our kids remind us of what it means to live our own faith. If we are really about deeds, not creeds, they are little U.N. observers placed in our homes, looking for evidence of the justice and mercy we preach, calling us to the better angels of our nature, even when we don't feel particularly up to the task.

Parenting, of course, isn't done just by parents. Most of us would be far worse off if our mothers or fathers were the only ones allowed to parent us. What is true, though, is that anyone who cares for children in a particular way, whether we are their parents or members of their

extended family and circle of friends, finds themselves engaged in a rigorous discipline of spirit, rigorous in all the right ways.

From the fullness of the command to behold them and be present to their unfolding with love and not too high a hand, to responding to the challenging questions they ask about the biggest questions of meaning-making there are, to their call that our deeds match our words, holding us accountable for a life of integrity, they both challenge us to be our best selves and they are the best motivation there is to do good. After all, we want the future shaped by our best selves, don't we? And theirs too!

Every day in my life, someone on loan to me extends to me her small hand. She is looking for someone to behold and companion her. Every day that I take that hand and agree to be present to all of what that day's journey will mean for us, I recommit to what has become my most significant spiritual practice. It is as demanding and as lovely as any I've known. And I hope and pray we are both the better for it.

Amen.