THRIVE EMERGE

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Over the years, I have been honored to enter deeply into their lives, exploring the fascinating ways that they experience the world; and through these partnerships, coming to appreciate how they have become at once the challenged and wonderful people that they are now.

It is only from this respectful understanding of their inner lives that we – parents, educators, mental health professionals -- can shape the interventions that will ultimately help them become their best possible selves as independent adults.

Many years ago, I had an older patient – a man in his 50s – who I diagnosed for the first time in his life with ADHD. The diagnosis was a revelation to him and provided a lens through which he could view the shape of his often challenging and confusing life. But his elation at finally having a framework to make sense of his experiences was tempered by a sadness at what had been lost.

He was a bright man, a bit of a poet, and his words continue to haunt me: “I feel like I have lived my life like a pendulum,” he said, “but one that has never found the dignity of center.”

The dignity of center. What a powerful phrase to capture the sense of dysregulation, of being emotionally and cognitively homeless inside of our own skins. It is a description that our neurodivergent children might find all too familiar, having themselves never found their dignity of center.

As I use it here, the phrase “neurodivergent” is meant to capture a wide array of brain-based information processing challenges – including those we see with ADHD, the autism spectrum disorders, sensory sensitivities and a myriad of other processes such as slow processing speed, receptive and expressive language disorders and learning disabilities.

Our children with neurodivergent brains have struggled to find their dignity of center, challenged as they are with dysregulations that are present from before birth, and which shape every waking moment. These are dysregulations that will time and again collide headlong with a neuroatypical world that fails to understand our children’s uniqueness, and which adheres to social, educational and employment norms that unfortunately play to their weaknesses.

These interactions -- with the accompanying emotional insults accumulated over a lifetime -- sap our children’s joy, their confidence, their agency, their will. By adulthood, it can leave them feeling broken, unsure of their place in the world or of their ability to negotiate its many demands. And it can be a long and difficult journey to recover what is rightfully theirs.

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At the juncture between adolescence and adulthood – as the rules of engagement between the individuating child and the guiding adults shift and stretch – we who are the providers of support often begin to question our role – or even the necessity of our presence – in their journey.

It is critical that at these troubled times we remember: we are now -- and must remain for years into the future -- a vital part of their development into healthy young adults. If they are -- in a metaphoric sense -- the ship sailing away to the horizon, we are the water that carries them to their destination.

I have always said that as parents, we experience our children's pain one hundred-fold. When we are overwhelmed by our own distress for them, our fear and anger well up inside; and we risk becoming the stormy sea that – despite our deepest love and best intentions –throws their ship off course. Or if we are unsure of how to act, we night shrink back from them, leaving their boat emotionally stranded.

But if we are to carry them fully and compassionately to their destinations, our arms and hearts must stretch with them to the horizon. Just as we call on them to look inward and outward at their lives, so must we engage in the same intense exploration of our own actions, our own souls. For as much as this is about modeling and guiding our children in this particular moment, it is -- just as importantly -- about a longer, deeper journey as well, one in which we are called to attune ourselves exquisitely, again and again, to the shape of their boats, the vessel of their souls.

We are given our children not just so we can guide them to finding a job or getting through school. We are given our children so we can engage in a life-long venture of mutual discovery, of the creation of meaning in our lives and theirs, of the realization of their – and our -- deepest longings and truths. It is a journey in which we are offered a partnership where together we can experience the gift of unfolding, of becoming.

Though the journey is long and challenging, it is by no means hopeless. Because deep at the cores, our children still hold the spark of the divine. There is not one teen or young adult that I work with who - when held and heard and healed — does not show the desire to blossom into some greater manifestation of themselves.

This then is our work as parents and professionals: to offer -- from our hearts, in any one moment -- just the right movement, just the right motion of our waters, just the right alignment of our push with their desires -- so that we help bring them closer and closer to their dreams.

I am clear that the poetry of these words is often a far cry from our experience of raising our children day to day. I have raised three daughters, 2 of them neurodivergent, and I am well aware of the many storms at sea.

But I offer this metaphor to help us remember: If we are curious and patient, we have the chance to become the compassionate partners that our children need to reach the horizons they long for.