

CHAPTER 1

A REAL PERSON LIKE MYSELF

One morning, my daughter shook me from sleep with great excitement. “The fairy has left you an amazing present,” she whispered. “See what the tooth fairy left you!”

I reached under the pillow and found a one dollar note, torn down the middle in exactly half. Said my daughter, “The fairy left half a dollar for you, and the other half is under daddy’s pillow.”

I was speechless.

Simultaneously I found myself in a dilemma. All of those messages about “money doesn’t grow on trees” and how important it was for my daughter to learn the value of currency came flooding into my mind. Should I use this opportunity to teach her about not wasting money, explaining to her that a dollar note torn in half is worthless?

I realized that this was a moment in which how I responded could make or break my child’s spirit. Thankfully I chose to shelve the lesson and tell her how proud I was of her willingness to be so generous with her one and only dollar. As I thanked the fairy for her big-heartedness and her acute sense of fairness in giving both daddy and myself an equal share, my daughter’s eyes responded with a sparkle bright enough to illumine the bedroom.

YOU ARE RAISING A SPIRIT THROBING WITH ITS OWN SIGNATURE

Parenthood affords many occasions in which we find ourselves in a battle between our mind and our heart, which makes raising a child akin to walking a tightrope. A single misplaced response can shrivel a child's spirit, whereas the right comment can encourage them to soar. In each moment, we can choose to make or break, foster or cause to freeze up.

When our children are just being themselves, they are unconcerned about the things we parents so often obsess over. How things look to other people, achievement, getting ahead—none of these issues that preoccupy adults are a child's agenda. Instead of engaging the world in an anxious mental state, children tend to plunge head first into the experience of life, willing to risk all.

The morning the fairy visited my bedroom, my daughter wasn't thinking about either the value of money or the egoic issue of whether I would be impressed she had shared her dollar. Neither was she worried she might be waking me too early. She was simply being her wonderfully creative self, joyously expressing her generosity and delighting in her parents' discovery that the fairy had visited us for a change.

As a parent, I repeatedly find myself presented with opportunities to respond to my daughter as if she were a real person like myself, with the full range of feelings I experience—the same longing, hope, excitement, imagination, ingenuity, sense of wonder, and capacity for delight. Yet like many parents, I tend to become so caught up in my own agenda that I often miss the opportunity afforded by these moments. I find myself so conditioned to sermonize, so oriented to teaching, that I am often insensitive to the wondrous ways in which my child reveals her uniqueness, showing us she's a being unlike any other who has ever walked this planet.

When you parent, it's crucial you realize you aren't raising a "mini me," but a spirit throbbing with its own signature. For this reason, it's important to separate who you are from who each of your

children is. Children aren't ours to possess or own in any way. When we know this in the depths of our soul, we tailor our raising of them to *their* needs, rather than molding them to fit *our* needs.

Instead of meeting the individual needs of our children, we tend to project our own ideas and expectations onto them. Even when we have the best intentions of encouraging our children to be true to themselves, most of us unwittingly fall into the trap of imposing our agenda on them. Consequently the parent-child relationship frequently deadens a child's spirit instead of enlivening it. This is a key reason so many of our children grow up troubled and in many cases plagued by dysfunction.

We each enter the parenting journey with visions of what it will be. For the most part these visions are fantasies. We hold beliefs, values, and assumptions we have never examined. Many of us don't even see a reason to question our ideas because we believe we are "right" and have nothing to rethink. Based on our unexamined worldview, we unknowingly lay down rigid expectations of how our children ought to express themselves. We don't realize that through our imposition of our ways on our offspring, we constrain their spirit.

For instance, if we are super-successful at what we do, we are likely to expect our children to be super-successful also. If we are artistic, we may seek to push our children to be artistic. If we were an academic wizard in school, we tend to carry a torch for our children to be brilliant. If we didn't do well academically and have struggled in life as a result, we perhaps live in fear that our children will turn out like us, which causes us to do everything in our power to ward off such a possibility.

We want what we consider to be "best" for our children, but in seeking to bring this about, we can easily forget that the most important issue is their right to be their *own* person and lead their own life in accord with their unique spirit.

Children inhabit a world of "it is," not a world of "it isn't." They come to us with their being brimming with potential. Each of our children has their own particular destiny to live out—their own *karma*, if you like. Because children carry a blueprint within them, they are often already in touch with who they are and what they want to be in

the world. We are chosen as their parents to help them *actualize* this. The trouble is that if we don't pay close attention to them, we rob them of their right to live out their destiny. We end up imposing on them our own vision for them, rewriting their spiritual purpose according to our whims.

It's no surprise we fail to tune into our children's essence. How can we listen to them, when so many of us barely listen to ourselves? How can we feel their spirit and hear the beat of their heart if we can't do this in our own life? When we as parents have lost our inner compass, is it any wonder so many children grow up directionless, disconnected, and discouraged? By losing contact with our inner world, we cripple our ability to parent from our essential being in the way conscious parenting requires.

Having said this, I want in this book to throw a life preserver to parents who are just trying to survive—especially those with teens. I am convinced from my experience with many teens that if you have a teenager with whom you have been struggling to stay connected, it's not too late. Of course, if you have younger children, the earlier you begin building a strong connection, the better.

PARENTING UNCONSCIOUSLY IS WHERE WE ALL BEGIN

One of the more challenging tasks any of us takes on is to bring another human being into the world and raise this individual. Yet most of us approach this task in a way we would never approach our business life. For example, were we to head up a billion-dollar organization, we would craft a carefully considered mission. We would know our objective and how to achieve it. In seeking to realize our mission, we would be familiar with our personnel and how to draw out their potential. As part of our strategy, we would identify our own strengths and figure out how to capitalize on them, as well as identify our weaknesses so we minimize their impact. The success of the organization would be the result of *strategizing* for success.

It's helpful to ask ourselves, "What is my parenting mission, my parenting philosophy? How do I manifest this in my everyday interaction with my child? Have I mapped out a thoughtful, mindful mission, as I would were I running a major organization?"

Whether you are a couple, separated, or a single parent, it would be beneficial to think through your approach to parenting in the light of research about what works and what doesn't. Many of us don't consider how the way we parent affects our children, which might cause us to change our approach. Does our method especially include listening to our child's spirit? Would we be willing to change the way we interact with our child if it became clear that what we are doing isn't working?

Each of us imagines we are being the best parent we can be, and most of us are indeed good people who feel great love for our children. It certainly isn't out of a lack of love that we impose our will on our children. Rather, it stems from a lack of *consciousness*. The reality is that many of us are unaware of the dynamics that exist in the relationship we have with our children.

None of us likes to think of ourselves as unconscious. On the contrary, it's a concept we tend to balk at. So defensive are many of us that, let someone say a word about our parenting style, and we are instantly triggered. However, when we begin to be aware, we redesign the dynamic we share with our children.

Our children pay a heavy price when we lack consciousness. Overindulged, over-medicated, and over-labeled, many of them are unhappy. This is because, coming from unconsciousness ourselves, we bequeath to them our own unresolved needs, unmet expectations, and frustrated dreams. Despite our best intentions, we enslave them to the emotional inheritance we received from our parents, binding them to the debilitating legacy of ancestors past. The nature of unconsciousness is such that, until it's metabolized, it will seep through generation after generation. Only through awareness can the cycle of pain that swirls in families end.

TO CONNECT WITH YOUR CHILDREN, FIRST CONNECT WITH *YOURSELF*

Until we understand exactly *how* we have been operating in an unconscious mode, we tend to resist opening ourselves to an approach to parenting that rests on entirely different ideals from those we may have relied on until now.

Traditionally parenthood has been exercised in a manner that's hierarchical. The parent governs from the top down. After all, isn't the child our "lesser," to be transformed by us as the more-knowledgeable party? Because children are smaller and don't know as much as we do, we presume we are entitled to control them. Indeed, we are so used to the kind of family in which the parent exercises control, it perhaps doesn't even occur to us that this arrangement might not be good for either our children *or* ourselves.

On the parent's side of the equation, the problem with the traditional approach to parenting is that it rigidifies the ego with its delusions of power. Since our children are so innocent and ready to be influenced by us, they tend to offer little resistance when we impose our ego on them—a situation that holds the potential for our ego to become stronger.

If you want to enter into a state of pure connection with your child, you can achieve this by setting aside any sense of superiority. By not hiding behind an egoic *image*, you will be able to engage your child as a *real person* like yourself.

I use the word "image" in connection with the ego intentionally, so I want to make clear exactly what I mean by "ego" and its associated term "egoic." In my experience, people tend to think of the ego as their "self," in the sense of who they are as a *person*. The word egoic would then refer to an inflated sense of ourselves such as we associate with vanity.

Crucial to an understanding of this book is the fact that I am using these terms in a quite different way.

I want to propose that what we regard as our "ego" isn't our *true* self at all. I see the ego as more like a *picture* of ourselves we carry

around in our head—a picture we hold of ourselves that may be far from who we are in our essential being. All of us grow up with such an image of ourselves. This self-image begins to form when we are young, based largely on our interactions with others.

“Ego” as I’m using the term is an *artificial* sense of ourselves. It’s an *idea* we have about ourselves based mostly on other people’s opinions. It’s the person we have come to *believe* we are and *think of ourselves* as. This self-image is layered over who we truly are in our essence. Once our self-image has formed in childhood, we tend to hold onto it for dear life.

Although this idea of who we are is narrow and limited, our core self—our fundamental being, or essence—is limitless. Existing in complete freedom, it has no expectations of others, no fear, and no feelings of guilt. While to live in such a state may *sound* strangely detached, this state actually empowers us to connect with others in a truly meaningful way because it’s an *authentic* state. Once we have detached from our expectations of how another person “should” behave and we encounter them as they really are, the acceptance we inevitably demonstrate toward them naturally induces connection. This is because authenticity automatically resonates with authenticity.

Because we are so close to our ego, to the point we imagine it’s who we really are, it can be difficult to spot. In fact, other than the more obvious displays of ego such as boastfulness and grandiosity, the ego tends to be mostly disguised, which is how it tricks us into believing it’s our genuine self.

As an example of how the ego masquerades as our true self, many of us are unaware that *a lot of our emotions are ego in disguise*. For instance, when we say, “I’m angry,” we imagine it’s our core being that’s angry. The reality may be quite different. It’s quite possible that at some level, we are actually resisting a situation that has arisen, preferring to attach ourselves to how we *think* things *ought* to be. If we then unleash our anger on others, it becomes a full-blown manifestation of ego.

As we all know from personal experience, our attachment to

anger or other emotions such as jealousy, disappointment, guilt, or sadness ultimately causes a feeling of separation between ourselves and others. This happens because, not recognizing our anger as an egoic reaction, we believe it's part of who we essentially *are*. Masquerading as our true self, egoic attachments obscure our ability to stay in a state of joy and oneness with all.

At times our ego gets channeled through our profession, interests, or national identity. We tell ourselves, "I'm a tennis player," "I'm religious," or, "I'm American." None of these are who we are within. Rather, they are roles to which we attach ourselves, often without even realizing we are attached to them, so that they soon create a sense of "I." If someone questions one of our roles, we feel threatened, imagining *we* are being attacked. When this happens, instead of releasing our egoic attachment to our sense of "I," we tend to hold onto it more tightly. This attachment to ego is at the root of many a conflict, divorce, and war.

I don't wish to imply that the ego is "bad" and shouldn't exist. On the contrary, the ego *in and of itself* is neither good nor bad: it just *is*. It's a stage in our development that serves a purpose much like the eggshell in which a chick forms until it hatches. The eggshell has a role to play during the chick's formation. However, were the shell to stay in place beyond the period when it serves a protective purpose, instead of being broken apart and discarded, it would stifle the development of the chick. Similarly, the ego needs to be progressively shed in favor of the re-emergence of our true self from the mists of childhood.

Although we might not become entirely free of ego, to parent consciously requires us to become increasingly *aware* of the influence of our ego. Awareness is transformative and is the essence of becoming a conscious parent. The more aware we become, the more we recognize all the ways in which we have been living in the grip of unexamined conditioning from our own upbringing, then imparting this to our children. In the course of this book, we will see a variety of examples of the different ways in which this happens from the lives of people to whom I will introduce you.

Becoming aware of the fact that your ego isn't who you really are, and of how it operates to trick you into believing it is, requires observing those moments when a little space opens up and you catch yourself thinking, experiencing emotions, or behaving in ways that aren't entirely true to yourself. As you begin to notice these moments, you'll find yourself spontaneously distancing yourself from your ego.

YOU CAN BUILD A FEELING OF KINSHIP IN YOUR FAMILY

Conscious parenting embodies our longing to experience the *oneness* inherent in the parent-child relationship, which is a partnership and quite different in character from the dominance parents generally exercise.

In seeking to restore an experience of oneness between your children and yourself, the path leads by way of the discovery of communion with *your own forgotten self*. This is the case because establishing a meaningful partnership with your children will inevitably cause you to attend to the development of your own authentic being. As your growing awareness disintegrates the parent-child hierarchy, it will spontaneously equalize the playing field in your family. Moving away from egoic behavior—surrendering your opinions of how situations *ought* to be, and how people *should* act—will allow you to step off your pedestal of dominance.

Because our children are so moldable, we often ignore the invitation to mold *ourselves* into our children's spiritual partner. However, by paying attention to the one who is, for all apparent purposes, *in our control*, we have an opportunity to release ourselves from *all need to be in control*. By providing us with a way to shed the eggshell of our ego and step into the freedom that living in our truer state of *being* allows, our children facilitate our evolution. We find ourselves exposed to the truly transformative potential of the parenting journey.

With the myth that the relationship between parent and child should be unidirectional shattered, the circular potential of this

journey comes into view, as we discover that our children contribute to our growth in ways that are perhaps more profound than we can ever contribute to theirs. Although a child appears in a “lesser than” form, susceptible to the whims and dictates of a more powerful parent, it’s precisely the child’s seemingly less-powerful status that has the potential to call forth the greatest transformation in a parent.

Viewing parenthood as a process of spiritual metamorphosis allows us to create the psychic space to invite the lessons of this journey in. As a parent, to the degree you are able to recognize that your children are in your life to foster a renewed sense of who *you* are, you will discover their potential to lead you to the discovery of your own true being.

In other words, while you may believe your most important challenge is to raise your children well, there’s an even more essential task you need to attend to, which is the foundation of effective parenting. This task is to raise *yourself* into the most awakened and present individual you can be. The reason this is central to good parenting is that children don’t need our ideas and expectations, or our dominance and control, only for us to be attuned to them with our engaged *presence*.

HOW CONSCIOUSNESS CHANGES HOW WE PARENT

Consciousness isn’t a magical quality bestowed on the few who are lucky. Rather than being dropped out of the sky, it’s a state that emerges as part of a process.

To engage this process, it helps to be aware that consciousness isn’t a sudden and total absence of unconsciousness. On the contrary, consciousness emerges progressively from unconsciousness. Those who walk the path of consciousness are no different from anyone else, except that they have learned to mine their unconsciousness for its potential for heightened awareness. This means that consciousness is accessible to *all* of us. Indeed the magical thing about the parent-child

relationship is that it constantly presents us with opportunities to raise ourselves to a state of intensified consciousness.

While we believe we hold the power to raise our children, the reality is that our children hold the power to raise *us* into the parents they need us to become. For this reason, the parenting experience isn't one of parent *versus* child but of parent *with* child. The road to wholeness sits in our children's lap, and all we need do is take a seat. As our children show us our way back to our own essence, they become our greatest awakeners. If we fail to hold their hand and follow their lead as they usher us through the gateway of increased consciousness, we lose the chance to walk toward our own enlightenment.

When I speak of our children transforming us as parents, don't for a moment imagine I'm advocating relinquishing our influence on our children and becoming their minions. As much as conscious parenting is about listening to our children, honoring their essence, and being fully present with them, it's also about boundaries and discipline. As parents, we are required to provide our children not only with the basics of shelter, food, and education, but also to teach them the value of structure, appropriate containment of their emotions, and such skills as reality testing. In other words, conscious parenting encompasses *all* aspects of bringing up a child to be a well-rounded, balanced member of the human race. Hence there's nothing "permissive" about parenting consciously, and throughout this book we will see examples of parents learning to truly *be* parental in a constructive manner that empowers their children to become emotionally and behaviorally mature.

This being the case, I think it's important for me to explain why I have reserved the *specific* information I wish to impart concerning discipline for the final chapter. The conscious approach to discipline is grounded in our ability to *exercise real presence* with our children. It's crucial parents realize that this approach is only effective once they have learned through the parent-child dynamic *how to be present* with their children, which is something that will unfold chapter by chapter as we proceed on this journey together.

Parental metamorphosis is the key to a leap in human consciousness. However, when parents come to see me, they aren't usually looking for a way to grow personally. Rather, they are eager to find answers to their children's behavior. They hope I have a magic wand that will transform their children into youngsters with a resolute and healthy psyche. I point out that conscious parenting is more than applying clever strategies. It's an entire life philosophy involving a process that has the power to transform both parent and child on an elemental level. The only meaningful way for parent and child to relate is as spiritual partners in *mutual spiritual advancement*. For this reason, conscious parenting goes beyond techniques aimed at fixing a specific behavior, speaking instead to the deeper aspects of the relationship between parent and child.

The beauty of the conscious approach to bringing up a child is that, rather than trying to apply a technique and hoping it's the right one for the particular situation, consciousness informs us moment-by-moment how best to go about the task of parenting. For instance, when my daughter tore a dollar bill in half, was a reprimand required or praise? I allowed my inner being to guide me, which in our oneness resonated with her inner being. Even when we are called upon to discipline, consciousness shows us how to do so in a manner that bolsters our child's spirit rather than diminishing it.

As you muster the courage to abandon the control inherent in a hierarchical approach and step into the spiritual potential of a circular parent-child dynamic, you will find yourself increasingly free of conflict and power struggles. The parent-child dynamic then becomes a transcendent experience, replete with soulful exchanges worthy of beings who recognize the privilege of finding a spiritual partner. By surrendering to the oneness of a conscious parent-child relationship, we elevate parenting out of the purely physical and into the realm of the sacred.