

When We Are Very Young

Episode 3

The Grandmother Story

Quite a few years ago, in Toronto Ontario, I attended a conference on the effects of war on children and youth. The keynote speaker was the UN Special Envoy to AIDS orphans in Africa or at least that is what I remember. I am not sure if I remember correctly as the only Special Envoy on AIDS I can find is Stephan Lewis and this speaker was not Mr. Lewis. It was a few years later that I began to tell this story to other parents, and with apologies, I have lost the name of the speaker. I do however remember his beautiful baritone voice and gentle, humble manner. He told the following story which, at the time, stayed with me because it went against my beliefs and intuition of that time. The wisdom took some time to settle in. Perhaps it will be the same for you.

As the story goes, the Envoy was travelling in Sub-Saharan Africa assessing the plight of children orphaned by the AIDS epidemic. In many areas, the epidemic had killed most of the adult population leaving the children to survive in child-headed households. Some were fortunate enough to have a grandparent or auntie caring for them. In one particular

village, the Envoy was greeted by the elders of the village who welcomed him and invited him to meet a very special grandmother.

“What’s so special about this grandmother?” he asked.

“Wait and see,” was the reply.

He waited patiently in the village square, drinking tea in the shade of the acacia tree --- this may be my vision of the scene---- and after a while, he looked up to see an old woman approaching with a large group of children, all dressed in school uniforms.

Now in this particular country, although there are no school fees, the required uniforms and supplies must be purchased. Many orphans not only lost their parents, they also lost the financial means to an education thus greatly increasing their risk of life-long poverty and privation.

So, as the woman approached with the group of children, a village elder explained: her husband, all her children and their spouses had died from AIDS. The grandmother now cared for all 14 of her grandchildren and all 14 attended school. This was truly a remarkable accomplishment recognized by all in the village.

As the Envoy was introduced to the Grandmother, he asked her, “Grandmother, how do you do it? How do you look after all of your grandchildren, keeping them healthy and in school?”

The grandmother paused and then said thoughtfully, “I eat first.”

What? “*I eat first*”? That is not what I was expecting to hear. As a mother, I have always been of the jump-in-front-of-a-train-to-save-your-kid kind of mother. “*I eat first*” sat with me, gnawing a bit, for a couple of years. As I began to delve more deeply into attachment-focused work with parents and children, I began to realize the wisdom in the Grandmother’s words: the health and well-being of the parent is the necessary precursor to the health and well-being of the child. Without a parent, how could the child be safe and secure? Nurturing the parent, supporting the parent, means the child is better supported and nurtured. “*I eat first*” figuratively suggests that self-care, self-nurturing is essential for parents raising children and in fact, the more arduous the parenting task, the greater the need to meet your own needs first. The survival of your children depends on it.

Although when I tell this story many parents respond with “Ah yes, the oxygen mask principle”, I do agree there is a similarity.

Just don’t wait until the plane is crashing.

Our African Grandmother ate first on a daily basis--- not just when the food was running out.

Reading List

Well, not a reading list this time. I thought I would include some ideas about looking after the most important person in your child's life...you. Taking time to reduce stress and to look after yourself is essential. Here are a few suggestions:

1. Eat properly, practice good sleep habits (7-8 hours per night) and exercise regularly. These three things help your body and brain to function optimally.
2. Practice yoga, meditation, dance, drumming.
3. Be organized: Keep your space and your things organized. The stress of losing things and forgetting things is largely avoidable by practicing this area of self-discipline.
4. Plan your time: Make schedules and plan when you need to do things and then forget about them until you can do them. I find I don't stress about stuff I need to do if I know when I am going to do it.
5. Plan your time for you, no one else will. Make it a priority, remember the African Grandmother Story. Post a list that you can see daily of what you like to do to look after you. Here are my favourites that I can do alone or with family or friends:
 - a. Watch a movie cuddled up with my husband (the kids have fledged).

- b. Hike or snowshoe in nature with my dogs
 - c. Read (not work stuff)
 - d. Work outdoors
 - e. Play a game
 - f. Workout
 - g. Nap
 - h. Sing while I am driving (alone!)
 - i. Listen to music
 - j. Talk with friends
6. What is your stress level? If it is an 8/10 then I suggest you will need 8 hours per week of self-care. That's just over 1 hour per day. You can do it. In fact, your child really needs you to.