

PARENTING AS A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

*Deepening Ordinary & Extraordinary
Events into Sacred Occasions*

Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer

Ch. 6

Character

For People of All Faiths, All Backgrounds
JEWISH LIGHTS PUBLISHING • WOODSTOCK, VERMONT

living in was a true community, an experience she knew from her childhood. The particulars of time and place differed, but the essence was constant.

One of my young informants, a thirteen-year-old girl, told me that after being exposed to a variety of religious services, she invented her own religion. It was the essence of simplicity. "God created the world and that's it. You die and that's it. It doesn't matter what you wear to the services. Actually, there are no services, just the announcements and the refreshments."

This girl may not have gotten all that religion has to offer yet, but she has begun to appreciate sharing life with others. As she gets older, she will find that she was right not to leave community out of her invented religion. For many, the home a community offers is a profound glimpse of grace. As Robert Frost said about home,

*I should have called it
Something you somehow haven't to deserve.*

Chapter 6

PLAYTIME

Character

*"We'll always love you, but we want to
raise you so other people will love you too."*

In Yiddish, the word *mensch* literally means "human being." It connotes quite a bit more. A *mensch* is someone who acts with integrity, someone who is responsible, who is decent and fair and honest. Another Yiddish word, *edelkeit*, complements it. *Edelkeit* means nobility of soul. A person possessing *edelkeit* is compassionate, loving, generous of spirit. When I asked parents what they wanted for their children, this is what they told me—those few who knew Yiddish and the great majority who did not: "I want my child to be a person who radiates *edelkeit*. I want my child to be a *mensch*."

When playtime comes, the little *mensch* in training is brought to the playground, carrying his beloved ball. The parent watches from the bench, pretending to be interested in the other parents' gossip, really interested in the child. When someone else wants to play with the ball, what will he do? Will he display the *edelkeit* I have tried so hard to instill? Will he be the *mensch* I so want him to be? Or will he push the other child into the sandbox? And then comes the question that makes parenthood the spiritual journey it is. If he doesn't act as I hoped, will I be a *mensch*? Or will I push *him* into the sandbox?

The challenge of shaping our children's character is a spiritual education for us. Sometimes, children's innate goodness startles their parents and evokes their awe. Just as often, however, parents are shocked and frustrated by their child's crabby, selfish, or even violent nature. Parents discover anew the underside of humanity. And in their response to their

and his character flaws, parents find darkness in their own hearts. Yet they also discover, again to their surprise, that their desire to be better parents sometimes pushes them to become better people.

The depth of compassion we sometimes see in our children hardly feels natural. Rather, it seems almost supernatural. Every parent has his or her special memories, moments that ripped them open with emotion. Jeremy told me one that had us both in tears by the end. "I took my two daughters to a new swimming pool. Although the older one could swim, the younger one could not. The little one was sitting on her sister's shoulders and being carried around the shallow end, her legs held down by her sister's hands. Suddenly, without realizing it, the older one walked further into the pool, too deep to stand. I watched from a distance as, terrified, my daughter surveyed her options: ditch her sister and swim or try to keep her sister up while slowly sinking herself.

"I watched my daughter resolutely try to tread water with just her feet. While both hands held tightly to her sister's legs, the water covered her head and eventually submerged her. By then, I was in the water and could pull the little one off to safety so the older could swim up to the surface. She was frightened but unharmed. I could not get over it. *Where did that come from?* I wondered. I tried to teach her basic rules and values, but this came from someplace else. She had just risked drowning rather than abandon her sister. I did not know there was as much love in my soul as I felt that day for my daughter."

Donna wanted to teach her daughter about the spark of divinity in every human being, but her daughter ended up teaching her. "When my daughter was only five, we were walking through the supermarket, and a mentally ill man started following us. He clearly wanted to relate to us. My instinct was to walk faster, lose him. My daughter turned and began to chat with him. He seemed delighted and proved to be harmless. Afterward we discussed this at length. I explained my position: I didn't understand this man, I was afraid of him. The best course in such a situation is to steer clear. My daughter explained her position: we did not know for sure what he was, but he could not harm us in a supermarket, so why not give him a chance? I realized I had become hardened by life, while she still believed the principles I preached. There *is* divinity in every human being. How am I supposed to teach *her* goodness? I could teach her prudence; she could teach *me* goodness."

Yet there is the other side. Some parents were struck by how difficult it is to become a mensch—how much darkness lurks just under the surface. Civilization is a thin veneer. Winnie found that when she could acknowledge her son's wilder instincts, it was easier to teach him how to manage them.

"One day Fred, who was about eight, wanted something very badly—I can't recall what—and I said no. He was so furious he began to lash out at me. I told him he was not permitted to hurt me. He began to curse and yell. I told him he was not permitted to curse. He was beside himself with rage. He asked for whatever it was again. Again, I said no. He looked like he would shoot me if there had been a gun. I told him that I knew he felt angry and asked him if anything could make him feel better. What did he most feel like doing? He said he would like very much to spit at me.

"I was totally disgusted by this idea, but I had to admit that it was completely honest. He was also now under control and waiting respectfully for permission. Yes, he was tremendously angry, but he was learning that most of the ways he felt like acting when he was angry were forbidden to him. He was successfully controlling the impulse to indulge in them. I said it would be OK, just this time, for him to spit at me. Once. He spat. With an elaborate flourish, I wiped my cheek and said, 'Yuck!' At that point, we both burst out laughing. It was over.

"I felt great. I was teaching him mastery over his antisocial instincts while acknowledging that they existed. For a long time, I could not do that because I was too upset by them. When I see them as human, part of our flawed nature (we are not gods, after all), then every once in a while, under very controlled circumstances, like the spit, I can even honor them."

Teaching children to become better people is a chance for us to grow. Sometimes what we call children's "behavior problems" are there to teach us something. The story is told about a monastery that included one very difficult man who fought with others constantly. Finally, the man left. The spiritual leader of the community pursued the man and convinced him to return to the community by paying him a salary. The monks were outraged. Why bring this man back at all, and why *pay* him on top of it?

The leader explained, "This man helps you learn about patience, about compassion. That is why I hire him." Maybe our children's difficult behavior is just so we can learn what we need to know.

Anger is a huge problem for parents; many report that they grow as human beings when they learn how to transcend it. Fran said, "When my husband and I first had children we discussed the issue of punishment. We agreed that we would never physically punish a child unless the child was about to put her finger in an electric outlet or run into a street filled with traffic. But as my kids got older, I found myself getting into battles with them constantly over the littlest things. Once I drew a line in the sand, I felt I had to stick by my demands, just to show them who was in control. The problem was that they didn't listen, and it made me so angry I got out of control, often whacking them on the bottom.

"When my daughter was five or six, she began to speak in a very flip way to me, something she must have picked up in school. On two or three occasions, I very consciously slapped her on the face. I began to feel a lot of remorse about those slaps. It seemed to me it was a serious violation of who she was as a person. I began to believe that it was abusive to hit someone who is vulnerable, dependent on you. I made a resolve to never slap or even whack again. But I had no idea if I could keep it.

"I began a prayer life that consisted of one request: gift me with calm, teach me a better way to deal with all this. I needed to contact a higher force within me from which to teach my children mutual respect. Over the years, through lots of work and meditation and prayer, I found it.

"That whole experience actually deepened my sense of what it means to be a moral person, acting in a spiritually aware and conscious way. I set for myself a norm that I have kept; in ten years, I have not touched one of my children in anger. It meant a lot for my own evolution as an adult to see that I could set that kind of standard for myself, be clear about my reasons, and then stick to it."

Bill grew up on spankings, but he never felt they were abusive. "My Dad would always hug us first and say, 'We love you no matter what you do, but that won't be true out there in the world. We have to make you the kind of person *other* people will love as well. I'm going to spank you now, but only to prevent someone else from doing it first.'" Bill loved his father and respected his child rearing, and he knew the biblical verse "Spare the rod, spoil the child." But Bill had no intention of spanking his children, and he never did. "I decided that in biblical times, a rod was an instrument shepherds used to guide the sheep down the path. So I reinterpreted the verse to mean direction, not physical punishment."

Parents often struggle with the relationship between religion and moral education. Martin grew up in a very tightly knit Christian community about an hour outside of Philadelphia. He married a woman who also grew up in the church; both of them swore they would never live in that town again. They moved to the city and loved its diversity of opinions and activities. They pursued their careers, made friends, and developed themselves as human beings, including learning about themselves through therapy. Neither of them ever stopped believing in God or in "bettering ourselves through spiritual principles."

When their two small children were ready for school, they felt that they were being "pulled home." Martin explained, "We wanted our children growing up among people with whom they could talk about God and not be embarrassed." Martin and his wife and children now live in their hometown, just minutes from their parents and childhood friends.

For Martin's parents, discipline and faith had a clear connection: parents were God's representatives to their children; their role was to teach the children right from wrong and to administer punishments. Their job was to remind their children of what God wanted of them. Martin sees it differently: "When my children are misbehaving, I am often tempted to invoke God. I know my kids believe deeply in God, and it would be easy to say to them, 'The Lord does not want you to be doing that.' But that feels too heavy. It is really *me* who does not want them to be doing whatever they are doing. I don't want to hit them over the head with spirituality as a weapon to be used when I am angry. I would rather talk about God when my kid comes to me feeling vulnerable, asking me to help him figure out a problem. I say to him, 'You know you can talk to God about that.' The way I was brought up, God mainly came into the picture to enforce rules. I am trying to take on more of the discipline myself and save God as a source of inspiration and support."

Marie said that for her, discipline is a constant battle between the side of her that just wants to shower her children with love and the side that wants to teach them limits. Her son is tucked into bed, and then he comes back out and asks for her to lie by his side till he falls asleep. No special reason, he just likes it. She actually likes it too. But there is a rule that bedtime must be observed. He needs to learn to sleep by himself, to follow the procedures. So she marches him back upstairs, gives him a big kiss and hug, and then sits on the living room couch by herself in torment.

Marie thinks to herself, "I love him so much I want to just give him every bit of nurturing he needs. But sometimes I make life hard for him, because I think it makes sense to teach him. So I sit on the couch and just think about all this and try to learn from it something about my own life. I want God to be lying by my side all the time, hugging me, but maybe sometimes she's sitting downstairs on a couch teaching me how to do things for myself."

Wendy had studied psychology in college and had been very critical of behavior modification. She had to write a whole paper about B. F. Skinner, and it was entirely negative. She believed she would inculcate desirable traits and behaviors in her children through more profound methods. But midway in her career as a parent, philosophy and theory started to matter less than results. "Every time we went anywhere in the car, my kids fought. Badly. It was making me crazy. Finally, I did what I had always vowed I'd never do. I went to a two-session seminar on child rearing. The teacher suggested a marble jar, with marbles added each time the desired behavior was manifest and subtracted when bad behavior set in. When the jar was full: a prize! It seemed shallow, but I was ready to try anything.

"I made up my version of the marble jar. It was called Warm Fuzzies. We put a glass jar in a prominent place in the kitchen. Every time the children made it through twenty minutes together without a squabble, one warm fuzzy (a cotton ball) would go into the jar. When the jar was completely full, they could get Nintendo. The children adored this system, and they fought less and less. When the jar was full, we bought the promised prize. Three days later, they had lost interest in the Nintendo. They had also lost interest in the jar. But the children were clearly fighting much less; the good behavior had become a habit. So I learned a lesson that helped me in my own life: good actions, whatever the motivation, create their own momentum. I became an Aristotelian."

Karen noticed that the difference between moralism and real moral teaching was the spiritual base from which she spoke. "I used to give little lectures to my kids on moral topics. But they would get to the point where they would just laugh and say, 'Here comes Mom's lecture number 342!'" After I started going to church and feeling more deeply the spiritual basis of my own desire to be a good person, I kept giving lectures but they were coming from a different place. The children seemed to notice. Now when I see them wasting food, I might stop them and say, "This isn't kind. You

need to stop this and look at it.' I share with them why waste hurts me and hurts God, as I understand it. They know I am talking from my heart, and they actually listen to the lecture now."

Children sometimes motivate us to discipline ourselves. My oldest child forced me to begin working on one of my worst moral failings, gossip. (I am sorry to report that one of the places I became accomplished in this "skill" was the play group I attended when my children were little. In retrospect, I can see that the boredom, sense of impotence, and narrowing of horizons of early parenthood were just the conditions in which gossip could flourish.)

I knew this was a failing, but it was not until my twelve-year-old daughter and I attended a study session together on the subject of "bad speech" in the Jewish tradition that I finally got serious about weaning myself from this habit. During that session my daughter told me how much my failings in this realm hurt her. All the sermons I had heard (and even given!) on the topic were not nearly as effective as that simple statement from my own child. I thought about the ways I had tried to train my daughter in good paths, looking for one that would help me. Finally, I hit on an idea I had seen years ago in the home of a friend. Since I did most of my gossiping on the telephone, I pasted a reminder on the handle of each phone, a verse from Proverbs that says, "On her lips was kindness."

Sandra told me, "Before I had kids, I never worked on myself. I grew up in California and rejected all that stuff about processing feelings and going to therapy. But when my kid was in pain, I knew that she was carrying around some weighty stuff, and I knew, too, that I had put it there. The only way to get it off her back was for me to do some serious digging around in my own psyche. So I did. And it was a good thing for me."

Howard was divorced and his twelve-year-old son, Max, had just come to live with him full time. One night, they had a huge fight, and Max was threatening to get his baseball bat and hit his father. Howard did not know what to do next. "I was out of my depth. I knew in another minute, I would be the one heading for that bat. Suddenly, I remembered something I had heard two weeks earlier at a seminar I attended at work. It was a human relations training for salespeople at my company. The leader told us that usually people are most difficult when they are most in need of positive attention. He suggested that when dealing with hard-to-manage customers, we should be *especially* nice, even complimentary. So I turned

to my raging son and said, 'Max, I love you very much. You are a good kid.' It was like magic! The whole situation turned around. I learned something very important that day, not only about dealing with business customers or even with Max but about the way life works."

Sometimes it takes laughter to help us through tough spots. If we can laugh, we can learn to see the absurdity of our own situation. Humility is the hard-won reward. Johanna started yelling one night and just could not stop. She screamed, "Do you know what makes me mad? You are doing the dishes all wrong. And do you know what else makes me mad? This house is a pigsty and no one seems to care but me. And on top of that, neither of you can manage to keep your elbows off the table, and you aren't doing really well on not fighting with each other, and . . . you know what *really* makes me mad? When I am yelling at you, my hair always falls in my eyes and I can't see anymore!" At that point, they all began to laugh, and the laughter dissipated the anger. "Within minutes," Johanna reported, "the kids were happily improving their behavior."

Occasionally, while parents are planning how to morally educate their child, the child goes off and discovers her own code. Both Les and his wife, Joan, grew up in liberal Jewish households with minimal observance. They now are living an Orthodox Jewish life in large part because of a conversion experience—not their own but that of their twelve-year-old daughter.

Les told me their story. "When Sarah was in sixth grade, she got very friendly with her Hebrew teacher, who happened to come from an Orthodox community in Israel. The teacher offered Sarah a two-month trip to Israel if she would act as a mother's helper. We packed a trunk full of shorts and T-shirts with one or two dresses and sent her off. Sarah's letters were vague, but when she got off the plane at the end of the summer, we knew something had changed.

"First, it was a hot day and she was wearing a long skirt and a long-sleeved shirt. When I unpacked her trunk, I saw that the shorts and T-shirts had been untouched. As she began to tell us about the summer in spoken English (her Hebrew was better than her English at that point), we realized she had been totally engaged in a complete community, a thoroughgoing lifestyle, and she was now passionately committed to following it.

"What had appealed to her was the strong sense of moral values and repose. She kept saying she felt more complete there. She found that the

children at her school back home seemed superficial in comparison. In the apartment house in which Sarah lived in Israel, on Friday afternoon an old lady across the landing would yell out, 'I need someone to wash the floor for Shabbat!' A mother would inevitably send her son or daughter over with a mop. Sarah liked that feeling of connection and caring. She loved the structure. Knowing what was expected at all times made her feel safe.

"When she returned, we had to renegotiate many things as a family—how kosher the food in our home was, what we would do on the Sabbath. If we wanted to have an integrated family life, we needed to make some changes. We worked through many issues. Once Sarah made up her mind about her life's direction, she never wavered. She led the rest of us on a path. She had a level of discipline that encouraged us."

Not every set of parents would have reacted the way Les and his wife did. They saw their daughter's choice as one that had potential for them as well. Like so many parents (including me), they had been reluctant to impose too much structure on their daughter's life. They had given her a great deal of freedom. Their education about values had been ad hoc, rather than part of a tightly woven community with clear systems and norms. Now their daughter had used her freedom to opt for a detailed life plan in which values were embedded in specific rules and customs.

As a mother of a daughter on the verge of adolescence, I could not help envying Les's situation just a little. Many of the values Sarah has devoted herself to in choosing an Orthodox Jewish life are also my values. I wish there were a way for me to offer these values to my daughters in such an integrated and compelling fashion. On the other hand, there is too much of the Orthodox Jewish worldview that I do not share. For me, that kind of "conversion" would not work. Nevertheless, I think often of Sarah and wonder how we "freethinking" parents can also give our children a clear and coherent set of norms and structures that embody our values.

Gail is an ethicist by training. She now spends her days with her two young children in the playground. She wants to make her children kind and good. She spends all day with them, helping them through the little trials and joys of the sandbox. She models giving and sharing. She sees the hugest challenge as being how to evoke the behavior she wants from her children by the way she lives. She feels all these issues with great immediacy. Ethics is no longer abstract but something she does with her own hands.

When Gail was young, her mother taught her that "we are the hands of God to each other." Now each Saturday night when the blessing over light is recited to mark the end of the Sabbath, she follows the custom of extending her palms to the candle to catch its reflection. As she gazes at her outstretched hands, glowing a bit from the flame just beyond, she thinks to herself of her week ahead, of how she wants to be with her children, of the kindness she wants to teach them and the way in which she wants to do it. She whispers to herself, "These hands are God's hands. This week, may they do holy work."

Chapter 7

NAP TIME

Being Versus Doing

"What I liked best about being here was being here."

The parent of young children counts the minutes until nap time, that sacred space in the middle of the day when, if Roto-Rooter does not choose that hour to visit and there are not three phone calls to make and a stack of bills to pay, the parent might have some time to do . . . absolutely nothing. The pauses between the notes, the times of being rather than doing, the experience of resting are all critical to the spiritual journey of parenting.

Many of the people I interviewed were hardworking, highly successful professionals. Peggy had been so well into the groove of her professional track that she hardly missed a beat when her first child was born. "I took off two weeks for the birth and recuperation, and then hired a nanny and went back to sixty hours a week." Three years later, still working as hard as ever, she learned that her second pregnancy was in trouble. "The doctor said if I wanted the baby I would have to stay in bed for the next four months. I had never in my life done anything like that. But I wanted that child, so I did. And the most remarkable thing happened to me. I stopped in my tracks. Being in bed for four months changed my life. I lost some of my ambition and discovered some of my soul."

For some parents, the learning is a bit less dramatic. "I am so driven," said Mark, "and my time feels so precious, I hate to waste it. But making every minute have its agenda is a horrible way to live. Over the years, my kids helped me realize that. Since I did not want to model that drivenness for them, I slowed up a bit for their sake. It ended up helping me a lot."