

Nothing I Learned in *Kindergarten* Makes Any Sense

By Richard Rice

I envy people who achieve financial success with one book. I envy people even more who achieve financial success with one clever book title. Take, for example, *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*.¹ That title is all it took. In fact, that title is all there is. Does anyone seriously think that John Gray's writings actually add anything to that clever phrase? (Personally, I think the title is an exaggeration. There are times when my wife and I are lots farther apart than Mars and Venus.) Then there's Robert Fulghum's whimsical title, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*.² The rest is history. People evidently line up to buy his books and hear him give readings.

Whether or not you accept Fulghum's view of things, however—and I obviously have some reservations—he raises a question that we all ask sooner or later. What shall I do with my childhood? Nobody seems to know. Is childhood something to return to? Is it something we should hang on to? Or is childhood something we should try to escape? Like somebody said once, your childhood is what you spend the rest of your life trying to get over.

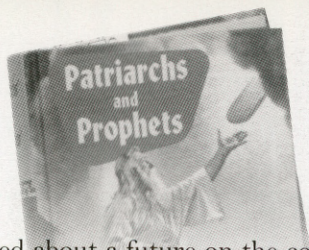
Like Fulghum, a lot of people sentimentalize their early years, especially if they were happy ones. I'll always remember the kindergarten I attended in Princess Anne, Maryland, during my father's first year of medical practice. It was right down the street from the house where we rented a second-story apartment. Mrs. Webster was the teacher. We learned to listen quietly when she read stories, to take turns, and to hold hands when we took walks. I also learned to stay out of the bathroom when there were girls in it. Mrs. Webster made a big deal out of that.

One day I learned how far politeness and courtesy could take you. Mrs. Webster was going to pick one of us to hold the flag while everyone recited the Pledge of Allegiance. The other kids all danced and shouted for the privilege. I looked at the foolishness around me and decided to set myself apart from the rabble. So I raised my hand quietly and affected a look of respectful expectation. Naturally, I got to hold the flag. As a bonus Mrs. Webster described the superiority of my deportment in glowing terms to the others.

I must have carried that attitude with me into grade school, because while teachers were generally pleased with me over the years, my classmates sometimes weren't. One in particular wanted to beat me up around fourth grade or so, and he reiterated the threat on a daily basis. Tom, as we'll call him—since that was his name—didn't have the same luck with school and teachers that I did, and he was determined to take out his frustration on me. I think I can understand why. I must have been insufferable to someone like him. I managed to avoid a showdown, although there were a few close calls, and in time we became pretty good friends. But my kindergarten experience had let me down. Being nice to teachers doesn't cut any ice with your schoolmates. In fact, it works against you.

I was also introduced to serious music about the time I was in kindergarten. I distinctly remember sitting at the piano with the grade one book by Czerny or Schirmer or somebody, with my mother, my first piano teacher, close beside—too close for comfort. There were tears running down my cheeks as I thought of other kids outside playing ball or hide-and-seek, while I was laboriously trying to get my fingers to behave in very unnatural ways. But mother was insistent. Someday I would thank her, she said. Besides, she wasn't pushing me to be a concert artist or anything like that. She only wanted me to be able to play for my own enjoyment. What she really meant, of course, was that she wanted me to play for her enjoyment.

In time, I grew to love music. In fact, I became so fond of it I would have been happy to devote my life to it. I drew courage from another kindergarten certainty. You can do anything you really want to do. You can be anything you really want to be. All it takes is hard work, the determination to be the best. That's the great leveler. And so I worked hard. I took more lessons, from better and better teachers, costing my parents more and more money. And I



fantasized about a future on the concert stage or the recital hall. There was only one problem: no talent. No matter how hard I worked, my playing never got beyond barely passable. Finally, my freshman year in college a merciful professor gave me one of the lowest grades I ever got for one semester hour of piano. God had spoken, and the message was clear. I put you on earth for some other purpose than playing the piano.

In areas like music and athletics, the difference between talent and un-talent emerges with ruthless clarity. Kids who can't run fast, or throw hard, or sing sweetly, or play beautifully see more gifted colleagues rise easily to heights they could never reach with all the effort in the world. Another kindergarten platitude crumbles. Hard work doesn't always even things out. There are some places personal effort just won't take you.

If you've seen the play *Amadeus*, you know Antonio Salieri's incredulity that God had given such talent to Mozart—someone who seemed so unworthy. Beside the sublimity of Mozart's music, Salieri saw his own tiresome, bombastic efforts in all their ugliness. He realized that a lifetime of labor would never achieve the beauty that radiated from just one of the compositions that flowed effortlessly from Mozart's pen. God seems to be utterly indiscriminate in the way he distributes his gifts.

I grew up in a religious home. So kindergarten took on other dimensions, too. It meant going to a specific children's division at Sabbath School each week. There were cradle roll (this was before the invention of tiny tots), kindergarten, primary, juniors, and so on. The big development in kindergarten was that you didn't have to have your parents with you. You were on your own in a significant social setting for the first time in your life. You heard a lot of stories—many of them Bible stories—and learned a lot of memory verses. You also sang a lot of songs, including "Happy, Happy Home." "With mommy in the family, daddy in the family . . .," you get the picture.

The most important verse was "with Jesus in the family, happy, happy home." I thought Jesus was in our family. We certainly invited him to be. But my father had tremendous problems anyway. There were some mysterious absences, some late night arguments, and my parents divorced when I was eleven. The certainties of kindergarten seemed to melt away in the heat of life's tough experiences. Families with Jesus in them, I discovered, don't always avoid heartache.

And so it goes. In many ways, growing up is a

matter of coming to terms with the certainties of early life. And none of the certainties are more important than the religious ones. If you had a religious upbringing, you know what I mean. Religion has a way of painting the world in black and white contrasts. There's right and wrong, truth and error, saints and sinners, the remnant and Babylon, and ultimately heaven and hell—all very sharply delineated. But the clarity of that vision doesn't last forever. The world is much more complicated. And your outlook inevitably changes. The certainties fade. Black and white blend into various shades of gray. Nothing seems as clear-cut as it used to be.

The loss of certainty can be sad and painful. More than a century ago, Matthew Arnold portrayed its emptiness in his famous poem, "Dover Beach."

The Sea of Faith

Was once . . . at the full

But now I only hear its melancholy, long withdrawing roar,

Retreating to the breath

Of the night wind . . .

The world which seems

To lie before us like a land of dreams,

So various, so beautiful, so new,

Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,

Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain

And we are here as on a darkling plain

Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,

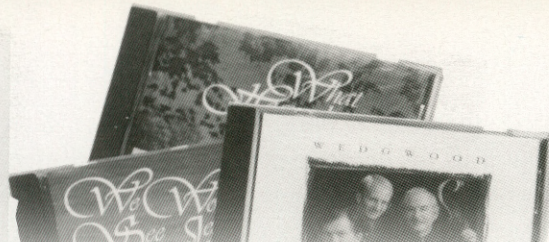
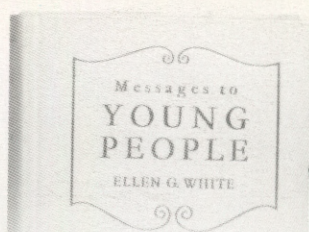
Where ignorant armies clash by night."

Not a reassuring picture, to say the least.

The certainties of childhood fade for several reasons. One is the sheer passage of time. As the years go by, things that once seemed so important just lose their significance.

Another, as we have seen, is that life inevitably brings challenges. As the questions become more and more complicated, the answers with which we grew up seem less and less adequate. In spite of Fulghum's insights—and there are many of them—the rules of the playground don't always translate to the classroom or the boardroom. New challenges require new approaches.

Another factor that applies particularly to those of us who have spent years in school is the effect of academic life. Scholars are trained to scrutinize, to insist on adequate evidence, to ferret out logical inconsistencies and weak arguments. We are naturally suspicious of claims that go beyond our experience. Scholars are trained skeptics. Our professional motto is "show me." Where's your evidence? If you can't prove it, you



shouldn't believe it! It's not hard to see the effects of this approach on religion. If trust is the natural disposition of childhood, doubt is our disposition as adults. Academic training cultivates an ethic of suspicion, if not unbelief.

So what should we do if nothing we learned in kindergarten makes any sense? How can we recover or maintain a religious sensitivity when we've become highly trained in the art of doubt? How can we live by faith, by trust, once we've learned to put every aspect of life through the fire of critical reflection, as the spokesmen of my alma mater were fond of putting it?

Here are some suggestions.

1. Be faithful to what you do know. The fact we don't know everything doesn't mean we don't know anything. In his devotional classic, *A Diary of Private Prayer*, John Baillie offers these words to help us when shadows fall across the bright path of childhood:

When the way seems dark before me, give me grace to walk trustingly.

When much is obscure to me, let me be all the more faithful to the little that I can clearly see. When the distant scene is clouded, let me rejoice that at least the next step is plain.

When what thou art is most hidden from my eyes, let me still hold fast to what thou dost command.

When insight falters, let obedience stand firm.

What I lack in faith let me repay in love.

And if still I cannot find thee, O God, then let me search my heart and know whether it is not rather I who am blind than thou who art obscure, and I who am fleeing from thee rather than thou from me.⁴

2. Find the path of service. When the door of faith is closed, says Adventist philosopher James Londis, the door of service may be open. When the Gospel according to Matthew describes the last judgment, it emphasizes what people do rather than what they believe. When the king commends those on his right hand, he says nothing about the purity of their doctrines, or the majesty of their ecclesiastical institutions. Instead, he mentions their acts of faithful service, their attention to the simple, obvious needs of other people. We can live as Jesus did, with love and care for those around us—whether or not our universe is entirely ordered—and all our beliefs make perfect sense.

3. Remember that faith is more than belief. We often have the idea that belief is the first step in any spiritual development. We have to have a system of clearly defined doctrines in place before we can find our

way spiritually. But that is not the case. Knowledge is just part of the picture, and not necessarily the first part.

4. Go easy on your childhood teachers. One of the things that sometimes prevents people from drawing strength from their early years is the discovery that their parents or teachers were wrong, occasionally dead wrong, and people grow indignant. How could parents and teachers believe some of that stuff? And how could they teach it with such self-confidence, such finality? I recently came across the book *Kaddish*, by Leon Wieseltier, a journalist living in Georgetown, D.C.⁵ He was a non-observant Jew who nevertheless decided when his father died in 1996 to follow the traditional ritual of mourning and say kaddish for his father during the year following his death. The book recounts the experiences Wieseltier had worshiping in the prescribed manner and studying to find out what his words and actions meant, in accordance with the masters of Talmudic law.

It was a deeply moving journey. Toward the end of the book, Wieseltier asks this provocative question. "The theology and the cosmology and the eschatology that are implied by the kaddish: is all this truth? I do not believe that it is," he replies. "Still, I have no patience with people who treat it as nonsense. And I do not regret for a moment that I was taught to believe it. When they taught me what they believed to be the truth, they taught me to believe that there is truth. They spared me the dizziness of my contemporaries."⁶

It is a gift to have teachers who care deeply for their students and who care deeply about the truth, even when we discover that we now inhabit a somewhat different world. In the concluding pages of his volume on *The Age of Faith*, Will Durant makes this comment about the Gothic cathedral: "one must forgive much to an age that loved so conscientiously the symbols of its faith and the work of its hands."⁷ In a similar way, we should forgive much to people who tried so hard to set our feet on the path to the celestial city.

5. Seek fellowship. The great journeys are seldom taken alone. And the journey of the spirit is no solitary quest. According to a story I once heard, some young people asked Blaise Pascal what they could do to develop their faith. The great thinker told them to go to the place where believers go. "Do what they do," he said. "Sing when they sing. Kneel when they kneel." You will find that faith can grow in the company of faith. Our model of authentic humanity is typically the isolated

individual searching bravely for knowledge, determined to find it on his own, ignoring religious tradition and religious organization. But the path of faith is not a solitary journey. It brings us into the company of faithful souls present and past, whose experience can strengthen and encourage us and whose deep convictions can guide us to our own.

Some people feel that a religious community is essentially a group of people who share the very same beliefs. Accordingly, if your views differ from the established pattern, then you need to move out on your own. Work things out for yourself. Find another group whose views are closer to yours. But there are other ways to think of community. A community is not just the end of the quest, nor is it just the beginning. It is the ideal environment in which all our questing takes place.

6. Make some distinctions between more and less important beliefs. People seem to have an all-or-nothing approach to religious ideas. One response is to keep them at any cost. The opposite response is to reject them all if you find a flaw anywhere.

I suggest another response: sort them out. Some things pass, but other things last. OK, not everything we thought was true turns out to be so. But that doesn't mean nothing we believed is true. Nor does it mean that we were wrong for believing it.

We must be ready to change our ideas, respectful of the old, but open to the new. Jaroslav Pelikan opens his magisterial multivolume study of the history of Christian thought by distinguishing between tradition and traditionalism. "Tradition," he says, "is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living."⁸ There is a right way and a wrong way to look at the past.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus asserted that some things will last till heaven and earth pass away. In the very same sermon he told his listeners to give up some of their cherished, time-honored beliefs. "You have heard that it was said," he repeatedly intoned, "but I say to you . . ." (e.g., Matt. 5:21-22, RSV). Jesus was neither an iconoclast nor a traditionalist. He knew the past could be a drag on progress. But he also knew it was the foundation for the future.

In the greatest chapter in all his letters, Paul acknowledged that some very important things can pass away. But we can live with that because there are even more important things that don't pass away: tongues, knowledge, prophecy—important gifts of the Spirit. Hard to understand what life would be like without them; but none of them lasts forever. "So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love" (1 Cor. 13:13, RSV).

A good friend of mine went through a terribly difficult time several years ago. He lost his job. He was forced out of denominational employment for reasons that were largely political. He had to make a major career change, leaving work for which he was supremely gifted and thoroughly educated. He moved in a completely different direction.

On a visit to the West Coast once he told me about a remarkable change in his thinking. "Several months ago," he said, "I went through a very dark time. I poured out my bitterness to God and blamed him for everything wrong in my life. And then something happened. I developed a new appreciation for the plain, basic truths of the Christian gospel. Jesus loves me. I am a child of God. Nothing can keep us apart. A miracle happened, he said. The clouds lifted, and peace filled my heart." When you separate what is essential from what is merely important, wonderful things can happen.

So, when what we learned in kindergarten makes little sense, let's be sure that the Center of the universe is the center of our lives. And let's remember the most important lesson of all—the first song many of us sang. "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

Notes and References

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3. Arnold, "Dover Beach," in *The New Oxford Book of English Verse: 1250-1950*, ed. Helen Gardner (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 703.
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5. Wieseltier, *Kaddish* (New York: Knopf, 1998).
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7. Durant, *The Age of Faith: A History of Medieval Civilization—Christian, Islamic, and Judaic—from Constantine to Dante: A.D. 325-1300*, part 4 of *The Story of Civilization* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1950), 1085.
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