

Parenting as Path

by Lama John Makransky (*Tricycle Magazine* 2001)

Jonathan (nine years old) reads to us from his favorite comic strip, *Calvin and Hobbes*. First panel: Young Calvin's teacher gives him a math problem. Next panel: Calvin stares at the problem, dumbfounded. Final panel: Calvin, dressed in private eye's hat, looking tough, declares: "It was another baffling case. But then, you don't hire a private eye for the easy ones."

Mediated by his private eye fantasies, Calvin copes hilariously with teachers, parents, and friends. But because he is never fully present to the realities, he falls into trouble repeatedly without ever understanding why.

We love Calvin because he is us. We too are lost in fantasies of self and others, struggling to get the world to fit them, inexplicably finding ourselves in difficulty again and again. But there's a difference. Calvin's cartoonist gives us a privileged perspective on Calvin which we do not have on ourselves. We know Calvin's fantasies to be empty, mere thought constructs, projected upon the realities. For us readers, fantasy is known in its emptiness, thus great fun. But for Calvin, fantasy is not known in its emptiness. It is utterly believed and acted on, leading to recurrent suffering. The comic gives us the joy of being enlightened with respect to Calvin. To enjoy our own life as much, we would have to find such an enlightened perspective on ourselves.

A prior evening, I come home from a slightly crazed day at work, exhausted, deeply hungry for food and peace. As I walk into the house, tension is palpable. David (six years old) and Jonathan are caught in pre-dinner, low-blood-sugar altercations, ominously escalating toward pediatric violence. My wife Barbara, working over the stove, tired in eyes and voice, calls sharply for the children to settle down. They ignore her. Suddenly, as if out of nowhere, I feel a glimmer of rage, a wish to take complete control, to make home the welcoming place it was SUPPOSED to be on my arrival. A fantasy comes with it: grabbing both children, yelling at them for ignoring their mother, frightening them into quiet behavior (supportive of their parents) for the rest of the evening, indeed for the rest of their lives....

Then, as if out of nowhere, another thought: "*This* is what they feel, so many other parents, *this* very difficulty." A subtle shift occurs. I now feel my rage as if feeling it *for* the other parents similarly trapped in helpless rage. I take the feeling deep into my heart, as if taking it from all, where its power cracks the shell of self-protection at the heart, releasing light radiating

to all the others. Mind and body relax into that radiance. A fatherly voice, calm but directive, informs the children they will now prepare for dinner. The voice is mine.

"Dinner is ready," Barbara calls. The fantasy of control dispelled, space has opened for me to respond to more fundamental qualities of family life: the humor, wisdom, care of the dinner ritual.

Actually, the glimmer of rage didn't come from nowhere: it came from the long habit of translating events into cartoonish fantasies of self-protection, all of which lead to disaster (like Calvin). And the sudden exchange of self for other, instigated by the rage, didn't come from nowhere. It came from a daily practice given by my teachers, the Tibetan gift of mind-heart training (lo-jong) which seizes oppressive emotions as the very means to awaken to their insubstantial nature (wisdom) and to the suffering of beings (compassion).

The practice is simple. We familiarize ourselves with each step, both in meditation time and daily life. Bring to mind any familiar feeling of difficulty in mind or body, like physical pain, hostility, fear, confusion, longing. 1) Allow yourself to feel the difficulty fully. Sense how it feels for someone to undergo that. 2) Then, right within the feeling, think, "*This* is what so many feel!" Feel it as if you were sensing, right through your own feeling, the difficulty of many others. 3) Take that feeling deep into your heart, as if taking it from the others, where the force of it cracks the shell of self-protection, releasing light from within, representing the radiance of inmost well-being, freedom and compassion. It radiates through all pores of your body, offering up your well-being to others who undergo similar difficulties. Imagine them thereby becoming free of the suffering and deeply well, and take joy in their freedom. 4) Finally, relax deeply through the radiance, dropping all concepts, even distinctions of "self" or "other."

We can let the natural wisdom and care uncovered by such practice increasingly influence our responses to family, co-workers, and community.

Poor Calvin doesn't have our precious opportunity. He is trapped in his cartoon. Spiritual practice can free us from ours. Calvin's cartoonist helps us understand Calvin so well that we love him no matter what he thinks he is doing, unconditionally. Spiritual practice can help us find such a perspective on our own lives, on those we love, indeed on all beings, all the "Calvins."