

The Journey to a Genuine Life

Mentoring the Passage to Adulthood

Len Fleischer

As people who love children, our job is not to provide them with all the answers to life's questions, but to tune in, with them, to the marvels all around them and all the wonders within them.

More than 35 years ago, I was wandering the streets of Boulder, Colorado, looking for a job. I didn't have much of a resume: I was a college dropout, and had lived in a monastery in the Colorado mountains for the past three years. But I was hungry, and eager, and broke. As serendipity would have it, I was on a street corner when a friend drove up and told me that a building nearby was looking for employees, he had seen a sign. "For what?" I said. "I think it is a preschool," he replied. I didn't know a thing about teaching, but I liked kids, and necessity is the mother of invention. So I ventured forth.

The man who answered the door, the director of the preschool, asked me whether I had any experience. I began to stammer that I didn't, but was a quick learner, and the fact that I had been a journalism major before I dropped out of college had nothing to do with why I believed I could do a really good job.

He stopped me in mid-sentence. "You don't understand. I only hire people without experience." He laughed at the surprise he saw on my face. He went on, "I want people who work here to not have preconceived notions and theories about children. I want to know who they are, who they really are, and what they deeply care about. I want to know how that translates into who they are when they are with children. I want the children who come here to expand, not contract, their natural sense of wonder, and I hope the adults who will be with them don't have all the answers, but rather all the questions, all the wondering themselves about the mystery of the world."

I was stunned. I had never heard a potential employer talk like that. So I talked like that. I told him about myself, and I got the job.



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And that, as Frost (1916) says, “has made all the difference.”

The marvelous experience of being with the children of Boulder Day Nursery changed my life. I went back to college because I was so intrigued — and entranced — with the wide open minds and hearts of these little ones. I still am. One of the great blessings of being around children on a regular basis is the possibility of bearing witness — in the kids and in ourselves — to the genuine wonder of being alive. I thought I had a robust spiritual practice in the monastery. Turned out it was nothing compared to what I experienced in the preschool.

My wife and I have a goddaughter, a five-year-old child by the name of Thupten. It is a Tibetan name that means blessing, and she certainly is. She was born 10 weeks premature, and weighed about two pounds when she was born. Her first days were a constant struggle of doctors and medical emergencies. She barely survived. So every day of her life is precious for her parents and those who love her. But she doesn't think that way, of course. She just loves being here because everything — and I mean everything — is so interesting. Sometimes a lot of things, all at the same time. But once in a while, she will become absolutely entranced with just one thing, just one precious thing, and the multisensory awareness of this young child will focus like a laser on the marvels of the world.

One day, we were with her when she was completely riveted, transfixed, by a woolly caterpillar inching its way up a tree. Just that. Happens all the time, in all kinds of places. You and I wouldn't give it much thought. We will smile, perhaps, when we see children pausing, in fascination, before we move on to that next thing. But watching Thupten watch the caterpillar, it was clear she was completely entranced with this little life as it made its way up the tree. I had no idea what she was thinking. It doesn't really matter. She was constructing her own story, her own meaning, and that connects with other stories and other meanings in the developing tapestry of her life.

The narrative that she is developing speaks deeply to her, separate from anything you or I might know or say about caterpillars. It is her soul story, not ours, and it is made of the moments where time and obligation and rational action and the needs of care-

givers pause, allowing the magic of the world to show up in a child's deep awareness.

My work with children started with that remarkable preschool long ago, and my wondering about their wondering has never stopped. One of the working hypotheses I've developed over the years is that when children are born and begin to grow, their parents and their caregivers — that includes all of us — do something that can have lasting impact. We tell them, in so many different ways, you must fit into the world. Our world. My world. This is the way it works. Here are the rules. This is what is good, this is what is not so good. Here is what you should love, this is what you should fear. In essence we are handing them a guidebook — actually a rule book — of the world, *as we know it*.

Children, in the preschool years, are developing a script, a story they are telling themselves about the way things are. That script is, of course, heavily influenced by what the adults in their lives tell them. How could it be otherwise? I don't know what kids might bring to this life from other realms of knowing, but I do believe that they absorb, in deep and often unconscious ways, what we offer. They begin to develop a script, a story, a narrative about how it all works that they, for the most part, are not the author of.

That is what I want to focus on here. How, when, will we, can we, live our lives according to our emerging story, piecing together all the encounters with caterpillar and leaf, the night sky and the day world, the strange logic of our dream life and the singular and unique lives of our caregivers? Too often, it all gets dictated to, imposed on, and interpreted for the children. This is what caterpillars do. That is the way your grandmother is. Girls are sometimes bossy. Boys can be mean. This is the way to go. Be careful. Watch out.

This is not necessarily a bad thing. The survival of the species depends on the nurturance and mentoring of the young ones. It is *how* we mentor that makes so much difference. My work as a teacher, psychologist, and rite-of-passage guide with youth and adults suggests to me that the script hardens into a story, a way of doing and being that extends well into adult life; actually, until the day we die, for most of us. The script becomes a template: we live according to essentially automatic assumptions.

And as the assumptions become relatively automatic, the space for wonder wanes. Life becomes more formulaic. Mystery is something to be explained and decoded, as opposed to a rich immersion in a magical world, a world that is full of undefined truth. "Live the questions," Rilke famously advised. How do we do that when everything in the script we are handed tells us we need to find the right answers, to pass the test?

God Speaks to Us

God speaks to each of us as he makes us,
Then walks with us silently out of the night.
These are the words we dimly hear:
You, sent out beyond your recall,
Go to the limits of your longing.
Embody me.
Flare up like flame and make big shadows I can
move in.
Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.
Just keep going. No feeling is final.
Don't let yourself lose me.
Nearby is the country they call life.
You will know it by its seriousness.
Give me your hand.

—Rainer Maria Rilke

Rilke's poem (Barrows & Macy 1996) speaks to me of the critical importance, for those of us who love children and work for their future, to encourage all of it — the "beauty and the terror" — to be embodied in their experience of forming a healthy, authentic, soul-rooted identity, a life they can truly call their own.

Childhood innocence is nature's foundation for a soul-centered adult life. Our original openness serves as the seed for our sense of wonder. Our capacity for wonder sets the stage for the social authenticity we'll need in adolescence. This is because developing an authentic self necessitates that we wonder deeply about our ways of social belonging. All three of these qualities — innocence, wonder, and authenticity — provide the platform for the passage into soulful adulthood.

In a soulcentric approach to child development, the primary task of parents and teachers is to raise children who will grow into rooted adults, people who have discovered the gifts they were born to bring to the world. How can we do this? If that is our hope, if that is our intention, it has to start with us. It begins with our opening to nature and human nature, experiencing how our inner wilderness — our

indigenous self — mirrors the outer wild, and how these natures that we live in are the deep wellsprings of our life.

In the middle childhood years — what Freud (1901) called the "latency period," suggesting that not much was going on — children are testing out the veracity of the life script that parents and teachers have offered them. As they move out from the family cocoon, children have a difficult time learning about the natural world and about real community when they tend to be isolated from both. Our schools essentially prepare young people to work within the cultural paradigm of commerce and industry. Schooling does not help children become fully themselves, belong to a place, create a meaningful life, and contribute to the health of the biosphere and the creation of a sustainable society (Plotkin 2008).

When a child comes to that threshold in life — usually in the pre-teen years — when the sense of belonging offered by the family of origin, however that might be, is no longer enough, the social world expands to the peer group, mediated by the heat of puberty. The hunger that adolescents carry for love and acceptance is projected onto others, and that radiance often does not shine back. This is the place in life where youth long to be "just like them," to have friends, to be popular, to not be alone. Often, the lonely ones lose their voice, and tell themselves they are not worthy. Often, the popular ones develop a voice of privilege and hierarchy, a false voice that doesn't consider the internal landscape, the inner wild. It is good enough to be thought of as cool, as acceptable in the eyes of others. That is what matters. Not the genuine voice of a youth emerging into Rilke's "beauty and terror."

This is the time when adults tend to grit their teeth and hope for the best ... let's just close our eyes and hope that somehow these awkward, pimply, narcissistic, conformist 14 year olds will make it to 18 or 19 and figure out for themselves what it means to be an adult.

But if the journey is going to move from the social approval that is so desperately sought at 14 to the self approval in young adulthood that is so critical to the development of a genuine, authentic self, a unique identity, voice will be the key variable. The whole idea of adolescence, biologically, psychologically,

and spiritually, may be to listen to the many voices, the wildly disparate voices of identity and belonging, of yearning and meaning, of purpose and passion, and out of that chaos, emerge with a voice that carries with it the embodiment of who we really are.

People from the very beginning of human habitation on earth have known that the young cannot be expected to figure this out on their own, that they need to be heard and mentored and challenged and loved by their elders. They also have known that the adults who are welcoming the young into authentic adulthood, into a passionate, committed, purpose-driven life need to have done their own work. The newly opening young adult, tenderly trying out his or her wings, emerging from the cocoon, needs to be met by genuine grownups, part of a community that wants to hear their voice, and engage them in a lifetime dialogue about what is truly important.

We, of course, have very little of that in our culture. Childhood and adolescence is more than a chronological fact; many, perhaps most, of those with bigger bodies and multiple decades on them are still operating, psychospiritually, at the level of early adolescence, where social approval, as opposed to individual and social authenticity, has primacy.

One of the great gifts that mature parents, teachers, caregivers, mentors — all of us — can offer the young is the opportunity to be in relationship with that emerging voice, to ensure a container where it can be heard and mirrored and cherished. When that happens, young people can go about the critical life task of coming to terms with their story so far, leaving behind what they no longer need. They can, in the context of a community that encourages it, pick up the pen and set about the task of authoring their life, of writing the new chapters that will guide their life path, the rules for living with integrity with which they have wrestled with their elders. It is a process of initiation into what it truly means to be an adult, and it can only happen in relationship with already-initiated adults.

In modern American culture, adolescents initiate each other into what they think is genuine adulthood (Kimmel, 2008). Since the adult world is saying very little of value to youth about what it means to live a passionate, engaged adult life, young people are forced to figure it out for themselves (Fleischer, 2005).

Hence, we have rising levels of mindless binge drinking, emotionless, friends-with-benefits sex, and a focus on consumerism and economic status. Why should they see it any other way? What are we as an adult culture offering them that espouses values of personal and communal integrity?

Michael Meade (1993) asserts, “If the fires that innately burn inside youth are not intentionally and lovingly added to the hearth of community, they will burn down the structures of culture, just to feel the warmth.”

Bill Plotkin, author of *Nature and the Human Soul* (2008), writes that

healthy adolescence holds our master key to both individual development and human evolution. Adolescence, at this time, is the locus of both our crisis and our opportunity. The crisis of adolescence and the crisis of our culture are two facets of the same impasse. Seizing the opportunity in one quickens the opportunity for the other. Once enough people embrace the true nature of adolescence — its promise and potential — Western culture will transform and again become life sustaining. To the extent that we don't know what adolescence is for, we don't know what humans are for.

I am teaching a class at Keene State College in New Hampshire for first year students called “Encountering Adulthood.” It is an intensive “thinking and writing course,” a cross-cultural study of how adults initiate their young into adulthood, with particular emphasis on modern American rites of passage. We look deeply at the markers of adulthood in American culture, and we make it personal: we learn from the inside out. This, after all, is where they are in their life, betwixt and between, no longer a child, not really an adult (Arnett 2004). They are in that liminal space where they are seeking an abiding identity that personifies who they are, can be, and want to be.

So I ask them, what is the culture telling them about what it means to be an adult? Where are the messages coming from, and who is offering them? After we study how cultures have, for thousands of years, consciously and intentionally initiated young people into an adult life of purpose and passion

(Blumenkrantz 1992; Mahdi, Foster, and Little 1987; Some 1993), I pose the question: how are you being guided, and by whom?

As you may expect, many of these responses are not encouraging: the adult world is not really showing up and the young are essentially initiating each other into what they think it means to be an adult.

At the same time, my experience with these young adults suggests that they want a lot more than that, more than the surface markers of adulthood. They particularly want the mentors to show up, the initiated adults who are living a life of integrity, generativity, and responsibility for emerging adults.

During the last presidential election, our Encountering Adulthood class was talking about the markers of adulthood, such as they are, in American culture. You can imagine what they said: alcohol, sex, driver's license, earning money to spend. I said, thinking that this was an election season, what about voting? They looked at me blankly. What about citizen participation, being part of your community, voicing what you care about for your country and for the world? I could tell I was not connecting.

I asked them if they, as emerging adults, wanted to be part of the big conversation going on, and for their voices to be heard. I asked how many of them were registered to vote. It was 3 out of 20. So we set about a whole project of learning about the voting process, what the candidates stood for, and most importantly, what *they* themselves stood for. On election day, we all walked over to the local polling place (New Hampshire has very accessible election laws, and college students can vote locally no matter where they live, and people can register on the day of the election) and voted as a group.

We then celebrated, knowing that something had shifted for us. Something about emerging voice. It was a lot more than registering and deciding whom they might vote for. They could articulate what they cared about, awaken strongly-held beliefs, imagine a future, and be taken seriously by their elders. They were moved by that.

When I was on sabbatical recently, I traveled coast-to-coast visiting visionaries (Blumenkrantz 1992; Elbot & Fulton 2008; Kessler 2000) who are attempting to bring ancient cultural wisdom about transition to authentic adulthood into the mainstream of schools

and communities. For several years, I have been a wilderness-based rite-of-passage guide with adolescents and adults, and have witnessed extraordinary transformation of individuals in the crucible of nature. But of late, I have been feeling an urgency to see what can happen when ordinary communities in ordinary places take on the task of caring for the individual and collective soul of the rising generation.

Isn't it the case that everyone, however deeply it may be buried, has those same needs for connection, for meaning, for joy, for initiation and belonging into a loving and accepting community? Don't our children and their friends, the accepted and the alienated, deserve that?

What if schools made emotional literacy a centerpiece of their curriculum? What if the "soul of education" (Kessler 2000) was embodied in the classroom? What if the walls between the school and the community were taken down so that genuine intergenerational discourse could take place?

What if the American college experience was reframed as a time of initiation into healthy adulthood, as opposed to such pseudo-initiatory practices as binge drinking, which essentially invites an extended adolescence? How is it that we have what amounts to a culturally-sanctioned developmental arrest that undermines movement into an engaged and vibrant adulthood?

The answers to these questions, I believe, starts with loving and committed adults who recognize the crisis as well as the opportunity for youth, and are willing to show up and stick around. As cultures have understood for thousands of years, people who have been initiated into their own authentic adult life naturally tend to the needs and the mentoring of the community and the rising generation (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern 2002).

At Keene State College and in the Keene community, a diverse mix of adults are currently collaborating on a project that is looking anew at the college experience. We are taking a fresh look at how the staples of college life — orientation, academics, advising, living arrangements — can be re-imagined to truly engage students who are on the cusp of what can be an authentic adulthood. At the same time, potential mentors are learning from indigenous wisdom and experience that initiation into genuine

adulthood cannot happen without a community of already-initiated adults (Mahdi, Foster & Little 1987; Plotkin 2008; Some 1993).

One day during my sabbatical, I watched a group of adolescent students identified as having Autism Spectrum Disorder engage in Council, an ancient form of Native American sacred communication (Zimmerman & Coyle 1996), as a prelude to academic initiatives. Their capacity to openly communicate their yearnings and their values exceeded the capacity of many “helping professionals.” They were being given the opportunity by trusted and non-judging mentors to be real, and they took it.

That is all it takes to get the ball rolling, the heart moving. What is it we are willing to say to the young ones, as they journey, hopefully, to a genuine adult life of purpose and passion?

It is many years later for me, from that fateful day at the preschool in Colorado. I have a lot more experience than I once did. But for all my fascination, and my studies, and my theories, I have not figured kids out yet. Maybe that is the point. Perhaps less knowledge, and more wisdom — the wisdom of not knowing, Alan Watts (1968) would call it, the wisdom of not having the answers — is, in the end, an answer. Watching a child watch a caterpillar make its way can remind us that all these moments of wonder are sacred, and that the world is full of them, if we notice, pause, and stay present. Our job, ultimately, as people who love children, is to tune in, with them, to the marvels all around them and all the wonders within them, and thus become part of a larger story, an ancient story, the universe story.

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