

In Your Face

Working-Out with an Adolescent
in the Soul-Gym

John Allison

Revised and edited transcript of a talk given to parents
at Glenside Rudolf Steiner School, Sydney
May 2010



John Allison can be contacted via his website at www.johnallison.com.au

In Your Face

~ working-out with an adolescent in the soul-gym ~

Whenever I speak to a group of parents about the challenges of living with teenagers, I'm mindful of a mother describing to me her 'perfect little girl' who always had been filled with 'light and loveliness', but who suddenly at the age of thirteen became a 'complete stranger'. This abrupt transformation had brought with it all kinds of conflicts, including secretive, even furtive behaviour, and unpredictable moodiness. The mother was very hurt by this, and felt she was not coping very well.

I can see that this is familiar territory for quite a few of you, yes? And faced by this complete stranger, you might have felt at a loss... Maybe you don't like the way you're feeling about it — about their behaviour, certainly, and also probably you're not enjoying the way you're reacting to that... That's why you're here. So tonight I want to present several pictures that might depict just what is happening for teenagers and how you experience it. Then we will consider how you can deal with it, hopefully by responding better than you rather too often might be doing at present.

First, let's acknowledge that all *behaviour is a form of communication*. It mightn't be the best sort of communication, from the point of view of any mutual satisfaction, but *something* is being communicated, usually on more than one level. For instance, your teenaged daughter might be asking you for something. The message she is focused on is what she wants from you, while you are focused on something else altogether — what you want from her. *She* only wants \$20 to go to the movies, but you hardly hear this actual request — what *you* hear is the tone, and what *you* want is respect. So you say, 'When you learn to ask properly, then I'll happily listen to you.' And now she is furious with you because for her it's not about the tone, it's simply about the money, and anyway she wouldn't sound like that if you weren't so negative all the time... You then try to be reasonable, and she says, 'Whatever.'

Familiar? Let's agree then that all behaviour *is* a form of communication, and now explore why *tone* has suddenly become such an issue, and how you might work with it. And bear with me for a moment if I seem to digress when I say that it used to be safe to talk about the weather, but climate-change now seems as contentious as adolescence. So this part of my talk is called *Facing Climate Change*. Let's talk about the weather, and lead over to a consideration of the often 'heavy weather' of adolescence. First, though, we do need to develop a context — so we could begin with 'fair weather', interspersed by a few light showers...

When children are still tiny tots, the joys and sorrows and conflicts of life are just like passing weather. It seems as if an emotion-cloud comes over the horizon, they get rained on for a few moments, but it passes. The sun beams down on them and they shine in its light. A turbulent little squall of emotion whips up, they are suddenly all over the place, and then it abates. So, for instance, in the sand-pit a child might suddenly be in conflict with a neighbour, yet a few moments later they will be happily playing beside each other again.

This 'emotion-weather' is quite external to them. It comes over them, they get caught up in it, and then it passes. Such weather-patterns continue even into the early school years. Around the age of twelve, however, maybe a bit earlier, there is a distinct climate-change. Now they are completely caught up in the weather — the highs and lows, the wind-shifts, the tropical cyclones — suddenly they have actually *become* storm-centres, or high pressure regions... You probably all know what it's like to encounter a 'slow-moving cold front' surging out from your teenager's *anti*-cyclone! They *are* their weather in a very personal way. There they are, right in the middle of it but, because they are *in* it, surrounded by it, and looking out through it, they experience it as coming at them from outside. It is therefore entirely *your* fault! Have you noticed that?

These weather-systems are very volatile, very regional. From within them, another curious attitude arises. It's an attitude we might even notice in ourselves when, for instance, in grey wintry Melbourne we see on the weather map that it's just great in Sydney, and then we have to find something else that's wrong with being in Sydney, to justify our continuing existence... So too with these proto-adolescent climatic regions. They often feel an affinity with similar weather-patterns, such as might occur in friends, but this can be disconcertingly short-lived because each pattern is constantly changing; they really feel disgust towards any differing patterns, and they then feel downright bewilderment regarding those peers where some affinity but also some difference occurs.

Affinity — disgust — bewilderment. Life can be pure sunshine, or it can be a storm. Or a whirlwind. It seems to be so constantly subject to change. This is very difficult for the proto-adolescent. *You* think it's hard! But just try being *inside* one of those weather-systems...

Thus, there has come this rapid climate-change. Everything has become personal, everything is changeable, and it's always your fault, remember. When a little child awkwardly bumps into a table, injuring their body, they might admonish the table — 'Naughty table!' — for having hurt them. The twelve-year-old will do the same with any emotional hurt, for this personal weather-system is in fact a rather clumsy *attitude-body*, and so when they bump into another attitude with it — into you, for instance, or very often a younger sibling — they quite naturally *project* their anguish.

We can quite readily understand the psychological usage of the word 'projection'. An acute inner discomfort is projected outward... It's a bit like children having an upset tummy — eventually they throw up, and then usually feel better for it. If we get in the way and cop it, naturally enough we don't like being vomited upon, but really it's just the way it is, and we should consider whether our own lack of hygiene caused the upset before we accuse the suffering person. This is true of emotions also.

Now, we can't see the 'attitude-body' in the same way that we can see a physical body, but we certainly can experience that it's there. It's a body in the same way that we speak of a 'body of evidence', or a 'body of thought' — its boundaries are less clearly defined than a physical body, just like those of weather-systems, yet we will always know whenever we have come within the zone of its activity (for instance, when that cold front comes over, or the way, when your teenager is in such a mood, the door almost bulges with the impact of the attitude-body even before the door handle has been turned!). Then, sometimes we might also realise that it is a 'sensation-body' or a 'sensitive-body'... It's quite a chameleon in fact.

In meteorological terms, what do we notice? One notable 'emotional weather' phenomenon developing at this time is called 'acid rain'. Suddenly your child is sarcastic, even cynical in attitude. When you are exposed to this acid rain, it stings. And it is really corrosive. Like the polluting acid rain corroding the marble statues of the Parthenon in Athens, it starts to dissolve the beautiful images you hold of family ideals. You cry out, 'What happened to our happy family?' And she says, in that particular tone, 'Whatever'... But we cannot solve these problems of atmospheric pollution through blame and recrimination; we have to learn to work with the new conditions, and this takes some understanding on our part.

For instance, we need to recognise that the newborn attitude-body at the heart of this weather-system is just as vulnerable as the physical body of the baby. The baby can only flail about with its little limbs, and can only instinctively grasp with its fingers. It has to learn to direct its movements, it has to learn to let go of what it grasps. So too the attitude-body of the adolescent flails about initially, and grasps instinctively, often locking on to issues quite obsessively. Control of the attitude-body's unpredictable movements takes time, effort, and skill. And letting go is also something to be learned.

Pictures like these — of the weather-system, of the newborn attitude-body — can really help us see what's going on. And because they are living pictures, they can develop. So, for instance, the weather picture might lead you to acknowledge that if the weather is squally and you forget to take a coat or umbrella with you and then you get rained on, it's hardly the weather's fault, is it? The weather is just doing its thing. So is your teenager.

However, we might also note that as a storm pattern develops, it forms a centre — a still, relatively calm centre that we call the eye of the storm. In the adolescent, this centre, which is an inward intensification within the changing weather-system, becomes a reference-point in which the self develops throughout these years. This picture can lead us further in our effort to understand the adolescent as they slowly mature towards eighteen or so.

And the picture of the newborn, flailing, uncoordinated attitude-body can develop further also, towards ways in which it can best be exercised. This will lead us ultimately into what I have called the *soul-gym*.

Before heading off to the soul-gym, however, we need to discuss another vigorous form of activity, which is most usefully coached in pre-adolescence. I mean the idea of *playing the game*. We could talk about manners, but I think the kids who challenge us most would opt for sport. So let's meet them 'where they're at' and talk about the 'game', although our *real* concern is manners.

Manners were once instilled into children as habitual behaviour. For instance, as a child I was taught that 'children should be seen and not heard', to 'only speak when you're spoken to', to 'hold the door open for ladies', and to 'give your seat up to your elders'. If I did these things I was 'good'. Such lessons were so ingrained that children generally were praised only in terms of being good, a good 'habit-being'. The breaching of manners usually incurred wrath / blame / shame / punishment — most often a 'clip over the ear'. As children we were repressed in the realm of our lives. Some people say they were never harmed by it, but I have to say that, to me, they often seem harmed, damaged...

Something has changed, however, and I think it is a fundamental shift. I still like the social decorum of manners, but people often comment that today children mostly seem not to be taught these things. In fact they often seem very rude. As rude as some adults can be... And if we try to repress or blame or punish them, their resistance is remarkable. There are many sociological or psychological theories that explain this, but rather than look at these, I want to assume here that 'it's just the way it is', and suggest another way of looking at and dealing with the behaviour of children. It is summed up in the words 'boundaries' and 'tact'.

The sense that gives us our experience of boundaries is the sense of touch — our *tactile* sense. Now, being 'in touch' with what's going on, with what's needed, requires *tact*. We learn to 'sense out' a situation, to put out 'feelers'... Tact is thus more conscious than manners, which were automatic, habitual responses.

Children need a number of different boundaries, and they need them at particular stages. For instance, the baby who is learning to crawl and then walk needs *safety-boundaries* that are essentially physical in nature. At a later stage they will need socialising *life-boundaries*. Later still they need behavioural *attitude-boundaries*. And at each stage they need an approach from parents and teachers that supports and encourages their development in self-awareness and progressive self-management. For it is at boundaries that children encounter what is not-Self, thus growing reflexively aware of themselves as a Self.

Mostly, when we talk about children needing boundaries, we are referring to behaviour. Here I think it is interesting to reflect on the word 'boundaries' as it is used in team games and sports, and then consider it as an analogy for what takes place in the human 'life-field'. Co-operative participation in the 'life-game' represents a more conscious attitude to issues of behaviour than just the enforcement of 'manners'. I find that boys especially can grasp the parallel, and so often it is boys who are 'pushing the boundaries'.

Everyone knows that the game works best when everyone knows the rules and agrees to comply with them. Then the game can flow, and we can all enjoy it... Having to stop the game to teach or enforce the rules breaks up the flow of play, spoiling the game for a few moments. However, we can say, in the first place, that not being aware of the rules or being a clumsy player, is simply ignorance and/or ineptitude, not wrong-doing.

Therefore, incidental breaking of the rules is a transgression that stops the flow of play and will require coaching. That's just the way it is — something already agreed upon. Deliberate breaking of the rules is foul-play, however, and will lead with repetition to the 'sin-bin', the 'tribunal', penalties, fines, perhaps to disqualification or to other consequences.

Here, mention of the 'sin-bin' allows me to introduce what I often call — to some people, irreligiously — an ancient 'behaviour-management document'. I hasten to say that I do not want to offend anyone who is either religious or non-religious — let's just see what we can learn... I am referring to the *Lord's Prayer* — in particular to those four petitions: 'Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil...'

In our present context of playing the game, this is all about *behaviour and boundaries*. Those physical safety-boundaries required by infants and toddlers are represented in the nurture of

'daily bread' — the birth-right of every human being. Life-boundaries however are about 'trespass' — those clumsy blunders we make through ignorance — and then having suitable conditions for 'forgiveness' to occur. Attitude-boundaries though are concerned with the problem of 'temptation'. Ultimately, laws must attend to what we experience as 'evil'.

In considering this further, it's helpful to recall that *all behaviour is a form of communication*. Just think about that again for a moment — it's very sensible, isn't it? The child is 'telling' us something, and if they could say it another way, that worked better for them, they probably would. So coaching behaviour is coaching communication.

In our schools and our families, in dealing with behaviour we are essentially concerned with 'trespass' and 'temptation'. We must learn to distinguish between them, and to handle them differently. There *is* a distinction between trespass and temptation, both in sport and in life. Trespass can be forgiven, 'as we forgive them that trespass against us'. In essence it is only clumsiness. But if the rule-breaking is repeated we must decide whether the person is inept or malicious. If we conclude that it is clumsy and inept, some coaching in a special training-session might be required. If it is malicious, then we conclude the person has given way to 'temptation', and then just saying 'sorry' is not enough — in fact, even promises to change probably are not enough, and there might need to be some amends (restorative justice), and perhaps 'time-out' for the person to contemplate their responsibility and its consequences, in order to reinforce the need for change. The 'sin-bin' — time out — offers such an opportunity. Other penalties might be considered also.

I think it is important when we deal with children's behaviour to make a distinction between incidental boundary-crossing and deliberate boundary-flouting. This requires us to identify those actions arising from the more-or-less *unconscious asocial patterns* that are part of the 'habit-body', and respond to them appropriately, in ways that differ from how we deal with those more *intentional antisocial reactions* characteristic of the 'attitude-body' appearing from the twelfth year on. The former needs kind, firm, especially patient refereeing and coaching; the latter needs firm refereeing, patient and methodical coaching — and especially firm guidance, kindly counselling.

Particularly in the latter case, our approach needs to take into account the reactive nature of the 'attitude-body' when challenged. This typically will include a range of behaviours, in varying degrees of denial, anger, and bargaining (which may be pleading or manipulating). These reactions are what resulted in the 'clipped ear' or the 'belting' of the past, when 'good' behaviour was bullied into us. But there are techniques through which parents and teachers can get past this 'attitude-body' and its clamorous voices of judgment, fear and cynicism, to engage the child's conscience. Everyone has within them this quiet witness to their own actions. If we can let it speak, the voice of conscience is able to announce its own verdict. We can then engage it in conversation, and encourage it to dictate change.

Just as a good referee or umpire is able to support and guide the flow of play in a game, so we can support and guide behaviour. A good referee doesn't 'lose it' out on the field; nor should we. What I am advocating is a 'no-blame' approach to behaviour, which is relevant both for dealing with instances of individual behaviour and for group behaviour such as bullying. It works equally well in the home, in the classroom, in the playground, and on the sports field. Some training is necessary, though, and perhaps a work-out in the *soul-gym*.

If you want to test your physical fitness, you can go along to a gym, where a trainer will assess you and then set up a work-out on specific apparatus to help you develop quite specific muscle-tone. It's hard work. It hurts. But you know, don't you, that to be effective, the apparatus must offer resistance — all those weights, springs, and adjustable friction mechanisms are necessary. For each person there is an optimum degree of resistance; but you know it is necessary to suffer...

Periodically you may curse the gym, the trainer who set up the circuit, or maybe even the apparatus. But it's something you've chosen to do, so you might as well just get on with it. After all, no pain, no gain. In reality your struggle is with yourself, with that part of you that you've deemed flabby, and most of all with whatever habits and attitudes you discover have caused that flab. There's no point in blaming the gym.

The adolescent's struggle in reality is not with you. It's with themselves. It's helpful to know this, but I suggest you don't tell them. Instead, just recognise that *the attitude-body needs a work-out in the soul-gym*, and your role as a parent is to be the trainer, and the apparatus...

Now, the attitude-body consists of all sorts of highly-personalised thoughts, feelings and impulses, which are undeveloped, unsophisticated. Don't tell them this either — and don't expect them to want to sign up for the training circuit in the soul-gym... Just set it up, adjust the weights and springs and friction mechanisms for optimum effect, and let them work-out. How else will they be able to develop the muscle-tone of their intellect, of their emotional life and values, of the determination of their will, if you as their apparatus are a push-over?

Of course you are not alone with this. There are other parents, teachers, and the community — all kinds of activities which test and measure the attitude-body's fitness. At best it is a co-operative venture, but you have the primary responsibility for your child's development, especially while he or she is a minor.

Let's step into the soul-gym. Decide what is to be done. Set up the routines. It is one of your responsibilities as a parent to develop the skills to become the equivalent of the trainer in a gym. Regarding the degree of resistance appropriate for each child, the analogy holds. If you don't provide enough resistance, the young person cannot come to real self-knowledge. But with too much resistance, constantly too much, then there can be no growing awareness of achievement.

I've heard a parent say, regarding her thirteen-year-old, 'Whatever I decide, I'm damned if I do and damned if I don't. So he can make the decisions from now on and then live with the consequences.' This is the equivalent of taking the springs off, taking the weights off, taking the brakes off the gym apparatus. That child went feral for a while, and was seriously at-risk; later he surrounded himself with tightly self-controlling structures...

Another parent in a similar situation became the control-freak, asserting too much crushing resistance for far too long. The consequence for the child was psychological crisis in early adulthood — she was all over the place. How much resistance, and what apparatus, always depends on the particular situation and the nature of the child. We need to acquire a range of observational techniques, like a trainer learning to assess what's needed, and then we need some knowledge of useful tools.

Now, in fact there will have been some preliminary exercising already, for there are times before puberty when children challenge boundaries. These are points at which some initial 'apparatus' needs to be set up — the ways in which you choose to handle children at such times determine the subsequent possibilities. For the toddler, you'll establish some absolute physical limits; after all, you don't want them to wander out on the road, or to drown in the creek. So safety-boundaries are paramount. Then, when they throw tantrums, you will deal with it most effectively by changing the physical situation, by re-directing their activity... Kindergarten teachers know this well in dealing with those passing thunder-storms. Later, when the child is about nine or ten, there comes a real challenge to the boundaries of your authority, which is best met by a straightforward assertion of the regular pattern of life, of the established processes. Of course, you need to have established them long before...

At these earlier thresholds — where you have to reinforce physical safety-boundaries and social life-boundaries respectively — you should not let the child participate too consciously in decisions. To reason with the child before the age of reason is unreasonable, absurd. It is also very manipulative to reason with a faculty that isn't there yet. The nature of the circular stubborn arguments that soon develop proves its irrationality.

Usually at this stage the adult will still win, but the situation is set up for hostile encounters when the child later develops the same power to manipulate thinking and language. And because the arguing is so subjective when it is pre-mature, it seems to remain so, and then thinking tends never to become the clear analytical tool needed for judging situations in adult life. Really, whenever you consistently blame anyone else for your circumstances — 'It's your fault! It's my husband's / my wife's fault! It's my mother's fault! It's always the government's fault!' — then you are still behaving like twelve-year-olds.

Until the child's twelfth year the parent's authority should be absolute. That is what playing the game means. First, explain the game through example: 'Do as I do' — then, 'Do as I say'. Refereeing decisions can be announced without discussion. This allows the child to get on with the business of being a child, while the parent gets on with the business of being an adult. Tact and respect suggests that you do some coaching, that you give some information — for instance, 'In a few minutes we will go to the shops.' Then, in a few minutes, the child will usually be ready to go, for you have allowed him time to accept the disruption of concentration in his creative play, and to embrace the new prospect in his imagination.

When we notice the birth of the child's attitude-body, so too we must establish some limits for it. My experience is that it might be best to begin with absolute resistance. In most cases, the demands are unreasonable, so absolute resistance is No. Then the work-out can begin, gradually easing off and practising at lesser levels of contention until eventually the muscles are sufficiently toned-up to be able to bench-press that No.

Between the twelfth and sixteenth years, children can be asked for their viewpoint, so that they can begin to participate, and feel that decisions are being made in their best interests. Children will often have valid things to say, but theirs is one voice which, especially when it comes out of the whirlwind or the tempest, should not be simply acceded to. There are many minor matters in which they can have an opportunity to choose, of course, within the clear boundaries you have set up, but all the major decisions in life must remain the parents' responsibility.

If these boundaries are clearly established, and the border-controls are in place, then another process can be initiated. You can think of it as negotiations between sovereign states about the easing of tensions. This is always best done at times of relative calm. It's where the fine-tuning of the gym apparatus really begins. Adolescents then can gradually appreciate the value of the work-out, and in consultation can set their own boundaries. Ultimately, from about the seventeenth year they will be making their own decisions, but if the earlier stages have been effectively handled, the older adolescent will still value parental guidance.

Throughout, the safety-boundaries have been there and, in one form or another, they remain. The life-boundaries have been established, and of course must be maintained — continuing to play the game well is important. Then, with the development of clear attitude-boundaries, accompanied by some toning-up in the soul-gym, you have set up the best conditions for sovereign soul-statehood.

This viewpoint might sound quite soft — or it can seem quite tough. That's the good thing about it — it can be soft, or as tough as 'tough-love' might need to be. No matter how well you do it, you can be in for a rough ride. But it also can be pleasantly human, as shown in the following anecdote. A child I know well one day asked me if he could do something. When I replied, 'No,' he sighed and gave up. His somewhat-older sister then burst out, 'Silly! Don't you realise that when Dad says "no" he really means "maybe" but first he has to feel he's in control? And when he says "maybe" he means "probably" but just needs time to consider it! Then "probably" will usually turn out to be "yes". But you just have to give him some time to get used to it...'

These are a few of the pictures through which you begin to see adolescence as it is. Now let's consider how to live and deal with it. I said: *all behaviour is a form of communication*. You can also add to this, that *all testing of boundaries is a search for the Self*. How is this Self reflected to them out of the encounter with the world? One of the difficulties that teenagers face to day is that of living in the 'adolescent culture' that passes for 'western civilisation' — I've already noted that our tendency to always blame anyone else identifies us as a twelve year old society. An aspect of this adolescent culture is its obsession with images — it's all about how you have to look, and how the things you own have to look. What the label is... A culture of surfaces — often stylistically brilliant, but mostly superficial, and transitory...

How does a teenager, just beginning to sense who they are, cope with this? It's a difficult time. What becomes most important for them is *self-image*. Appearances. Thus, the idolising of sports and music and fashion icons... Suddenly everyone has the same hair. The same clothes. Yet the mirror does not lie. You can do hair and clothes quite easily. But the face? The body-shape? The options *are* there, but it costs — in more ways than one... This search for identity based on self-image isn't new, is it? But was it lived out so intensely in the past? Life based on self-image alone is a fragile experience.

A deeper experience arises out of the teenager's feeling life — *self-esteem* is a weighing up of attributes, qualities, values... An estimation in my feelings — what's my worth? If I really value myself, the comments of others are less important. Many will be affirmations. But if my estimation of self-worth is based only upon the views of my peers, then I'm at risk.

Genuine self-image and self-esteem grow out of something much deeper — the grounding of the Self in its own certainties, in experiences of *self-determination*. ‘I am what I make of my experiences’ — this is the basis of resiliency. The child discovers ‘I can...’ ‘I have...’ ‘I am...’ I’m convinced that it must always be in this order — that resiliency is built on foundations of accomplishment, of steadily developing capacity. So it becomes very important that your teenager accomplishes something, and this requires real commitment from you — for *you* have to be accomplishing something also. Your child needs you to be an adult, and one definition of an adult is *self-accomplishment*. This doesn’t mean being an expert — it means rather that in all sorts of areas you are making your way... *That* is the accomplishment, to be a *Self*, and to be making it, against all adversity.

It’s about being a role-model, in terms of having a purposeful vision of life, and values to live by, and real aims which motivate you. Your child may not choose the same vision and values and aims. But they need to see how that vision of what life is about gives definition to how you see yourself, to your self-image; and how those personal values when lived have become the measure of your self-esteem; and how those aims are founded in your self-determination. In his book *The Soul’s Code*, James Hillman writes:

Parents’ deficit attention to the individual call they brought with them into the world and the hyperactivity of their distraction from this call betrays their reason for being alive. When your child becomes the sole reason for your life, you have abandoned the invisible reason *you* are here. And the reason you are here as an adult, as a citizen, as a parent? To make the world receptive to the daimon [your individual human spirit]. To set the civilisation straight so that a child can grow down into it and its daimon can have a life. This is the parenting task. To carry out this task for the daimon of your child you must bear witness first to your own.

Your teenager needs you to be your Self. An adult, not an adolescent. This brings with it some responsibilities. I like to think about this word as meaning *response-ability*, the *ability* to *respond* rather than merely *react*. For to react is adolescent. To be able to respond is adult. You must never be sarcastic, for instance... Here then are three adult ‘response-abilities’:

Speak truthfully

Listen attentively

Practice action learning

Teenagers need you to be true, the way a door-jamb is said to be ‘true’ — straight up and down. A teenager can seem to have a strange relationship to truth, asserting that ‘It’s true because I’m saying it, now’. If you try to remind him that yesterday he thought differently, he might retort, ‘You’re *so* yesterday! Today’s today!’ In fact he’s all at sea, washing around in a storm of emotions (and hormones), blown about by the changeable winds of life, and his utterance of truth is like a Verrey light, a flare fired from a lifeboat, saying ‘Here I am!’ He’s lost and he’s distressed and he needs to make his way towards the shore... Maybe he doesn’t need rescuing, probably he’s telling you he doesn’t, that he’ll do things his way... Still, you long to help, and you lie awake at night wondering what is the right thing to do...

Well, you need to be a lighthouse firmly founded upon the rock, unaffected by the storm. A tower of strength, your light shining... Vigilant. You speak your truth. But this truth is not just what you *feel* like uttering. It is a crystallisation of your reality. It was much the same truth yesterday. It will be much the same tomorrow. The light of a lighthouse is concentrated by its reflective mirrors. Reflect, and speak. It will be more powerful than if it is not reflected.

You need time to reflect, sometimes just a few moments. My mum said, 'Count to ten'. Learn to use the *pause button*. Say to yourself, 'I'm going to stop now, because I want to get this right.' Then reflect, *how will your next words or actions affect what's happening?* And then you have your say, or do what is needed, taking full responsibility for the consequences.

Your listening needs to become a safe harbour... Receptive, its waters deep and calm. *The secret of active listening is attention*. When your child wants to speak to you, stop what you are doing, look at her, give her your full attention, listen intently, check that you have heard her correctly. Then reflect and speak, or ask for time to consider... But *do* come back to it.

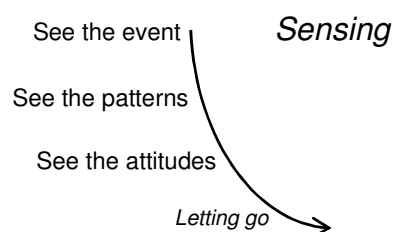
Learn each of those stages and do them. Teenagers don't believe you are listening if you are multi-tasking, and in fact you may not be listening adequately if you don't do every step:

- Stop what you are doing
- Look at her
- Give her your full attention
- Listen intently
- Check what you have heard
- Respond

A lot will improve between you if you just do that. And by the way it also works well with partners, friends, co-workers, colleagues...

Action Learning is your third responsibility. It means learning on the way, from your mistakes – which may simply be 'miss-takes', requiring another 'take'. Action learning takes many forms, all of which use some kind of reflective practice through which you 'get it'. You learn to see what is happening, how it happens, and why it happens; then you resolve to do it differently; and so you find a new motivation and aim, you develop new skills, you initiate new practices.

Here is my elaboration of a pathway through which you can transform situations – first through reflective practice, and then with increasing facility in the timeframe of the events themselves. The initial steps in *sensing* the reality are as follows:



Let's work our way through this movement. Something happens, and now there are all sorts of things going on... First, *see the event*. You know, if you were involved in a car crash, and a policeman was asking what actually happened, it's likely you would begin and then break down and get very emotional. Anger, shock, maybe fear or grief. But he will ask you to give him the facts, just the facts please... As you comply, you curiously begin to feel calmer. For the physical world is the most stable. So — *what* actually happened? Who was involved? What did you *say* or *do*? What did the other(s) *say* or *do*? You outline the events objectively as if in a report — maybe even as a simple narrative in a writing journal. In our time-poor lives, it's easy to just blunder on, repeating the same old mistakes. I suggest you need to take some time, go for a walk, or just sit down in a quiet place and reflect. *Sensing*...

Then, *see the patterns*. In family life, if there's something that's concerning you, probably it has happened before, in reality probably you realise you've been a bit slow to get on to it... So — *how* did it happen? Was it much the same as last time? What helped? What hindered? What picture emerges? Is it part of an habitual pattern? What/where were the *trip-wires*?

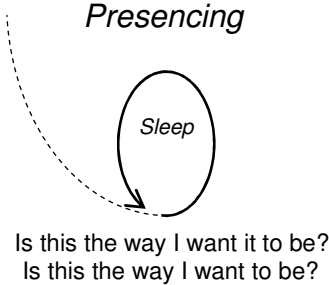
Now, these 'trip-wires' are interesting. They're there all the time but you never see them in time! It's like walking along a bush track, and then *Oops!* you've tripped on the root of a tree and sprawled in the dirt. What do you do? Well, you probably look around hurriedly, to see if anyone noticed your clumsiness! You feel hurt, embarrassed, even humiliated. If no one's there, however, you calm down and dust yourself off... Life in a family can be just like that. Who put those trip-wires there, those tricky things that always trip you up? When you look at it, you have to admit they're yours — no one else seems to trip over them, in fact they've all got their own. Habits are just like that — you see anyone else's habits and flaws, but your own are invisible — except to others... On this reflective path, you have to begin noticing your own trip-wires. They expose your clumsiness, your social or practical ineptitude. But really this is an opportunity — they are inviting you to become more awake.

The other aspect of reflection is to *see the attitudes*. Strangely, everyone else's attitudes are obvious! It's their fault, remember? But here you have to learn to see yourself as clearly as you see others — as clearly as you are seen by others. This leads into self-knowledge. Ask yourself, *why* did it happen? What did you expect? What assumptions were made? Why did you react as you did? What was the *trigger-point*? What values and attitudes shaped your emotional reactions and behaviour? Where did they come from?

Now, as you do this, entering this deeper region here, towards the bottom of the curve, it can be a tender moment. Or you might react to it angrily. Here, your chickens are coming home to roost. This is your life, and you are a good person, you want the best, but here at the core of your existence you realise the pain of not doing so well. I suggest that it's an important arrival, because here you must come to terms with the untransformed adolescent in you, and unless you come to this place you will remain rather like a teenager... So what is the 'trigger-point' for you? Was it a breach of trust when you were just nine years old? That's common. Was it — is it — to do with your own experiences of adolescent self-image, self-esteem, self-determination?

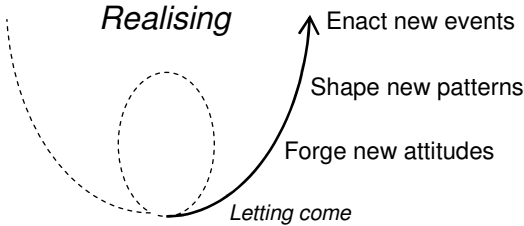
It is a tender moment. You might need help — it can be from a close friend, or a life coach, or a counsellor, or maybe you have faith in God or some spiritual teacher. Essentially, however, at this moment it is necessary to *let go*. 'I can of mine own self do nothing', says John the

Evangelist. Similar thoughts are found in most other religious and philosophical traditions. And the mystery is that in letting go, other things become possible. ‘When I let go of what I am, I become what I might be,’ says the ancient Chinese sage Lao Tzu. But this letting go is not always easy, so I want to introduce you to one of your best friends — the companionship that is found in sleep.



There is a wise saying that things look different in the morning. Neurological research is showing us that deep processing occurs in sleep, and people sometimes experience this as a sense of being in touch with another, wiser Self — a True Self or Higher Self — some even talk of a Guardian Angel or Spirit Guide; however you name it, I believe the transformative experience is the important thing. This is what is meant on this path by *presencing* — to be fully present, in the present. You can make this a methodical process — you follow those steps of sensing outlined above, and then, letting go, you go to sleep. *You sleep on it.* If you’ve looked at it honestly, it’s likely you will sleep more readily than if you are just stewing in it.

This process leads towards deepening understanding. At the centre of your consciousness are lots of questions: Is this the way you want it to be? Is this the way *you* want to be? Is there another way you could look at it? What was the experience of the other(s)? What could you have done differently? What do you have to *let go* of? What new insights are coming to you? Through this you begin to *sort the essential from the non-essential*. It comes to you what really matters. This *letting come* can be instantaneous, an inspiration or intuition — ‘I get it!’ Or it grows more slowly as a realisation — ‘making it real’... *Realising*, you work your way back out into life through the further steps, which are a transformation of the first three steps:

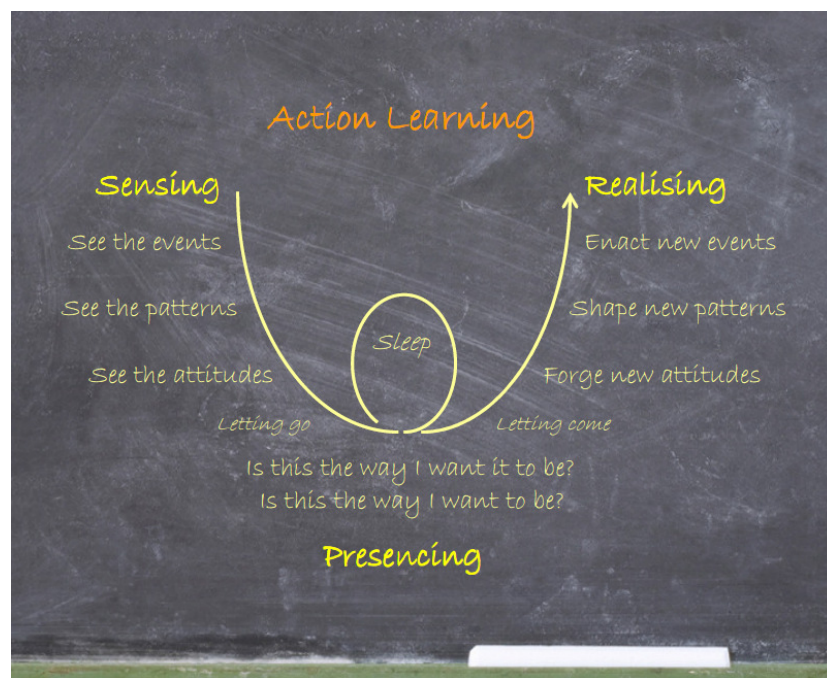


First, you *forge new attitudes*, which provide both an aim and motivation. *Why* will it now be different? What will be negotiable and non-negotiable for you? What values and attitudes will now inform your practice? *Why*? This is a very important stage — it’s what will keep you going in the hard times, for it gives meaning and purpose to your direction.

Then you can *shape new patterns*. *How* will it now differ? What skills or new habits, patterns and routines need to be established? What else needs to be developed? How will you avoid

repeating your mistakes? What do you have to stop doing? This is the level of *coaching*, of developing new capacities and skills. 'This is how I will do it from now on' — you will need to tell your teenager how it will be, what skills are needed, and then there's lots of patient practice, lots of patient coaching... Picking yourself up and going on, maybe apologising for any excesses, but then having another go... It's hard to change habits. But you can do it.

Finally, you *enact new events*. They need to be planned and prepared for... *What* will now happen? *What* will you do? *What* will others now do? *What* are the next steps? *What* does the situation require? *What* does this mean in practice? *What* will these changes look like? *What* will indicate change? *How* will you know when you get there? *What* celebrations will reinforce this realisation of the new?



Do you notice how this process leads from what you see happening 'out there', noticing how it recurs in situations that are confronting you, then sensing downward and inward to your core principles and values, and finally working outward again into action? It's a path that acknowledges that transformation originates within. But it proves itself in being enacted.

In conclusion, I want to encourage you to *admit your mistakes*. I mean this in a very specific way... First, realise that 'to admit' something can be understood as 'to let it in' — denial is one of the deepest forms of untruth, especially when we refuse to admit something even to ourselves. Then, as I mentioned earlier, see your 'mistakes' as just that — 'miss-takes'. You simply had the wrong take on it, and therefore, like a film-maker, you proceed to another 'take' — 'Take 2' — 'Take 3'... Or like an archer who has missed the mark, you take another arrow, adjust your aim, and try again... Again. You know, a couple of the greatest barriers to development are encapsulated in the words 'failure' and 'guilt' — they cripple your initiative to do better. Learn to admit the mistake and move on... But do learn from it. Let go in order to let come. Your teenager will respect an honest learner.

Let's just contemplate this whole process for a moment... Tonight we've lived with some pictures which help us understand adolescence, which enable us to become familiar with the 'complete stranger'. We've reflected on our responsibility — that is, our 'response-ability'.

And we've acquired some tools to work with... There are other tools I could recommend. For instance, on my website www.johnallison.com.au there is a lecture transcript 'Parenting as a Vocation' — you will find there several reflective practices which will reinforce the approach I've presented here. I've moved quickly through this final movement, but in reality it is of course not so easy. It can take a while to get it, and even longer to do anything about it.

Yet rapid change is often ineffectual. So don't be discouraged if it takes a while. Sometimes it even gets harder — because you see things more clearly... Admit your mistakes. Your *intent to be an adult* — that is, a developing human being — is what your teenager requires of you. It's a deep, thorough passage, and this approach is about the one person you can change — yourself. Sometimes the real change is mysterious: 'We must be willing to let go of the life we have planned, so as to have the life that is waiting for us,' wrote the novelist E.M. Forster. 'You must *be* the change you want to see in the world', said Mahatma Gandhi, doing it.

Most learning has its challenging moments. That's just how it is. I'm thinking of the refrain of a Leonard Cohen song:

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in

Your teenager will offer you many opportunities — those cracks through which the light can get in, if only you look for it. I hope tonight has allowed a little light in...

Note: Some of the content presented in this talk has been published previously in my email parenting journal { *parent-theses* } in a number of articles also called *In Your Face*. I am grateful to those school communities in which these ideas have taken shape and been developed, especially to Glenaeon Rudolf Steiner School. I also acknowledge my debt to Dirk Lemson and Friedrich Glasl for their *U Procedure*, and to Otto Scharmer for his insightful elaboration of this path as *Theory U*.