

## THE FAMILY FORUM

# THE KID: AN AWAKENING METAPHOR

by Michael Farnworth, Ed.D.

*Who hasn't experienced the contradiction of doing all we are supposed to do within the Church yet feeling like a loser because we think we could have done more? This sense of shame breeds self-enmity and hatred. We don't need more self-righteous, self-promoting religious behaviors. We need to surrender our self-contempt and finally embrace the part of ourselves that we've been trying so long to hide from: the vulnerable, imperfect child.*

OUR BEHAVIOR AS sons and daughters, wives and husbands, mothers and fathers, lovers and friends is ultimately fused with our unexplored interior life—childhood memories, feelings, fears, and especially our relationship with ourselves.

Authors, artists, composers, and poets have the ability to articulate inner realities in a way that scientists and clinicians cannot. While researchers conduct studies that add much to our knowledge of the dynamics of family interactions, they cannot capture the intensity, complexity, and profundity of actual life. Creative artists and storytellers give life to the findings of scientific research—which seems like a miracle to me.

Some of the most moving film portrayals of family life I've seen include *Ordinary People*, *The Great Santini*, 'night Mother, *Dead Poets Society*, *Kramer vs. Kramer*, *Parenthood*, *My Life*, and *Doing Time on Maple Drive*. The power of these stories resides in their ability to sensitize us to the underlying and sometimes hidden essence of our relationships.

Another such movie is *The Kid*. Though

it's a typical, feel-good Walt Disney release (in which Bruce Willis gives up his guns for a suit), it is also a well-tuned metaphor for the six stages of self-discovery.

Willis's character is Russ Duritz, an aging but successful Los Angeles image consultant whose life is interrupted by an unwanted intruder—his pudgy, whiny, eight-year-old self, Rusty.

### STAGE ONE: OBLIVION

*In this first stage, we are living deep in cultural slumber. We put all our mental, emotional, and physical efforts into establishing our success as human beings according to our culture's dictates. Conformity and production are the goals of this phase. We are clueless about why we act the way we do.*

Thirty-nine-year-old Russ has no tolerance for people who feel sorry for themselves. To a client on the brink of an emotional breakdown, he sneers, "Somebody call the waaaAAmbulance!" However, Russ also suffers from insomnia and a twitch in his left eye. Like some of us,

he remembers absolutely nothing from his childhood. He also avoids anyone connected to his past, including his father. His house is an extension of himself—a virtual fortress with high concrete walls and alarms to keep intruders out.

The only pleasant thing in Russ's life is his personal assistant, Amy, a lovely, good-hearted woman who habitually bites a fingernail when feeling stressed or put upon. Russ and Amy are attracted to each other, but neither admits it.

The movie begins with Russ being his typical jerky self while performing triage on the public images of his clients. But while he's stopped in a freeway traffic jam, a red bi-plane buzzes him, causing him to scream like a little child. The plane is a metaphor for his subconscious energies marshalling to get his attention.

### STAGE TWO: AGITATION

*In this stage, our carefully constructed world starts to unravel. The energies we have suppressed since childhood begin leaking out. We are assaulted by feelings and memories that we do not understand and don't want to face. Many people seek relief from the symptoms of this stage through medications and addictive behaviors.*

Russ arrives home late at night to glimpse a child in a red jacket just disappearing into the bushes. Infuriated and wielding a baseball bat, Russ searches his house, but the only thing he finds is a red toy plane that he thinks his father must have left.

Later that night, Russ is awakened by the red-jacketed kid, who has managed to break into his house. The boy escapes through a window, but Russ jumps into his Porsche and takes off in pursuit of the boy as he speeds away through the dark streets on a red bike. The boy disappears.

In the morning, Russ goes to a psychiatrist's office and demands a prescription. He insists that he's not like the nut-jobs who have to see a therapist—he just needs some pills to stop the hallucinations. When the psychiatrist questions him about his childhood, Russ responds, "I've forgotten my childhood. It's in my past where it belongs." Reluctantly she gives him a prescription for four pills but insists that he find out what is causing the hallucinations.

Russ returns home to find his hallucination playing with the toy plane in the living room. They argue about who owns the plane until Russ's knees give out and he has



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to sit down. When he hoists his pant leg to reveal a scar, the kid pulls up his own pant leg and shows off an identical scar. The thought that this kid could be his younger self hits Russ like a freight train.

#### STAGE THREE: DENIAL

*Denial is the most difficult stage to penetrate—and we often never do. Our emotional life is typically barricaded behind years of defensive postures, distortions, and memory blocks. As I've explained in previous columns, most of us are protecting ourselves from feelings of self-loathing that the sanctuary trauma of our childhood had foisted on us. These feelings are so painful and pose such a threat to our controlled, ordered selves that we will do almost anything to keep them at bay.*

Unwilling to accept that his young self is sitting in his living room, Russ bolts out of the room and locks himself in the bathroom. There he gulps down all four pills in an attempt to make Rusty disappear.

But Rusty doesn't.

Russ brings the kid to his office to learn if Amy can see him. She can, which makes Russ feel better about his sanity but does

nothing to help the fact that he's stuck with the doughy little loser he's been trying to escape all his life.

Meanwhile, young Rusty isn't very pleased with his older self, either. He figures out that Russ isn't a jet pilot, hasn't married, and worst of all, doesn't have a dog named Chester. He concludes that he is going to grow up to be a loser.

Though Russ accepts the fact that Rusty is going to be hanging around a while, he decides that he's going to make Rusty more presentable. He puts Rusty on a diet and signs him up for boxing lessons. But Rusty fails miserably, throwing Russ into a rage. He calls Rusty a pudge-boy and a pathetic dweeb. He makes fun of his appearance and the way he talks. Then he turns to Amy, asking if she despises Rusty as much as he does. Amy answers, "No," then asks, "Why? Do you despise you?" It's a question we all could ask ourselves.

#### STAGE FOUR: SOFTENING

*The stage of softening occurs only when the stage of denial has been breached. It is a painful and scary process. Maybe for the first time in our lives, we begin to consider the pos-*

*sibility that all is not well. Though frightened, we begin to approach what we fear the most—our own denied and forgotten past.*

During a wedding (where Rusty embarrasses Russ yet again), Russ has the chance to take his relationship with Amy up a level. But he blows the encounter, unwilling to make himself vulnerable to her. On the way home, Rusty laments Russ's failure and pleads with him, "We gotta change. We have to change." Rusty really doesn't want to grow up to be a "dog-less, chick-less guy with a twitch."

That night, while getting ready for bed, Rusty tells Russ that he has figured out what image consultants do: they help people lie about who they are so they can pretend to be somebody else. Russ is jolted enough by this no-holds-barred assessment of his life's work that he talks candidly with a past client about his strange situation. She notes that the boy is obviously there to teach Russ something—not the other way around.

So Russ goes home and wakes Rusty, staying up the rest of the night peppering him with questions about his forgotten childhood. Rusty reminds him about how he liked caterpillars and the day

Parmesan cheese got stuck up his nose. He talks about messing up at home and at school, his second grade teacher, and his best friend whose house smelled like fish sticks. Amid these reminiscences, they stumble upon the reason Rusty is probably there.

When Russ had been Rusty's age, he'd been trounced in a school yard fight, which destroyed his reputation for the rest of his years at school. The two decide that if Rusty could hold his own in the fight, their lives could change. And through the magic of Disney cinema, the mountain tunnel they are driving through becomes a time warp portal transporting them backward thirty-two years to the very day of the fight!

Rusty uses the techniques he learned in his sole boxing class to knock the bully down. But winning the fight changes nothing. It's not Rusty who has to change; it's Russ.

#### STAGE FIVE: COMPASSION

*The stage of compassion occurs when we are willing to let our hearts be vulnerable; when we are willing to face our past; when we can embrace the sadness of past injuries. When we become willing to acknowledge our own goodness as well as our wounds, we can finally forgive and embrace our wounded self and be made whole.*

After the fight, Rusty is brought to the principal's office, and his mother arrives to take him home. When they pull up to the house, Rusty's dad storms out of the house and berates Rusty for making his mother come get him. We learn that she is dying. "How could you do this to your mother?" he rages. "You're killing her!"

Rusty starts crying, but his father takes him by the face and demands, "Stop crying! Stop! You gotta grow up now. Do you understand? Grow up!" At this, Rusty's left eye starts to twitch.

"Mom's dying," Rusty tells Russ after Rusty's dad has left.

"I know," says Russ.

"Soon?" asks Rusty.

"Before your next birthday."

"Did I do it?"

Instead of calling for the waaaAAambulance, big Russ gets down on his knees and embraces little Rusty, telling him that his mother's death is not his fault. This embrace of his childhood self symbolizes Russ's willingness to forgive—and this forgiveness changes everything.

#### STAGE SIX: ENLIGHTENMENT

*When we surrender to our heart's wisdom instead of our ego, we have entered the enlightenment stage. We reclaim our own interior life, the one we had abandoned so long ago in our attempt to appease our culture. We embrace our core identity and, for the first time since early childhood, feel at peace. Our souls are no longer engaged in civil war; our balance is restored.*

By having compassion on his young self and integrating him into his life, Russ begins the process of healing enlightenment. Many of us spend much of our lives in one of the first three stages—oblivion, agitation, or denial. Though we likely experience moments of softening, we harden ourselves again to protect ourselves from the unknown. Sadly, this means we live in a state of dissonance, unable to become our deepest selves. We remain a house divided.

I think Jesus was talking about this state of self-compassion when he commanded us to love our neighbors as ourselves. After all, how can we be capable of loving others in a deeply human way unless we truly love ourselves?

**M**Y own awakening wasn't nearly as surreal as Russ's, but it was certainly as effective. Instead of being a hard-hearted jerk, I was a self-righteous prig. Frankly, I didn't know any other way to live. I was sleepwalking what my culture and church had taught me, being good exactly in proportion with the contempt I felt for myself.

Fortunately, I stumbled across this thought from Eric Hoffer: "Self-righteousness is a manifestation of self-contempt." The idea resonated strongly with C. S. Lewis's idea that all pride is enmity: the more pride a person carries within his or her heart, the more hostility, loathing, hatred, and contempt for self and others also resides there. Pride and contempt are joined at the hip, and, as Lewis has explained, both are the anti-state of God. I was a spiritual contradiction, my church service and good behavior fueled by my self-righteous self-contempt.

But one night twenty-plus years ago, I was in bed alone; Cindi was working a night shift. I woke up around 1:30 a.m. and was thinking random thoughts when a strange notion came to me: "Sing yourself a lullaby."

What? I dismissed the idea as silly—just not something a man my age did. But the notion kept asserting itself until finally I

gave in. Tentatively I sang the first verse of "Angel Lullaby" from *My Turn On Earth* to myself. Suddenly, I was overwhelmed with emotions. I lay in bed, tears running down my cheeks, utterly astonished at what had happened.

But that wasn't the really strange part—or the transforming part. That came when I whispered to myself, "Michael, I love you."

When Cindi got home that morning, I was in the bathroom shaving, but I stopped and narrated the events of the night to her. Then I asked, "Well, what do you think?"

She responded with a hesitant, "Well, it's interesting."

"No," I said. "Really. What do you think?"

"Well, it seems a little weird."

"I know, it's a lot weird. But here's the really weird part. That moment was the first time in my thirty-seven years of life that I have expressed any kind of loving acceptance toward myself."

It was true. Thousands of times I had beat myself up and demeaned and shamed myself for not measuring up. My withering self-appraisals and the spiteful names I have called myself have been legion. That night marked the first time I'd tried to balance all that self-contempt with self-compassion. That self-compassion was the greatest spiritual gift I have ever received—a gift with effects that have spilled over into my relationship with my wife and children.

Who hasn't experienced the contradiction of doing all we are supposed to do within the Church yet feeling like a loser because we think we could have done more? This sense of shame breeds self-enmity and hatred. We don't need more self-righteous, self-promoting religious behaviors. We need to surrender our self-contempt and finally embrace the part of ourselves that we've been trying so long to hide from: the vulnerable, imperfect child.

The compassionate embrace of the vulnerable inner self is a spiritual gift from God; and because it changes everything else, it may be the most important gift we could ever receive. I think it may be at least partially what Jesus meant when he said of children: "of such is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 19:14). Unless we become as they are, we won't be going there.

In the next column, I will begin exploring our well-intentioned but destructive treatment of little children via our culture's forms of discipline.