

{ parent~theses }

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The Glorious Summer of the Awakening Self

One summer's day, when I was just three years old, I stood alone in a farmyard along the Kaikoura Coast and knew there was Mystery in the world. It was an experience of anticipation and apprehension: of the self, and of the world. The New Zealand novelist Maurice Gee makes use of an evocative juxtaposition of two common images in several of his books — the creek and the kitchen: 'I'd run home from the creek to the safety and security of the kitchen; one the place of safety and affection, the other the place of adventure, danger, excitement.' This is how I too see my childhood. The light and the darkness of the world existed in polarities which felt like a natural circumstance.

So I stood there, in that farmyard, in warm long sunshine, seeing the light flossed by thistledown and the bright-winged insects hatched for a brief existence in the summer air. I had walked out of the house of the folks my parents were visiting that day, down a path and away through the wooden garden gate beneath the trees. I wandered about, under the brooding macrocarpas, amongst and through the wooden out-buildings. Bruce Chatwin writes of these first adventures:

Children need paths to explore, to take bearings on the earth in which they live, as a navigator takes bearings on familiar landmarks. If we excavate the memories of childhood, we remember the paths first, things and people second — paths down the garden, the way to school, the way round the house, corridors through the bracken or long grass.

I think we remember such things because they are *adventurous*; that juxtaposition of anticipation and apprehension heightens our perceptions. So I still recall my impressions from that day, along each path I took: the smell of sun-warmed fuscous manure and straw in the doorway of the hayshed; the lanolin musk of the pile of old woolsacks; the pungent odours of thick oil and creosote oozing from rusted drums against the back wall of the barn; worn leather harness hanging on nails amidst odd bits of machinery and tools; the tractor standing on its cul-de-sac of off-set chevron tracks imprinted into dry mud; the rusting plough and chain harrows; the *cawdling* of magpies, and the sudden barking of the sheepdogs...

And there is something else in that memory of place — awareness of events as further paths. There may have been a few earlier memories, but this is my first experience, as I walked from gate to yard to shed to barn, of mood... Now I look back, marvelling at this awakening, hearing in my heart each summer's call: Receive the light.

Housework

[I am grateful to Esther Leisher, for permission to reprint a number of her articles. This excerpt is from 'Housework Part I: Confessions of a Waldorf Mom'. The Toolbox at the end of this issue features practical tips from this same article. Her full series of 'housework' articles can be found at <http://www.waldorfinthehome.org>]

Deciding what to do about housework has to be so individual, tailored not to some ideal, but to the life you actually live. Nothing anyone says should make you feel guilty. You have your own way of doing things. Talking together thoughtfully with other parents should not leave you discouraged, but should bring intuitions. Each person in the conversation begins to know what it is they want to do in their own situation. It's okay to say, 'I just want to get it done without interference from the kids'.

The following tales from my own family life are more about moods and qualities than housekeeping tips [see the Toolbox on Page 13 for some useful tips].

With all you have to do, including all that wonderful Waldorf stuff, how do you get the housework done? Everyone comes up with an individual way of coping with it, a happy solution or a not-so-happy one. Mine was to involve the kids in whatever I was doing. In their early years children learn through imitation; they want to do what they see you doing. For my children that meant they were involved in sweeping, mopping, cleaning the bathroom, washing clothes, preparing meals, washing dishes. In a way they were apprentices, not so much in housekeeping, but in attitudes toward life. We did lots of other things besides housework of course, wonderful things, but housework was not separate, not a category of 'unwonderful things'.

Sweeping a floor meant an inner experience of the broom, the floor, the dirt. We had linoleum floors when they were young (four kids, remember) so sweeping happened often. The little ones wanted to help, of course, but the adult brooms were too awkward for them (small brooms satisfy some children, but not mine). So they took turns holding the dust pan, intently watching my Zen sweeping. I swept lovingly ('I am scratching the house's back', I felt, while listening to the sound of the broom scritch across the floor).

Having listened carefully, I noticed, and mentioned, that the broom seemed to be saying not 'sweep, sweep, sweep', but, 'Peees, Peees, Peees', with a hard sound at the beginning. You could hear it, really. Were the little ones listening to the broom? Watching the dirt form a pile? Or learning that work can be entrancing?

The broom thing took on another dimension when I found a lovely, soft, strange-looking broom in an import store. We bought it, felt it, examined it. This broom was made by a human being and we thought with gratitude about the person who put it together. 'We have a special broom', was the feeling. 'How fortunate we are'. The new broom, curiously enough, spoke differently. Its soft sound was at the beginning, not at the end. It said a genuine 'sweeeP, sweeeP, sweeeP'. Of course the children were allowed to use the broom

whenever they wanted, but I was the one who loved using it most. Sweeping became a moment of soul restoration for me: a soft broom, a soft sound and a clean floor. The children felt it. They came running when I started sweeping, and one winter's day they told me with great concern that Daddy had used the special broom to knock snow off the car. That sacred broom!

I remember that I had three mops because three of us mopped the kitchen floor. Or one did — me — while the two little ones went through the gestures. (In this instance the older ones were at school. There was a wide gap between the first two and the second two children.) Even though the mops were identical, my mop was 'better' because it went straight. Their mops went in all sorts of unexpected directions, so one child or the other continually wanted to exchange mops with me, so they could use the 'good' mop. But then that mop would go in all sorts of directions so they would trade me again. I found it more amusing than frustrating, but by then I was years past the anxious feeling of 'Just leave me alone, I have to get this done!'

My children were fascinated just by the gesture of mopping when they were younger. But by the time Paul and Laurel were about $2\frac{1}{2}$ and 5 years of age, we were making wet patterns on the kitchen floor with the mops (would you call it a prelude to form drawing or a movement experience?). By age five or six they could mop alone (with an audience). By age eight they were choosing mopping the kitchen floor as a chore they did alone on Saturday morning.

Laundry was another activity they gladly participated in. By two they were helping me sort out the clothes in front of the washing machine: white, dark, light, delicate (I also did some unobtrusive re-sorting, of course). Then, while the machine was filling up, they got to put the powder in and then the clothes. The gesture of picking something up and tossing it in some pile appealed most when they were younger. By the time they were five, they wanted to learn how to turn on the washing machine. I showed them and stood by. By the time they were eight, they were washing their own clothes (I know, nobody believes it. Recently I had to assure my son Craig's wife that he really did wash his own clothes from a very early age).

Bathrooms: even a two-year-old will gladly help with the bathtub. A wet sponge, a can of (safe) cleanser and the challenge of shaking the powder only onto the sponge — one of those many things that you show them rather than tell them (the baby gets just a wet sponge to fiddle with). Lots of scouring powder gets spilled by a young one who is not yet well coordinated. You don't say a word beyond, 'Thank you for helping me.' You will rinse the tub again the next time you are in the bathroom.

With bathrooms you also have the magic of water. 'Water magic washes our sink and carries away the dirt,' you might say. 'See, there it goes.' Amazingly enough, water, this very special stuff, flows out of our faucet (I'm sure your house is just as magical). Here again is the Zen feeling and the reverence. In our dry land [Esther lives in New Mexico], water especially matters. I never see running water without a sense of wonder. How often I said to them, 'Look, running water!' Wonder, thankfulness, the inner experience

of water sets a mood. By experiencing mood, gestures, example, they soak up inner qualities — without any preaching on your part.

Another water experience was washing windows with rags and squirt bottles — fun, but messy. The result wasn't very impressive, but the kids liked the process. And it's always the process and the meaning that count. Laurel, at four-years-old, assured us that we had wonderful windows that never let any bad thing in at night, only starlight. Washing them was special...

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Being 'Good Enough' is Pretty Good ~ part three

We can now consider a useful filter for the outer parenting environment, the structural holding environment — that is, the home, the gathering-place of the family. First, what is the difference between a house and a home? Pause for a moment [I remind readers this is a lecture transcript] and talk with your neighbour about this...

So, let's hear your reflections — 'a house is dead, a home is living' ... 'a home has a soul' ... 'a feeling of something living and breathing' ... 'warmth' ... 'a place where you feel nurtured' ... These are great observations! Take the idea that a home is living — we can explore that. A living organism is characterised by seven *life processes*. I've written about them before, but I think they're worth another look. With these processes in mind we begin to reflect how a home is an organism.

These seven life processes are: *breathing, warming, nourishing, secreting, maintaining, growing, and generating*. They are prerequisites for all life: for instance, even in plants a kind of breathing occurs; and warming, whether inwardly present as in mammals and birds, or as in the case of plants and insects — and also reptiles, amphibians, fish — directly due to the sun's warmth, is a life necessity.

These first processes of *breathing* and *warming* appear to be preconditions for all other life activities. But each one is fundamental, and each depends upon the right functioning of the others. Thus, through the *nourishing* process, substances are drawn into the organism, and *secreting* then becomes a necessity — a sifting and sorting must take place, retaining what is essential, rejecting the inessential. Then the existence of any entity must be regulated and moderated, through the process of constant *maintaining* — think for a moment how each cell in your body is constantly bathed and cleansed, and now imagine if this were not so... This activity would only keep things as they are, however, were it not for the process of *growing* that underlies all development. Organisms develop, from their juvenile forms to maturity; this is a process which fills us with wonder and awe when we perceive it in any living thing. And finally, there is a process through which reproductive capacities appear in the organism, *generating* its own kind, creating something new.

In a baby, these processes are all evident, though not yet evenly regulated. For instance, if we observe a baby's breathing, we notice how irregular it is, how easily affected it is by sudden events — any unexpected change is a shock, and it registers in the breathing. This irregular breathing — laboured at times, and almost suspended at others — can be a source of anxiety in a parent, and that is exactly what is not needed. Breathing is easily polluted, and not only from physical causes. The baby breathes most easily in a calm environment, one which is free of any extreme nervous or emotional intensity and flurries of abrupt activity.

Similarly, we know the baby does not have a conscious relationship to its own warmth, so we have to ensure that the physical surroundings are right, that the baby's head is covered against heat and cold, for instance, especially in those first years when the fontanelles are still open. We could consider each of the life processes in turn, observing their normal and their abnormal conditions. I am not a doctor, however, and where any problems are evident, that becomes a medical matter you need to act upon — otherwise, it is not your task as a parent to interfere directly with these processes, but rather to ask yourselves, what is to be done to support the healthy functioning of the baby's life processes? If, as Donald Winnicott puts it, the baby *is* a going concern, how do you establish the right holding and facilitating environment for its development?

Let's use the life processes as metaphors for conditions in the home. So how does your home *breathe*? A home can seem full of fresh air and light, or it can seem dark and claustrophobic. Have you noticed that, after a spring clean, your home seems more open and spacious, as if there is more room to breathe? Just reflect on that phrase, *more room to breathe...* And now think about it in terms of *warmth*... Is your home welcoming? Do you experience any other particular homes as welcoming? What is this quality? Notice how it just seems to accept you, takes you in, envelops you in warmth... We experience warmth as something that permeates the space, and is absorbed by things. A home can feel like a temperate zone, or else tropical, or arctic. Have you noticed how, in springtime, the sun seems to warm you right through into your bones? In some homes you can feel the same fresh, sunny warmth. Then again, you will have noticed that warmth, when it is shut up and enclosed, becomes 'fuggy'. *Breathing opens a space, and warming fills it.* Taken together, these elements — breathing and warming — constitute the atmosphere of the home, its physical and social climate. Considering the home as a container, as a holding environment, what *climate conditions* support a baby?

Within this container of the home, weather occurs as an emotional constituent of the climate. Is the prevailing soul-weather of your family stormy and tempestuous, or calm and mild? Does it vary? Are there more extreme events? It can be really heavy weather. Special weather conditions prevail when a teenager is in the home — you might have experienced what a slowing-moving cold front can feel like as an emotional event, or a tropical cyclone, or acid rain... If the home is a facilitating environment, what is in the best interests of your baby?

Then there is all we can understand as *nourishing*. You know what food is, of course, and maybe you've considered it in terms of quality, not just quantity. You know the quality of

everything is important, because it all goes into a baby's mouth! On another level, everything in the baby's environment is an immediate question of *taste*. There is food-as-fuel, and there is food-as-experience. It is food for the senses, which in a child are like open doors. Whatever a baby takes in is nourishment or malnourishment. Now, are you 'force-feeding' or 'starving' your baby? Walk through your home, tasting it... What is the flavour of your home? Ask yourself, is it nourishing? Is this just about liking or disliking? Or is it what is meant by 'wholesome'? The senses nourish the child. You know, even touch is a form of nourishment for a baby — there is research that shows that premature babies in an incubator gain weight much more quickly if they are stroked gently and regularly. They *devour* your love.

Secreting is a secret process, a mysterious activity through which the organism sifts and sorts the essential from the non-essential. Nothing remains as it was; it is transformed, and either secreted or excreted. How does this manifest itself in the organism of the home? Because it *is* secret and mysterious, this isn't so easily observed — but think for a moment what *presence* is — you have an awareness that something inhabits the space which is a home and which isn't present in a house. I'm talking of that mysterious element we call humanity. It's a special quality which we certainly know when we experience it — and we know when it's absent. It's that intangible quality which we might experience in the atmosphere of a Steiner school, for instance. I sometimes refer to it using a Maori word — *turangawaewae* — which I interpret as the place where you can stand, feeling empowered and connected. This human 'secretion' — we could call it a *genuine spirit of place* — forms a focal point for the baby's experience, encouraging purposeful, meaningful development.

You all know about the task of *maintaining* a home. It isn't just a physical demand — your life and soul have to go into it, or it will be just a house. My feeling is that women especially are sensitive to this requirement — they have an innate sense of the ongoing processes that maintain existence. In fact, you can observe that women — more often than not — are aware of all the life processes, and tend them like a gardener tends a garden. Do you know women like this — who have that ability to shape and tend and nurture the environment? Are you one of them? Who can remain constant in attentiveness to it? (Some men have this capacity, and it's a marvellous experience to be in their vicinity).

This process is very much about looking after the container — that holding environment. It ensures the healthy activity of all the other processes. In our kindergartens, we know that neglect of the space leads to accidents and incidents — in a spot not fully inhabited by our conscious activity, other unwanted things might happen. Health and safety consciousness is one aspect of maintenance in the life environment of a baby, a vigilance that attends to all possibilities. Seeing that each day is sufficient — that your activity of nurture suffices — is another aspect. Maintaining implies a steadfastness that is difficult amidst the forces of contemporary life. To just keeping on going... This is a vital element in a child's life — to provide a constancy and dependability that can be relied on.

Maintaining keeps things as they are — *growing* is another process, and you will have gone into homes where renovations have brought about a genuine growth. When you move into a new house or apartment, you initially set it up as best as you can, making do, fitting things in. For some people, that's as far as habitation goes, and the space remains undeveloped. So some places never seem to change, while in others a restless, forceful energy brings constant upheaval... However, most homemakers will begin to make changes, seeing and developing the possibilities... Alterations and renovations can be an organic process of transformation, through which the substance of the house is shaped into a new tissue of homeliness. The house becomes an entity — you visit such a place from time to time and discover refreshing developments. It is as though it is becoming more completely itself. A child feels supported in a home that grows and develops as they grow.

When it comes to the life process of *generating*, I have to admit to being at a bit of a loss to express exactly how that happens in the home environment. But homemaking *is* generative, and you can see the effects, you can feel the effects, immediately recognising a creative space in which beauty and goodness are generated as a spiritual-soul activity. I am fortunate to live with someone who is an artist of the home. So I witness these life processes being cultivated, and recall what Winnicott spoke of as the facilitating environment:

It is in the space between inner and outer world, which is also the space between people ... that intimate relationships and creativity occur.

In a very real way, this space is defined by the *home* you make.

~ John Allison 2009. The whole lecture transcript including the remaining sections can now be downloaded from my website <http://www.johnallison.com.au>

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What every child needs...

The greatest need of children today is to have real adults in their lives. Promoters of resilience often say that just one adult is enough. But we need to be clear about what we mean by 'adult' — for it is not a matter of qualifying merely through age. There are many adults today who seem to have remained at an adolescent stage of development. In his remarkable book *The Soul's Code*, James Hillman states it uncompromisingly:

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.

This is rather provocative — very often the child *does* become the sole reason for our life, yet Hillman suggests this is a diversion from our real mission. To grasp this, I think we need to understand that word 'sole', and see that at its extreme, losing oneself in

parenthood *is* a shortcoming. Hillman then asks a rhetorical question, before proposing his answer:

And the reason you are here as an adult, as a citizen, as a parent? To make the world receptive to the daimon. 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.

That Greek word 'daimon' has psychological, even mythological significance. Hillman uses it in the sense of the individual human spirit — that seedlike essence or 'genius' of each person's being that we each have a responsibility to *realise* — make real — more fully. Throughout his book, he makes intriguing observations about so-called adults who have not succeeded in this task of becoming, and also about those who have.

The child wants us — *needs* us — to fulfil ourselves. Our example will be the teacher and guide for their development, the encourager of their *will to be*. Of course we must endeavour to protect and nurture and succour our children. But we also have a greater *raison d'être* — to grow down into our own lives and establish our meaning in the world. *To be, or not to be*, muses Hamlet. The answer is, always, *to be is to become* — to continue to learn, to continue to develop...

In those thought-provoking terms used by Donald Winnicott (in the previous article), we could say that to be an adult is to become a *facilitating environment*.

~ John Allison 2009: a seed-thought for further development.

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A call for more creativity in schools



The following article has been edited from the second interview by Kerry O'Brien (7.30 Report, 17th June 2009) with Sir Ken Robinson, a leading thinker on education, creativity and innovation who was visiting Australia at the time. I printed selections from the first part of this interview in the September issue of { parent-theses }.

What great teachers know, what great parents know, what great head teachers know is that every school is different, every class is different. You have to create conditions where people give of their best...

Leadership is really important from every point of view. Just look at what's happening in America: that shift from the last presidency to the current one. There's been a total change of mood because people take their cue from the tone of the leadership. And it's true in every system I know. If you find a school where a head teacher gets it, anything is possible, and I mean that literally. A lot of schools do things they don't have to do — I can't speak in detail of the legislation in Australia, but I doubt that there's anywhere

in the legislation for education in Australia that tells high schools they have to have 40 minute periods, you know, six a day, over five days...

All the schools I know that are achieving a lot are prepared to question the routines they've taken for granted for years and try something else... It's about finding freedom within the system as well as changing the system in the long term...

[The Reggio schools] practice what generally people call 'child-centred education'. And I think, well, why would you even call it that? I mean, what else could it be? But they give kids a very structured environment in which they can play, think creatively and work collaboratively. And you see similar principles in other systems. Montessori and Steiner have different takes on it, but the premise is the same: that in early years education, children need time to play, to socialise, to try new things out and to let their imaginations run. And what they find of course is not that this puts these kids at a disadvantage, but that they learn with a greater appetite later on...

This cramming thing is really worrying, I think, because it assumes that if our children follow the path we followed and that we know how that's going to work, all will come right for them... I live in Los Angeles. Not long after I arrived there, about eight years ago, I saw a policy paper which was titled 'College begins in kindergarten'. No it doesn't. If we had more time, I could go into this, but it really doesn't. Kindergarten begins in kindergarten. There was a friend of mine who ran a great theatre company for kids. He said a three-year-old is not half a six-year-old. A six-year-old is not half a 12-year-old. If they're three, they're three. But in some parts of the world — I'm sure this is true in the big metropolitan centres in Australia — kids are being interviewed for kindergarten. I mean, what are they hoping to find out? What are they looking for at the interview? Evidence of infancy...?

The problem manifests itself very often in parents, in my view, pushing their kids in the wrong direction, pushing them against the grain of their talent, because the assumption is we've got to keep them at the programme, they've got to do conventional academic work, they've got to go to a good university, they've got to do a law degree. Presumably the assumption is once we've all got law degrees, the whole world will get back on its axis. But the truth is, people's lives are not linear like that. They develop much more organically. And many of the people I interviewed for the book — I'm sure it's been true of your life — these people have got to where they have got by following their particular talents and interests and passions. And so what I'm arguing for is that at the heart of our education systems, of course we need high standards, of course we need to cover common ground, but instead of promoting conformity, we should be promoting diversity of talent...

The analogy I always draw is people have become used to the idea now that there is a crisis in the world's natural resources. It seems to me beyond dispute that there are some serious strains happening in the world's natural environment. But I think what this conversation is about is that there is a similar crisis in the world's human resources. Many people, in my experience, go through their whole lives doing work they're not very

interested in, just bumping along because they happen to have wandered into it, with no great enthusiasm, waiting for the weekends. And much to the pleasure of all the drug companies and the alcohol companies, who keep them buoyant. But I also meet people who love what they do and couldn't imagine doing anything else...

And I think this is the big irony, that a lot of these restrictions on education are being forced on education by governments acting in what they believe to be the interests of the economy. You know, you say, 'Well, why are we doing this?' The answer comes back, 'Well, because we have to be competitive.' Well, if we know anything it's that the real driver of creativity and innovation is imagination and diversity...

Innovation isn't some soft-edged liberal idea, it's an essential economic imperative. We could revivify education if we did this deliberately. Corporations have a responsibility here because they need to stand up and start saying politically what I know they say to me all the time, which is that we need people who can think differently. If we get that message — if we get that connection between economic, personal and social development, then we will have the revolution that we've been waiting for.

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You Are Your Child's First Teacher ~ a book review

[This review by Meryn G. Callander of Rahima Baldwin Dancy's seminal book is reprinted with permission from 'The Wellspring' — <http://thewellspring.com>.]

The importance of what our children learn in the home and through their relationship with us forms the irreplaceable foundation of all that comes later. Mother, childbirth educator, midwife, and Waldorf educator, Rahima Baldwin Dancy aims to deepen our understanding of the nature of the young child as a whole being — body, mind, emotions, and spirit — so enabling us to meet their needs for balanced development.

It is Baldwin Dancy's sensitive, sincere, and ever-so-natural tending to the soul and spirit, as well as mind and body, of the newborn and young child, that makes this a very special book.

In a society which values intellectual development above all else, we tend to ignore other aspects of development. We reason with our children as if they were grown ups and teach them with techniques appropriate for much older children. Distrustful of natural processes, we believe we have to do something in order to ensure our child's development. Milestones of the first three years — walking, talking, thinking, and memory — occur by themselves, according to their own timetable. Trusting natural processes does not mean that we do nothing, but that the things we do need to be consonant with the child's own developmental stages.

The world of the young is critically endangered, as more and more children are placed in daycare in infancy, and academic pursuits are pushed onto younger and younger children.

The hurried child syndrome is apparent in all spheres of activity. We try to speed their development with baby walkers and gymnastics, and reason with five-year-olds as if their ease with words ought to translate into control of their actions in the future. Problems arise when we fail to realise how different a three year old is from a child of nine, or a teen from an adult. Children do not think, reason, feel, or experience the world the way an adult does.

Understanding that incarnation into earthly life is a gradual process, we can clarify how we perceive, interact with, and help our children so they realise their full potential. Recognising a vertical stream of knowing individuality as well as a horizontal stream of hereditary characteristics in each child, a primary task of parents is to seek to harmonise the two, so that one does not dominate to the exclusion of the other.

Baldwin Dancy writes of the passage from womb to world as a very significant and sacred time. The first six weeks of life are a time of tremendous transition between one level of existence and another. The energy of creation that is present is 'very powerful and holy', and more accessible if acknowledged and protected. It is a time for the new mother to practice doing nothing, to just be centered in her heart or in her breath, and a special time to just be together as a family.

The sensitivity of the newborn calls for special regard at birth, and in the months following. Baldwin Dancy emphasises the importance of paying attention to the quality of the infant's surroundings and the experiences that come to her. For example, protecting the baby from bright lights, focusing on the quality of sounds that reach her ears — in terms of volume, harmony, and rhythm — and offering stimulation from natural rather than artificial sources.

She advocates nurturing a baby's development throughout the first year by touching, carrying, talking, singing, contact with nature, nursery rhymes, and movement games. She cautions against baby bouncers, baby walkers, playpens, and baby gymnastics, and believes that one of the greatest gifts parents can give a child between birth and first grade is time and materials for the creative play which helps her work her way into earthly life by imitating all she experiences. The very young do not need playgroups (though their parents might!), gymnastics, educational tools, nor fancy toys. They need circle and movement games, songs, musical and artistic activities, and examples of real work for imitation. They need contact with nature, nourishing images from stories, and simple toys they can complete with the imagination. We learn, for example, that the beautiful doll and the anatomically correct doll are a hindrance to the child's inner development, leaving nothing for her imagination to supply, and providing more than she can hold in awareness. Toys based on TV and movie characters (therefore with fixed personalities) leave little room for creative imagination. Baldwin Dancy urges that we consider not only the safety, but aesthetic quality of a toy. Is it beautiful? How does it feel to the touch? What pictures of the world does it offer the child?

She cautions us against providing rational and scientific answers before our children are ready. Because their verbal skills far outweigh their conceptual knowledge, we tend to

answer at a level of abstraction far beyond their comprehension. Calling directly on the intellect and memory of the child during the first seven years, not only takes him away from movement and valuable play, but accelerates his change of consciousness and robs him of the valuable years of early childhood — years vital to later physical health and mental development. At this age, children learn best through direct life experiences and imitation.

Baldwin Dancy describes discipline as a process of effectively and consistently setting limits, and guiding a child to develop in a healthy way physically, emotionally, and mentally, rather than simply correcting undesirable behavior. She always emphasises the importance of imitation and example, patience, repetition, and rhythm.

We are reminded that how a child enters sleep and wakes impacts the spirit as well as the body, and the quality of both sleeping and waking life. Celebrating festivals and the course of the year 'is not only important in individuals' lives, but is important socially, and for the possibility it provides us to step out of 'ordinary time' and be connected with something more abiding.'

Baldwin Dancy addresses a host of basic issues — such as toilet training, separation anxiety, cabin fever, sharing meals, nutrition, naps, quiet times, childcare, breast-feeding, co-sleeping, and educational TV programs for the young (which she does not endorse.) She suggests what to do to encourage the balanced development of the five-year-old who is already reading, and the impacts of divorce, death, and a new sibling. She looks at the Waldorf early-childhood program and Waldorf education in the home. She encourages us to trust our hearts, and value our parenting. Not everyone can stay at home in the first three years but she urges that we reject the notion that it's all the same.

Encouraging us to see our children as unique individuals with their own personalities and lives to live, and parenting as part of our own inner growth, Baldwin Dancy writes:

The young child accepts us as perfect and good; once he becomes older and sees our imperfections, the most important thing is that the child sees we are striving to do better. Our desire for inner growth (or our complacency) is perceived by the child and has a very deep impact on him.

This book includes and goes beyond the physicalities of parenting to offer substance for heart and soul to ponder.

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The Helping Conversation

Contact me via my website at <http://www.johnallison.com.au>

In the Toolbox ~ housework

These practical suggestions from Esther Leisher supplement her article earlier in this issue. You will note that she advocates what I have been referring to as 'good enough' parenting, not some ideal of perfection.

- 1) Schedule a particular day for housework — then you don't have to think about it until then.
- 2) Get your kids used to doing things for themselves.
- 3) Have a shoebox-sized basket for each person's things — baseball cap, picture to send to Grandma, things they must take to school, unfinished crocheting, or whatever.
- 4) Do some of the cooking on the weekend and freeze it — double batches, triple batches, whatever you have room for.
- 5) Or make a main dish for supper first thing in the morning; then supper doesn't find you having to make do with tuna sandwiches.
- 6) Fill the kitchen sink with hot soapy water before you sit down for supper and have everyone scrape their plates and put them in the water after supper. The dishes are half done.
- 7) My favourite trick was the clutter-clearing basket. Carrying the basket around the house, I put in everything I found on floors and tables. Then I put away everything in the basket. If putting things away is just what you can't bear to do at that moment, put the full basket in the closet to take out and deal with at some less frazzled time. The peace-saving basket creates such a wonderful sense of order in less than 15 minutes. I often did not get everything put away, but every child knew where all the 'lost' things were — in the basket! That basket restored me to my better self. Also, the system is the most wonderfully instant 'company is coming' housekeeping. Fifteen minutes to pick up clutter, 15 minutes to hastily clean the bathroom, and 10 seconds to close the bedroom doors.
- 8) Make lightness, happiness, imagination — even in housework — a priority.

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Postscript

So we come to the end of the fourth year of this journal. I've now created an archive of past issues, gathered as annual Collections, together with a detailed Index of Contents, at <http://groups.google.com.au/group/parent-theses>. My intention remains, as stated in the first issue, 'to share some views — *theses* — about *parenting* as a vocation: that is, a conscious search encompassing the spirit, soul and body.'

There is a great new website offering comprehensive insights into babies, toddlers and parenting at <http://www.consciousparentingguide.com>. Have a look at it.

May your Christmas and New Year be blessed with light amidst the hard work!