



Piero Ferrucci. **What Our Children Teach Us**. New York: Warner Books, 2001.

#### EXCERPTS

It is a lovely evening in late spring. The air is clear and I am walking the city streets with Jonathan, my second child, who at the time is a few months old. I

hold him in my arms, feel him close to me. After observing a passing parade of cars and people, he's about to fall asleep, and he chatters to himself, his voice like some strange chant, exquisitely sweet and beautiful.

I feel I have on my chest a treasure that has been entrusted to my wife Vivien and me. A miracle, whose growth I have the daily privilege of witnessing. Right now it is his voice that fills me with wonder: a voice that says nothing, as it cannot yet form words, but says everything, because you can hear in it the pleasure and tranquillity of a baby who is at peace, who surrenders to sleep.

I play with Emilio before going to work. At some point he sticks on my forehead a picture of a clown playing a trumpet. He is amused and we both laugh. After a while, I say good-bye and go to work. But I forget about the sticker. My psychotherapy clients don't tell me anything. I see that they have a funny expression today, all of them. For some mysterious reason, my sessions are better than usual; they are happy and uninhibited. Only in the evening, while driving home, do I realize that the sticker is still pasted to my forehead. I would describe it in this way: Emilio has disintegrated my professional role.

Before I had children, I would observe parents and feel a sense of superiority and self-satisfaction. Most parents seemed awkward and pathetic to me. I am a psychologist, and full of my psychological know-how, I used to note their

mistakes, secretly criticize them and offer a whole lot of advice. I was sure I could do better.

Now, two children later, I am a good deal humbler. All my theories have tumbled like a house of cards. Having fallen flat on my face many times, I have lost all certitude.

But no matter. In order to understand something and move on, we have to empty ourselves of our certainty and complacency. This is the first step.

Like every parent, I have been stung, squeezed out, wounded, reprogrammed, turned inside out, never let off the hook. How often have my children, with a diabolical instinct, touched those weak points I kept carefully concealed! These episodes have transformed me. In a hard and painful way, they have made me different from the person I was before, like no course of psychotherapy, no spiritual retreat, no meeting with an Oriental guru could have done.

Jonathan is crying. Why? Does he want cuddling, a clean diaper, does he want to go outside, or to eat? No, he is thirsty. I thought about what he might need and worked it out. My understanding makes not only him feel better, but me as well - not just because he stopped crying, but because each time I understand, something in me relaxes, and there is more light. Love, I think, is just this practical intelligence, knowing, moment to moment, what others need. Living with children is a continuous exercise, like a quiz with questions

of increasing difficulty, that put even the most empathic intelligence to the test.

Caring for another, I forget myself - and that is a marvelous gift. For many years I have been studying the processes of growth, how we can evolve, have better relations with others, free ourselves of blocks, enjoy beauty. I have concluded that we cannot grow deliberately. It happens by itself, like a flower that opens or a seed that sprouts. However, the right conditions must be there. The space in which we can grow and expand and breathe freely is too often cluttered with our anxieties, our struggles, or the very desire to grow. The more we think about ourselves, the less likely it is that we grow. If instead something worthwhile absorbs our attention - an idea, a value, another person - then we grow without even noticing it. We realize it afterward.

Raising children seems to me the best teaching of self-forgetfulness. Children's demands, so frequent and so clamorous, their rhythms, so pressing, leave little room for thinking about ourselves. We gradually become more disinterested, and act without expecting something in return.

Destination: play park, three blocks away. Emilio has discovered the tricycle. He pedals happily while I walk behind.

But reaching the playground takes us two hours. Our short walk becomes an adventure in a foreign land. We start with the no parking sign. Emilio wants to understand that mysterious red and blue circle with the oblique line, and why cars are not allowed there, and whether or not we can stop there, and who put up the sign, and what happens if a car does stop there, and who will come out of the driveway, and so on. Next we meet the little red man and the little green man at the traffic lights. What fun to watch them appear and to shout "Now" when they change into one another!

A billboard shows a child with a mouth in the shape of a triangle, eating a triangle biscuit. That fascinates Emilio. Out of a crack in the sidewalk grows a tiny flower worthy of attention. And how can we ignore the dog shit in the form of a six?

At first I am impatient. Weren't we heading to the play park? Well, then, go ahead and pedal, and stop wasting time. Let us stick to our plan. Soon, however, I realize that this short trip is a grand journey. It is not a boring urban road from A to B, but a microcosm.

I am in a waiting room with Jonathan. Not knowing how to spend the time with him, I roll up some bits of paper into four little balls. Jonathan is fascinated. He takes them one at a time, as if he were counting them, then gives them back to me. I make one disappear, and open my hand showing three balls. Jonathan immediately notices that one is missing. "Ooh!" he says. He waits for me to add it to the other three. After I have done so, he asks me to take it

away, then to take two, then three. There is a lady near us, watching. Jonathan gives her a little ball, then another, then returns to see how many I have left. He continues to play with the various combinations. Half an hour goes by in this fashion.

Jonathan, eight months, finds a plastic bottle. He takes it in his hands, examines it from many angles, lifts it to his mouth, puts it down, and watches it turn around and around before coming to a stop. His curiosity is aroused. He observes the plastic bottle for a time. He leaves it and moves away. Immediately he returns to it. Is the bottle still there, or has it disappeared? He repeats the sequence a number of times, rolls the bottle, and then takes it again in his hands to see if all these interactions have altered it in any way. Altogether he spends about twenty minutes with the bottle, his mind totally concentrated and absorbed by experimentation. I have accompanied him in this exercise, decided only to concentrate and to observe. At first I was feeling irritated and scattered. Now I am centered and whole. I has almost forgotten that I could pay attention so naturally and so undividedly.

Emilio, three years old, has been doing lots of jumps. He must have done a hundred of them. "Daddy, Daddy, look, how do you like this jump look" he says every time. "It's a new jump!" He is very proud of his jumps.

I like the first three or four. But after a while I get bored. There, in the middle of the play park, I let my mind wander; I become inattentive.

Don't get me wrong; I love my child a lot. Even before he was born I had decided that I would spend a lot of time with him. I was not going to be an absent father. Although we have a great relationship, after spending hour after hour with him, I have often caught myself looking at the watch, wondering when it was going to be my wife's turn to watch him. That's when I clock off, as we jokingly say, and am free.

My little boy tugs at my sleeve: "Look, do you like this jump? Watch me!" By now there is a touch of irritation in his voice, almost a threat. "It's a new jump!" I look at my watch again. How much time is left? Two more hours, and then I can have some peace and quiet.

It has become impossible to even read the newspaper with Emilio around. He considers it an insult. At the most, I can manage to read half a column, and then: "Daaaaaaddy! Watch my new jump!" Now his voice is trembling with exasperation, like a schoolteacher who catches a misbehaving student.

I watch. And at last I understand: It really is a new jump. The hundredth jump is as important as the first and deserves the same attention. Emilio gives this new jump all he has got. It is a jump with a turn, followed by a kind of ballet move. For him, it is a marvellous creation. He has just finished painting *The Last Supper*, discovering the New World, formulating the Theory of Relativity. How can I possibly drift off? It is an unforgivable lapse.

Watching his hundredth jump, I once again understand the importance of attention. Often, in speaking with someone about a subject close to my heart, I see from his eyes that he is somewhere else. He is probably thinking of something more important to him. The absence of mind has a disintegrating effect on me. When I lose someone's attention, I speak in an emptiness, my words are merely dry leaves, scattered here and there by the wind, till finally all that is left is the sad, dead winter.

I also know the uplifting feeling I experience when I am the recipient of someone's undivided attention, without judgement and expectations. Such a feeling warms me, tells me I am important, makes me whole again. I have found this out many times in my life, yet it is easy to forget.