

## SPIRITUAL PARENTING

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We enter into a sacred contract with our children, whether they arrive with great planning and intention, or they are unexpectedly delivered on our doorstep in the middle of our life. The nature of a contract, any contract, is to draw people together for a purpose.

Who are these children with whom enter into a sacred contract? We often get a glimpse of children's unique personalities even as infants. The way they respond, the things they are drawn to, what they evoke in us—all begin to demonstrate that they are their own unique beings right from the start. One mother describes how an unusual first meeting with her children helped her recognize even more deeply who they were. "I had a dream of who my children were before they were born. I saw these young adults and what they would be doing at that time. I saw my son as a young man working with a Chinese teacher. I didn't know what to make of this at the time, and I never shared the image with my son. Twenty years later I have to smile when I think of that image, because my son is now studying Taoist philosophy in China."

She continues, "I had these images of my children, and from this I could see, that they weren't *my* children. They were their own individual selves becoming my children. This was a revelation for me. And I think that one of the most important messages for parents is, 'Your child isn't just your child.' The questions then become, 'Why has your child come and how can you help them fulfill their purpose here?'"

When we recognize a child first as a complete spiritual being, rather than merely as our growing offspring, a powerful shift occurs, just as it did for this mother. What arises is respect and reverence for the uniqueness of this soul in front of us, even though he or she may not yet have fully ripened as a human. Our children do not belong to us; they belong to their own soul and calling.

Kahlil Gibran tells us, "Children come through us but not from us." We are the gateway through which children enter and explore the world, but they are not, merely "ours." Through some unseen cosmic agreement, we serve as their sponsors, hosts,

and guides. Perhaps our child is like a visitor from Mars or a teacher, an old friend or a new playmate, who soon becomes family.

It is important to recognize that biological mothers and fathers and legal guardians are not the only parents. We share in parenting as teachers, relatives, friends, and neighbors. Spiritual parents come in all kinds of guises:

- A neighbor who takes a child to the library when she takes her own child, opening new horizons and stimulating a mind;
- The elderly friend who provides a soft cookie and an even softer ear as she opens a soothing and compassionate heart to a child;
- The coach or teacher who notices a child's effort and who, by simply saying "Nice job today," affirms the child's worth and maybe his or her very existence;
- The friend who sees that a child is capable of more and shapes the child's character by expecting more—good manners, kindness, having the day's homework done;
- The relative who is honest with a child and thereby reminds him or her how to be truthful;
- The teacher who validates the inner life by asking for a child's ideas and opinions about important topics;
- The eccentric relative or friend who shows the child it is OK to be just who he or she is.

These are the simple day-to-day spiritual relationships that shape a life. They soothe and support, bring inspiration and imagination, and affirm a child's value so that the inner life can flourish.

What we know of resilient children—those who have grown up in very difficult, abusive, or neglectful situations but who have thrived nonetheless—is that they nearly always have had a "leg-up" person, a spiritual friend, someone who made a difference in their life, who saw a spark in them, who noticed them, who offered a kind word or took a genuine interest in their life. All of us have the opportunity to spiritually parent in this way, and at times a child needs more than one or two parents.

Sometimes the main parent plays his or her role and fulfills the contract by giving the child something to push against. Through the child's eyes, the parent might even become more of a symbol (of authority or whatever) than a person. This is sometimes the perspective of adolescents as they struggle to individuate. Parents provide limits so that children can clarify their ideas and beliefs, and find their own

limits. In such situations, other parents or spiritual friends are especially important serving as other symbols—role models, kind nurturers, listeners, visionaries, wise elders, mirrors in which children can find their own reflection, and maybe even more demanding ogres (“I guess my parents aren't all that bad after all.”). When we serve some small but significant part in a child's life, we become part of the child's family; we become kin.

In *The Education of Little Tree* by Forrest Carter, the narrator, a young boy who, upon the loss of his own parents, has been sent to live on a rural mountainside with his grandparents, explains the meaning of "kin" as his grandparents knew it: "I `kin' ye," meant, "I understand ye." To them, love and understanding were the same thing. Granma said you couldn't love something that you didn't understand; nor could you love people, nor God, if you didn't understand the people and God. Grandpa said back before his time, kinfolks meant any folks that you understood and had an understanding with, so it meant loved folks. Perhaps it is our greatest task as parents and spiritual friends to understand the child. But understanding does not simply mean figuring something out; the word means to stand among, implying that we hold and behold our children.

### **Beholding**

The heart of understanding comes through what Thich Nhat Hanh calls *pure recognition*, which means seeing without judgment. This begins as an attitude of simple appreciation and a willingness to try to see the world through the child's eyes—to stand among. This is the practice of beholding, and it is a gateway to love.

For a moment, look at a child, whether in your mind or face-to-face, through the eye of your heart. Stare in a way that is not considered polite for adults, but in that absorbed way that children often stare. Let yourself fall into this child with openness, curiosity, and simple appreciation. The goal is just to see and feel him or her without judgment—pure recognition. You may notice the light in the room seems to change; your chest may warm or ache just a bit. You have reached into the heart of the child in the only way possible—through your own heart. You begin to feel the spirit of the child, to see him or her as perfect, radiant, and mysterious, in spite of their leaving dirty dishes in the

living room, or fighting with a brother or sister, or being mean in some way that shocks you. From this vantage point, the child is remarkable. In this moment, he or she loses all weight of being a burden or an imposition on you. The child transcends the gravity of who you hope the child will be and instead emerges with the lightness of who he or she is in essence.

It is so easy to get caught in our judgments and frustrations as parents, but this simple exercise of staring can serve as a kind of centering prayer or meditation amid the bustle of parenting. Perhaps once a week or even once an evening, after the children have gone to sleep, we can behold them in this way. We stare with no goal except to see them with the fresh, soft eyes of appreciation.

Psychologist Ira Progoff tells us, "Love depends upon the capacity to reach beneath the surface of persons, to feel and touch the seed of life that is hidden there. And love becomes a power when it is capable of evoking that seed and drawing it forth from its hiding place." Beholding the child in this way nourishes the seed of the child, even if we cannot fully see what it is or what it is to become.

Levi had been a handful for his parents. He was extremely demanding, often out of control, a little emotional powerhouse who just seemed to overwhelm his family. He was only four years old. His parents tried one thing after another to help him and them survive his childhood. At the suggestion of a friend, they decided to have him tested by a psychologist who specialized in intellectually gifted children. His mother tells the story: "Right after we had him tested, we left Denver and drove to Colorado Springs, where we stopped for the night at a motel. But before we got into our room, Levi gave me a hug and said, 'I just love our family.' And I said, 'I just love our family too.' I was wondering what prompted his sudden comment, and then he said, 'Since we went to that place [the psychologist's office], it seems that you really want to know me now.'

"A little later that evening, we were all playing hide-and-go-seek in the hotel room, so you can imagine how many places there were to hide. So I decided I was going to get under the covers and hide like they were. Levi exclaims: 'Stop! Stop! Time out! Mom, close your eyes!' I said, 'OK, they're closed.' He said, 'No, really, keep them closed. I have a great surprise for you!' He went through the whole thing of really

making this a big deal. 'Close them! Are they closed?! Are they really closed tight?!'  
Finally, after building and building this up, he said, 'OK, Mom, you can open your eyes!'  
He was standing over me with that incredible spark in his eye. And it was like looking at  
Levi, but it felt like someone bigger and different, and it seemed that there was a silver light  
around him. He held his arms out to me with a big smile, no words, then he covered  
his hands over his heart and said, 'It's me, Mom!' That was his surprise. I was totally  
overwhelmed. Tears came to my eyes and I felt like I was seeing him in a whole new way. I  
hugged him and said, 'Thanks; I'm really sorry it took me so long to get to know you like  
this. I'm going to do the best I can do to help you with whatever you need to do.'  
And he looked at me and put his hands on my face, and this little four-year-old said,  
'Thanks, Mom, I really needed to hear that.'"

Understanding makes the other kin; it makes the other loved folks. Our  
greatest offering is to have the presence and allow the space for our children to show  
us who they really are.

## **Waking Up**

Parenting becomes an intentional spiritual discipline when we practice the art of  
understanding. This requires more than *showing up* for our life and the life of the  
child; it means that we *wake up*. Waking up means being present and mindful-  
watching and feeling the child, our self, and our relationship. Presence allows us  
to be more aware of what is called for in a situation and to engage deeply and  
spontaneously in the relationship. The opposite of this is to be disconnected, distant,  
unaware, self-absorbed, distracted, numb, and caught in the whirlwind of our own  
thoughts, reactions, and agendas.

If we are distracted when eating a good meal, we will hardly be able to taste  
the food. We will have fueled our body in the most basic way, but we will have missed  
the texture and smell, the color and taste, the care of preparation and the marvel of  
abundance. When we really are awake and take the time to savor a meal, it nourishes  
more than our body—it sustains our soul. Even after the food is gone, we may draw  
sustenance from the felt memory of that flavor, the soothing of the warm tea, the  
sense of belonging as we sit with our friend or family. Artist Julia Cameron says this

about paying attention: "The quality of life is in proportion, always, to the capacity for delight. The capacity for delight is the gift of paying attention."

When we are awake as parents and friends, we get the full power and gift of our relationship with children. We are deeply nourished by it and, in turn, provide nourishment for our children in the form of our earnest listening, thoughtful responses, and genuine meeting. Such presence is described in many traditions and has been referred to as mindfulness. To be mindful is to be nonjudgmentally aware in the here and now. Mindfulness includes the ability to witness the contents of our consciousness—our thoughts, feelings, impulses, and so forth—without getting lost in thought or habitual and mindless reactions. It is not so much learning to do something as it is undoing the habits of mindlessness.

This practice does not require sitting meditation or years of training. It is activated by simply taking a breath and being aware of where we are right now in this moment, without being overly attached and therefore overwhelmed by our thoughts and other reactions. Through this gentle awareness, we create more spaciousness and spontaneity in our consciousness, instead of being driven by a mind on automatic pilot. As we hear our own parents' voices rising within us or find ourselves withholding our love as a message of disapproval or feeling helpless as we are taken emotional hostage by some tiny tot, mindfulness invites us to pause inwardly, take a breath, and perhaps ask ourselves, What's that about? Is there a better way through this? What's the real lesson here? Where am I right now?

This practice is very simple and remarkably powerful. I remember a week some years back when my wife was out of the country and I was trying to juggle my work, her work, and our two young children and all their activities. It was to be the longest period of time that I was alone with our children. By the end of the first day I was already tense, resentful, and very curt with them. Something would have to change drastically, or it was looking like a miserable week was in store.

After putting the children to bed, I did manage to be still for a few minutes and ask myself, "What's really important during this week? How could this go better?" I realized my expectations for my work were unrealistic and unnecessary during this week. I then stripped away my own agenda for getting anything except what was

absolutely necessary done and decided that the number one priority was to just be with my children.

The next day felt so completely different that I still chuckle about it. After a dreadful start, we ended up having a glorious week. I enjoyed them so much and fell more deeply in love with them than I thought was possible. I loved being with them in this way and secretly looked forward to the next time my wife would go out of town. What felt to me like an absolute transformation was possible simply by my pausing for a moment and being present to the here and now. The opportunity is available to all of us at every moment.

Mindfulness does not take us away from action and engagement with the world, but allows us to be fully present in our action, whether eating food or helping a child with homework. As awareness develops and we simply and honestly observe and tolerate our own reactions, we also gain a tolerance for others. We come to appreciate their uniqueness and lead with compassion rather than judgment. Fundamentally, being awake is an act of respect, and it sends the message that the child is worthy of our full attention. We respect the child enough to listen and understand him or her.

Respect can be expressed by how richly, honestly, and deeply we respond to a child's questions and often how willing and well we are able to pose more questions in return: "What do you think?" And it is not only our responses, but also the way we establish our requests and demands that conveys respect. Respect comes when we explain *why* something has to be done, not just that it *has* to be done. "Because I said so" is a disrespectful and ineffective response and sets up a power struggle with the child. Explaining the purpose of something gives the child a bigger picture. Blind obedience is ineffective for most children today; explanations help them learn how the world works and elicit their cooperation.

Explaining the why often gives them the sense of meaning that allows them to move forward and find their agreement with your request. Sometimes the why is quite specific and logical, but other times our reasons defy reasonableness. Sometimes the best explanation we can offer is just to let children know that this is the way that people on the planet operate. Beyond explanations, we can also ask for their help: "I'm tired and really need your help today." This elicits a partnership through honesty and information, rather

than through demanding compliance at every turn. Of course, nothing works 100 percent of the time, but I am still amazed at how the energy changes with this kind of request. And sometimes it is not what we say, but how we say it.

At eight years old, my daughter explained to me how a request could be more effective, that is, how I could elicit her cooperation instead of her resentment. After some ranting on my part about some earth-shattering transgression on the order of leaving toothpaste all over the sink, she offered this feedback to me: “When you talk to me like that, it hurts my feelings. If you are upset about something, you can tell me but please don’t yell at me. It hurts. I get it without you yelling.”

Spiritual parenting implies that we are present not only to the child, but also to ourselves. Presence allows us to realize that unexamined anger moves us backward, and that our own expectations may get in the way of the child’s life. We can begin to see parenting as a practice of our own spiritual growth; it truly is a spiritual path. We practice presence when we ask ourselves, “Where am I now, in this instant? Why am I so upset about this? What is triggered in me? Does this have anything to do with my own parents? How am I withholding my love to this child and even to myself? How can I be of service to this child? How can I be gentle and loving with my own inner child?”

As parents, it is often the hangover from our own childhood—the parenting we received—that we are challenged to either overcome or honor. Through presence we practice the art of centering ourselves so that we can act from our highest spiritual aspirations and our biggest heart, rather than from our automatic habits. Many of us have to reparent ourselves in order to do better for our children; otherwise we simply repeat what was done to us. As one mother told me when I asked her what was most significant about being a parent: “It was realizing that I had to be the one who broke the cycle of abuse in my family. I had to do something better to my daughter than what was done to me. It was my responsibility. And I did it! When my daughter has her own children, she will have to overcome other things I probably did wrong, but she won’t have that abuse to overcome.” The child is helped, and the parent heals.



## **The Inner Parent**

We never parent alone. Beyond whatever partner or community we may have, the child is our partner in parenting. At the most fundamental level, the baby tells us when he or she is hungry or uncomfortable by crying. And messages come in all sorts of other ways as well. Sri Aurobindo, the Indian sage, told us that there is an *inner teacher* or inner parent within each of us. Meister Eckhart called this the *inner man*. This is the part of us that knows what we need, that is wise, that directs the seed toward its blossoming, and that is connected to the wisdom of the universe. A great offering of a teacher or parent is to listen to the inner teacher of the child through the ear of his or her own inner teacher, intuition. It is as if there is a conversation between these two inner teachers.

Carl Rogers, the influential humanistic therapist, described it this way: "It seems that my inner spirit has reached out and touched the inner spirit of the other. Our relationship transcends itself and becomes part of something larger." This is exactly what it realized between parent and child when we listen for the inner teacher. The message may take the form of a glimpse, a feeling, or a hunch of something to do or say. As Rogers said, "When I can relax and be close to the transcendental core of me, then I may behave in strange and impulsive ways in the relationship, ways which I cannot justify rationally, which have nothing to do with my rational thought processes. But these strange behaviors turn out to be right, in some odd way." As we wake up, we are increasingly able to hear the inner teacher through that small voice of our intuition.

While insight often arrives spontaneously, we can activate the energy of this intuition through our intent. A parent simply needs to pose the question, "What is the best I can offer here?" This is an invocation, a prayer to the inner teacher and whatever guides the universe may provide. We then must listen carefully for the response. There is a familiar old story of a devout man who is stranded during a flood and who prays to God for help. A makeshift raft floats right under the tree and he elects not to leave. "I'm waiting for God to help," he reminds himself. A man comes by with a boat and offers to help. "No, thanks, I'm waiting for God to deliver me," the stranded man replies. Next, a helicopter comes by and dangles a ladder for the man to grab. Again, he declines, knowing that God will answer his

prayers. Finally the waters overtake him and he drowns in great shock and disappointment, believing that his prayers have been ignored. Upon meeting God in the afterworld, he complains about his fate and cannot understand why God did not hear his prayers. God responds, "Who do you think sent you the raft, the boat, and the helicopter?" Oops!

The answers to our prayers and questions come in unexpected ways. We have to be awake enough to hear and see: a neighbor uncharacteristically mentions a new book that seems to be a bull's-eye for a problem we have; a telephone call from a friend offers some spontaneous advice; a child tells us what is called for in his or her own way; a spontaneous impulse arises to change our diet; a dream arrives in the middle of the night; a still, small voice whispers insight; or maybe an angel appears directly to a child. We need only to ask and stay awake enough to listen.

### **Holding**

While each parenting contract is unique, the bottom line seems to be nonnegotiable. Our responsibility is to behold and to "hold." Holding means to provide the safety and the clearing that allow children to find their way in the world. The impulse to provide safety and nourishment to the child is instinctual; it is part of our animal nature, just as it is for mice or ducks. That deep place where we are connected to the earth gives us the messages we need.

Before our first child was born, my wife and I could feel the impulses rising in us to provide a safe nest for our little hatchling. We went to classes, we read, we bought the safest car we could afford. We still did not really know what becoming parents would be like, but we were ready to take the leap, and we were both excited and a little nervous. Throughout the pregnancy, I had this strange worry that seemed to anchor my anxious uncertainties about parenting in a single concern. I just could not figure out how I would ever know if the baby was the right temperature—if she was a little chilly, or too hot. She would not be able to speak, so how would I tell? And when I asked, the answers I received were never very satisfying. A nurse said, "Oh, you'll be able to tell." The doctor said, "Whatever you're wearing will be about the right weight for the baby." Not good enough! How would I know?

I think this worry was like my new-parent-anxiety lint trap. It seemed to capture all my worries about parenting in one little fairly harmless-looking question. This kind of anxiety is just a sign that we are feeling the primal instinct to nurture and protect. It is not to be avoided, but instead honored as part of our connection with creation. After my daughter was born, the question disappeared. I did just seem to know and I knew to "ask" her by holding her close and feeling her body. At whatever age, holding means that we stay in touch enough to feel each other's warmth.

Holding implies more than physical safety and sustenance. If we are distracted, angry, only going through the motions, what message are we sending? We comfort the psyche and soothe the soul by how we hold a child. Can the child fall asleep in complete trust and safety in our arms? If we can hold in this way, we teach the child to trust, and we teach constructive surrender. And at the same time, can *we* surrender to the peace of holding a sleepy or sleeping child? We hold and heal ourselves as we hold that child. A young child holds her baby doll; we hold her. We soothe and heal one another.

Family rituals and routines are a way of holding. Family meals, bedtime stories, back rubs, a family joke, special foods and special places, celebrations, rites of passage such as weddings and funerals, walks, even chore time, all provide a sense of dependability that helps children feel at home. Yet it is easy to overlook the importance and meaning of these little things.

As bedtime approached for his four year-old son, Francis would start singing an old song, "Good Night, Irene," as the signal that it was time for bed. He would scoop up the child and carry him toward the bedroom as he was singing. One evening, Francis was distracted by some problems at work and forgot to sing the song. As he was tucking his son in bed, the child had a concerned look on his face and, with a very serious tone, asked, "Dad, what happened?" "What do you mean?" Francis replied. "You didn't sing 'Good Night Onion Ring' tonight."

The little things are like glue that holds us together; they serve as touchstones for our lives. And the safety does not just hold, it also teaches. We demonstrate responsibility through our reliability; we teach trustworthiness through our

dependability. We create a container of safety, not only by a lock on a cabinet door or a safe car seat, but also and especially by our energy.