



Grandfather and grandchild, Askole village, Pakistan

PHOTOGRAPH: ART WOLFE

CHILD HONOURING

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ACROSS ALL CULTURES, we find an essential humanity that is most visible in early childhood - a playful, intelligent and creative way of being. Early experience lasts a lifetime. It shapes our sense of self and how we see others; it also shapes our sense of what's possible, our view of the world. The impressionable early years are the most vulnerable to family dynamics, cultural values, and planetary conditions. At this critical point, the needs of all children can offer a unifying ethic by which our world might reorder its priorities.

Child Honouring is a vision, an organising principle, and a way of life that calls for a profound redesign of every sphere of society. It starts with three givens. First, the primacy of the early years: early childhood is the gateway to humane being. Second, we face planetary degradation, a state of emergency that most endangers the very young, and that requires a remedy of equal scale. And third, the crisis calls for a systemic response in detoxifying the environments that make up the ecology of the child.

In this way, Child Honouring is a 'children first' approach to healing communities and restoring ecosystems; it views how we regard and treat our young as the key to building a humane and sustainable world. It is a global credo for maximising joy and reducing suffering by respecting the goodness of every human being at the beginning of life.

The latest findings of neuroscience tell us that a lifetime of behaviour is largely shaped by the age of four, and that, developmentally speaking, the pre-school years are more important than the school years. In the words of Greenspan and Shanker from the Council on Human Development, "Early childhood is the most important time in a human being's development."

What does it mean to honour children? It means seeing them for the creatively intelligent people they are, recognising them as essential members of the community and providing

the fundamental nurturance they need in order to flourish.

Child Honouring ultimately means living in reverence with the mystery of Creation. In our quantum universe where everything is interrelated, the child is a 'holon', something which is both 'whole' and a part of something bigger. Just as in quantum physics observation affects outcome, so too in human relations: with respect to the very young, regard shapes development. How we regard a child is the vital mirror with which that child's innate potential comes alive.

Children who feel loved and honoured are far more able to become loving parents and responsible citizens later on. Children who do not feel valued are inordinately represented on welfare rolls and police records. Much of the criminal justice system deals with the results of childhood wounding - the vast majority of sexual offenders were themselves violated as children - and much of the social-service sector represents an attempt to rectify or moderate this damage which comes at an enormous cost to society. Most of it is too little, too late.

Child Honouring is a corrective lens that, once we look through it, allows us to question everything, from the way we measure economic progress to our stewardship of the planet; from our physical treatment of children to the corporate impact on their minds and bodies; from unthinking consumerism to factory schooling. It offers a proactive developmental approach to creating sustainable societies. Child Honouring can become a potent remedy for the most challenging issues of our time.

The essence of the vision is expressed in *A Covenant for Honoring Children* and its underlying principles. The approach is precautionary: "First do no harm", the physicians' oath, can become a nonviolent mantra for all of society.

THE CHILD-HONOURING society would uphold the basic human rights of every child. No child would live in

neglect or lack access to health care. Children wouldn't be alone after school with violent computer games, eating junk food, waiting for a parent to get home. We would see family support centres in every neighbourhood. Working with young people would be valued and well rewarded. Universally available child-care centres would be staffed by trained carers. We'd have more schools and teachers, smaller class sizes, and a range of learning options for families to choose from.

To address the dramatic rise in children's asthma and the body burden of toxic compounds now in blood and in breast milk, a 'child-friendly protocol for commerce' worldwide would breathe new life into public health. Organic farmers would play a leading role in protecting the world's food security. Engineers would compete for the most benign industrial compounds and manufacturing processes. Corporate charter reforms would herald a new dawn of responsible commerce in which company heads and shareholders would be truly accountable to the public good. Released from the Midas curse, we could be free to work towards our highest aspirations.

THE COMPASSIONATE revolution needs you - parents and educators, corporate leaders and policy-makers, grandparents and youth, social justice activists and environmentalists, non-governmental organisations and health professionals, scientists and faith leaders. Take an oath to live by Child Honouring principles in your own life, and to infuse them in our institutions. Let the transformative power of Child Honouring strengthen the global civil society. Join the wave to restore our children's stolen future, to make this the world of their dreams as well as ours. Nelson Mandela said, "We must turn this world around, for the children." We have that power. ●

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