

The Deeper Lessons and Greater Opportunities of Parenting

by Gertrude Lyons

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The Cosmic Joke

I truly believe that the job of raising children is a privilege and a blessing. I also believe it is a complex undertaking of mind boggling proportions—by some sort of cosmic joke, parenting is one of the few jobs for which we don't receive extensive training.

Fortunately, children are tremendously resilient, and with love, caring, conscious effort, and lots of humor, the job gets done. I did not always have this attitude, and this shift in my perspective is a change I am really proud of.

Serving and Co-voyaging

One of the beliefs I hold on to, one that helps me keep my sanity, is the belief that parenting is a co-creative process, not a test of my competence and knowing. I like to think that, as parent and child, we are on the journey together. We are serving and teaching each other at all times. I believe that I will receive in proportion to my investment in our mutual development. Perhaps, there is even more that comes back to us when we live in this mutuality of co-voyaging. Ironically, as co-voyager, I can avoid enmeshment and living through my children. I so much prefer to live with them instead.

Taking Full Advantage of the Opportunity

I find parenting also to be an opportunity to heal past childhood wounds, learn more about myself and the world around me, and grow more deeply into the person I am striving to become. I hope you can relate to a few of my experiences and apply them to your own life. Living these realizations is much more difficult than talking about them as we are finding in the Mothering Program at the Wright Institute for Lifelong Learning.

Nursing My Child, Nourishing Myself

When Morgan, the first of our two children, was born, I was filled with so many feelings. Some were wonderful, but others were painful, I felt so insecure. Our nursing relationship got off to a rocky start. Morgan was not gaining weight at a rate doctors were satisfied with. I did everything I could to aid the situation - from hiring a lactation consultant to drinking an herbal tea that is supposed to increase lactation. But, it wasn't until I started looking inside myself and asking deeper questions about my co-voyaging with her, that I realized this crisis really provided a deeper opportunity for me to heal, and address my own issues of development and abundance. Surprisingly, as I grew internally, she grew physically.

Surprise, the World Reflects my Unrecognized Desires

I looked at a number of layers - my insecurity as a new mother, my dependence on my own mother and desire for independence, and my own struggles with giving and

receiving nourishment. The one that surprised me the most was a desire right from the start to keep her little, and not allow her to grow up. I really loved her dependence on me. It was so fulfilling to be needed. When I started sharing some of these deeper truths, getting better support and applying new insights I had learned, I found that even my own weight-gain issue began to resolve itself, too.

Learning to Play - Messing and Cleaning

When Morgan was three or four I noticed how upset I would get when she would make messes while playing. I knew it was a good thing to let her make messes and teach her to clean up after herself, but it still really bothered me. One day while on the phone with my own mother, I mentioned that Morgan was playing with Play-dough.

No Wonder!

To my surprise, she retorted vehemently, "You let her play with that stuff? Doesn't it get stuck in the carpet?" I asked her if I ever played with "that stuff" at home and she said quite firmly, "No."

So began the adventure of reliving a lost and taboo part of my childhood - the world of messes! Now I get on the floor and play with the Play-dough, even mixing colors!

Morgan and I even engaged in the utterly unthinkable, we brought mud into the house and did mud finger painting (ending up painting ourselves, of course).

Fulfilling my Potential as I help her Fulfill Hers

My final example of developing with instead of living through my children falls under the topic of children's extra-curricular activities. At one point I had Morgan in an activity each day of the week from swimming, to music, to sports. I was telling someone about this; quite proud that I was exposing my daughter to so much of what the city had to offer when she looked at me with concern and asked what I was doing while Morgan was engaged in these activities. I said I was, "Watching, of course." I was proud of the fact that I stayed with her and observed so I could help her.

Living Through or Living With

As we talked about it further, I was shocked to see that I was living my life through my daughter, not with her. I was having her do the things that I wanted to be doing but had given up on, thinking I was too old. The one that really hit home was the violin. Playing the violin? I had never learned an instrument and always wanted to; so of course my children were going to do it.

Fulfilling Mother Hunger, Nourishing Child—"Both/And"

After this revealing discovery, I admitted my own hunger to learn to play, and rather than try and live through Morgan (and now my daughter Hannah), which I see now as unfair, I have begun my own violin lessons and learn with them, facing the practice challenges side by side with them. The other way, doing things 'for them,' puts unfair pressure on both of them, pressure that I was unaware of in my own childhood until much later in adulthood as I tried to differentiate from my mother.

Having begun my own violin lessons, I can not only teach them better, I can learn from them and they are proud to be able to teach me. The truth is: my children have helped me do something I had always wanted to do.

Parenting, Humbling and Inspiring

These are just a few examples of ways I have consciously used parenting as a way to grow with my children rather than through them. Parenting is often so humbling, and I don't always like the lessons parenting and my children reveal to me, but it surely helps me put my life into a bigger perspective.

So often, I think I am supposed to be an expert, rather than a student of life, living and learning with my children. I now see that if I think I am supposed to know it all and be the "expert" in everything, I am setting myself up for huge disappointment and even failure in some areas. I guess in some ways my children teach me as much as highly paid consultants, giving me huge opportunities I never would have had without them.

Gertrude Lyons is Director of the Parenting Program at the Wright Institute for Lifelong Learning develops and leads engaging and interactive parenting trainings and groups. Gertrude is a Wright Institute for Lifelong Learning certified coach in: parenting, couples, peer communications, lifestyles, soft addictions, and breathwork. Individuals, couples and families who work with Gertrude are enriched by her straightforward and mutual approach to coaching, and by the results they see in their lives.

Gertrude Lyons is dedicated to supporting people on their journey to have the richest and fullest lives possible. At home, with her husband Rich and two daughters, she does the same, developing an intimate family life on a foundation of truth, humor, and growth. Gertrude is completing a master's degree in couples and family psychology at Antioch University.