

Responses to World Events

Dear Editor,

I wanted to share one way I've responded to the recent events with my (very) small kindergarten. The news broke as I was preparing for a birthday celebration—at first I thought, “Oh, how can I continue with this lovely, sweet celebration when I'm so upset over what is happening?” But everything was ready, the birthday child was glowing in anticipation, and I turned all my attention to our tiny corner of the world—our safe and comfortable room filled with color and flowers. As thoughts of the events filtered into my mind, I concentrated even more on the “here and now,” and we had a delightful morning—the children thankfully oblivious to the dark clouds on the horizon. The next day, however, they had been exposed to the events, although they didn't talk about it or play it out. My sister, who is trained as a play therapist encouraged me to stimulate play that would allow them to “play out” their fears, but I felt that such play needed to come from the children, and not be suggested by me. (Her suggestion was to build towers, have planes crash into them, and help rescue the people.)

Instead I turned to Michael—was not a dangerous dragon threatening us—not just a dragon flying in from abroad, but the dragon of anger and revenge being kindled in our own breasts? I told a story of a dragon who shot flames into twin towers, and how the people were very sad and fearful, and they called to Michael to help them. St. Michael came, and reminded the people he would help them if they had courage, and if they remembered the Golden Rule. The people promised to love and help one another, and the dragon was subdued.

In the following days we had some Michael-dragon play, and the children were very satisfied with that. I haven't talked directly about the events, nor have the children asked.

Sincerely,

Judith Wynhausen

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Dear Editor,

Here is a letter I wrote for the parents in my Parent/Child classes at Acorn Hill Waldorf Kindergarten and Nursery.

As we live through these uncertain times, with the daily ebb and flow of anxiety, we parents and teachers can experience a great blessing in our mornings at school with young children. As we watch them at work and play, and observe their shining faces—alight with glee at one moment, crumpling in despair at another—we cannot help realizing how completely they live in the present moment, and with what total devotion they give themselves over to whatever they do. We would do well to be inspired by being in the presence of the children, as we try to find our way through these troubled days and weeks.

Rudolf Steiner said that children in their first seven years need to experience that the world is good. What can he have meant, considering that in his day, just as in ours, there was clearly a great deal in the world that was *not* good? How many times a child falls down and gets hurt! How he suffers with illness and fever! How she weeps when Mommy and Daddy leave her with a babysitter! Perhaps the elderly man next door suffers a heart attack and dies. And as recent events remind us, danger and violent acts may threaten us. How, then, can we expect a child to experience the world as

good? If we tried to present such a picture of the world, wouldn't we be lying to our child? And why, since the world is in fact full of trouble, would we want a child to think it is good?

Each of us, as an adult, may have a different response to the statement, "The world is good." One person may feel it is only true to say, "There is goodness in the world," a more limited statement. Another may have a worldview which supports the idea that the cosmic order is "good" in the sense that every occurrence and every living thing has a necessary role to play in world evolution (even though we may not always understand the necessity). Such existential issues are worth pondering. Here I would like to offer some rather sketchy thoughts for your consideration. You can fill them out with your own reflections; and you may come up with other answers, of course. I believe it is important that the child experience that the world is good. Such experience supports the child's natural trust and unconscious confidence that he can grow and learn and find his way into the future. It is this trust and confidence that gives the child (and later adult) the courage to meet and overcome the challenges which will surely come. These challenges, which may at first seem to be "bad" experiences, are in fact opportunities for growth. The individual who is able to have trust and confidence will be well-equipped to summon the inner resources necessary to benefit from such opportunities.

Consider the little child's "world." For the infant, the whole world seems to exist in the parent's eyes. To a nursing baby, gazing into Mother's eyes, the world is indeed good. As the infant grows and begins to sit up and then to crawl and finally walk, the "world" expands to the circle of home and family, and then to extended family and close friends. A home in which the child has a secure place, where there is a measure of attention to beauty and order, where there is a healthy rhythm, conveys to the child that the world is good. When a child suffers an injury or illness, the comfort offered by a calm and loving adult restores the sense of goodness.

It is, in fact, through the mediation of the adult that a little child experiences the world, in the sense that our attitudes and our moral bearing, as well as our actions, work deeply on the child. The child's world still consists—and *should* consist—of what is in the immediate surroundings. This places a great responsibility on us. Rudolf Steiner's words, and the realization that *we* are the little child's world, can guide us in the present world situation. When we are with our children, we can try to set aside our concerns about our adult-sized world, and do our best to be fully present in our daily activities. Mental health experts recommend that adults try to maintain their normal routines and activities in times of stress. This is wise advice, and it applies to our children's "world" most strongly. We need to keep their familiar routines intact.

We should also be mindful of the wise old saying, "Little pitchers have big ears!" Children have an uncanny ability to take in what adults are saying, even when they seem not to be listening. Even if they cannot possibly understand the content of what they are hearing, they are absorbing the feelings and underlying meaning, and they will be affected. Being exposed to adult fears can seriously undermine the child's ability to experience the world as good. We need to find the strength to save anxious conversation for times when the children are not present.

Of course when a sad or frightening experience does occur in the child's small world, it must be dealt with rather than denied, so that the child may be comforted and may share in the healing and recovery of goodness as the adults meet and cope with the situation. The important thing, once again, is to keep in mind the child's natural capacity for living in the present, in the immediate experience. Let us not ask our children to share our adult concerns and our consciousness of the larger world. Let us rather help them to experience the world as good, so that they—the future of our world—may grow in trust and confidence and strength.

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In a Time of Tragedy: Helping Children Understand Good and Evil

As we face the tragedy inflicted on us all by the terrorists, many people are wondering how to help their children come through this experience without trauma but with new strength. Our national leaders speak of “evil-doers,” and this raises the question of how children understand good and evil.

All children, especially young children, need to feel that the world is a good place. They can accept that bad things exist alongside goodness, but they need to believe that the good will prevail.

When the Challenger space shuttle exploded with teacher Christa McAuliffe on board, millions of children were watching on television. The next day I saw a tape of a psychiatrist speaking to a kindergarten class that had seen the explosion. What can one say to five-year-olds about such a tragedy? The doctor’s words were simple and eloquent: “Yesterday, a terrible thing happened. Nevertheless, the world is good.”

Children need to be reassured that there is love all around them—from their families and community, from the heavenly world, and from the beautiful Earth itself. This is a time to let your children feel the strength and warmth of family life, neighborhood, and community life. If you are part of a religious or spiritual community, let your children experience the solace and transcendence of your religion. And let them feel the healing qualities of the Earth. Take your children out into nature or into the garden to absorb the sun, the light, the sounds of water flowing, the colors. Nature in its beauty is a great balm to the soul.

Fairy tales and myths from around the world are full of examples of the battle of good and evil and of how goodness triumphs. So are stories from the great religious books. Tell your children these stories or read them aloud. Knowing these stories inspires children to make the best choices they can when faced with difficult situations. These stories serve children well throughout childhood and into adulthood as well. The beautiful words of Genesis, for example, tell us that God, at the end of each day of creation, looked at what had been created and found that it was good.

Do not let children spend too much time in front of television and computer screens, especially if they are seeing images of violence and death. (The same advice applies to adults as well.) If you do expose children to news reports of disastrous events, follow this wise advice from Fred Rogers: “When I was a boy and would see scary things on the news, my mother would say to me, ‘Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.’ To this day, that’s where I focus my attention—to the many caring people in this world.”

Parents will find more helpful information from Mr. Rogers at the following web site: <http://pbskids.org/rogers/parents/sept11a.htm>; and articles on children’s grief at <http://wnet.org>.

Young children need to be reminded that however strong evil is, in the end it is never as strong as goodness. But goodness must be nurtured so that it can grow and thrive. Children understand this. They understand the goodness of the thousands of people who have reached out to help in this time of sorrow—the police and firefighters, doctors, nurses, all the people giving blood and food, and those raising their voices in prayer and in song.

Help your child to find his or her own way to contribute. It may be giving money to the Red Cross, or drawing a picture and sending it to a fire or police station in New York, or in your own town, with a word of thanks. It may be setting up a special table of remembrance in your home with

a bouquet of flowers and a candle that is lit once a day with a prayer or a verse said for all those who died or are suffering.

School-aged children and adolescents will want to go further. They will want to understand why evil can take hold of a human heart and cause it to act in such violent ways. Depending on their age, children can begin to understand that one of the great gifts—and great challenges—of being human is that we are free to choose how we will act.

Assure your children that, even in the midst of conflict and strife, there are people of good will in every country who share their hunger for peace and justice for all and who abhor killing. In the *Qur'an*, the holy book of Islam, it is written “if anyone kills an innocent person, it is as if he has killed all of humanity. And if anyone saves a life, it is as if he has saved all of humanity.” This same passage, almost word for word, appears in the ancient Jewish teachings of the *Talmud*.

Now it is our daily task to choose whether or not we align ourselves with goodness. How do we handle frustration, pain, and anger? Do we lash out in ways that hurt others, or do we find ways to transform them into new strengths? Do we think only of ourselves and our wishes or do we reach out to others to be of service? Do we give in to the temptation to lie or do we stand up for the truth? Do we give in to destruction or do we use our energy to create new possibilities?

Every school child wrestles with these issues on a small scale or a large scale. You can help your child understand that it is always tempting to give in to our lower selves, our baser emotions, but we are able to practice good deeds daily, and this strengthens our ability to do good at the times when it really counts.

Remember that children look to adults to see how we handle crises like the terrorist attack. It is all right that they see we are saddened or grief-stricken, even that we are shocked, puzzled, and angry. But mostly they want to see what we will do to help put things right. Can we rise like the phoenix from the ashes and build a “new economy” that is more compassionate to the poor? Can we develop knowledge of peace that is even greater than our knowledge of war?

Many have commented that we will never be the same. If that is the case, then let us make the changes count for the good. That would be the best memorial we could create to those who have died or sacrificed so much.

Thanks to the Alliance for Childhood for this article from its website. The Alliance for Childhood may be reached at P.O. Box 444, College Park, MD 20741. Its web site address is www.allianceforchildhood.net

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