

Chapter Eleven

Spiritual Aspects of Resilience

Many people equate spirituality with participation in religious services. Actually, the term encompasses more than going to church, synagogue, mosque, or temple. It has to do with transcendence, with the ability to move beyond the Self. Depending upon your frame of mind, spiritual experiences might include staring at a candle, listening to a river, watching the sunrise over a red-rock desert, witnessing a meteor shower, sleeping in a boat on a calm sea, hiking through an old-growth forest, holding your newborn baby, sitting in a cathedral while the organist practices Bach's *St. Matthew's Passion*, listening to Gregorian chants or bagpipes or the sitar, watching a teen go through a bar or bat mitzvah ceremony, being present for an infant's first steps, seeing the look on your child's face when first peddles off on a bicycle, serving Thanksgiving meal at a homeless shelter, writing a poem, playing a Rachmaninov toccata on the piano, reading anything by Louise Erdrich... The possibilities are endless. And the things that light your child's spiritual candle may not be the same as the things that transport you. I like to think that, if you're mindful of the present moment – that is, if you keep all your senses open to the here and now – even the most mundane thing (e.g., loading groceries into the back of the station wagon) can inspire a spiritual thrill.

Why should we bother to aspire to transcendence? It allows us and our kids to find meaning, purpose, and value in our existence. Without those things, life doesn't seem worth living. Ideally, your life should also contain periodic passages wherein you rise about your self and glimpse where you fit into the broader context of humanity and nature and, if you wish to venture that far, the mysteries of the universe. In this way, you will gain the perspective necessary to see the big picture of your life. You will find yourself on some larger roadmap, navigating with the equivalent of a Cosmic Global Positioning System, feeling secure and oriented. Once you reach a spiritual scenic overlook, you can see the how your life fits into the grand scheme of things.

A sizeable body of research supports the notion that spirituality and religious practices such as prayer provide significant health benefits. People who incorporate

spiritual practices into their lives seem to be better adjusted, become ill less often, and live longer. For instance, people with religious involvement recover more swiftly from heart surgery and are less likely to die in the intensive care unit after a heart attack. One investigation found that a sense of spiritual values contributed in a big way to success in adult life. Internist Larry Dossey, M.D. has written two books about scientific support for the power of prayer: *Healing Words: The Power of Prayer and the Practice of Medicine* and *Be Careful What You Pray For*. A book by Dale Matthews, M.D., *The Faith Factor*, also addresses this growing topic.

Fortunately, all children are naturally spiritual. Robert Coles, M.D. writes about this phenomenon in his 1990 book, *The Spiritual Life of Children*, for which he won a Pulitzer Prize. Sometimes spirituality is quiescent, waiting for development. Because we live in such a materialistic, commercialized, and fast-paced society, this aspect of ourselves is too often neglected. With support and nurturing, however, parents can encourage those seeds of spirituality to bloom.

Of all the factors that enhance inner capacity, spiritual strengths hold the greatest power and influence all the other aspects of health: physical, emotional, mental, and social. If a child is spiritually healthy, he can compensate for weaknesses and vulnerabilities in other areas. Why? Because a spiritual framework is so broad and encompassing that it can positively influence all facets of our being. Because it lies largely within a person's control. For instance, a child can't help it if he carries a genetic risk for anxiety or depression. But he can decide to be compassionate and grateful.

Changes on a spiritual level can have dramatic impacts on health. Remember Jim from Chapter Seven? Years of traditional psychiatric treatment had done little to relieve his depression. I couldn't begin to nudge him out of his rut of negative and self-destructive thinking. Finally, a process of spiritual healing transformed him. I have seen many cases like Jim's where spiritual mediation in healing resolved what conventional health care could not touch.

I've also learned that the more chronic any illness is, the more important it is to attend to the spiritual realm. That's because physical or psychological illness challenges our spiritual beliefs and also requires significant spiritual resources to cope

and manage.

I break spirituality into five main skills: meaning, service and compassion, gratitude, spiritual awareness, and life purpose. These are not tasks the typical child masters in childhood. Rather, they are skills that can take a lifetime to polish. Nevertheless, parents can lay the framework in childhood and support the long process of development and refinement.

Meaning

Your life has to have meaning, otherwise there would seem to be no point in getting out of bed each morning. What do we mean by meaning? Think about it this way: If a book doesn't hold meaning for you, you don't enjoy it. You don't get it. You feel no compulsion to read to the end. Now, consider your life a book. If you want to enjoy it, it had better be meaningful.

What sort of things provide meaning? That depends upon you. But common sources include family, friends, companion animals, artistic endeavors, nature, and work. They are the things that keep us going, that keep people with painful, terminal diseases clinging to life. You want to see your child's face one more time – see her graduate from high school or college, attend her wedding, hold your grandbabies. You want to walk your old, smelly dog another morning as the sun slices through the pine trees. You want to see the redbud and forsythia bloom in the spring, see the children running through the sprinklers over green summer lawns, see the leaves go gold and scarlet in autumn, see the snow drift over fallow wheat fields. You want to feel the sun's heat and the bite of winter's wind. You want to smell lavender and sautéed garlic and your child's sweet neck. You want to write that poem about your first kiss or finish that still life. You want to learn Italian, bake a croissant, stand inside the Sistine Chapel and gaze upon Michelangelo's frescoes, hear the water roar over Niagara falls and feel the cool mist against your face.

If you're really good at this kind of thing, you can even find meaning among the wreckage of life's sorrows. This gift, it seems, rocket-fuels resilience. In a study of adults who had been severely traumatized in childhood, the thing that helped them

overcome those horrors to grow into happy, healthy, and loving adults was an ability to transform their suffering into spiritual growth and to understand these ordeals in broader spiritual terms.

Here's an example. One woman who was severely sexually abused for years as a child feels gratitude because the experience taught her to love, forgive, and replace vengeful hate for compassion. Spiritual understanding helped her overcome the emotional damage inherent in abuse. Child psychiatrist E. James Anthony, M.D. called this capacity in resilient children *representational competence*. This sort of competence has to do with the child's capacity to make sense out of the chaotic and downright horrifying experiences. Anna Freud (Sigmund's daughter) observed a similar phenomenon in small children during the London Blitz of World War II. She believed that their ability to find spiritual meaning in the bombings helped them cope with the stress and turmoil of those times.

Perhaps the greatest modern exploration of this human capacity lies in Victor Frankel's book, *Man's Search for Meaning*. In it, he describes the ways people maintained their will to live and find meaning in their lives while interned in Nazi concentration camp victims. Other researchers have described the spiritual resilience factors that helped kids survive the World War II holocaust, factors that enabled them to carry on as refugees and orphans. ^{1, 2}

Here is a true story from my friend John Graham-Pole, M.D., clown, poet, and pediatric oncologist at the University of Florida. His patient Anna was diagnosed with bone cancer in her hip when she was in college studying art and design. She endured radiation treatments, surgery and chemotherapy. When John first met her, the chemotherapy had caused such inflammation of her mucous membranes she could barely eat or talk. He walked into her hospital room to see a beautiful young woman with curly strawberry blonde hair. As he stood beside her bed, she grabbed his tie and rasped, "More morphine, doctor."

Two days later, she was feeling much better. John entered Anna's room to see

she had created a near life-sized cartoon of that previous interaction. One thing led to another, she eventually created a coloring book of cartoon images for children dealing with cancer and bone marrow transplants. This activity imbued her life with meaning and kept her positive and focused. She refused to let doctors stay distant and “professional,” always demanding personal connection, honesty, and openness. She pulled everyone close to her and refused to become dispirited. Meaning sustained her spirit in the face of a losing a battle for her life. During a weekend trip to Disney World, she told her boyfriend, “I’m loving you, but I’m leaving.” Soon thereafter, she died. Memories of her live on in the mind’s of those who knew her. So does her artwork. Recently, University of Florida exhibited her work in celebration of her life.

Happily, most of our children will not have to cope with catastrophic events. But they will need to deal with everyday disappointments. And gleaning meaning from the experience can help. Let’s say your child tries out for a junior high sports team and doesn’t make the cut. She comes home devastated, weeping and blaming the coach for missing her merits and cursing her friends who made the team. As a parent, you can help her step back and view the situation differently. For instance, she might take this rejection as a sign that she needs to practice harder. Or she might look at the situation as an opportunity to explore other sports or invest time in the musical instrument she’s not had time to play. In this way, the experience no longer represents failure, but rather a chance for growth and change.

When kids alter their spiritual perspective, their personal narrative undergoes revision. Personal narrative is the internalized story of one’s life journey. (Kids can externalize this story in a written narrative, something I’ll discuss a bit later.) We all carry these stories within us. Depending upon a child’s perspective, the story’s theme may be one of victimization and defeat (a common theme among depressed individuals) or optimism and personal success.

Finding meaning and symbolism in experiences is a means toward creating an uplifting plot, toward altering the main character from a base and selfish coward to a

wise and generous hero. We should be actively participating in the creation of our personal narratives. And, if teach our kids to begin this authorship in childhood, they will ultimately find more happiness and meaning in their lives.

Compassion and Service

A human being is part of the whole that we call the universe, a part limited in space and time. He experiences himself, his thoughts, his feelings, as something separated from the rest—a kind of optical illusion of his consciousness. This illusion is a prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for only the few people nearest us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living beings and all of nature. --Albert Einstein ³

Compassion grows naturally from empathy. It requires that we see others in the broader context of humanity, that we see ourselves as not much different from anyone else. A compassionate person not only understands another's feelings, but, if he detects distress, wants to alleviate that suffering. The act of doing something to make things better is service. Albert Einstein, writing in 1937, describes this call to service: *Many times a day I realize how much my own outer and inner life is built upon the labors of my fellow men, both living and dead, and how earnestly I must exert myself in order to give and return as much as I have received*

Kids naturally like to help out, an inherent tendency we adults should capitalize on. Service is compassion put into action. Empathy fuels compassion, and service further raises empathy and, also understand of the needs of others. Basically service refills the spiritual and social well. It makes kids feel better. Furthermore, service allows kids to contribute to society, builds problem-solving skills, and increases competence, satisfaction, and self-esteem.

Many small and seemingly mundane acts can teach a child compassion and service. Reading stories (fiction and nonfiction) about people of different ages, cultures, races, and religious beliefs engenders understanding and compassion. Speaking of others with compassion and tolerance helps too.

Here's an everyday example, one that raises empathy, compassion, and service.

Let's say a family new to your neighborhood has a boy the same age as your child. You might say, "Sometimes moving is hard. I'll bet Sammy hasn't had a chance to meet many kids his age yet. I wonder how he feels?"

Your child shrugs and says, "Lonely, I guess."

"I think you're right," you say. "What do you think we should do?"

"Well," says your child, "you said we could buy pumpkins and carve them today. Could we invite Sammy to go with us?"

"Good idea," you say. "Do you want to call him? Or would you rather I talked to his parents first?"

Not only do compassion and service build inner capacity, they also help heal a troubled mind. A child who feels concerned about others can't remain preoccupied with your own problems. Did you see the movie, "Patch Adams," wherein Robin Williams portrays the man who became a physician with a strong humanitarian message? If yes, recall that, as a young man, Patch was hospitalized for depression. His compassion for the other inpatients shook him out of his self-preoccupied gloom. His comedic efforts to make them feel happier not only cured him, but helped him find his true calling – medicine.

In the adolescent day-treatment program I direct, we use community service to help the kids connect with others in need and to experience the satisfaction of rectifying that need. Many schools require that students do community service. Adult organizations such as Kiwanis and Rotary Club and the Junior League find ways to give back to the community.

As a parent, you can involve your child in your own service projects. Possibilities include organized events such as serving meals at Salvation Army, rebuilding hiking trails, sprucing up a local park, participating in a clean-up day at your child's school, distributing gifts to hospitalized kids at Christmas, or stuffing envelopes at your favorite candidate's campaign headquarters. (Most schools, which seem to run on shoestring budgets these days, are usually extremely grateful to have volunteers.)

Service can also be informal. For instance, you might take your child with you when you visit relatives in nursing homes. She may wish to distribute flowers to the

other residents or, if she's musical, play a music instrument while she's there (many retirement homes have pianos), or read to people whose vision has become too poor to read on their own. She can bring up the mail and newspapers for neighbors who are out of town. She might take a wounded bird to the vet. She might plant a rose bush. (One of my neighbors ripped out her lawn and replaced it with a kaleidoscope of flowering plants that draw birds, bees, and human admirers (to who she gives free gardening advice). I consider her garden a community service.) Even routine chores can become an act of service. Rather than ask your child to do chore, say you need his help (and let him know that he has contributed something).

The possibilities for service are endless. The common theme is that, if you do good deeds, your child will mimic you. If you thank her for her help and support her own, independent ideas she will continue to be a kind and giving person. It really does happen. The week before I wrote this chapter, kids at a local high school, troubled by China's continued bullying of the Tibetans persuaded area musicians to donate their talents for a benefit concert and also designed and sold "Free Tibet" T-shirts. All proceeds went toward the education of a Tibetan child.

Solitude and Living Deliberately

The counterbalance to service is solitude. We give to others and then take time to recharge, to encounter that dark and beautiful netherworld of the soul. If we don't bother to slow down and look inward, we let life run us and never manage to make sense of it all. It's like barreling down the Autobahn at 90 miles an hour and missing the details of the German countryside. Running at that speed, we can not know ourselves, let alone anyone else. We can't even look at our deepest thoughts and feelings about our life events, much less understand them. And if we don't understand what goes on in those murky depths, then we can not possibly transform baser feelings of sadness, disappointment, and anger into their loftier cousins: acceptance, love, and gratitude.

Henry David Thoreau wrote from his solitude at Walden Pond: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I

had not lived.” He also wrote, “Our life is frittered away by detail....Simplify, simplify, simplify.”⁴ What would Thoreau think of our society’s endless busyness, with our preoccupation with work, TV, and the ceaseless acquisition of babbles?

Creating solitude in bustling America is tough. Our lifestyles have inertia. Freeing ourselves from that force requires the determination and agility necessary to hop off a merry-go-round. My friend Susan Zimmermann is one person who heard the call for concentrated contemplation and took it seriously. Ten years ago, she quit her job as director of the nonprofit Public Education and Business Coalition and retreated to a converted garage adjacent to her mountain home to write. As she puts it, “An inner voice badgered me, insisting that I slow down and reflect.”

What she felt compelled to reflect upon was the sorrow she carried over her profoundly brain-injured firstborn child, Katherine. Katherine had developed normally until age one, when she spiraled into a dramatic developmental and neurological regression. Susan responded to the challenge with a “crazed and fruitless effort to fix her.” Later she found out that Katherine had Rett syndrome, which has no known cause or cure.

Years passed. Susan thought she was dealing with her grief. She worked hard and devoted herself to Kat, her other three children, and her compassionate husband. Then she found she couldn’t keep going. She quit work to examine and write about the sadness that weighed at her heart. Through this process, she says, “I came to a place where I embraced my life and everything in it.” Her pain ceased. She found herself in a state of acceptance, peace, and gratitude.

Fortunately for the rest of us, Susan describes her spiritual journey in two books: *Grief Dancers* and *Writing to Heal the Soul* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2002). In this latter book, she describes how writing “taps into the healing power of your own unconscious. By giving voice to fears, anger, and despair, by letting go of old dreams and hopes, our self-healing powers come into play. The soul knows what it needs to heal.”

Susan hasn’t become a hermit. Throngs of friends and admirers pack her book signings. Plus, she practices the ideals of compassion and service. Most recently, she

helped launch “The Women’s Wilderness Institute,” which is based in Boulder, Colorado and whose mission it is to get adolescent girls and women into the outdoors as a means to strengthen confidence and enhance resilience. Nevertheless, she always finds time to think, hike alone, and write.

Susan went through this transcendental process as an adult. Children also need time to reflect in order to grow spiritually. By learning this skill early in life, kids will come to recognize the need for solitude and will not fear being alone. Make sure you and your child have ample time to contemplate your respective navels. Parents today find that the one commodity they (and everyone else in the family lacks) is quiet time. [xx “In a society that honors busyness,” Susan says, “we have to consciously find ways of slowing down. It’s important to do. It’s so much a part of staying healthy.” She encourages kids and adults to find time “to reach deep down to see what you’re made of.”

Make it happen. Turn off the TV. Turn off the telephone ringer. Go for a walk or lie in a warm bath in a dark room or sit or draw or write – whatever it takes to help you or your child look inward.

[xx Susan feels that artistic activities are particularly good ways to connect with one’s deepest thoughts and emotions. “Art,” she says, “is often the expression of sorrow turned into something beautiful.” She goes on to say, “Get kids to write, draw, or dance – anything to express their feelings.” Susan has seen creative pursuits help her own children. When her daughter Helen was eleven, her hair began to fall out, due to an untreatable condition called alopecia totalis (literally, total hair loss). Soon she didn’t even have eyelashes or eyebrows. Helen says that her elementary school environment was really supportive. The challenge came when she transferred to middle school, where no one knew her. She felt she had to prove herself, a bald girl in a school where everyone worried about appearances. Her confidence faltered.

When Helen was in seventh grade, she made a New Year’s resolution to write a poem a day. A friend had recently given her a collection of Emily Dickinson’s poetry. Helen was impressed by how prolific Dickinson was. “I wanted to give it a try myself,” she says. “The theme of hair loss came up a lot in my poems. Writing poetry

strengthened me. I felt like it was something I could retreat to when I felt pressured by the outside world to be a certain way. For me, writing is a way to be solitary, to get in touch with what I'm thinking about away from the pressures of daily life. It's both comforting and sometimes scary." Now a student at Yale, Helen continues to make time to write. This solitary habit has helped her working through all kinds of feelings, including the recent death of a close high-school friend.

Life Purpose

My friend John Graham-Pole, M.D. recently told me another story, this one about his patient Leo. John first met Leo about five years ago when he diagnosed the fourteen-year-old boy with bone cancer. Despite surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation therapy, Leo's cancer progressed, spreading to other parts of his body. When Leo was 16, John told him that modern medicine couldn't do more for him, that it was time to leave the hospital and go home.

Leo was unfazed by this news. "Don't worry doc," he said. "I'll be OK. I've got things to do. If you want me to do hospice, I will. But, I'll be back." Top on his list of things to do was becoming a doctor. The first step toward that goal was going to college. He kept his sights set on that objective.

So Leo took the 200-mile trip back home. John lost touch with him. A few years later, something reminded him of Leo and he decided to find out what happened to him. When he dialed Leo's home number, he expected another family member to answer and tell him that Leo had died. A male voice answered. John asked if he was Leo's father. "No," the voice replied, "It's Leo. I'm fine, just like I told you I'd be. It's my birthday. I'm enrolling at the University of Florida. And, I'm going to volunteer with you at the hospital. I really want to become a doctor like you. Did call because you want me to get another CAT scan? If you want me to, I will."

Now 19, Leo's a junior at the University of Florida. He's doing well in his premed studies. He's full of life and free of cancer. His story exemplifies that a clear life purpose has the power to heal, the ability pull us through adversity and suffering. It gives us a focus for each day and keeps everything in perspective.

Unlike Leo, too many people wait until they have to choose a college major or

find a job or learn they have a serious illness or hit the fabled mid-life crisis to wonder what on earth they're doing with their lives. I think it's a mistake to wait so long. I believe it's better to continually examine one's life purpose, starting in childhood. With practice, kids can begin to understand their role in the world.

This process also helps them sort out more practical issues about what course of action to take (e.g., Should I take the summer job at the smoothie shop or study violin at Interlochen Center for the Arts?) Contemplating life purpose puts kids with their interests and passions, their talents and personality quirks, their resources and opportunities. It helps them find their niche. A child who prefers literature to biology, who would rather spend time alone than deal with crowds, who can't function without a good eight hours of sleep a night is going to be better off (in adulthood) writing books than working as an ER doctor. A child who knows herself, her talents and inclinations, will avoid blind career allies and better serve herself and others.

It does not matter that your child hit her "calling" on the head by the age of thirteen. Finding one's purpose is a process not a one-shot deal. Carl Jung called this process *individuation*. Individuation has to do with realizing one's potential, one's best self, one's unique expression. Allowing passions and talents to blossom helps children overcome their limitations and shortcomings to contribute the most they can to life (theirs and others). To do this, they must pay attention to the inner self and the outer world.

In Jung's view, most people spend the first half of life focusing almost exclusively on the external world. For this reason, they do not begin to understand themselves as distinct individuals with distinct personalities and strengths until the second half of life, when mid-life crisis provokes some serious soul searching. Jung felt that straying (or never finding) from the path of individuation (a.k.a., life purpose) caused neurosis. Internal messages (dreams and intuitions) and external occurrences (seeming coincidences, accidents, illnesses, and other traumas) provided cues about being off course. The only way to resolve the neurosis was to go deep inside, discover that purpose, and get on track. Jung felt that individuation and following a calling is life's sacred quest. This quest leads to the highest expression of a person.

When I'm working with families, I encourage parents to explore life purpose using myths, storytelling, and personal narrative. When you read a myth or tell a story to your child, ask him questions such as, "What challenges did this character face? What did they do to overcome them? What would you have done?" When it comes to your child's own life story, you can ask similar questions so he sees the connection between the situation, his reaction, and alternative choices. Ask, "What did you learn? What would you do differently next time?" Such exercises also build problem-solving skills and elevate life story to life myth. From that lofty and somewhat detached vantage point, a child may be able to see whether he rose above a defeat or handicap to accomplish wonders or fell victim to another's devious scheme (or to his own impulsive mistake).

How do you formerly obtain your child's personal narrative? Simply ask your child to tell you the story of his life to date. You can either record his words with a tape recorder or write them down. Life stories usually highlight dramatic situations, transitions, pivotal choices, turning points. Encourage your child to talk about, not only what he has done, but what he dreams of doing in both the near and distant future. Ask for details. The younger the kid the more fantastic the imagined future is. Don't worry – these wild dreams may help him accomplish his goals. For my patients who lack a sense of life purpose, I suggest they rewrite their personal narrative every six to twelve months to see how their life's story has evolved.

As your child tells her story, you may notice patterns, such as whether situations happen to your child or whether she makes situations happen (internal versus external locus of control). At the end of any one session, ask her what the essence or main plot of her story is. Are there any central themes? The major theme in my life's story is sharing a holistic approach to a conventionally-trained professional community with the goal of altering our mental healthcare system. Every book or article I write, every lecture I give is a scene from that plotline.

The perspective granted from making her life into a story will help her see where she is headed and give her a sense of being drawn toward a destiny of her own making. Eventually, she will have a scrapbook of her life, her hopes, her dreams.

Personal narratives put kids in touch not simply with their goals, but also with the motivations behind them. Psychotherapy is another tool for uncovering intentions, their underlying motives, and desired rewards. The ultimate objective is to move from understanding the reasons behind actions to changing the things kids don't like about their lives.

Another way to help a child formulate his life purpose is to support his interests and point out his strengths. Comment on the things he seems drawn to, the things he does easily and naturally. Prerequisites to doing these things include seeing and accepting your child for who he really is. You might say, "You really seem to enjoy drawing buildings. I have a terrible time with perspective, but you make it look easy." Avoid saying, "I think you should be an architect and design low-income housing." Let him make that connection on his own. Noticing strengths offer another avenue for asking your child what he dreams of doing. Realize that those dreams will change and evolve. Refrain from guiding him into doing what *you* want him to do. ("You have nice hands. You should be a surgeon.") If your child actively expresses an interest in a particular field (and, if he's old enough), you may wish to arrange for him to spend time in observing or perhaps helping such a professional.

The long-term goal is that your child match what he has to offer and with what the world needs from him. Someday he will have that epiphany. As he fits into the greater community, he will reach a state of internal harmony. Maybe he will never experience that moment of terror when the formal-education segment of his life draws to a close and he realizes he has no idea what sort of job might suit him. Maybe he will never spend forty hours a week at a job he hates, and the rest of the time anesthetizing his disappointment with television and booze.

Gratitude

At the ripe old age of nine, Charlene had been suffering for years. Afflicted with a severe form of sickle cell disease, she had dealt with chronic pain and multiple hospitalizations for her disorder. Her illness had caused kidney and heart damage and recurrent infections. In the last year alone, she had experienced four lengthy hospital

stays. This current episode overlapped with the Christmas holiday. Charlene's devoted and loving family visited often, as did an assortment of other well-wishers—distant relatives, teachers, and friends.

Charlene had many wonderful traits, including a never-ending sense of gratitude. In spite of the discomfort and limitations of her illness, she radiated an appreciation for life. When her doctors asked how she was, she always had something positive to say. "I'm better today. Let's try less pain medication." Though she had much to complain about, she never did. Her "attitude of gratitude" kept her happy, optimistic, and socially connected, despite a devastating illness. She inspired the adults and kids who visited her. Although they came to offer comfort and sometimes gifts, they usually left with the greater gift of her grateful attitude.

When most of us think about gratitude, we think of giving thanks for the lovely and wonderful things in our lives. We feel thankful for birthday presents, hugs from loved ones, long letters from old friends, pay raises, a warm fire on a cold day, and rain on parched crops. We feel grateful when the baby sleeps in an extra hour and when the car brakes manage to stop the car before the stop sign at the bottom of an icy hill. Sometimes it's easy to take even really good things for granted -- things like freedom of speech, lending libraries, public radio, public education, the call of the meadow lark, hot and cold running water, indoor toilets, warm beds, shoes, and ample food.

That's nothing compared to the big challenge: feeling thankful for things that are painful and difficult, things like bad diseases, debt, and death. This skill requires a big leap known as symbolic reframing, which means using symbolism to view an unfortunate event (e.g., a diagnosis of cancer) as something positive, or at least to find in that situation some good things or opportunities for growth. It also requires complete acceptance of the event or situation. We can then digest the event, integrate it into our lives, recover, and heal.

During this process, we move from acceptance to surrender to the event. Surrender is not the same as giving up hope. It is instead a way of finding inner peace with things that can't be changed and the strength to carry on with the work yet to be done. The reason Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous work is their

foundation in spiritual principles of acceptance, surrender, and gratitude.

Why should we teach our children to feel thankful about things wonderful, sad, and in between? Because gratitude helps kids stay healthy and resilient. Children who feel grateful and positive about their lives cope better with stress. Those who don't remain locked in their own, personal struggles.

How can you help acquire this skill? Notice the good things in your life and sometimes express your own thanks aloud. Say grace. You don't have to follow an orthodox religion to give thanks for food and friends and another day of life.

Without sounding corny, you can tell your child things such as, "Every day, when you step off the school bus, I feel so lucky to see your sweet face." "I'm so grateful that headache's gone." "You know what? I was annoyed at first that the flu kept me home. But I really enjoyed a chance to lie around and watch the birds at the feeder." "Thank the stars for hot baths." "Wasn't that nice of Gram to send us that cartoon?" As a daily exercise, you can find something for which to thank each member of the family. Thank each person out loud and to his face. This exercise counteracts our tendency to under-appreciate those closest to us.

Celebrate everything. Celebrate lunar eclipses, meteor showers, birthdays, Groundhog day, May Day, Earth Day. Celebrate your child's developmental milestones: first smile, first tooth, first word, first steps, first drawing, graduation from every grade, achievements academic and artistic and athletic, orthodontic bands going on and coming off, passage into adolescence, driver's permit and license, and on and on. Celebrate his existence in your life by giving him uninterrupted time (even a quarter hour to talk or read aloud) each day. (This last habit is the best way in the world to let your child know you love and appreciate him.)

Rituals are another good way to inject gratitude into your life. Formal rituals are imbued with meaning and symbolism. They generally involve giving thanks too. Such rituals surround holidays, religious services, births, deaths, anniversaries, weddings, and school graduations.

You can also create your own rituals, particularly those that bring together friends and family. I know families who plant a new sapling each spring, hike or bicycle

together every Sunday, or organize a neighborhood egg hunt each Easter and neighborhood caroling before Christmas. I know a family that gathers together every Friday evening for the start of Sabbath. The father cooks the meal. They come together, light candles, eat, enjoy one another's company, and feel thankful for their lives.

Another ritual is writing thank-you notes. I know the notion of writing a letter sounds almost quaint these days. But a note (even if it's sent via e-mail) is a wonderful gesture, and one that requires kids to pause to think about and express their appreciation. And people love to be appreciated and respected. If they mailed a gift, they generally also like to know it arrived. Kids can write notes of thanks for presents and other gifts as well. Grandma might love to be thanked for that afternoon at the zoo. Aunt Bea might enjoy hearing how much your child enjoyed bringing his friends to swim in her pool. Kids too small to write can draw a picture that you can pop in the mail. Or maybe you photographed the event (zoo, swimming party, whatever) and can send a print or two. Even if your child had no use for the gift, he can at least feel glad that someone thought enough of him to bother.

For my young patients who have trouble breaking out of the grips of disillusionment and despair, I recommend gratitude journals. That means they spend a short time (five to fifteen minutes) each day writing down the things for which they feel thankful. The form can be a list or a detail narrative, illustrated or not.

If your child is dealing with a mental illness, you will both need to dig deep to discover anything good about the experience. You may feel like Orpheus venturing into Hades to bring back his beloved Eurydice. Nevertheless, you may find that you're thankful for the therapies that exist to help restore health, for the greater depth you've both acquired, and for the kindness and compassion you now feel toward anyone else struggling with mental illness.

Love

"All you need is love." Easy for the Beatles to say, given that they were, at that point in their careers, wealthy. We all need love. We also need food, clothing, and shelter.

But without love, we wither spiritually and die from the inside out. Kids yearn for their parents' love. How do you love your child? By creating a safe and secure home environment. By spending time with him. By setting a good example. By setting limits and using gentle discipline to help him become a polite, responsible, and likeable person. By forgiving his transgressions, yet holding him accountable for them. By empathizing with his challenges and trials. By supporting his social life. By seeing him for who he is and not the person you wish he were. By honoring his choices and opinions. By completely and unconditionally accepting him -- strengths and weaknesses, triumphs and failures. By focusing on his skills and being patient with areas that have yet to develop. By appreciating aloud the nice things he does and encouraging his continued progress. By nurturing his aspirations.

Enough abstractions. How do you really show your child you love her? The same way you show love to your spouse, partner, or best buddy. You make time for her. Some of that time is so sacred you don't interrupt it to answer the phone or fold laundry or do sit-ups. You take her out for special dinners or to baseball games or ballets or whatever tickles her fancy. You write her notes to express your appreciation. (You may even tuck a note in her lunchbox or school notebook.) You send her goofy emails. You build her up rather than belittle her, praising achievements small and large. You pick her flowers. You hold hands, hug, and kiss her cheek (unless, of course, displays of affection make her uncomfortable). When she speaks to you, you listen and look her in the eyes. When you transgress against her, you apologize. Most of all, you regularly tell her how much she means to you. You use statements general ("I love you.") and specific ("I love the way you hug me goodnight.").

Note that love has nothing to do with lack of discipline or permissiveness. Loving your child gives you the courage to discipline inappropriate or undesirable behavior. Your motivation is that you want others to love her as much as you do.

In these ways you help your child love herself, a quality essential to loving others. This chain-reaction love is a potent medicine that heals all manner of wounds. Its light serves as a beacon for the lost souls of this world.

“Give all to Love”

Give all to love;
Obey thy heart;
Friends, kindred, days,
Estate, good fame,
Plans, credit and the Muse,
Nothing refuse.
-- Ralph Waldo Emerson
(Bartlett's p. 429.)

Recommended reading:

The Spiritual Life of Children by Robert Coles, M.D. (Mariner Books, 1990).

Everyday Blessings: The Inner Work of Mindful Parenting. Myla and Jon Kabat-Zinn
(NY: Hyperion, 1997)

10 Principles for Spiritual Parenting: Nurturing Your Child's Soul
by Mimi Doe Walch, Marsha Fayfield Walch (HarperPerennial, 1998)

Spiritual Parenting : A Guide to Understanding and Nurturing the Heart of Your Child by
Hugh Prather, Gayle Prather (Crown, 1997)

Nurturing Spirituality in Children : Simple Hands-On Activities by Peggy J. Jenkins
(Beyond Words Pub Co, 1995)

The Purpose of Life by Carol Adrienne (William Morrow, 1998)

Spiritual Parenting by David Carroll (Paragon House, 1990) OUT OF PRINT

The Faith Factor: Proof of the Healing Power of Prayer by Dale Matthews, MD
(Penguin, 1998)

Parenting as a Spiritual Journey by Nancy Fuchs (Jewish Lights Publishing, 1998)

References

¹ Ayala-Canales, C. E. The Impact of El Salvador's Civil War on Children, Child Development Thesis. University of California-Davis, 1984.

² Moskowitz S., Love Despite Hate: Child Survivors of the Holocaust and Their Adult Lives. New York: Schocken, 1983.

³ *The Expanded Quotable Einstein*, page 191. Alice Calaprice, editor. Princeton Univ. Press 2000.

⁴ Thoreau, Henry David. From *Walden*, "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For."