

The Wisdom of Childhood

L. Carol Scott, PhD

Do you want to live beyond the routines of earning and consuming? Would you like to stop censoring who you are, without losing relationships? Are you willing to believe in your dreams and bring them into reality? Imagine, if you will, that these goals are possible. All you must do is tap into childhood. Not *your* childhood, but childhood as an archetype, a pattern.

I believe in the wisdom of childhood. As its student for more than 30 years, I have learned that childhood and its processes of development contain guidance for adult relationship issues, for our life issues now. With childhood's wisdom you can grow and heal the wounds that hold you back.

Here is what childhood knows: when we were very young, we built our understanding of the world and how it works, one interaction at a time. Every time anyone had any social interaction with you, you put one brick or stick of understanding into the home of your Self. Every time anyone responded to your overtures—kindly or harshly, supportively or dismissively, with love or disregard—every time, you added one more rank of height to the walls that now house your spirit.

One interaction at a time, you built your sense of self, your sense of others. You built your understanding of the treatment you deserve, and of how you should treat others. You constructed your capacity for trust, and built a sense of self. You learned about faith, about belief in the impossible. Stone by stone, you built your ability to negotiate through problems, and your ability to create a vision and achieve it. You learned something about how compromise finds common ground, and something about what to do when there is no common ground.

If you were lucky, you built strong and enduring capacities for Trust, Independence, Faith, Negotiation, Vision, Compromise, and Acceptance. These abilities, which I call the 7 Childhood Treasures™, are each associated with one of the first seven years of life. And if your interactions in early childhood have left your spirit living in a home built without these treasures, with rickety walls, full of holes, you are not alone ... and it's time to remodel. Here's the good news: it's never too late. You can build these treasures now and use them to shore up the walls that house your soul.

You can be the architect who designs a new home for your Self. You can rebuild your understanding of how to live in relationship with the world. These childhood treasures can be constructed now, stronger than they were in childhood. To begin, a little understanding of child development will help.

Perhaps you think of a human's development as maturation, the inexorable unfolding of innate potential. Do you see a child developing as surely as a flower

opens, as surely as a seed becomes a plant? Yes, you are right, and that's not all that development is.

Do you see child development as a gradual acquisition of skills, knowledge, and patterns of action? Perhaps your view of development is that it results from external influences such as instruction, reward, and punishment. Yes, you are correct, and that's not all that development is.

Your development as a young child was a natural and innate unfolding *and* was shaped by praise and disappointment, by teaching and repetitive practice. Both are true, and there was more. Human development does not result only through these passive processes. You were also an actor in your own becoming.

Your development required you to *construct* your self and your world. You built them, manufactured them, sculpted them. Your development resulted from both conscious and unconscious efforts to make sense of what happened to you each moment. Using the raw material of your interactions with your world and those who peopled it, you constructed reality, understanding, and rules.

Children act on—interact with—other humans and observe the outcomes. Each interaction provides some of the raw materials used in this building project. As a newborn infant, you cried out in discomfort: hunger, or a wet, cold diaper against fragile skin. Did the world respond? Did someone comfort you? If you were reared by a parent guided by an “expert” who advised scheduled feedings, perhaps you cried alone in the dark, your need unmet.

When you were two years old, someone gave you a direct order—“Stop that”—or a polite order—“Please come here”—and you said, “No.” Even if you remember being extremely well-behaved and compliant, you said “No” at least once. Toddlers’ job descriptions require it. What happened when you refused to comply with someone else’s view of what you should be doing? Were you ignored, distracted, admonished, spanked, put in time out? Praised for your initiative?

These interactions, these exchanges of information with the world, provided the material you used to construct your image of your self in relation to the other beings around you, your social world. Your identity may say, “I trust—or don’t trust—that I will have my needs met.” “I am an initiator of my activity—or I am dependent on others to tell me what to do.”

Each exchange with every person in your world left you holding the stuff with which to build your life. Like so many locking blocks, you snapped them together and made a self. A little mistrust, a little shame, a small bit of faith, an edge-piece of fear ... you built yourself. You built your Self.

This construction aspect is usually the “missing piece” in our understanding of human development. Woven into the natural and innate unfolding of some

abilities, layered between abilities shaped by teaching and practice, you gained other abilities by being an actor in your own becoming. You built your capacity to trust, your understanding of relationships, your sense of wonder, your ability to negotiate for what you want, your belief in your dreams.... You constructed your self and your understanding of how that self “fits” in the social world.

Back then, you built yourself, and now you can *rebuild*. That’s what my work is about: rebuilding, strengthening the wobbly walls you built years or decades ago. Which ones of the 7 Childhood Treasures™ are you most ready to build, and what parts of them need to be reconstructed?