

SPIRITUAL PARENTING

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"What's wrong with my child? She acts like a delinquent!" "Why does my four-year-old lie?" "What have done to make my children hate me?" "Why does my son cause problems at school?" "Why won't my child act like a human being?" "My daughter never listens to me - she insists on doing things *her way!*"

Does any of this sound familiar? Are you a parent or someone who works with youngsters who finds yourself unable to understand their behavior? If so, you may not have looked deeply enough at the spiritual meaning of what looks like disturbing behavior or unhealthy patterns. (I use the word, "spiritual", here referring to any *religious* ideology, but rather as the *essence* of beingness, that ineffable part of all of us that connects us to the mystery of life.)

As a parent of two adult daughters, I've been through it all. And as a counselor, I've heard it all. I've discovered the key to a successful relationship with children is simply *to respect them as spiritual beings and not make any judgements about them or what appears to be happening*. In other words, it is wiser to not respond to the behavior but rather to the child's Soul. (I refer to "Soul" as the personal manifestation of the mystery of life.) Certainly it's our responsibility as caregivers to guide children away from dangers, to teach them what we can from our own experience, and to apply firm but kind discipline in order to help them develop confidence and boundaries. But I believe we do great harm to a child's essence when we insist they be just like us, that they follow our models of success (or failure), and that they don't question us when we decide their future. As Kahlil Gibran says in his famous work, *The Prophet*, our children merely come *through* us - they do not *belong* to us.

That may be a stretch for most of us because it is easy to want our children to be our safety net, our protegés, guarantees that we will live forever. But the most important thing a parent or teacher can give a child is her/his Soul's freedom. This means we must first develop a strong and healthy relationship to ourselves, so old fears and unresolved inner conflicts don't intrude in our role as our children's guides. In addition to keeping our children safe and healthy in body, mind, and spirit, we need to transform our role from one in which we've learned to perceive "parent" to one of mentor and caregiver. There's a vast difference between wisely mentoring a child and trying to make her/him behave according to rules and beliefs that generally never worked for us, yet we apply them to our children anyway.

In my role as a counselor, I've discovered much of what cause adults great pain is that they are not doing what their Souls want and need them to do. This is especially true in regards to our professions. I've found that what we used to play and fantasize about as children is generally what we are *practicing* to become as adults. We deny the wisdom of this when we work in a job that kills our Souls, many times because our parents chose it for us or at least implied

we should do this work rather than what we *longed* to do. We may have been taught that our dreams are merely unreal and impractical fantasies that we should ignore and override. But the truth is, our dreams are *exactly* what we should be working toward manifesting creatively. Those are what our health and happiness are built upon, not the pained limitations of others.

We show our deep inner fears and doubts about *ourselves* when we accuse children of not doing something *right*, calling them stupid, spank them out of our own frustration and fear of loss of power, or keep them from expressing themselves in unique ways. One of my daughters used to insist upon dressing in bizarre color combinations when she was young. People would comment or even criticize me for letting her dress that way. I ignored the comments and let her go on selecting her own clothing because I knew she loved colors and had a distinct artistic eye. Even when she was in her teen years and wore only black, I knew her Soul was that of an artist. She is now a very successful makeup artist for film and television. She still has an unique sense of style and I am pleased I never tried to squelch it.

In the first step of releasing our own demands and fears onto our children and working on ourselves, we need to do so *non-judgementally*. For too long an underlying attitude in our society has been that we should discount ourselves because there is something ineffably *wrong* with us, that we don't count. Many of us learn early in life that we are powerless to make changes in our lives or be uniquely creative because of this belief. We are taught to make concessions and unholy sacrifices in order to *get along* or support the status quo. Even in the most loving of homes, it is common to expect the children to succeed *for* the parents and even *as* the parents. I can personally attest to the difficulties in overcoming and healing such restrictions to my Soul, but to the rewards of doing so as well. As I learned to love myself unconditionally and non-judgementally, it became easier to love others that way too. My relationship with my daughters improved dramatically and I now take great pleasure in helping to raise my grandson in this way.

Another important step is to become truly honest with ourselves as well as with our children. We need to learn how to express our feelings openly and appropriately with youngsters so that they learn by example, not by threat. Of course, this must be tempered with wisdom so that we don't end up *dumping* our feelings on our children. I'm afraid I did this with my eldest daughter when she was a young child to the extent that she shut down emotionally because I *shared* too much with her. At that time, I was immature and didn't know the wise boundaries between truth-telling and inappropriately *using* my daughter as a therapist.

Another step involves what my four-year-old grandson might call "Stop, Look and Listen." Before making a decision that might affect your child, or jumping to conclusions about the reasons for upsetting behavior, you can take a moment to look deeper into the situation. Really *listen* to your child, particularly when there is great emotion behind what s/he is telling you. For instance, if your child is yelling at you about why you won't let her/him take fencing lessons,

instead of yelling back or making a disciplinary decision based on the yelling alone, stop and look at your child's expression of feeling. It may be more than merely the fencing lesson. It might be *your* fears about the possible dangers of fencing. For example, I tended to hold my young daughters back from physical activities because, as a child, I had been timid and fearful about getting hurt. (Although it never influenced my younger daughter - she was a natural at sports and physical challenges. She was on a baseball team at seven and a strong and talented modern dancer by twelve.) It may be an assertion of independence and need for stretching personal boundaries on your child's part. If you sense this is the case, respond accordingly by listening to the underlying *Soul message*. Your child's Soul may be telling you it's time to back off a little, that your child may be ready for more challenges in order to successfully grow toward uniqueness. This may be an opportunity for both you and your child to grow. And, if you truly feel your child is not yet ready for fencing lessons, you can work together to find an activity that will support the quest for independence. Your child will love you for it because the Soul's needs will have been respected.

Boundary-setting is of utmost importance especially during the challenging years of adolescence, but it doesn't have to be accompanied by trauma and drama! By applying a sincere, honest respect for your teen's Soul needs, accompanied by loving firmness, you will find ways to iron out difficulties you never imagined possible. One of the scariest things for parents of teenagers is knowing when it's time to let them make their own decisions. And I believe we err when we think we know best and thereby contribute to the fights that ensue because of it. It's a thin tightrope we walk upon when we decide to allow our teens to make important decisions involving their lives. But the important foundation we have built upon honesty and respect for their Souls' urgings can mean the difference between mutual agreement and disaster. After several years of battling it out, my then teenaged older daughter brought our family into a serious and frightening crisis. We were all in shock, she to the point of dropping her sullen attitude, looking deeply into my eyes, and telling me she did what she did merely to *get my attention*. I was incredulous and knew I had an important choice to make. I could become angry and defensive with her, insisting I had given her lots of attention, or I could *respect* what her Soul was communicating with me and work to discover what I should do about it. I chose the latter and have never regretted it. It was by far the harder of the two routes to take, but it was the key to healing many unresolved problems in our family. I began to see that her Soul's wisdom had led her to the crisis in order to break her - and all of us - free from the bonds of limitation, misunderstanding and pain. She and I were able to develop a *real* relationship, one based on truth and mutual respect. Now thirty years old, she is no longer my therapist as in her childhood, but her deep wisdom enriches my life.

It *is* possible to change your perspective on the children in your life and your relationship to them. You can learn how to sense into deeper levels of your child's beingness than the ordinary, surface realities, wherein lies the *belief* in the troublesome behavior, health problems, or poor social interaction. You can

discover how to “read” and honor your child’s Soul and Its purpose, as well as Its patterns, if you are willing to perceive her/his actions in an entirely different way. Your relationship will be strengthened, healed and transformed. And don't forget - this process can be fun, enlightening, and freeing to *your* Soul as well as your child’s.