

Bringing Balance and Harmony to Everyday Life: Helping Parents to Slow Down and Simplify

— Christine Summerfield

In looking at the theme of last year's international Waldorf early childhood conference, *The Journey of the "I" into Life*, several imaginations come to mind. For example, with the gentle unfolding of a flower, each stage of development is allowed to unfold in its own time, culminating in a strong, flourishing plant. If it is rushed or hurried, the plant is often weak and floppy and does not exhibit strength or vitality. Similarly, the human being also has stages of development, in which the spiritual core or "I" gently unfolds over cycles of time with a certain signature in each stage. Just as with the plant, a young child's I can gently unfold over time, or be pushed into adulthood too soon, causing stress, anxiety and weakness.

In my own journey as a parent and teacher over the years, I have seen trends come and go. Especially in the field of technology, new gadgets seem to be invented and marketed every day with alarming speed. And along with devices, new parenting trends also are emerging affecting our experience of childhood. In our modern Western culture, one can see the signs and hear the messages everywhere of activities being pushed down to younger and younger children: computers in the kindergarten, early childhood literacy, Baby Einstein. If it's good for teens, then why not expose kids earlier? Surely it can only help them develop faster and earlier.

But what happens to the I of the child when it is exposed to adult content too early? And in the bigger picture, what is happening to the phenomenon of childhood itself? Counter to the emphasis on "too much, too fast, too soon," is a growing hunger to slow down and create more calm, more ease, and more grace in everyday family life. Voices including Kim John Payne (author of *Simplicity Parenting*), Sharon Elliott and Carrie Ferguson (authors of *A Child's Way: Slowing Down for Goodness' Sake*), and Helle Heckmann (author of *Childhood's Garden* and *Slow Parenting*) are helping to articulate ways to bring ourselves back into harmony with natural rhythms,

while coping with the challenges of modern life.

Parenting groups are one way to offer support for such efforts, creating a community that helps individuals to feel less alone in their struggles. In the parenting groups that I lead (which are based on Kim John Payne's *Simplicity Parenting*), I try to offer a safe place where parents can gather in a warm, supportive environment to share ideas and creative solutions for the parenting challenges in today's world. First, we look at the analogy of *Soul Fever*. What are the hot spots in our daily lives? Where can we see the inflammation in the behaviors of our children? Where is there stress and anxiety? Where is there too much stuff or too much hurry? Just as with a physical fever, how can we stop, take notice of an area that needs attention, slow down, re-connect to our children and help them navigate through the fever of the times we live in?

While the element of warmth does possess healing properties, too much of it and too early can cause inflammation of the soul life of the child. Restoring balance is the key. Where can we apply some coolness to soothe the soul fever? How can we create more space and more time for more connection and more ease?

After defining the elements of Soul Fever, we move in to simplifying and refining four areas of home life. These are the *Physical Environment*, *Rhythm*, *Scheduling* and *Filtering Out the Adult World*. (In anthroposophical terms, these relate to the four members of the human being, the physical body, the life or etheric body, the astral body and the I or higher self). Each parent is given a workbook to use for journaling, studying, drawing, and making plans of action for change. In keeping with the spirit of simplicity and gradual change, our circles take place every two weeks, so we can have time to digest the material and implement one small, doable change at a time. Then, each time we reunite, we begin with celebrating successes, along with "juicy mistakes." Over time, trust and warmth are generated and conversations grow deeper and more authentic with each passing session.

Physical Environment

So, what are these four areas of family life and how do we create change? The first area is the most concrete and practical to work with: the physical environment. Toys. Clothes. Books. Clutter. In other words, stuff. We talk about how much stuff we have in our homes and look at play. How many toys are really necessary in my child's room? How does my child play? What is play? Best of all, what is a toy? This session is often quite lively, as I reveal on the floor in front of us, a spectrum of items for play, ranging from violent-looking action figures, toys with parts that flash and beep, caricature-like dolls, toys with logos. . . to a bucket of dirt, a bowl of water, a sheet, and a bundle of ropes and string. In exploring these items, they discover the difference between an open-ended toy and a closed-ended toy. Often, a golden moment is remembered from their own childhood when they see a bucket of soil or a bowl of water. Stories begin to emerge. "I remember digging for HOURS at the beach when I was kid! All we had was some old buckets and shovels!" "Our dad let us dig in that empty lot the whole summer. When we found those old animal bones, we really thought we were paleontologists, making great discoveries!" We find our own perceptions of toys expanding and our thinking about the nature of play is stimulated in new ways. Often, at the next session, parents return with stories of how boxes of toys went "on vacation" or were donated to charities. They observe how children played more deeply and cleanup was easier, with comments such as "My kids didn't even notice they were gone! They could simply find the toys they had and went right into play!"

Rhythm

The second area we explore is that of rhythm. We ask ourselves, what is rhythm and where does it live? How is it different from scheduling? While scheduling involves writing down appointments and commitments on a calendar, rhythm is something much greater. What are things we do every day and every year? We soon discover that rhythm is connected to life. Rhythm resides in eating, waking up and falling asleep. It lives in the human heartbeat and in each breath; the monthly cycles of the moon, the yearly cycle of the sun and the turning of the seasonal wheel. We even see the timely wisdom imprinted in our bodily organs. And we depend on rhythm to build security, predictability and strength. Rhythm is the key to life.

Then, we look at rhythm in our own lives, in eating and sleeping. We look at mealtime and bedtime

rituals. What is a ritual? What rituals did we grow up with? What makes them meaningful and memorable? What are our family meals like? How can we create more connection at meal times? Can we have more reverence and more joy in the sharing of food? Together, we learn a simple verse to say or sing before meals. We explore the commercialization of food and its complications. We talk about how preparing food and sharing it together builds a sense of connection and how simplifying food lessens anxiety around food. When meals are simplified and more predictable, pickiness diminishes.

In this session we also look at the world of sleep. What happens during sleep and how does it relate to rhythm? What are bedtimes like? Are they at different times or predictable? How can we create a bedtime ritual? Stories are looked at. Can we share a story from our own childhood that nurtures our child? Perhaps instead of a series of stories before bed, one is enough along with a simple verse and candle. We learn a bedtime verse together, one that is a fit with our own family values and that we can say together; one that communicates a message of safety for a child before entering the world of sleep. As this is a large topic in itself, often requests are made to go deeper and have more time to explore storytelling and rituals.

Scheduling

The third area that we explore is the area of scheduling. What we often come to is that the young child in today's world is "over-scheduled" with a different commitment or class each day of the week. Today, the busy schedules of most modern children leave very little down time or time for unstructured free play. What once used to be neighborhood free play has now been replaced by organized "play dates" or scheduled activities such as sports, music lessons, dance, gymnastics, language classes and more. We look at competitive sports and how they have been pushed down to younger ages, with an early "burnout" age and sports injuries occurring younger in children, before they are developmentally ready. This can be a controversial topic for many parents and they have to find their way with boundaries that fit their family story. Nevertheless, it makes for juicy conversation and stimulating thoughts. In our workbooks, while mapping out a typical day and week, we look at active and calming moments. When we find "hot spots" that could use a little cooling down, we find places in our week that can use a little pause or a moment of down time to create bal-

ance. Finding a balance between movement and rest is a big theme in this area.

Filtering Out the Adult World

Finally, the last topic we explore together is that of filtering out the adult world. What does this mean? This involves protecting the young child from too much information, too soon. Too much information about adult worries and world events causes unneeded stress and anxiety in the young child. We look at the world of media and how to build protective buffers with limited media in family life. We explore the world of technology and alternatives to high tech entertainment. This inevitably leads to conversation about spending time in nature and its regenerative qualities. One parent recently commented, “Nature is an antidote to technology.” In these circles, wisdom comes from the group.

We also explore the principles of speech. We look at the quality of speech and its uses. Three helpful guidelines that we look at are: *Is it true?* *Is it kind?* and *Is it necessary?* We also talk about choices and even look at brain development in relation to the faculty of decision-making. We discover how stressful it can be for young children to be confronted with too many choices when it is not developmentally appropriate. In observing our speech patterns, we can resolve to make

subtle changes in how we speak with young children, with using quality over quantity. The wise adage of “less is more” comes into play. More importantly, we learn how our presence carries more meaning with the young child than verbal clutter.

We also look at parenting styles. What are our parenting styles? We exercise the idea of loving the times we live in. In this sharing, we speak a verse by Karl König: “There is a Knighthood of the Twentieth Century.” We name something we struggle with from our modern times and come up with positive attributes about it. These are all thoughts for stimulating change, helping us find ways to act as a filter for the young child, buffering them from larger worries and protecting childhood. ♦

Christine Summerfield has taught in Early Childhood Waldorf settings for over ten years. As a teacher of young children, she discovered a passion for working with parents. She now facilitates Simplicity Parenting circles and helps families achieve more flow, ease and calm with personal organizing services. As founder and director of Summerfield Fiber Arts, she also currently teaches classes in wool felting in the Boulder, Colorado area.



Drawing by Jo Valens from Tell Me a Story