

Self-control

This week I am looking at what we can learn from our children and today I am thinking about self-control. It is fascinating to watch the way young children learn. Our small grandchild is just growing out of the stage of rush and stagger. Wobbling across the room to a bulky threshold, he paused and looked down and said to his feet "Careful, toes."

This marks a special stage in learning; we begin by waving our arms and legs about, our parents making sure they catch us before we hurt ourselves. The next stage is when they tell us to stop, using the remote control of the voice (I'm reminded of the old joke of the Mother saying "Jane, go and see what baby's doing and tell him not to do it") and eventually we let our young make their own mistakes. Our Jamie's words illustrate an interesting intermediate point at which he has begun to take responsibility over his whole body, but still needs to remind himself to issue instructions to wayward bits.

This, on a very small scale, illustrates a stage in our own spiritual growth. We start by learning to listen to the one person who has power, we then assume power ourselves and only later realise the need for guidance, for a set of rules. These come either through our Civil Code of laws and social prohibitions or through the more vague, but wider, moral teachings we get from our parents or some external authority, such as a Priest or Rabbi or Imam or other respected person. In many cases we may then turn to some written authority, the Bible or Q'ran or other sacred text. which will usually need interpretation, and because of the different interpretations of these occasionally ambiguous texts, we often find ourselves divided from our fellows.

This is one step which we Quakers have managed to avoid. We believe that there is a Light which can illuminate everyone, but because we are constantly distracted by the immediate, we do not always pay attention, and we stumble. We pick ourselves up, hoping to do better next time. The discipline which we have found most useful is silent prayer, in everyday life and especially in our Meetings for Worship where we hope to be inspired or reminded, either personally or through others, of the principles which should be leading us. We do not want to be told what to do; we want to grow up and become responsible for our own actions, not relying on specific prohibitions from a book or an organisation - though we can and should learn

from both books and people. Our Meetings are like Jamie: we look at what is in front of us and say "Careful."

Richard Hilken

BBC.RadioDevon: 7 Oct 08

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