

Parenting the Inner Child

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Matthew 18:4

Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

Many of us do not treat ourselves very well. We eat poorly and break contracts with ourselves regarding exercise and moving our bodies. We lose focus on our goals and stop moving toward the things that would benefit us. We drink too little water and too much alcohol. We stay up too late, read too little, and complain too much. We pray and think of God too infrequently and focus on the negative and destructive things in the world too often. We are often self-critical, self-absorbed, and self-righteous. If we treated others the way we treat ourselves, we would have no friends at all.

For most of my adult life a thought has persisted: we are not much different as adults than when we were children. Yes, our bodies are older, bigger, and stronger. But emotionally, I have noticed, at least in myself and often in those around me, that we behave and react much the same as we did when we were pre-pubescent.

I don't know about you, but I will occasionally have a temper tantrum. I get angry; I get disappointed and sad, and these feelings are not different than when I was a child. We all know, or have seen, people who demonstrate destructive behaviors. They can range from subtle self-sabotage and self-defeating actions to passive hostility and violent aggression.

One time as a child, I remember that my Dad had denied me something – I cannot even remember what it was – but I was so angry and disappointed that I picked the nose off my favorite doll. Commonly, destructive behavior in adults appears as the same impetuous, impulsive childish narcissism and moodiness. Sometimes as adults, we demonstrate an infantile neediness, a fear of abandonment, or an unrealistic dependency. We often wear our egos on our sleeves; quick to explode. Being a human being is not easy. Transforming from a child to an adult can be even more difficult. Although we age, our child nature can often direct our actions and decisions.

Of course, that inner child aspect of us is not always destructive and negative. I love to laugh and see others laugh. I enjoy creating music, singing, and playing the guitar, just as I did when I was a child. I delight in cloud formations and spotting the sun bursting through as rays. I love the feeling of walking through forests and along beaches, feeling the joy and awe of nature, just as I did when I was a child.

On our last trip to Monterey, on one of our beach walks, I so much enjoyed dodging the waves and picking up sand dollars. I did that until I felt guilty that I was delaying Mary for so long. But I was delighted and filled with the joy of Little Patrick inside me.

This inner child exists within each of us. It is an actual psychological and phenomenological presence within us. With practice, we can become aware of this “inner child”; it just takes us

moving our minds there. It is easiest with joy and pleasant experiences. We can easily envision that “little one” within us exuding joy. It is more difficult to be aware of the child-within when we are angry or upset. But the child is there, and if we take the time, we can observe the pain and disappointment and feel the source of our emotions.

In truth, many of us who think we are adults have not quite managed to get there yet. We have gotten older, smarter, stronger, and wiser, but we are still living emotionally as a child. To truly become an adult, we must acknowledge and take responsibility for loving, nurturing, and parenting our inner child.

I am still in the process of becoming an adult; I am in transition. Sometimes my inner child feels denied, abandoned and rejected. We are told by society to ‘grow-up’ and abandon our childish conduct. In some ways, we are taught by society, our friends, family, and the people we allow to influence us that we must put away our child-like capacity for innocence; we are to stifle our wonder, awe, joy, sensitivity, creativity, and playfulness.

Many people believe it is unacceptable to laugh, cry, or react with any sort of emotion other than anger or aggression. We are trained to control, suppress, and even kill our inner child. We are often taught to substitute the creativity and imagination of the inner child with prudence. But putting too much faith in prudence can end up paralyzing the human spirit; we become a predictable, common, socially indistinct automaton. When parents nudge their children toward “sensible” life goals, they encourage a mindset that favors

prudence over imagination, conformity over uniqueness, wisdom over risk, and security and comfort over adventure and change.

The inner child aspect of us incites joy, delight, curiosity, and seeing the positive and best in the world around us. Yet it also holds the fears, traumas, hurts, disappointments, and angers of childhood. Even though we may be what society calls an adult, that inner child is still with us, part of us, whether we are conscious of it or not. Far too often, it is a wounded inner child who is directing our lives: a five-year-old emotional mentality inhabiting an adult body. It is a hurt, angry, fearful little boy or girl calling the shots, making adult decisions. A boy or girl being sent out into the world to do a man's or woman's job. A five or ten-year old, or both of them, trying to engage in grown-up relationships. No wonder we have difficulties as we get older. It's no wonder we feel afraid, insecure, inferior, small, lost, and lonely at times. How else would a child feel as they tried to engage a grown-up world without proper parental supervision and counsel?

We can begin to parent our inner child, but first we must become aware. Remaining ignorant of our inner child empowers that child to rule our thoughts, emotions, and decisions. Without direct contact, the inner child will continue to overpower the adult will.

The next step is to take the inner child seriously, and consciously communicate with that child part of us. We can begin envisioning our inner child and listening to what he or she needs and how they feel. It is a mental and emotional process, and what we often find out through our feelings and awareness is that our inner child

wants acceptance, approval, appreciation, love, nurturance, and understanding ... all the things we want as adults. Where do we think those feelings come from? - it is from our inner child.

As adults in transition, we try to force others into the parenting role. We try to compel people to love us, take care of us, and meet our needs. We look to the world, and all it has to offer. We seek riches, material possessions, compliments, power and control. But this solution will always fail. This does not bring peace to our soul or the inner child.

No matter how the world has failed us in the past, with disappointments, fears, and hurts, or parents who lacked skills or interest, we must face them in the now, as painful as that may be. The past cannot be changed, and our former failed caretakers cannot meet our current needs. This is our responsibility alone. Adulthood is the acceptance of our painful past, and the acknowledgement that we are the primary custodian of our inner child and in charge of meeting those needs. We can learn to accept Christ's love and understand "The old is gone, the new is here!"

As the responsible party, we can learn to speak to our inner child just as a loving parent speaks to their own children. By initiating an inner dialogue with our inner child, we can provide the support, love, nurturance, and appreciation necessary for a healthy relationship; a reconciliation can be reached.

We can learn to be the inner parent for our inner child. We can make every effort to keep them safe and healthy. We can forgive

them of their inevitable missteps and mistakes and become their encouraging cheerleader and counselor. We can tell him or her how much we love and appreciate them. When we do something well, we can tell our inner child how proud we are of them. When we struggle or feel out of sorts, we can support our inner child and tell them, “I’m here for you; you are not alone.”

As an accountable inner parent, we can set healthy boundaries with others: letting people know what we want and don’t want; what is okay and what’s not. If someone is disrespectful or hurtful to us, we can speak up and tell them we don’t want to be spoken to that way. If someone is unkind, hostile or verbally abusive to our child, we stand up for them. A nurturing parent wouldn’t let someone treat our child with disrespect. A loving parent makes sure his or her child’s needs are met.

We can be gentle and compassionate with ourselves regarding our humanity and our flaws. We are going to make mistakes, but we can look at our self through the eyes of a loving parent, without punishment, criticism, or judgment. We can reassure and comfort our self, accepting our self unconditionally. We can demonstrate the love of our inner child by showing the same compassion and gentleness for our friends, family, and all other Children of God, because they too are having their own human experience. This is illustrated in Mark 10:13-16 when Jesus says, “*Let the children come to me, do not prevent them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.*” Christ finishes by placing his hands upon the children where he blesses and embraces them.

Best of all, we can do all of this from our inner arena; no one has to know what we are thinking or that we are carrying on an inner dialogue with our internal ‘wonder child’, as Emmett Fox calls it.

From a spiritual perspective the inner child, or wonder child, is nothing less than the presence of God within us, the fundamental and primal Source, Power, and Being of All. Isaiah 9:6-7 tells us - *"For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace."* We become aware of this inner child when we are prepared to put God first. In Isaiah 9:2 we are told the result of this awareness: *"The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined."*

We can allow our inner child to govern our life from a point of ego and our human nature, or from Christ and our spiritual nature. So, it is my prayer that we can bring the hurts, the pains, disappointments, loneliness and rejections of childhood to the healing power of Christ. I pray that today we can choose to have Christ bless our inner child, and think of that nature with respect, confidence, and praise. I pray that we can surround our inner child with appreciation and acceptance, as the love of Christ transforms our inner child into the wonder child of peace, love, and joy.

Let us pray....