SEVEN

What Do We Want for Our Children?

A child said, What is the grass? fetching it to me with full
hands;
How could I answer the child? . . . I do not know what it
is any more than he.

—From "A Child Said, What Is the Grass?" by Walt Whitman

Throughout my work on this book, I've been reflecting on what it is that seems to me so important about encouraging children to develop their philosophical selves. I've thought back on the conversations I've had with children, my own and others, about philosophical topics for the past fifteen years. Over and over again, children and young people have told me that making a space for philosophical questioning has been transformative for them.

As I've contended, awareness of the philosophical dimension of life seems natural for most of us. We grow up wondering about the strangeness of our mortal lives, the meaning of being alive, the complexity of identity, the nature of friendship and love, how to live good lives, and whether we can know anything at all. Our ability to reflect on our experiences and to use language to make sense of intricate and often inscrutable concepts makes questioning the conditions of our existence a basic human act.

Yet examining deeply the concepts we use, the beliefs we hold, and the experiences we have does not become part of the fabric of most adult lives. I have suggested in this book that this is a loss, and that supporting our children's efforts to develop philosophical sensitivity can be a great gift. Probing the assumptions and analyzing the larger significance of everyday life events involves proficiency in reasoning and analysis, as well as an ongoing awareness of the strangeness of existence. Engaging in philosophical inquiry with our children can provide them with some important skills for taking control of their own futures and developing the confidence to build meaningful lives, and it can deepen those lives by keeping alive the wonder at the human condition that almost all of us experienced as children.

BECOMING AN INDEPENDENT THINKER

> "I have always held strong beliefs which I practice and preach, but the topics we discussed in the course raised new questions that I had never given thought to."
>
> —Cristalan, college freshman and philosophy for children student

Many of the undergraduate students in my philosophy for children class, especially those new to philosophy, express how meaningful it is to them to participate in philosophical discussions with their peers. They recount that as children they often considered many of the issues we discuss in class but didn't have support for any kind of sustained philosophical inquiry. When we talk about the reasons to introduce children to philosophy, many of them describe feeling as if their philosophical growth was

stunted at an early age. Frequently, I watch them becoming aware that they have not thought through various issues for themselves—and blossoming in the process.

Growing up, most people develop, often without thinking deeply about the questions, strong beliefs about morality, what matters most in life, freedom and fairness, the existence and nature of God, and other fundamental issues. Many of these beliefs stem from what we learn from our parents, then are left unexamined. Children often grow up with a feeling that the way the world works involves some single and complete understanding, which they will discover when they get older. At some point, it becomes clear that no such holistic explanation will be handed to us—that there is no secret key that will unlock life's mysteries. We then recognize that understanding our world is a process, requiring us to absorb a multitude of information, undergo diverse experiences, and engage in ongoing education; moreover, we see that this understanding remains provisional, shifting and changing over time.

The opportunity to engage in such speculative reflection at young ages, especially with parents or other adults they trust, allows children to examine the questions that interest them based on their own perspectives and ideas. This also encourages them to cultivate a habit of questioning their own beliefs and ideas. Developing a comfort with questions rather than answers, with uncertainty as opposed to definitiveness, can help children successfully navigate the complexity of the world in which they are growing up.

A primary task of becoming an adult is making sense of both the world and one's place in it. Nurturing our children's philosophical selves is one way to help them develop the reasoning and creative-thinking skills that are so necessary when it comes to making sense of the world for themselves. To do this, a child must acquire the ability to take control over her life, and this demands skill at thinking effectively and asking good questions. Thinking and questioning are central to the practice of philosophy. Because philosophical issues are complex, they demand rigorous and careful reasoning. Because they are unsettled, they inspire the formulation of clear and articulate questions. When you spend time thinking philosophically with your child, you're facilitating her ability to acquire some of the tools she needs to become a self-directed learner and independent thinker.

> "Dear Jana, I'm now several weeks into my first college philosophy class. This is without a doubt one of my favorite classes this semester. . . . What I wanted to say is, thank you for introducing me to philosophy. For example, it was really great to have read the little book you gave me with 20 questions from great philosophers, because now I've been exposed to many of the concepts, and I can understand them better and get a deeper appreciation when the topics come up in lecture. I honestly don't know and don't want to think about what college

would be like if you hadn't pushed me to not get stuck in a cookie cutter high school experience."

—Alexandra, philosophy student in eighth grade, who sent me this e-mail message during her sophomore year in college

It perhaps seems a large claim to assert that philosophy can make a significant difference in the circumstances of a child's life. But I think it can. Our philosophical selves, alert to the large questions of human existence, are intimately connected to experiences involving wonder, awe, and perplexity. These are fundamental aspects of being a human being. Supporting your child's ability to maintain and expand this part of herself helps her sustain her sense of the world as marvelous and mysterious. The hard thinking that philosophical inquiry demands provides her with some of the analytic skills she needs in order to engage in thoughtful decision-making throughout her life.

PHILOSOPHICAL DIALOGUE

I frequently tell young philosophy students that what I love about philosophy is that it forces me to rethink what I believe, and I almost always come away from philosophical conversations with a new idea or way of thinking about a problem because of something that someone else pointed out. This means, I explain, that listening to what other people are saying is crucial, because philosophical inquiry is all about thinking in new ways through dialogue. Having a philosophical exchange demands attentiveness and a commitment to thinking carefully about what others are saying.

So many of our everyday conversations involve half listening to the other person's words while thinking about what it is that we want to say next. The best conversations, though, involve a genuine give-and-take between one's own and someone else's ideas. This entails a truthful attempt to understand the other's perspective. In philosophical discussions, expressing your views often illuminates intensely personal aspects of yourself. When you're talking about topics like identity, what makes someone a good person, or the meaning of life, in many ways you are expressing the kind of person you are. These kinds of conversations with your child, in which you really listen to each other's ideas, can help you gain a deeper understanding of one another and can support your child's efforts to understand and define himself. As one ten-year-old student once said to me, "I understand my own thoughts so much better after philosophy!"

As I mentioned earlier in this book, listening to one another and delving into the rich unsettled territory of philosophical issues takes time. Conversations about subjects like mortality, freedom, or beauty provide

opportunities for unhurried moments, when time slips away because we've been so immersed in what we're doing. The experience of authentically striving together to understand an issue or analyze a problem creates a space of reflective intimacy. We trust each other and are honestly working to hear what the other is saying. The kind of focused analysis that sometimes ensues can be one of those experiences of what is called "flow," where we are so fully involved that we lose track of time.[1]

One of the many pleasures of making time for these kinds of leisurely philosophical encounters with your child is that they allow us, for at least a little while, to leave behind the constant electronic interruption with which many of us live. This also sends a message to our children that we value reflection and making time to think. Encouraging our children to take moments away from active engagement in the world to reflect on the meaning of what they're doing and thinking—to become accustomed to carving out quiet time to think—is especially important in today's accelerated culture.

Our children seem to have fewer and fewer opportunities for reflective exchanges. It's important to me that my sons know the joys of being so engaged in a discussion that they forget to check their cell phones. Of course, there are many avenues for finding this kind of dialogical space; philosophy is only one. But it is one that is accessible to young people early, invokes unique parent-child exchanges, and offers almost limitless avenues for conversation because its questions are endless.

PHILOSOPHY FOR EVERYONE

You might worry that allowing your child to grapple with uncertainty might be too much for him, potentially provoking feelings of insecurity and fear, and that it might be harmful for your child to see you undertake questions to which you don't have answers. I think it's important to remember that children think about many of these questions anyway, and any philosophical conversation that you have with your child will be based on his interest in the topic. Uncertainty is not an unfamiliar experience for children. I think that adults' negative reactions to uncertainty and doubt, rather than these feelings themselves, are more likely to evoke confusion and insecurity in children.

I don't believe that it's scary for young people to see their parents or other adults struggle with difficult questions and express feelings of doubt. On the contrary, watching adults continue throughout their lives to address unsettled and demanding questions can be inspiring for children. The world in which we live is neither entirely predictable nor certain. You can model for your child approaching uncertainty with equanimity.

> "The thing that meant most to me, the most valuable lesson I learned, came from visiting a session with a group of elementary students. I was really amazed at how well these children were able to discuss with each other. They came up with fascinating questions and well thought out responses; ones that were similar to the ideas that would be presented in our classroom. After that session I found new value and respect for a child's intellect. I work with children so I know they are quite intelligent but I never really imagined holding a philosophical conversation with one."
>
> —Brandon, University of Washington senior and philosophy for children student

I believe that children are far more competent than adults think. We underestimate children's interest in examining complex intellectual topics, as well as their ability to do so. Too often we approach serious issues with children with too much assurance that we know what's best for them and too little confidence that they possess the potential for figuring things out for themselves. Sometimes I find myself surprised at the level of sophistication I encounter when I talk with elementary school students, and I realize that there are still times when I expect less from children than their capabilities allow. My undergraduate students have the same experience. Without fail, each year some of them mention being startled by the intellectual level of the questions and comments of our elementary school philosophy students.

RESPECT FOR CHILDREN'S IDEAS

Advancing respect for children's ideas is not a priority in our society or in most families. Children are typically patronized, at best, when they propose serious ideas about difficult subjects. Yet, as I've noted elsewhere in this book, children have a great deal to offer. Unburdened by either the assumption that they already know a lot about the world or the concern that they should appear knowledgeable, children are generally open to exploring all possible explanations of philosophical puzzles. What an adult might describe as children's ignorance becomes, in philosophical conversations, an imaginative willingness to look with fresh eyes at difficult questions, without assuming they do or should know the answers.

Respect for children's ideas and intellects is embedded in the very concept of talking philosophically with children. A child's attempt to grapple honestly with ideas and questions is in itself worthy of respect. Thinking about large philosophical issues with children involves appreciating their attempts to attain intellectual self-determination and understanding, and also evaluating the ideas that they suggest with the same respect accorded to adult reflection. This ultimately requires taking children seriously as children; we're not pretending children are adults, but

we acknowledge the ideas and perspectives of children as being worthy of attention and consideration. It's empowering for children to have their ideas recognized by others as having substance. I remember, as a child, how seriously my father seemed to consider most of my musings. I took away the message that my ideas mattered, that I had things to say that were worthy of respect and deliberation. This sense gave me the confidence to develop and express my own point of view.

According children's ideas genuine consideration provides reciprocal rewards. Children gain the experience of conversing in a legitimate way with adults, which enhances their capacities for advocating their views and expressing their thoughts coherently, and adults gain the benefit of children's novel and imaginative insights into questions that matter to all of us. Gareth Matthews once wrote,

> Children are people, fully worthy of both the moral and intellectual respect due persons. They should be respected for what they are, as well as for what they can become. Indeed, we can learn from them and let them enrich our lives as, much more obviously, they learn from us and let us enrich their lives. The parent or teacher who is open to the perspectives of children and to their forms of sensibility is blessed with gifts that adult life otherwise lacks.[2]

Indeed, the sensibility of children—new to the world and open to novel possibilities—can help adults step away from the comfortable insulation of our long-held beliefs and reawaken our awareness of the perplexities inherent in the most ordinary things.

People frequently remark that it's important to them that children learn to "think for themselves." However, in general children are told what to think far more often than they are encouraged to think independently. In order to develop competence in "thinking for themselves," children need practice doing it. And few areas provide better practice for acquiring the habit of independent thinking than philosophy. Uncertainty and questions are at its core, and delving into philosophical wondering leads to an ability to zero in on a core question or assumption when discussing an issue and to recognize more easily the deeper questions involved.

Attaining the kind of critical consciousness that is part of philosophical sensitivity—a way of looking at the world and the decisions facing you in your own life—allows children to enlarge their self-awareness and confidence. Thinking for themselves inherently involves asking searching questions, evaluating situations independently, and coming up with their own answers. These skills are crucial for children to be able to build their own futures.

Not every child will embrace philosophy. But every child should have the opportunity to engage in philosophical inquiry. Most children will tackle various philosophical issues during childhood and will be inter-

ested in at least a couple of the areas of philosophy described in this book. By the age of ten or eleven, children will have asked themselves questions like the following: Why am I alive? What happens when we die? What is love? Taking the time to talk about such questions with your child can help him enhance his ability to be cognizant of the uncertainties in what often comes packaged as Truth, whether or not he ultimately comes to relish philosophical inquiry.

For many children, philosophy can become a significant part of the way they look at the world. My three children are all very different. Yet each is drawn to philosophical discourse, to wondering about the world in which we live and discussing the puzzles that human life engenders. If parents give children the space in which to ask questions, and then approach these questions seriously and respectfully, many children will be inspired to develop their philosophical potential, and all of them will have enriched their ability to think clearly and well.

Bringing philosophy into your relationship with your child may seem a small thing: adding a conversational topic to your repertoire. But I think that this apparently small thing is actually extraordinary. Entirely founded on children thinking for themselves, philosophical inquiry engenders trust in and respect for children's ideas and can be transformative for both children and their parents.

HOPE AND PHILOSOPHY

A colleague asked me some time ago for one word to describe what I think philosophy offers to children. My answer: "Hope."

I said hope because I think there is a connection between thinking philosophically and being able to build your own future. Psychologists have noted that hope involves creativity and a belief in the future and that central to the experience of hope is making plans aimed at a better life.[3] Hope demands confidence in the future and in your own potential to reach your goals. I see a connection between hope and introducing philosophy to children because I believe that philosophical reflection can open doors to self-directed learning and to the kind of confidence in one's own point of view that allows children to envision their own futures.

> "Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out."
>
> —Vaclav Havel

One of the obstacles faced by many children in living the life they might want is their sense that they have no control over the course of their lives and no power to alter the path that seems to be set for them. Once all our basic needs are met (shelter, food, water, and safety), it seems to me that our most important goal becomes building the most

fulfilling and worthwhile life possible. For all too many children, life seems full of limitations rather than possibilities. They see no path to living a life that is different from the one that those around them seem to believe is in store for them. Acquiring confidence in their own perspectives and skills at developing and expressing their own understanding can make a real difference. And even for children for whom life's possibilities seem more reachable, all too often they are steered to live someone else's, and not their own, idea of the best life possible for them.

Aristotle's concept of *eudamonia*, or happiness, as I briefly described in chapter 5, exhorts us to develop our potentialities as fully as possible in order to live the best possible life. A life of happiness is a life in which a person has become self-actualized to the maximum extent possible. What does a young person need in order to create such a life? Fundamentally, aside from having the necessary resources and opportunities, children have to develop appreciation for their potentialities and insight into what might constitute the best possible life for them. This requires the kind of self-examination and effort to reach self-understanding that, according to Socrates, made life worth living. An essential part this process is having confidence that your thoughts and ideas matter and that things "make sense," that your understanding of the world and your own situation has substance.

Of course, I'm not contending that without philosophical thinking children (or adults, for that matter) cannot develop good reasoning skills and confidence in their abilities to sort out dilemmas and acquire a thoughtful grasp of their situations. However, I think there is no discipline better than philosophy for cultivating and refining these skills. Because philosophical questions are, by definition, deeply abstract and historically contestable, they provide infinite challenges to our analytic reasoning capacities. Inviting our children to think about some of these questions with us encourages them to make a habit of self-examination and scrutiny of their own views and thus strengthens their thinking, reasoning, and reflective abilities. Being able to think well and trust your own reasoning gives you enormous control over how you face the circumstances of your life.

OUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH OUR CHILDREN

I've been talking with my own children about philosophical issues since they were small. Recently, I had a conversation with my youngest, now fourteen years old, that made me think about the impact these conversations have had on my relationships with my sons.

Duck, Death and the Tulip, by Wolf Erlbruch, tells the story of Duck and her meeting with Death, who informs Duck, "I've been close by all your life." The two spend some time together, and they talk about death. In

many of the frames, Death is carrying a tulip. At the end of the story, Duck dies, and Death carries her to a river and lays her in the water, placing the tulip on her body. The book ends with this line: "When she was lost to sight, he was almost a little moved. But that's life, thought Death."

I had used the story in the fall in discussions with my undergraduate students. Afterward, I read it with Jackson to get his opinion. The book is beautiful. It's written in a soft and tender mood, and its personification of death is quite captivating.

My conversation with Jackson about the book led to an exchange about the relationship between life and death. Jackson suggested that in order to have change, death is essential. We agreed that without change, life would seem lifeless. We then talked about what happens when you die, whether the body's death means the end of all consciousness, and whether it's possible that there are planes of existence beyond our ability to imagine.

When I considered our conversation afterward, I was struck by how easily we'd fallen into the dialogue we'd had and how comfortable it felt for us to talk about subjects like these. Although there are many areas in our lives together where I continue to be an authority figure, when we talk about these kinds of questions, we approach them in a collaborative way. My sons all express their ideas forcefully and with every expectation that what they have to say is meaningful and worthy of response. This kind of shared inquiry, where we authentically seek together to understand something, has given my relationship with them a depth and mutual respect that has paid rich dividends in their teenage years. Of course, philosophy is not a panacea for the challenges of those years. But the conversational intimacy we've developed in our family—due in large part, I think, to the philosophical questioning we've done together—has helped us approach some of these challenges with trust and respect (though not always without conflict).

Some of what is most powerful about talking about philosophy with your children is the experience of striving to understand their thinking and ideas, without regarding them as either cute or threatening. Children's philosophical ideas have a special quality because they emerge from the experience of being a child. Although we were all once children, childhood becomes a somewhat inaccessible world once you leave it. Encountering children's ideas in serious conversations allows us access to the private world of childhood and gives us respect for our children's autonomy and individual points of view. Our children sense this respect, and it heightens the trust between us. I feel as if philosophy has allowed my children and me to get to know each other better, and in a different way than we ever would have absent these kinds of conversations.

AUTHENTICITY AND IDENTITY

My son David has been applying to colleges this year. This experience has, in many ways, been a rewarding, albeit stressful, one for us. We've had many conversations about the current state of college admissions and how it has sometimes seemed to us that young people are encouraged to package themselves to resemble middle-aged people of accomplishment instead of young people just embarking on adult lives. At one point David said to me, after being advised to present himself in a particular way for a particular school (not dishonestly but with a slant that was at best an exaggeration), "Mom, maybe if that's what the school is looking for, it's not for me."

This remark led to a long discussion about authenticity—what it means and what it requires. I told David that I think that one of the most important values I've hoped to instill in my children is authenticity.

"So what would you say authenticity is?" David asked.

"It's a hard question. But I think it has to do with integrity and being true to the kind of person you are. What do you think?"

"That's exactly it," David said. "I just wouldn't feel good about pretending to be something I'm not, just so I can get accepted to a college. I don't think I'd be happy there if I knew it was the kind of place that wouldn't accept me as I am. For me, authenticity means knowing who you are and being honest about yourself."

> "That inner voice has both gentleness and clarity. So to get to authenticity, you really keep going down to the bone, to the honesty, and the inevitability of something."
>
> —Meredith Monk

Authenticity matters so much, I think, because most of our children are subject to intense and unrelenting pressures to look, act, think, and even feel in particular ways. They are bombarded with words and images saturated with a celebrity-obsessed culture, in which celebrity is often a product of hollow attributes like looks or money and not the result of any substantive achievement. If image is what matters and substance is less significant, authenticity can seem elusive and even unimportant. In the rush of pursuing material wealth and status, our children can miss the opportunity to know who they are and what it is they care about most deeply.

Existentialist philosophers saw authenticity as the act of being true to one's own spirit or character in the face of all the external pressures and influences of the world, so that there is a kind of wholeness about one's life. Authenticity involves living your life in a way that's genuine and consistent with the person you are. This requires an understanding of your own identity and values. Living as authentically as possible, then, demands that we have insight into our own character and possess the

confidence and independent thinking skills necessary to build a life fully integrated with that character.

WHAT DO WE WANT FOR OUR CHILDREN?

This book is an invitation to listen to the things your children say in a different way, to be alert to the philosophical dimension of their ordinary questions and observations. The most routine activities that we do with our children—such as reading stories, listening to music, watching television, and spending time outdoors—generate opportunities for philosophical conversations. If we become more sensitive to our children's philosophical inquisitiveness, we can help them to delve more deeply and thoughtfully into the questions that engage them and to ask better and better questions.

Encouraging your child to develop her philosophical self gives her freedom and space to wonder imaginatively with you about life's big questions and engenders respect for her ideas. All the benefits of thinking philosophically with your child that I've described—the cultivation in both parent and child of childhood wonder about the universe and the human condition, the attainment of an enhanced awareness of the rich variety of perspectives in the world, the experience of parent and child being co-inquirers, and the development of improved analytic skills and a questioning orientation to life—facilitate children's ability to live more self-directed and meaningful lives.

What I want for my children is exactly that: to construct lives of their own making, based on their independent and thoughtful assessments of who they are and what they want, and to have the confidence and capability to design their own paths and follow them. I think that this is what most of us want for our children. And I believe that being open to talking with them about the most elemental questions that underlie human existence can contribute to them getting there.

My favorite description of philosophy comes from philosopher Robert Johann, who said, "Philosophical inquiry is, at its best, an adventure in making life whole."[4] I believe that supporting our children's participation in this intellectual adventure ultimately can help both them and us to lead lives of greater wholeness.

NOTES

1. Mihaly Csíkszentmihályi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008).
2. Matthews, *Philosophy of Childhood*, 122–23.