

A Parent Evening in Response to Sept. 11

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Our Parent Evening with Rev. Peter Skaller and Dr. Michael Lipson on Monday, Nov. 5, was a most remarkable event. Peter and Michael addressed us on the theme of raising young children in troubled times and brought a wealth of insight and practical advice. The following summary is written from my notes, but of course, this is a pale shadow of their presentation and the intense and honest conversation that followed.

In working with pediatric AIDS patients at Harlem Hospital, Michael often experienced that the children knew they had a life-threatening illness before they were informed by their parents. The younger the child, the more objective s/he was about death. Even though

we restrict the children's exposure to media bombardment about the catastrophe, continuing threats, and the war itself, nonetheless, information and feelings leak through our protective barriers. Michael recommends a "fluid readiness" to meet the child's often disguised invitation to talk. In such conversations, initiated by the child, not the parent, one can gain insight into how the child is processing these events and how one might help. We must develop tact, the right word at the right time or a receptive silence. However, the fundamental response must be internal because the young child learns from us primarily through non-verbal means. The burden is on us to

honestly process these events, because the child will immediately pick up our feelings. When tragedy occurs, we first hold the child physically, then later hold the child through the equilibrium of our inner life. Michael led us through an exercise to show us how we can use our feelings actively and creatively; we need not only “suffer” them. Michael described the distinction between self-oriented emotions (“I am angry, sad, etc.) and world-oriented feelings which can be an objective, artistic, and spiritual means of gaining knowledge about the world. One important task for us as adults is to transform our self-oriented emotions into a more open, broad perception through feeling. (“What event filled me with wonder today?”)

Peter reminded us that this is not the first time parents have asked such questions. Where do we find the light that will guide us through dark and terrible times? We have been drawn out of our comfort to wrestle with problems that have beset humanity for a long time. When we carry faith, hope, and peace in the center of our being, we may say the “wrong” thing to our children, but yet our deeper conviction will shine through. This living peace is not a state of rest, but is a dynamic state, which must be achieved and regained over and over. The existential reality that we all face and that confronts us tragically through the events of September 11 is always Death. How do we adults find an ongoing relationship to the divine, not through theology, but through life? (Young children are “naturally” religious.) Only through this inner work can we build the foundation for realizing that in spite of what is going on in the world, there is still reason for reverence and hope. If we attain a real spiri-

tual and religious life, whatever the particular path we choose, the child grows up in this atmosphere (which reflects the child’s own spirituality) and can feel safe, even when the outer world is not safe. The religious life, with its feelings of devotion and reverence, doesn’t come automatically, but these feelings can be cultivated.

During the following conversation, we discussed working with little boys’ aggressive instincts by nurturing the imagination with pictures of “good” conflict found in the many fairy tales that deal with these themes. The meaningfulness and structure of the fairy tale can draw the child along through a psychological process when he has become stuck in repetitive or obsessive play themes.

Can we “be the change we seek in the world” as Gandhi urged us? Peter advised us to be completely honest with our questions. No one knows what is really going on, what will happen, or what is the “correct” thing to do. As we acknowledge this, we learn to face the reality of who we are at each moment and in each encounter with another. Rebirth can only come from the ashes; when I burn away everything I thought I knew, the new can arise. We adults have a lot of processing to do, to acknowledge our own suffering, fear, and vulnerability. By acknowledging our grief, we take some of the pressure off our children. Michael’s final advice: Steal a moment whenever you can with the intention to focus fully on your child and practice “fluid responsiveness.” Even an instant of open attention can bring freshness and new insight.