Parenting As a Spiritual Journey

Deepening Ordinary & Extraordinary Events into Sacred Occasions

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Ch 7

Being vs Doing

For People of All Faiths, All Backgrounds
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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."

Matthew confessed, "I had to work on just being there. If I walked into my daughter's room, there would always be a piece of duty involved: get her to clean her room, to write a thank-you note. I literally had to train myself to take the time to walk in there and just be with her. To sit down on her bed with nothing at all in mind. I finally got the hang of it."

Said Carol, "The great paradox for me in the parenting business is that I am intrigued by my kids just the way they are and I accept them with unconditional love, yet I always feel this need to keep working on them, to make them better, to fix them. I'm always inserting myself where I don't belong. But it is my job to raise them, which can't mean just accepting everything about them just as it is."

The resolution of the paradox is in balancing: there is a time for every purpose under heaven. A time to fix and a time to enjoy. A time for weekdays and a time for Sabbath. A time for work and a time for vacations. I always thought it was ironic that on the Sabbath, a time when we appreciate being rather than striving, the Jewish tradition has us bless our children by comparing them to their biblical forebears ("May God bless you like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah"). Why did they have to be blessed like somebody else? Shouldn't we simply congratulate them for being themselves? As a result, in our house we rewrote the blessing to say, "Thank you, God, for making Rena Rena." On weekdays we could work on improvements.

Lao-tzu once said, "What is important about a cup is the empty part inside." It is not only in the East that we find this wisdom. For the Western tradition, the holiest day of the week is the day when we are supposed to sit still and do nothing. The essence of the biblical idea of the Sabbath is that there is "no agenda." As Isaiah said, "in sitting still and rest shall ye be saved" (30:15). But how many of us believe it?

For many people today, the Sabbath has disappeared from life. Stores are open and E-mail is sent and received seven days a week. When a Hebrew school teacher I know instructed her class to ask their parents why they did not observe the Sabbath, each child came back with the same answer: "We do not have time." It was hardly a large sample, but the result seems accurate.

Parents today have barely enough time to *do* things with their children; doing nothing is clearly an extravagance. And yet, several parents confessed that they welcomed those occasions when they or their child got sick—not too sick, just sick enough to justify resting. My friend Debbie believes that if there were no such thing as Sabbath, yuppies would have had to invent it out of sheer physical and spiritual exhaustion.

Even those who do mark Saturday or Sunday as special often find this aspect of the Sabbath—doing nothing—entirely foreign. We appreciate the beauty and meaning in an active ritual like lighting candles or having a family meal or going to church. It is harder to understand the beauty and meaning of not accomplishing, not spending, not changing, not building, or not doing much of anything. Often, we reinterpret Sabbath. Since it is meant to help us remember the creation of the world, we engage in activities on the Sabbath that are creative or recreative.

There is much wisdom in that insight. Hiking, games, art projects, and visiting museums are all meaningful ways to participate in the creativity that was God's at the beginning of time. But there is also some value in remembering that the Sabbath does *not* commemorate the six days in which God created the world. The days of our workweek are our commemoration of that. The seventh day is the day God ceased from work and did *nothing*.

Two questions come to mind. How do you do nothing with children? And why? Let's begin with the second question. In his book on child rearing, Stanley Greenspan recommends as a tonic for just about every psychological ailment of childhood something he calls "floor time." Essentially, Greenspan insists to the educated, high-achieving, and overbusy parents who are his clientele that they must commit themselves to half an hour a day with their children in which they sit on the floor (with older children you can hang out in a fashion more comfortable for them) and *do nothing*. The instructions are very precise. Not only may you not plan to do anything specific, you may not even have any agenda at all.

Dr. Greenspan finds that parents are generally terrified by this suggestion, since they are used to budgeting time for their children carefully, with explicit plans and goals attached to each hour. But after a while, they come to love floor time. So do the children. What do the children do? Younger ones engage in imaginative dramatic play in which the parents are then drawn into the story. Older ones talk . . . or don't. But the important thing is that nothing is planned. By sitting still, you are saved.

Another child-rearing authority, Martha Welch, suggests a technique called "holding time": the parent commits to a daily time of physical contact with the child in which there is no program—no book to be read and

listened to, no moral or spiritual lesson to be learned, no expectations. The child can vent all kinds of emotions verbally or in appropriate, permitted nonverbal ways. Any kind of feeling is permitted. The child is also free to do nothing at all and still get held.

Have these medically trained therapists rediscovered the essence of the Sabbath? And is it not a very significant message for today's overprogrammed children? It's OK to do nothing. It's OK to just be. Stanley Elkin said the children of today are getting too many lessons, too many schedules. Parents do the same thing to themselves. Sabbath, traditionally, is an opportunity for parents and their children to do the exact opposite of what they do the rest of the week—that is, to do nothing. The Jewish tradition calls the Sabbath a "pearl"—a precious gift. Perhaps it is even more so today, for we have so many more distractions and feel so much more driven to achieve.

Can children handle doing nothing, having no plans, or will they get bored? Boredom is actually something very wonderful, says author Frances Moore Lappé in a book about the virtues of the unplugged television set. Boredom forces you to dig in and find yourself.

Doing nothing isn't a newfangled psychological technique. It is the spiritual teaching of the East and the West. It carries with it a message central to the spiritual life: *you* are loved by God, not your book reports or your piano recitals or anything you accomplish. Just you. It's hard to teach that lesson unless you believe it yourself, yet few of us do. And this is where a rather wonderful circle comes into play.

Our children can teach us that lesson. Look how they love us just for being there! "The biggest surprise for me," said one mother, "was discovering how much my kids loved me. I had never felt so loved before. They gave me so many hugs for so many years, it really helped me to feel loved just for being who I was. And isn't it true, after all, that you love them just for being, even when they are doing nothing?"

Taking time to be rather than do is a way of asserting control by letting go. We are the masters of our own fate, our own time. We can say no to the phone, to technology, to work, to anything. This is the great gift of the Sabbath. My eleven-year-old daughter reminded me of this. When Seth and I were newly married graduate students, we committed ourselves to not doing any of our own work on the Sabbath. For the first twelve years we had children, it was hard to know what they thought of this practice, since their elementary school did not give any homework on weekends. When my older daughter began middle school, she was taught "study skills." The teacher handed out a schedule for the entire week with blank spaces where the students could fill in all their scheduled activities. Then in the boxes that were left over, they were to plot out homework times in which they could do their long-term assignments.

My daughter, who was feeling overwhelmed by all the new demands on her, felt like the school was crushing her spirit. She sat down with the schedule and drew a huge X across Friday evening and then another across Saturday morning and afternoon. She looked up with satisfaction and said, "I am not allowed to work at those times! It is Shabbat. And nobody can make me!" I wanted to shout, "Hurray! The law makes you free!" It is in our power to say no to relentless demands of time, to be masters of our fate enough to sanctify some hours of our week and make them holy. We can say that one-seventh of our lives can be set aside for our souls.

Having time off is also a way to put our values in perspective. Judy, who observes a traditional Jewish Sabbath, had an experience as a young mother that clarified for her what the Sabbath was all about. "One Friday night, it was very hot and we accidentally left some windows open when we went to sleep. The next morning, we came downstairs to discover that my pocketbook, which had been sitting out on the kitchen counter, was gone. I panicked. I knew my car keys had been in the pocketbook, so I raced outside to confirm my fear: the car was gone too. I had lost money, credit cards, a car, all these terribly important things. I raced to the telephone to start making my reports when I remembered that it was Shabbat. I was not permitted to use the telephone. But if I couldn't use the phone, I suddenly realized, I also couldn't use the car or the money or the credit cards either. So I took a deep breath, relaxed, and enjoyed the rest of the day, walking to synagogue, visiting with friends and family, exactly what we always do on Saturdays.

"After sunset, I called the police. But by then I had a whole different perspective on the situation. It was not the earth-shattering crisis I had thought when I first discovered the loss. Shabbat made me realize that everything that mattered most to me in the world was untouched by the robbery."

How do parents make Sabbath happen for themselves and their children? Those who live within a traditional community know the rules and

simply follow them. For others, it is more of a creative art form. "I'm a single mother with a teenage son," said Ruth, "and I can't always get it together for a special meal on Friday night. Often, one or the other of us goes out. When we are home together, we certainly don't follow all the rules of the Sabbath. But we did want it to be special, so we sat down and made a contract with each other. For twenty-four hours, I would not talk on the phone and he would not watch TV. It's a special commitment we make to each other; the rest of the system gets observed in the breech rather than the practice."

Brian told me, "When our kids were little, we tried to institute a no-TV policy on the Sabbath for all the right reasons. Except the policy wasn't right. My son Gabe adored a particular TV show that came on Friday nights. So we decided instead to all watch it with him. My wife and I didn't even like the show, but we liked being a family together on Friday nights, and my son loved the fact that we all cared enough to watch his show with him. We would all get into a king-size bed and watch it together at 8:30 every Friday. Those are happy memories."

For many families, Sabbath is not a weekly practice, yet they do experience what it means to stop in the midst of life and just "be." Some allow their children to play hooky once or twice a year, a sanctioned "rest and relaxation" break, preferably with parents playing hooky too. For most families, the major experience of rest is vacations. Like the Sabbath, vacations are times to recreate our spirits, sanctuaries in time rather than space. Parents whom I interviewed often told me about vacations as time when they got a glimpse of the deeper meaning to their lives as parents. I heard about four kinds of vacations, each important in its own way to parents and children.

The first, and perhaps the most obvious, is the family vacation—a time when the entire family leaves their routine to live in a different place at a different pace. Families often find vacations are a time to connect with each other, to create memories. If members of the family can find activities they all enjoy, these times (even if they are very infrequent) become important glue. "At home, we all were busy living our parallel lives," Dan said. "On vacation we intersected. At first, the kids would ignore each other. Then they would fight. Then they would start to play together. Every year we went to the same lake for one week. We always rented the same cottage. The last night we always swam across the whole lake. The year our dog was dying, it was important that he make it to the lake for his final swim. Our family vacations were our sacred times."

(In fairness, I should report that there was a small but vocal minority who said that their family hated vacations. After many years, they finally accepted the fact that they loved each other but found vacations stressful and unrewarding. Some even had the courage to stop taking them.)

The second kind of vacation is also fairly obvious, although less frequent. Parents need time away together, without their children. These times of rest, of retreat, of just being rather than doing, are essential to nourish relationships that are often frayed by the stress of child rearing. It took me a long time to bring myself to do this, and longer still to do it without qualms and guilt (Seth says I still have not entirely achieved that goal). But part of the spiritual journey of parenting, when one has a partner, must be making sure the partnership survives the trip. The travelers need to stay in conversation.

Beth recalled, "We were doing so many things during the years our kids were young, we figured our relationship was at the bottom of the list. Then we saw friends starting to get divorced, and it scared us. So we went away for a weekend alone and remembered why we had gotten married and had all these kids in the first place. We made two pledges to each other after that vacation: first, we would each call the other once during each workday to check in. Second, we decided that during the Lord's Prayer in our weekly church service we would always hold hands. These two things have kept us connected."

David and his wife have never been able to afford vacations together. "We take the most extreme form of 'minivacation.' Three times a week we meet at the kitchen table at eleven at night and drink tea and talk for two hours or so. It's not glamorous, but it is our chance to recoup, and we look forward to it."

The third kind of vacation is one I first learned about from Sharon. It is a vacation taken by one parent with one child—a special time of connection, just the two of them. Sharon annually took each of her three children individually on a ski weekend. While I was impressed by the concept, it seemed to have little to do with my life—or, I suspect, with many of yours. Who can afford ski weekends, much less several a winter? Then I met Barbara, a single mother without much money, whose company sent

her each year to a nearby city overnight. One year, when her teenage daughter Cathy was barely speaking to her, Barbara decided to invite Cathy to come along. "The offer was so unusual Cathy couldn't pass it up. At night, lying next to each other in the hotel room in the dark, we chatted about many topics. The next morning, Cathy looked at me with a look that said, 'Don't you dare mention what happened last night, and don't count on it happening again.' It did not. At least for a long while. But it was still a wonderful interlude."

When Greg took his six-year-old son on a camping trip, he thought it would be an opportunity for the two of them to connect. But at night in the dark tent, Greg's son began to cry. He missed his mother, Susan, and wanted to go home. Knowing it was impossible to hike out at night, Greg tried desperately to come up with something to allay his son's distress. Finally, he said, "Let's tell stories about what we like best about Mom." For the next forty-five minutes, father and son took turns telling each other things about Susan that they liked. "My son kept coming up with these wonderful statements like 'She makes me eat healthy food like oatmeal,' and each time I had to come up with something I loved about Susan. After a while, my son drifted off to sleep, and I just lay there in the dark—moved beyond measure—in tears." Ironically, a trip that was designed to make father and son feel close to each other also had the effect of intensifying the bonds they each had with the missing family member.

The last kind of vacation, the parent solo, is the one least thought about, least practiced, and perhaps most critical to the spiritual journey of parenting. Parenting is so interactive, there is always someone else around. As one mother put it, "spending a day with children offers a million occasions to say a blessing and almost no time to do so."

The idea of being entirely alone is one that appeals to many parents. I often heard mothers describe spending half an hour on the toilet only to realize that what they loved so much about the bathroom was the unique peace and solitude it provided. Chris told me that when her three sons were small, she used to stay up till they and their father were all soundly asleep. Then she would sit alone in the living room and play the same songs on the piano over and over again, singing her lungs out, until past midnight. "It replenished me. I got less sleep but more strength to face the morning."

Nell found her extensive prayer life was curtailed by children, but she always grabbed ten minutes by herself just before the "arsenic hour" (4:00 to 6:00 P.M.). She would sneak off to her room and pray alone. She wondered how other parents survive that grouchy time without such an interlude.

I searched to find parents who had actually gone on retreat alone while their children were young. Did they manage to do the work they needed to do, or did they spend the whole time worrying about what was going on back at home?

"When my kids were eight and three, I went away for a week and I rediscovered who I was besides a mother," Sonia recalled. "I missed them a lot, especially at bedtime when I couldn't perform the little rituals. But I remembered parts of myself I had forgotten. That was the benefit I expected. The biggest surprise was that being apart from my husband and kids made me feel more poignantly how deeply connected I was to them. When we were together every minute, I couldn't feel it as strongly. But when I was alone for the first time, it was really clear. I was part of something bigger than myself.

"When I came back, I just gloried in the kids. I had hoped that I would look forward to seeing them again ('absence makes the heart grow fonder'), but I was really surprised by how much I just wanted to be with them. I was genuinely curious to get to know them again. I was interested to hear their ideas, their questions. Who are these little people? I found them more fascinating because they seemed to be more like separate people from me, less like simply extensions of myself."

Rebecca, who is active in the Swedenborgian church, told me about retreats for mothers, weekends that literally saved her soul during the years she was raising small children. "We would go to the mountains, sometimes twenty women, sometimes as many as eighty, and spend two days talking about our lives. We slept on the floor in sleeping bags, cooked meals together, shared prayers, songs, meditations, even droning. We would all grow incredibly close. On Saturday night, we would turn on rock music and go crazy dancing all night. By late Sunday, we would be ready to return to our husbands and kids."

Back home, parents can use time caring for the children as time to grow spiritually. Alone with a child is a good time to try to be fully present, in the moment. For some parents, the relative solitude of parenting is a challenge. Seth remembers how strange it was to find himself all alone with his child for hours at a time. He quickly realized that no one would

ever know if he propped a bottle in her mouth or held her in his arms and sang. Seth is a teacher, and he used to think of teaching as an unsung profession. He had always liked the line from *A Man for All Seasons* in which Sir Thomas More suggests to Richard that he would make a great teacher, and Richard objects, "And if I was, who would know it?" To which More responds, "You, your pupils, your friends, God. Not a bad public, that." That line kept coming back to him as he took care of his child alone. Who will ever know? "You, your child, God." As the months went on, he would remind himself, "Not a bad public, that."

Being present is not easy. I remember when I was a graduate student at Yale University hearing Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf counsel a Jewish student who could not decide whether to skip classes for the High Holiday services. "Go to class," the rabbi told him. "If you come to services, you will think about your class. If you go to class, you will think about the services. I want you to think about the services, so go to class." How many times did I go to the office and think about my child? How many times did I stay with my child and think about the office? Could I have the ultimate spiritual achievement of being totally *there* in that space and time? Perhaps children are just the ones who can teach us that, for their pasts are short and the future not yet a concern. Watch a small child play, and you will see a totally present being.

As children get older, they become more distracted, more like us. Hank took his family to a Zen Buddhist retreat center for three weeks, a risky adventure with a twelve-year-old kid who loves television and CDs. His eyes glowing with pride, Hank told me, "Rick liked the vacation a lot more than he expected. He loved hanging around the fields, helping to make a compost heap, and, on a lazy morning, taking a book and going 'back to futon.'" The last night, Hank asked Rick what he enjoyed the most. "I was thrilled with his answer," Hank said. "It showed that he really understood what the place was all about. He said, 'What I liked best about being here was being here.'"

Chapter 8

NATURE

Wonder

"Can we go visit 'Nature' today?"

I thought this chapter would be easy to write. So many people I know consider the awe and wonder evoked by the natural world the center of their spiritual lives. For lots of folks, the grandeur and beauty of a mountain peak or an ocean are the origin of their sense of "something more." Long before people have children, they are often touched, their hearts lifted, their urge to pray awakened by a sunset, a flowing creek, a perfect flower. A friend of mine who never talks about religion came home from a vacation on a river in Utah and said simply, "It was God's country."

Surprisingly, however, the parents I interviewed did not spontaneously choose to speak about the natural world. So I had to ask them directly, "How has having children affected your relationship with nature? How have you found ways to share the beauty of nature with your children? Why do you think so few people have mentioned experiences with nature when not specifically asked?"

"When I had children, I could not wait to share with them my reverence for the outdoors," Rob told me. "I remember once riding on a highway with my four-year-old and nearly driving off the road, I was so stunned by the beauty of a setting sun. I tried desperately to get my kid involved in my excitement, but he was playing with a wire toy—I think it was called a Slinky—and he just could not be distracted. Then I realized that for very young kids the whole world is awesome. They don't see the distinction between a really neat toy and a sunset."

"For me," said Hope, "the initial impact of having small children on my relationship with nature was negative. I simply could not get out and