

The Child Within

The phrase “inner child” has been so trivialized by pop psychology that we often use it without thinking about what we mean. I’ve heard people refer to their inner child with a disdain and flippancy amounting to inner child abuse, disparaging one of their most precious inner resources. Each of us carries within all of the memories of our childhood experience. Though we are conscious of only a few of them, they together form our personal internalization of being a child: all of the joys, delights, hurts, frustrations and fears. How we treat this part of ourselves can have a powerful impact on our well-being.

My formal introduction to my inner child took place during my psychosynthesis training. When probed about who within me was so fearful that she triggered panic attacks, I realized that it was myself, at about age three, very needy of reassurance, tenderness and love. I was invited to come up with a ritual that would help this frightened aspect of myself feel more secure. For more than a year after that, I went to my open bedroom window every evening before bed, gently holding my frightened inner child (I did this mentally, but it is also possible to use a stuffed animal or a pillow to symbolize your inner child), and, looking into the night sky, sang Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star. In this way, my inner nurturing parent reassured my frightened inner child. I have never had a panic attack again. Even as I write about this, I can hear a voice in my head, that of another aspect of myself — a very sophisticated, worldly, sarcastic young woman — who cackles her scorn of this ridiculous sentimentalism. She, too, is part of me. If I had listened only to her opinion, I would not have done this ritual and might still be suffering from anxiety.

The founder of psychosynthesis, the Italian psychiatrist Roberto Assagioli, posited a model of the human self as consisting of many “subpersonalities” or aspects of the self. Using an orchestra analogy, each subpersonality can be thought of as an instrument. When they are playing together, there is harmony. When they are competing against each other, there is discord. Our consciousness is the conductor. When the conductor gets so engrossed with one instrument that s/he loses the overview, that’s when outside assistance in the form of a guide, coach or counselor can be of great help. Each of us has our complete orchestra. The task of re-establishing harmony is never about getting rid of certain instruments or adding others. We are all whole, just as we are. When we feel unhappy or unstable, we are not broken, but we’ve lost our harmony.

We seem to have a natural tendency to want to get rid of aspects of ourselves that are interfering with our well-being, similar to the way in which we may avoid someone we find difficult. There were moments when I wanted my frightened inner child to disappear. But my experience with my work on myself and with clients confirms Assagioli’s assertion that if we reject a subpersonality that is playing too loudly or off-key, the problem will only grow. Just like a child who is acting up, a part of ourselves clamoring for attention, however inappropriately, needs attention and not rejection. We can assume that the more disruptive the behavior or symptom is, the more desperate the need.

Our default style of inner child parenting often resembles the least appropriate treatment we experienced as children and serves to perpetuate the hurts. Perhaps you can remember a time when your inner child seemed to take over your behavior and you responded with inner scolding along the lines of “For crying out loud, can’t

you grow up?" or "Get out of here — you're in my way!" This kind of abuse does not lead to greater harmony. What we need to do is connect with our most resourceful, loving and accepting inner parent and give the needy inner child the loving attention s/he needs.

Doing so will help to liberate the joyful and playful energy of the inner child. This is exactly the energy that bubbles out of us in peals of laughter at a funny joke, squeals of delight upon opening a present and sighs of pleasure at just lying on the grass and gazing up at the sky. This is the energy of life, of being in the moment. Parenthood gives us a window on this vitality that we may have lost touch with. Often though, we only watch, rather than joining in.

One reader offered to share her pleasures and delights. Just reading the list will awaken your inner child.

Watching my boys play in the sand and water

Watching my 2 year old dance

Watching my 5 year old swim underwater

Sitting on a beach facing the ocean

Walking in the forest, especially when light comes through the foliage

Exercising

The smell of rain in the summer

Seeing peonies

Perhaps you'll decide to give your inner child more time and space in your life.