



## INVITATION

When was the last time you were invited to a gathering which you really did not want to attend? Most of the time attendance is optional, whether it is a party, a city council meeting (open invitation), a grand opening or any number of public and private events. There are a few invitations, however, usually called *summons*, where attendance is required. Remember that time when you were called to jury duty, and failure to show up carried serious consequences? You showed up even though it was not the most convenient time for you, right.

Strange as it may seem, we are all currently involved in a *summons* to participate in a world event that we probably feel we didn't sign up for. Charles Eisenstein, philosopher and author of several books, including *The More Beautiful World Our Hearts Know is Possible*, compares it to an intervention: "*Covid-19 is like a rehab intervention that breaks the addictive grip of normality. To interrupt a habit is to make it visible; it is to turn it from a compulsion to a choice. When the crisis subsides, we might have occasion to ask whether we want to return to normal, or whether there might be something we've seen during this break in the routines that we want to bring into the future.*" Do we have the forbearance to choose to go through this "intervention" with as much wakefulness and intention toward positive change as we can muster? Many voices I've heard state they do not want to "go back" to how things were. Without knowing quite what it might look like to foster positive change, there is a growing

mood toward a more “human” pace of life, more open caring and awareness of one another, more valuing experience and exchange with other living beings over the acquisition of things.

Let’s pause for a moment and consider the other name for COVID-19. It is also referred to as a coronavirus, of which there are many, named for the crown-like spikes on their surface. Yes, corona means crown. Did you know there is a constellation named Corona? The mythology behind it is that the Greek god Dionysus immortalized his union with his wife Ariadne by placing her crown into the night sky. Ariadne is also known as the Greek maiden who provided a life-sustaining thread to Theseus so that he could escape from a labyrinth where a deadly Minotaur was housed. To think of corona in relationship to finding our way through a potentially deadly excursion that, like a labyrinth offers only one way out which is “in and through”, can be a scary image. That is, unless we realize that “in and through” can also be a metaphor for an awakening, a taking hold of the life-sustaining thread, trusting in something meaningful that wants to manifest through our awakening. One of the stories of Ariadne is that she was abandoned by Theseus, left to die on the shore of the sea. But she eventually awoke and met Dionysus who found her, saved her and eventually crowned her. She is considered a model of one who serves those in need. It’s true that in mythology there is always more to the story than we first imagine. This is also true of world events that can at first send us in a tailspin. It is not that what it looks like is not true; it is that there is usually much more going on than is initially seen. Like Frodo, in the quote above, we may wish it hadn’t happened in our time. We may quell at the idea of being called to be agents of change. However, as Gandalf responded, “All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.”

So many beautiful and encouraging thoughts have been expressed by others that it is with humility that I invite you to lend your open heart and mind to the words that have been coming to me over many days. It is my, perhaps naïve, attempt to be of service through words. While I began with the hope of offering a somewhat uncommon view of “freedom” and some hopeful suggestions for overcoming fear, my profession as an educator and carer urged me on to share ideas about the innate needs of children at various stages of development, the Living Arts as a foundation for sheltering at home, and thoughts regarding Screen Time.

Thus, rather than offering a rather long essay, the content is divided into separate, but somewhat intertwined, segments: Finding Freedom, Meeting Fear, Supporting Children’s Innate Developmental Needs During This Time, Screen Time and Mattering. Thank you for your interest in reading however much calls to you. I’m sending you a loving embrace as you navigate this amazing time we are travelling together.

## INVITATION PART ONE

### FINDING FREEDOM

As a young person, full of the vitality of youth and with a sanguine temperament, I wanted to feel happy. All. The. Time. Pharrell William's song *Happy* fills my soul to this very day! How can you go wrong with lyrics like:

*Clap along if you feel like a room without a roof*  
*Clap along if you feel like happiness is the truth*

While some might claim that happiness is trivial, I'm not so sure. Perhaps the word *contentment* is a more mature version of happiness. Yet, when world disorder, orchestrated fear, uncertainty and confusion strike, how do we lay claim to contentment or happiness? I think a more pertinent question is *how do I find personal freedom?* If I am fettered or fearful, I am not free, nor is it easy to experience contentment.

How old were you when you decided to embark on a path of enlightenment – whatever that means to you? Perhaps you joined a meditation group or some form of organized religion or you began to study content that awakened you to something grander, more eternal and mind expanding than you had ever imagined.

The latter is how it was for me, and the content I was introduced to when I was nineteen has continued as a lifelong study for five decades and counting! The world view I encountered answered so many questions and presented manifold more. While it deepened my devotion to the teachings of Christ, it also offered pictures of an evolutionary past almost beyond comprehension and pointed to a future full of promise as well as trepidation. Is it always true that we must venture through darkness in order to find the light? It makes me think of the last three lines of a poem called *Verse for Destiny*:

*Life grows more radiant about me,*  
*Life grows more arduous for me,*  
*Grows more abundant within me.*

I am always struck by how we can go from radiant to arduous and then to abundant. When I was younger it was ponderable. As I am older, I totally get it! It is like Nietzsche's quote: "That which does not kill us makes us stronger." Live long enough and you, too, will understand.

A flagship book among the massive number of books representing the world view I have spent all these years studying is called *The Philosophy of Freedom* by Rudolf Steiner. While it was not an easy read for me, the title has continued to intrigue me throughout my life. Is not freedom something that is bestowed upon us by some organized body that allows us to do

certain things in life, a prescribed set of actions that are okay, even encouraged? Isn't freedom offered to the collective group by whomever it is that holds the reins and that also establishes at least as many rules about what we cannot do? This is certainly a common idea of what comes to mind when we think of freedom. Something external to us that is bestowed upon us by some authority. Oddly, it is also something we often claim we must "fight" for. No, this is not the freedom heralded in this book. It is not about external freedom; it has to do with one's inner self.

The idea of personal freedom based on how I think and how I respond to my thinking through my deeds and feelings is . . . well, it is freeing! Yet with it comes the responsibility to learn *how* to think. Crazy as that sounds, it can be challenging when the noise of the day is so filled with voices telling us what to think. Not encouraging us to think for ourselves; simply telling us "this is how it is" even if our own sensibilities tell us something different.

So, while we are caught in what can seem like an endless trap of the daily dirge, can we lift up and out for a moment to think beyond what is happening right now? And perhaps another question to ask is "*what is happening right now?*" We see images, and we hear stories, and likely much of what we see and hear is somewhat accurate, even if perhaps skewed in one direction or another. However, accuracy or facts are not the bottom line of what is *true*. Truth has a much larger venue than what is expressed by factoids, educated opinion, experts of the moment or even what we see before our own eyes.

Truth, particularly when it comes to changing paradigms, worldwide revision or cultural transitions, is almost always larger than what we first apprehend. While one single event, let's say a pandemic, may capture the collective consciousness, there are likely things unseen and unheard also going on.

I just recently remembered a younger me reading a book that heralded significant challenges for humanity in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries and specifically mentioning the year 2020. [At the time that number sounded like science fiction to me.] Well, we might say, "so what?" Cataclysmic events have likely been predicted for every year we have been alive, so why should 2020 be any different? The proverbial "the end is near" has been touted seemingly forever. While I believe it is quite unlikely that "the end" is near, it might still be possible that the world as we knew it may have some permanent, or at least long-lasting, changes. With all due respect, for many families the world has already felt like it is spinning out of control as loved ones have become ill or died.

In recent weeks, I have heard and read numbers of individuals stating they do not want to return to how things were. They hope for a re-set, a greater, more enlightened humanity, more caring, more listening to one another, even perhaps a slower pace and less focus on accumulating things. Those are all actions that represent acting out of personal freedom. We may want to start exploring the choices we are making right now and ask ourselves if they resonate with the re-set we are imagining. Are we establishing habits that we may struggle to break when we are able to once again be out and about; perhaps taken the deep dive into being on our phones or computers even more than we were before? If so, can we counterbalance that with dedicated effort to spend more time outside, more time being introspective about the changes we hope to make in ourselves, perhaps more time serving others?

One image that comes to me when I think of the word “freedom” is something we talk about a lot in early childhood – that is, that the young child needs lots of “free play”. What we mean by that is “self-directed” play, leaving room for self-discovery without external guidance or control. It comes from within the child. And this “within” is where freedom lies.

A question to consider is, “Can I act out of personal freedom? Can I live in a self-directed way when certain outer freedoms have been curtailed?” Many have written about the number of civil liberties currently restricted for what might be called “the greater good”. Some are wondering whether all of those liberties will be re-instated and, if not, are there ones for which we are willing to take a stand?

As we find ourselves individually and collectively finding our way, can we, similar to the child, act out of our awakening sense of self? Can we choose to be free regardless of outer circumstances? This might be a good time to read Viktor Frankl’s amazing book *Man’s Search for Meaning* in which he shares a life journey most of us cannot imagine surviving. I am not inferring that what he experienced is what is getting ready to happen here. Rather, I offer it as an inspiring story of how our inner life is where we find freedom.

I recently read in an article about famous peacemakers that Leo Tolstoy, the famous Russian writer, experienced a profound personal crisis, followed by what he regarded as an equally profound spiritual awakening. His interpretation of the ethical teachings of Jesus led to the creation of his non-violent philosophy. He said, “Those who neither struggle against violence nor take part in it can no more be enslaved than water can be cut. They can be robbed, *prevented from moving about*, wounded or killed, but they cannot be enslaved: that is, made to act against their own reasonable will.”

## INVITATION PART TWO

### MEETING FEAR

Fear presents tremendous resistance to the capacity to feel freedom, to think differently from all the noise in the world, to experience levity or light, to have the courage to stand in the state of *not knowing*, to have the strength to embrace change on a global scale, to ask the question, “*What truly matters?*” Fear also can weaken our immune system and certainly have an impact on our quality of life.

There is no need to feel ashamed if you experience moments of fear. We are all in the human condition, and we are currently caught in a worldwide web of fear mongering. We can hardly help but resonate with our fellow human beings in that we are all connected to one another. It is worthwhile, however, and even essential that we take ourselves up and stand in the face of whatever it is that we fear. Otherwise, there could be a rough road ahead. One of the greatest lessons I ever learned when I was in my mid-thirties was to stand up to a dark and ominous energy that was overpowering my ability to function in the world and to state out loud, “I am no longer afraid of you. If you intend to continue to be around me, you will have to choose to become a part of my chosen path in life.” This invitation changed my life. And while I will not say I have never experienced fear since then, I will say that learning to take charge of it, rather than trying to hide from it, makes all the difference.

So let’s consider a few antidotes to fear (you likely can think of several more):

- Recognizing it for what it is. Sometimes we may simply feel beside ourselves or more easily emotional or unable to think clearly or trembling inside. All these can be messages from our own spirit to let us know we are dancing with fear.
- Gratitude. Once you recognize it, you can do something about it. And for that you can be grateful. You can also be grateful for the strength you are about to develop by overcoming your fear.
- When you begin to feel fear, there are some practical things you can do.
  - a. Deep breathing is always a good one.
  - b. Get a drink of water and drink it slowly.
  - c. Go outside for a moment and look at the sky.
  - d. When I experienced what I described above, my friend and counselor told me to put on an extra layer, like a sweater, since fear is often connected to forces that have a chilling effect on us.
  - e. Move your body. Dance. Exercise. Walk. Rough and tumble play with children or your partner.
- Speak directly to your fear and take charge.

- If you are able, find someone or something that makes you laugh. Dark energy detests humor, and will typically leave rather than bear it.
- Give consideration to what you are watching, listening to, reading and generally inviting into your daily consciousness. Is it furthering you or diminishing you? Even when we are basically grounded and living in trust, we can fall prey to the fear or anger promulgated via the news and social media. If you feel compelled to check in, my warm suggestion is to get in and then get out as quickly as possible. Linger in the muck and mire is another avenue toward illness.
- Find a verse, poem, prayer or other content that opens you up again and dispels the fear. Memorize it or have it readily at hand whenever you need it.
- Practice daily prayer or meditation.
- Accept that darkness and light are part of life, just as are living and dying.
- Understand that your spirit is not intended to stay embodied forever, and the transition out of your physical body at some point is just as normal and amazing as the transition of entering into your body when you were born! Perhaps you can consider the possibility that you have other non-physical existence awaiting you when you lift out of your physical self. When we lose our fear of dying so many other fears simply dissipate. Most of us are not going to die until it is our time to die, so fully live while you are alive. This made a big difference for my husband and me when we became very ill at the beginning of March when the world began to quickly implode. In bed with fevers, coughs and general discomfort, it was a gift to not add the fear of death to the mix!
- Recognize that our world culture has become so obsessed with never having pain, never being ill, never ageing in our bodies, and avoiding death at all costs, that we are willing to go to the extremes of seeing a fellow human being as a threat, of separating elders from being able to see their families, of not allowing a loved one to be with their dying partner. Let us fear a breach in our humanity rather than all of the above! Then, rather than fearing it, do something about it.
- As we awaken, each in our own way, to *what truly matters* may we be blessed with a deep in-breath that will open us to ourselves and to others and restore our balance.

## INVITATION PART THREE

### SUPPORTING CHILDREN'S INNATE NEEDS AT THIS TIME

Whether they are our own children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews, neighborhood children or children in our schools or places of care, they are watching us. No matter how the world around us may change, their silent, perhaps even unconscious hope, is that they will be able to find the goodness, the beauty and the truthfulness that still exists. It may feel like a tall order that we are the “first responders”, that we are the ones they are looking to in order to figure out how to navigate the daily unfolding of life. Rather than feeling it as a burden, we might consider it a gift. We have the opportunity to lift ourselves up and out of the flotsam and jetsam of “world gone crazy”, and instead become the sleuths, investigators, the seekers of the good, the beautiful and the true until we begin to manifest as their representatives.

#### Early Childhood

In the very young child's innate expectation of goodness, they are the most open. So open, in fact, that they are without filters. All that surrounds them to some degree enters into them. Judgment free, their experience is simply that what is, is. And typically they are fearless; timidity is not to be confused with fear. Judgment is something they learn over time, and the same can be true of fear if they are surrounded by it or experience trauma.

So, what is our mandate as the models of life for the young child? One could say that it is to “be the goodness”. And this begs the question, “What! Are you kidding me? What does that even mean?” Perhaps a starting point is to trust ourselves, trust that we want what is best for the children and we are who they need right now. And, in that, we can willingly begin the sometimes arduous process of sculpting ourselves into our best selves for now, our *good enough* selves who are striving to be better than we were and forgiving of the possibility that we are not yet the best of who we are becoming. Another word for this might be *resilient*. Modelling resiliency may indeed be the greatest gift we can bestow on the children. Perfection is neither the goal, nor is it what they need from us.

What they need from us is to orchestrate their lives so that they may do the following every day with the minimal amount of materials and toys needed:

Awaken  
Eat  
Play\*  
Eat  
Play\*  
Eat  
Rest  
Eat  
Play\*  
Eat  
Rinse Off The Day  
Sleep



\*Play is how the young child learns and assimilates life. Thus it is the foundation of almost everything they do and may include such activities as self-directed free play; exploring nature; crafting; drawing or painting; playing games; rough and tumble play; caring for dolls or helping with real babies in the home; singing and playing with simple instruments; dress-up; listening to, telling or acting out stories and puppet plays; bathing and other personal body care; preparing food; cleaning and tidying; laundry; sweeping and occasionally doing any of these with a beloved adult.

We do not need to entertain them; however, when we do choose to spend some time with them, we need to be fully present. Then, in good conscience, we can go about our day doing the other activities that we choose and need to do while they continue to do what they do best: play! LifeWays, Waldorf Early Childhood Association and numerous other organizations are posting ideas regularly of simple activities one could consider.

Play looks different when the child is an infant. Then our personal presence is needed more, and eating and sleeping; gazing; exploring their own bodies (fingers, toes, hands and such); exploring our faces, hair, etc.; lots of opportunities for freedom of movement; diapering and bathing; gentle massage and all we do to provide a sense of safety and well-being – all of this supports their growth and development.

Play changes again as they become upright, start coming more fully into their native language, and are exploring how to communicate through their awakening capacity to think. Toddlers' play tends not to be as potentially organized or planned out as the child who is slightly older. Mobility and speaking themselves into the world are their pleasure and delight. They are, however, moving in the direction of the Eat and Play chart listed above. The learning how to be together of the slightly younger and the slightly older can call forth another layer of patience and creativity from the adults in charge! Remember, it is like riding a wave that typically rises and falls over a period of weeks to months until new levels of capacity have been developed within the children. **Spend some time observing your children without them noticing. You may be surprised what you will learn about them and the ideas that may come to you. And if it makes sense to you, lift them up each night when they are sleeping to their guardian angels. They are the best partners to have in watching over your children!**

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### Middle Childhood

As we move to the second stage of childhood, they continue to look to us as models for how to live even though the push-back can be intense at times! They also learn from how we handle their push-back!

Play continues to be important, and this is the stage of life in which many of our fondest memories are formed. Riding roller coasters, playing games that required a certain level of dexterity or capacity to strategize, participating in competitive sports, adventuring with a best friend or circle of friends, having sleepovers, riding our bicycles or scooters some distance from home without an adult. These, and certainly other things, were all rites of passage, and blessed are the children today if we allow them to wait, perhaps even yearn, to do some of these things in middle childhood instead of allowing it when they are still in early childhood. We can easily fall prey to doing things with our younger children that are not quite age appropriate because we remember how much we enjoyed them from our own childhood. It's just that we were typically in our middle childhood when those memories were formed. If you find you have already done some of these things with your little ones, then trust that the joy you surrounded them with helped to mitigate the fact that they were perhaps a bit young for the occasion! I speak from experience having exhausted my own four-year-old at Disney Land almost forty years ago! Gak! Just pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and try to remember next time you start to jump the gun. And take them out in nature to slow back down again!

The innate, and typically unconscious hope, for the child in the second stage is to experience that the world is beautiful, and how we present the world to them can either distance them from this sense or draw them in to a real love of their surroundings, of the earth, and of the starry heights. This is a great age to share stories and chapter books of adventure, biographies of explorers and inventors, and stories from our own lives of discovery and travel and places we loved or from our own childhood memories of games we used to play. They also need a little alone time, stargazing time, time to explore their changing bodies especially as they approach puberty, time to wonder. Something they still need as much as the young child is a sense of protection, an awareness that we are there for them. And when the world seemingly flips on its head and all established life habits have to change, it can be a great time to explore something completely new with them. Perhaps it is singing together as a family or playing an instrument or learning a new craft or painting on canvas or learning new jump rope games or teaching them how to prepare a whole meal for the family or growing a garden or cleaning out the garage together or any number of other household activities that we now have the time to tend. And as they grow into the next stage of childhood, it can be a perfect time to introduce or increase community service.

They also need physical movement. As most of the things mentioned in the second paragraph of this section are not currently sanctioned by the *shelter in place* regulations, what are some other things they can do that exercise their bodies? When weather allows outside time, it's a great time to introduce old-fashioned games like hide and seek, tag, capture the

flag, hula hooping, hop scotch, relay races, shooting hoops, obstacle courses and other games they create out of their own imaginations.

If our mandate for the young child is to “be the goodness”, we might say that our mandate for the elementary-age child is to “show the beauty”, through the stories we tell and all that is listed above, and to help them find and experience beauty in their surroundings. Like the little flower that cracks open a sidewalk to show itself to us, we can find beauty anywhere if we train ourselves to see it.

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### Youth

Play in the third stage of childhood, youth, the time from puberty to stepping into early adulthood, may start to shine a light on the inner life of the child as we observe their choices of what entertains them and who and what they seek for daily companionship. It can also be a time when the influence of peers may play a role in choices they make.

At a time when everyone is required to stay home, social media, which already plays a significant role in the lives of many youth, may have an even greater uptick in use. This is an opportunity, however, for families to draw their young people back into their family culture – or to help create a new family culture that includes them heartily. The media-addicted youth may have a harder time with this as they have already united themselves with a virtual world that can cause its own form of social impairment. And indeed, now they may additionally be on the computer extra hours to continue their schooling! It is worth every effort, both loving and firm, to call them out into touchstones throughout the day – meals together, participation in the responsibilities of the home, physical exertion through exercise or play, perhaps a game night (not on a screen), reading classic literature together, and eventually having real conversation.

The innate drive of youth is to search for what is true; however, it has been so long since many people have felt that “truth” is being represented that youth can feel apathetic or cynical. In fact, many adults feel that way as well. This is a great time to simply listen to our young people. If they are able to open enough to express emotion – listen. If they are able to speak of their disappointment in society – listen. If they are able to share their fears or disappointments in humanity – listen. Listen as deeply as possible.

With teens, also listen to learn. What do they know that you don’t know? What might they teach you or share with you about a topic that they find interesting? What may already be living in them that will show up later as part of their artistry, part of their unique gift to the world? What intrigues them enough to want to dive in deeper and learn more? How can you help to draw that out, to honor their interest, and yes, perhaps to learn from them?

Some schools choose “community service” to be part of their high school students’ curriculum. This is ideal. At a time when a human being can easily fall deeply into self-involvement or, the opposite, self-loathing, doing something for someone else is the best. Listening to a holistic physician recently, he indicated that serving others who are in greater need than you also serves your personal health. Most of us probably already intuited that, yet it is somehow soothing to hear it confirmed. Starting with one’s own neighborhood and perhaps checking with volunteer organizations nearby, catalyzing our youth to serve can also help them to feel that they are making a difference.

As we were called to “Be the Goodness” for the little ones and “Show the Beauty” for the second stage of childhood, perhaps our mandate for supporting our youth is to “Guide and Support the Inquiry for Truth”. I will never forget when my younger son’s class sang a song for the parents called *Show Me the Way* by Styx in 1990. It seems worthwhile to share the full lyrics here with you:

*Every night I say a prayer in the hopes that there’s a heaven  
But every day I’m more confused as the saints turn into sinners  
All the heroes and legends I knew as a child have fallen to idols of clay  
And I feel this empty place inside, so afraid that I’ve lost my faith*

*Show me the way, show me the way  
Take me tonight to the river  
And wash my illusions away  
Please, show me the way*

*And as I slowly drift to sleep, for a moment dreams are sacred  
I close my eyes and know there’s peace in a world so filled with hatred  
Then I wake up each morning and turn on the news to find we’ve so far to go  
And I keep on hoping for a sign, so afraid I just won’t know*

*Show me the way, show me the way  
Bring me tonight to the mountain  
And take my confusion away  
And show me the way*

*And if I see your light, should I believe  
Tell me how will I know*

*Show me the way, show me the way  
Give me the strength and the courage  
To believe that I’ll get there someday  
And please show me the way*

*Every night I say a prayer in the hopes that there’s a heaven . . .*

This song feels every bit as relevant as it did thirty years ago. Trust that our youth still need us to show them the way.

It is also a time to offer as much levity, humor and lightness as you can. While they may not admit it, they may also be feeling uncertain, concerned about the future, and even fearful. Levity and humor are known to drive out fear and even send dark energy fleeing. Might be a good time to implement a joke night! As a little poem I wrote years ago says,

*Devils and demons all must flee  
When first we practice mirth and glee!*

## INVITATION PART FOUR

### SCREEN TIME

I attended an interesting meeting with a group of colleagues from various organizations recently (via a Zoom call) and heard how one by one they were finding their way with the use of screen time to communicate with the world, with their students, or with others who are in need of connection right now. These were all, for the most part, organizations that had not used screen time to represent their field of work up until now.

Now, weeks into the mandate to stay home, many of us may be a bit Zoom-weary while at the same time grateful for the possibility of remote connection. A positive note my son offered the other day was that his business Zoom calls tend toward being more focused and efficient. Even so, he also noted how tired he is at the end of the week after being on screen every day. I can relate.

A bigger question looms in my consciousness. How are we going to be when/if the time comes that we are able to return to community life, to start meeting in person regularly, to let go of pervasive amounts of screen time? Knowing that screens have an addictive nature will we all need massive therapy to free ourselves from checking our phones and social media frequently? Will we have grown comfortable with the ease of connecting virtually? Will we be awkward with each other at first – uncertain about shaking hands, offering a hug, standing closer than six feet apart? Will we be at risk of a *social-emotional pandemic*?

As our children are growing, and potentially facing ongoing fear-engineered, regulatory-controlled reductions of civil liberties with increased use of robotics in almost every field of work and service industries, what foundation can we offer them now so that they can meet whatever comes with resilience and humanitarian impulses?

One thing we can strive for is to model a balanced life. Engage the whole family in the Living Arts:

- practical, domestic care of our homes and surrounding environments
- nurturing care of each other and ourselves
- creative and artistic activities and skill building
- and social awareness and interest in others

These human-connection pursuits will help our children to be better equipped to recognize the difference between artificial intelligence and a soul-bearing human being, for example. Another thing we can do is to model a balanced way of using screen time and social media.

We can also do our best to understand the different stages of development of the children in our care and how they take in life. Let's do a tiny review:

The **young child** has no filters and takes in everything in their surroundings. They learn primarily via imitation and through sensory intake. When they are very little they are learning how to name the world and, as they grow, how to give it meaning. They tend to think that everything is "real". I heard a story recently of a little one whose teacher had sent a video to all the little ones in her care, and throughout the video this little one was trying to speak to and engage with her teacher. It was confusing to her that her teacher would not respond. This might make us feel that FaceTime or Zoom, which is somewhat "interactive", is better. I don't know – maybe. Believe me, as a grandmother I have had occasional FaceTime calls with my grandchildren, yet when they were little I had mixed feelings when they would reach for the phone to try to give me a kiss. I really didn't want to become virtual grandma, yet I loved "seeing" them. My hope was that the physical play in which we engaged when we were together somehow mitigated the non-physical moments of virtual connection. These are decisions we each can only make for ourselves and hopefully without sitting in judgment of others as they, too, are navigating this world where we are sometimes vast distances from those we love. We can also do our best to transcend the medium we are using by bathing it with love and light during the time we are on screen. The cautionary tale is to err on the side of "less is best." If we are bringing content to young children, perhaps at the request of parents, let us remember dear Fred Rogers of Mister Rogers Neighborhood. He moved and spoke at a pace that made room for warmth and love. One could feel that his intention was not entertaining as much as it was healing.

Perhaps as teachers and caregivers we can better offer support directly to the parents via Zoom or other platforms if they ask for it, although a truly personal phone call can really mean a lot to a parent after weeks of social distancing! And we can hold these families lovingly in our hearts in the hope that this time together will create deepening human-to-human connection and experiences for the children and their sensory awareness.

As parents, we can trust that our children will figure out how to entertain themselves over time if we keep their surroundings and their schedule simple and engage as much as possible through The Living Arts mentioned above. If we, in a moment of overwhelm, decide to offer some type of screen time experience to them, again keep the balance in mind. If possible, get them out in nature (even in the backyard) for at least twice as long as they were on the screen and also, after the screen experience, give them a cuddle and loving human touch to bring them back into the "real".

**Middle childhood** children are typically more awake to the workings of the world, and while they still take life in through their sensory experiences, they also have more developed filters and capacities to understand the difference between what is real and what is virtual. A challenge to bear in mind, however, is that some (perhaps most) commercial programming has woven into it an addictive quality, most especially gaming.

If their innate, though unconscious, drive is to experience beauty, please understand there is a vast difference between a real, sensory experience of a worm or bird or a tree or a flower or wind or rain in their backyard and videos that try to show the grandeur of natural landscapes and animal life. As much as possible keep it real for them. Bear in mind that if they are spending hours doing online school work they will need plenty of time for robust movement, human connection and fresh air.

Regarding **adolescents and teens**, I have already written quite a bit about screen time and youth. This is a time when we can do our best to teach them how to become the master over their screens, rather than vice versa. As we have abandoned dictionaries, and other books for that matter, in deference to Google, we can support our youth as they research the things that interest them. Ask them to share with you what they learned from what they researched. When applicable and possible find the supplies they need to make models of what they want to create or invent. After they've been on screen, encourage them to go for a bike ride (if allowed where you live) or just go outside to digest what they have learned and try to re-imagine it in their mind's eye. If they are so inclined, encourage them to draw it on paper.

We do not know what the world re-set is going to yield in the coming months and years. The world view that has occupied my research and interest for my whole adult life leads me to believe we will have further "disruptions" as we go forward – perhaps some less dramatic, others moreso.

One topic, perhaps the elephant in the middle of the room, which I cannot go into in depth, is for us to consider "what is the means by which we connect ourselves to screens?" Does the web of satellite connections and the growing number of cell towers (particularly with the increase in 5G) have any effect on our general health and well-being? And, if it does, what can we do about it? Of course, it is possible to find numerous and conflicting thoughts about this; however, a common suggestion is to keep our 5-G (or any-G for that matter) apparatuses as distant from our bodies as possible, ideally not even in our back pocket, but in our purse, backpack or briefcase. Some people also keep their phone in a specific place in the house rather than carry it around all the time. For those of us who grew up with wall phones, this is



not a new concept! Something else we can do is turn off our WiFi connection every night and whenever we are not using it – and to have it in a room that we occupy the least.

A less common approach, and one that bears consideration is something I recently read from Rudolf Steiner from 1923: “In times when there were no electrical currents, when the air was not swarming with electrical influences, it was easier to be human ... For this reason, in order to be human at all today, it is necessary to expend much stronger spiritual capacities than was necessary a century ago.” And that was spoken a century ago! He did not encourage us, however, to disengage from modern life, but rather to be well-grounded in our practical daily lives and in our devotional lives. He calls upon us to *“Seek real practical material life, but seek in such a way that the spirit which dwells within is not deadened for you.”*

So, we can ask, what are these *spiritual capacities* of which Steiner spoke? It’s a question I encourage each of us to ponder. Certainly we know that being able to move, to speak, and to think are foundational spiritual capacities. We want to do everything we can to protect these gifts when we start moving around again, start speaking face-to-face again, start placing our thinking in the service of a more sustainable culture – not only ecological or physical, but also emotional, intellectual, artistically creative, and social.

What we are always called upon to do is to come back into balance. When so much of our personal connection to people was somewhat shuttered through social distancing, many of us started surprisingly embracing a tool we had beforehand used more sparingly – screen time! For some of us, it is not a personal choice, but rather a tool that allows us to continue our professional work. It does remind me, however, of the enchantments we read about in the fairy tales and the various ways the spells were broken in order for the prince or princess (or whomever) to come back to their true self. Certainly that is my hope – that we will find our way back to human-to-human connection and once again reduce screen time. With its compelling, somewhat compulsive/addictive nature, however, we may want to gird our loins for the effort it may take to free ourselves.

This brings us back to what do we want for our children? After years of clinical studies showing the effects screen time can have on children’s quality of life, what might we offer instead to support families while sheltering in place? Can we collectively decide to *pause*? We have the opportunity for a cultural re-set, a paradigm shift that simplifies and slows things down to a pace that is not so overwhelming, a pace that is spaciousness enough for wonder.

Human connection, life skills, levity, outdoor excursions, trust that we can navigate these times – all of this and more will create a healthy foundation for the children in our

communities, our families and our care. Putting these at the forefront and virtual connection and screen time more in the background, and only when necessary or needed, sets a stage for the resiliency we seek for our children and ourselves.

## INVITATION PART FIVE MATTERING

If tough times are going to continue, does anything we do really matter anyway? I suppose if we asked Christ or Gandhi or Buddha or Lao Tsu or Tolstoy, Chief Joseph, Maya Angelou, Florence Nightengale, Harriet Tubman, Rachel Carson, Helen Keller, Mother Theresa, and countless other religious founders, peace activists and meaning makers, they would offer a resounding ‘yes, what you do matters.’

We are the first-line meaning-makers for the children. What we do with and for them now, in what I believe to be the first-ever worldwide re-set any of us have consciously experienced, can offer them a model of resiliency, strength, courage, trust, devotion, inner freedom, flexibility, patience, self-forgiveness, levity; and perhaps, if we slow down to a human pace, we can all experience a sense of spaciousness that has been absent for too long.

Decades ago when I was feeling stressed I sought the help of a curative eurythmist, a form of movement developed by Rudolf Steiner and Marie von Sievers. Jean, the eurythmist, gave me an exercise that had more to do with the inner movement of my soul. She encouraged me to breathe deeply and bring into my consciousness a lovely memory. It was very soothing and helped to bring me back into balance. It brings to mind something I read years ago about concentration camp survivors who survived partially due to the fact that they could momentarily lift themselves out of the hell they were living by bringing to mind fond memories from their earlier life.

This strange and unprecedented time we are living is offering us an opportunity to focus on memory-making. I’m not inferring we need to make good memories just so we, and our loved ones, can endure the hardships ahead. No, let’s create meaningful experiences during this time so that when we begin to move back into community life, we will hang on to the values we are creating right now. Perhaps the joy of family engagement that had slipped away before this mandate to stay home came upon us, perhaps the realization that we do not need to rush, that there are things we were doing that we really do not need to do any more, and perhaps the awareness that human connection is more fulfilling, more nourishing, more soulful and more true than virtual entertainment.

Many who are familiar with Rudolf Steiner’s approach to education, known as Waldorf education in many parts of the world, may know this verse:

*Receive the children in reverence  
Educate them in love  
And send them forth in freedom*

What better time than now to lay claim to and practice whatever expands our sense of Spirit and the continuum of life and allow that to awaken a deepened feeling for reverence, to

look out into the world specifically with the goal to find something to admire and love each day, and then to claim the personal freedom that allows us to choose how we will respond to all that goes on around us.

When these three soul qualities (reverence, love and freedom), even in their smallest seed form, begin to take shape within us, we can further trust ourselves to stand before the children and say, "Here, let me show you the way."