

On Obedience

An Open Letter to Kindergarten Colleagues

Bill Roberson

In my work with parents in the kindergarten, I have been trying to bring some light to notions about imitation and modeling, limit setting, and how we go about guiding our children in the first seven years of their lives. In general, I am struck by a general parental need to have permission, if that is the right word, to limit their children's choices, and to clearly define and model appropriate and consistent boundaries for their children's behavior. There is much reasoning and bargaining with children; then, when that doesn't seem to bring about the desired results, an angry or hysterical response often follows. Many parents feel a lack of control in their parenting that leads to feelings of powerlessness, frustration and confusion. There is even a hope, I think, that if their children are in a Waldorf kindergarten where "rhythm reigns," that their children will internalize boundaries and take control of their wills, and all will be well. Well, there is a perfect starting place for parenting work in the kindergarten!

I am interested in the fact that the word *obedience* is not one used by parents very often anymore. In fact, when the word is spoken, I sometimes sense a discomfort in parents. Obedience has many connotations to people nowadays, perhaps because of their own experiences growing up in a home in which *to obey* meant "do what I tell you or you will be severely punished and I don't mean maybe!" Or perhaps the discomfort stems from a generation of parents who, as young adults, lost trust in authority on personal and national levels, causing them to oppose obeying authority on principle. Or perhaps parents want their children to like them and be their friends. Whatever the reasons, expecting obedience from children does not seem to be integral to our parenting at the turn of the century.

Of course, holding the expectation that children will obey necessitates the adults accepting themselves as *authorities*. To accept oneself as an authority requires a certain will effort on the part of the adult that may

feel strange, and in some instances, hypocritical. Our models of authority may not meet our needs for trustworthiness and wisdom. The inner reckoning required to experience ourselves as truthful authorities is painstaking and difficult work, particularly in the absence of models worthy of our trust.

In considering these things, my interest in obedience has become even more pointed. So I went to the dictionary. The definition of *obey* has to do with submission to authority, carrying out commands, and generally following the rules. But it is the root of the word that piqued my interest. In Latin, *oboedire*, which, broken down, consists of *ob* ("in the direction of") and *audire* ("hear"). "In the direction of hearing." I heard: "listening," "paying attention." So when we *obey*, we are listening to someone or something. In the archaic meaning, submitting, carrying out and following aren't necessarily implied. Realizing this, I experienced for the first time the freedom in the deed of obeying. Here was the crack of an entrance into a thought about obedience.

Over the years, when I need some spiritual bearings, I have often gone back to Thomas Merton, the Trappist contemplative. I found this in his writing:

In order to understand the true value of spiritual obedience we must be very careful to distinguish between self-will and genuine liberty. This distinction is a matter of great importance, because we are called to freedom under obedience and not to the mere sacrifice of all freedom in order to respond to authority like machines. The highest freedom is found in obedience to God. The loss of freedom lies in subjection to the tyranny of automatism, whether in the capriciousness of our own self-will or in the blind dictates of despotism, convention, routine, or mere collective inertia.

Here obedience and freedom are clearly addressed. In obedience to God we find the highest freedom. If *obedience* has to do with "hearing," with "listening," then who we listen to is God. If to listen to God is to

find out what we are to do, what we are *meant* to do, then we are free to meet our destinies with self-will.

What a wonderful paradox! Obedience and freedom. If our conception of obedience is that it relinquishes our freedom, we limit our freedom critically. If we find the “right ear” with which to listen, then we are given the possibility for the highest freedom. Obedience in fact prepares us for freedom.

I’m trying to renew the meaning of obedience, and in so doing, to renew its meaningfulness and value in our lives as parents and teachers. But how does one bring this to parents in a meaningful and useful way? One way I’m working with is to talk about imitation, that young children learn primarily through imitation. We work hard at being models worthy of children’s imitation. (Merton again: “For the saint preaches sermons by the way he walks and the way he stands and the way he sits down and the way he picks things up and holds them in his hand.”) That is an enormous task and one thoroughly worth pursuing. We also work with Rudolf Steiner’s notion that we must never expect children to do anything we are not willing to do ourselves. Children need models worthy of their imitation and internalization. If we want them to *obey*, then we must model obedience, which means we must be willing to obey. Right now in my thinking, that means we must open ourselves to the

spiritual world with a listening ear to hear what our task on earth is. If we want to find out what we are to do, what the “right thing” to do is, we must listen and *obey* the spiritual world. As Waldorf teachers we work with the knowledge that we are in the kindergarten to continue and support the work of the angels. We are in service to their work with the children. We in fact must *obey* them, we must listen carefully to them, to realize how and why we work with children in the ways we do. We must model *obedience*, and realize that through obeying we experience our freedom.

So this is where my research is taking me. For me, these ideas are very chewy and seem to request my best bovine-like “secreting” and “maintaining.” How do I *obey*? How can I bring this idea to parents meaningfully? Are others in the kindergarten interested in this research? I would appreciate others’ thoughts on the issue of obedience, what it means to them, and how it fits into the picture of parenting we work to bring to parents.

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