

THE SPIRIT OF THE HORSE AND THE SPIRITUALITY OF THE CHILD

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Gandhi once wrote that the greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated. I would also add by the way its children are treated.

After 25 years of working with children, I am convinced that many adults - parents, teachers and therapists - know far too little about the world of the child. Children across America, in all strata of society, are suffering the effects of the ignorance of adults. **I hear in my heart, I hear in its ominous pulses, all day, on the road, the hoofs of invisible horses.** Guiney "Wild Ride"

We live in a day and age when there are many outside stresses placed on the child and family as a whole. We all know that the extended family has all but disappeared and that even the nuclear family is rapidly vanishing from our sight. We virtually live in a throwaway society. We pollute our environment with unwanted, often unused, material goods. We throw away our pets (multi millions a year) and we throw away our elderly and our children. Even though many normal children are not abandoned, they are to a degree neglected - educationally, emotionally and spiritually.

About 1993 *Fortune Magazine* devoted a whole issue to "Children in Crises - the Struggle to save America's Kids". They stated that addressing the unmet needs of American youngsters is a national imperative as compelling as an armed attack or a natural disaster. This year CBS Reporter, Bernard Goldberg, wrote a book called Bias with a chapter dealing with America's hidden crises: our children! We live in a time where there is much thought given to the needs of children but one can hardly say that this is a society which has children at its heart! It has been said that children are our future, but it seems that we do little to adequately prepare for the future of our children by considering their basic needs here and now. I believe that more parents and professionals need to be concerned with the prevention of major problems in children, to help the young child develop his ego, a sense of self-worth, and the knowledge that he is capable of many things so his world does not crumble in times of outside stress. It is my contention, that unless we get to the root of the evil pervading our society as a whole, all the programs in the world will be as effective as band-aids on cancer patients.

One of the gifts a horse offers is a chance to explore constructive ways to meet danger and manage our private terrors. Mary Midkiff

Childhood is not the carefree, light-hearted playful time remembered by many adults. It involves a series of physical, emotional, cognitive, and social changes, which most normal children will, at least one time in their development, experience as difficult. The accompanying stress or conflict can possibly lead to behaviour or learning problems. Normal childhood brings tasks of developing self-esteem, achieving independence, and learning to relate to others, especially peers, coping with a changing body, and forming basic values. The brain will grow faster in the first six years than at any time in the child's life. Add to this the stresses of our modern society, and problems (such as

divorce and drugs) are bound to occur which most children did not experience in generations past. A child's reaction to a stressful experience is dependent on her perception of self and her perception of the experience. The child who views herself as vulnerable or unable to control her life may perceive herself as helpless. Few children, even those who are competent, are able to handle stress easily. The majority of children have to work at dealing with stressful events. Even if they are unable to integrate an experience into their lives in a positive way they frequently do manage to deal with the stressful experience and get on with their lives. If they are successful their self-esteem grows. Some children, on the other hand, become extremely disorganized by a stressor. They struggle hard to overcome the experience but are unable to integrate the experience into their life. Most children, even the best at coping, are at one time or another in need of help in dealing with stress. When children are overwhelmed by stressful events and not helped to integrate them, developmental personality problems can occur as well as maladaptive behaviours that could prevent the child from attaining his fullest potential. According to Jungian writer, James Hillman, the soul reveals itself through pathology (pain.) Today we hear the terms "dyslexia, hyperactivity, attention deficit and conduct disorder, dysfunction this and dysfunction that. All words invented by adults to put a handle on things they do not understand about kids.

Those accomplishments on the horse collected in my heart as a savings account of power I could draw upon at lower moments. Mary Midkiff

Because the physical, mental and emotional development of the child is so often interwoven with disagreeable events, the child experiences on one hand, confidence, acceptance, and success, and on the other, doubt, rejection and failure. Even though negative experience develops inner resources, tension is also produced in the child. This tension can cause a slowdown or delay in his development. It is my belief that every major trauma in the life of the child adds a scar to his psyche. What is considered a normal event by adults is often seen by the child as trauma. Who is to say if these scars ever heal? In some children they do not. The more the child has help in coming to grip with the traumas of his life, the less scarring and the healthier the child will be. Often parents are unable to meet the needs of the child and so other adults must fill in the gap. At present few are doing so.

Come let me taste my horse, who is to bear me like a thunderbolt...Shakespeare

Because of the problems in our society and the demands placed on children, we label them as problems or special. Labelling children is not a way of respecting their uniqueness. Is the child really abnormal or just different? Isn't diversity more common than likeness and more desirable? When professionals speak of the average child what do they mean? And if the child appears to be very gifted this imposes another label. Each child is unique with her own needs, skills and traits that comprise her personality. As professionals, when we label a child we close a door to her. We limit her, impeding her growth and development. There is a very interesting book called Cradle of Eminence, which tells of hundreds of famous, very successful people who were failures in some part of their development, regardless of family background or type of schooling. Gandhi said his school days were the most miserable of his life. The actor Kenneth Branagh hated schools so much he tried to break a leg by falling down stairs. The noted Nobel physicist Richard Feynman called his early days at school an intellectual dessert. John Lennon was kicked out of kindergarten. And so the list goes on, Churchill, Patton, Grieg.

The symbol of wide open spaces and freedom, synonymous with nature in a mechanized world, the horse arouses great passion and feeds our imaginations... Leclair [1001 Images of Horses](#)

Childhood is undervalued in our self-centered culture and society is not meeting the needs of its children. Children are failing school (academically and behaviourally) because their needs for love and self-worth are not being met. Their problems are related to their inability to fulfill their needs. We are driving our young children too hard, depriving them of their most precious commodity-their childhood...children are growing up too fast. Every child's age is a magic age. We need to be as concerned for the six and 10 and 16 year old as the four year old. Children need to be allowed to enjoy the magical world of childhood. In this era of too many things and not enough time, we drag and harass our children to accommodate the adult world. What we need to do is allow children the privacy and respect, as they play out their fantasies and dream their dreams. We tend to feel that if children are kept busy they will be happier and get into less trouble. Yet so often when I ask kids what they want to do they say play!

"Mount on my back", said the Red Mare to the girl, and quickly she mounted onto the flower saddle and took up the reins that were a leafy vine. There on the mare's back she had no fear. Le Guin [A Ride on the Red Mare's Back](#)

Play helps children learn. It helps them work through problems. Play makes the difficult easier. It lightens the heavy load children sometimes have to carry. It activates the imagination and helps children discover new and better ways to create. Animals are often better playmates for children than toys because animals constantly bring the child back to the reality of the relationship. Animals help release energy and tensions in the child. I have come to find that in our society today we have what I would call "empty children". Many are inner city children who have come from a background where there is a breakdown of the transmission of culture, tradition, religion, social and personal values. In many cases it is a multi-generational cycle.

Little of value is being passed down to these children due to the multi problems of the parents, thus these children appear to be empty inside. My travels through many parts of America, even the poorest, such as Appalachia, showed these children to be rich in culture and traditions and do know what it means to be a child.

The lives of animals are woven into our very being – closer than our own breathing- and our soul will suffer when they are gone. Kowalski [Do Animals Have Souls?](#)

Many parents today are afraid to take a stand and communicate such issues as faith and values to their children. Thus we see an increase in crimes committed by younger and younger children.

Moral development is the spiritual equilibrium on which everything else depends. As Maria Montessori wrote: Morals have a practical side which governs social relationships and a spiritual side which presides over the awakening of conscience in the child.

A value system is tied integrally to self-image. Values can be defined as those aspects of life and behaviour which an individual deems as most important and worthy. If one is true to his values, self-image is enhanced. A decline in self-image usually is accompanied by a crumbling in values. Bettelheim wrote: Just because life is so often bewildering to him, the child needs even more to be given the chance to understand himself in this complex world with which he must learn to cope. To be able to do so, the child must be helped to make some coherent sense out of the turmoil of

his feelings. He needs ideas on how to bring his inner house into order, and on that basis be able to create order in his life. He needs a moral education which conveys to him the advantages of moral behaviour.... When the child accepts the values of his society he takes in a pattern that becomes a part of himself. "This pattern is potent and creative, giving form to the personality" (M. Montessori).

A (child) on a horse is spiritually as well as physically bigger than a (child) on foot.
Steinbeck

We see younger and younger children depressed and turning to sex, drugs and gangs. I am convinced this is because their spiritual needs are not being met. A lack of faith in the future, in something permanent, is perhaps one of the most pervasive problems among young people today. Faith is a search for meaning in life. Having faith means having a theory of life in some sense. It is a conviction that the process we are in is worthwhile.

I believe that many children are being turned away from the interiority of which they are capable and to which they have a right in order to become complete human beings. Interiority is that place within the child's being where she can feel safe, can be alone, and where she can find her true self. It is the spiritual side of the child's being. Since it is materialism which distracts children from the spiritual, then children must be distracted from the material. Today children are made to feel that only the visible exists. In order to make them aware of the invisible, they must be opened up to interiority.

The spiritual void in children is linked to a lack of interiority, to an inability to be present within oneself, and a tendency to be captivated by that which is exterior. Young children are sensitive to the silence, not only within themselves but to the outer voice of another who calls them to silence. With this quality of appreciating the silence within themselves comes the ability to face and bear aloneness and to grow. Too often adults think that children should not be alone or idle, and try to fill in the gaps with too many things to do, as television, computer, sports, etc. till the child is spiritually ready to collapse. Adults do not seem to understand that normal development in all stages of being demands and needs silence and a time alone in which to regroup energies. As stated earlier, we only have to look at the depression in our children to see that something we are doing as a society is not working. It is urgent that we give back to children a spiritual and interior life, following all the manipulations, such as early education and early emotional development, which have forced them back on their surface selves and made them dependent on the desires created by society itself.

We speak of waves in a storm as " sea horses". Like wild horses impetuous and irresistible, a man can ride them in a well-founded ship (as a man rides a horse which carries him), they can support him on his voyages. Layard Celtic Quest

Why is this spiritual void dangerous to our children? Because the child is educated despite himself to implement only a part of his potential, only a part of himself. Society's insistence on that which is exterior frustrates the child because it hides the essential part of his personality from him. Totally involved in living his life, he has neither the time nor the perspective through which to struggle with the question of meaning.

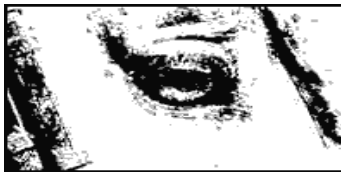
One can belong to a religion without being open to the interior life and thus one is in a spiritual void. It must be said that having religious faith is not necessarily the same as having interiority.

When I speak of the spiritual which must be developed in children I am speaking of that innate quality which is and has been inherent in peoples of all nations since the beginning of time. To suppress it or not develop it in our children is to block a very important door in their own passage through time. It is to deny them wholeness. As Montessori said: the child is the spiritual builder of mankind, and obstacles to his free development are the stones in the wall by which the soul of man has become imprisoned.

One of the major problems we see today in youth is a lack of conscience. Conscience is that part of our psyche that humanizes us, giving us a capacity to feel for others and to live by the ethics and principles of a society.

Peaceful voice when he neighs, I am everlasting and peaceful

I stand for my horse...Navajo Horse Song



One of the most important virtues we are not instilling in our young children is empathy. Direct contact with animals is one way of helping children develop empathy with other creatures, other humans and the environment. As the child discovers the inner self they become individuals, able to tell right from wrong, and able to move out and be caring and loving to all life.

Compassion is another virtue which we learn by being loved. It is to understand another's needs based on who they are. Compassion is sensitive, kind, forgiving, tender, merciful, unselfish. It releases the best in us and it defines humanity!

Because of the growing need for more and more ways to help children on the continuum of normal development I have introduced animals into therapy and activities. It is a method for creating a healthy environment to assist the child in coping with stress as well as deepen the sensitivity of children. It has amazed me for years that children who have a hard time in normal learning environments excel when working with an animal.

When there are child things to do, I have to be a child, but when there are hillsides of grass and forests with low hanging boughs and secret stables in loquat trees, I am a horse.

Petroski [Gravity & Other Stories](#)

Children often learn best by example, esp. of their peers. They can develop an awareness of the needs and feelings of others by watching how peers and adults care for and relate to animals. Children can practice a variety of interactions with a horse, which can be later incorporated into relationships with others. The horse can teach children behaviours not easily acquired by the usual learning techniques, such as a capacity to communicate nonverbally. The horse can also help the child develop self-esteem, nurturing, cooperation, and socialization, all of which contribute to the building of empathy.

Other values children must develop are respect for authority, respect for others and the property of others, a work ethic, patience, courage, cooperation, and patriotism.

There is no secret so close as that between a rider and his horse... Suretees, 800 AD

How can the horse practically help children? As was stated earlier, all children even those with the best coping skills, have difficulties. Some children have difficulty with structure, due to lack of it in the home. Working with the horse will teach the child to follow directions (from horse and instructor).

The relationship with the horse will show the child the consequences of the relationship and give the child limits in order to maintain that relationship. This interaction with child and horse restores the mind and body and spirit to wholeness, often allowing the child to forget problems.

Many children are suffering from poor parenting esp. in cases of divorce. Focus on care of the horse helps the child develop nurturing. The relationship with the horse can help the child express his feelings or better understand them.

The horse elevates the child and carries him off returning him to the ground with a lighter load and greater self-confidence than he started with. Many children suffer from hyperactivity or have poor attention span. Having the child exercise the horse, even running or walking along side the horse, can help release energy. One of the most important times for all children is quiet times with their animals. Again back to the interiority. Let the child just sit and be with his pal. Why do we adults have to interfere when a good thing gets going? For children who have a hard time relating encourage relationship with a specific horse. It takes a talent to align the child with the proper horse. Pair the child with others his age or older and assign them simple tasks with their horses. Find ways to help the child develop trust. Even tasks as foot trimming and simple training exercises can boost the child's self-esteem leading to trust of others. For the child who must always be in control, she will soon learn when she gives up control and lets the horse guide her; she can discover a new self. Horses bring magic into the child's life because they give our imaginations free reign.

There are a lot of books today about those who whisper to horses. They say the best training is based on collaboration and sensitivity rather than fear and shame. It is about heart and patience, not force and intelligence. We must apply this same whispering to all children.

The horse is a beautiful animal but it is perhaps most remarkable because it moves as if it always hears music....Halprin Winter's Tale

What greater gift can we give to children than a sense of calling, that there is a reason they are alive. The development of empathy for all God's creation is how we teach children to care for and protect the world. This development of empathy, which is a part of the child's developing interiority, should be the priority of all parents and educators and adults who deal with children.

Albert Schweitzer once asked: how can we have a spiritual relationship to the Universe if we have no spiritual life.