

Become Like Children

Excerpt from The Way To Love by Anthony De Mello

The first quality that strikes one when one looks into the eyes of a child is its innocence: its lovely inability to lie or wear a mask or pretend to be anything other than what it is. In this the child is exactly like the rest of Nature. A dog is a dog; a rose, a rose; a star, a star; everything is quite simply what it is. Only the adult human being is able to be one thing and pretend to be another. When grown-ups punish a child for telling the truth, for revealing what it thinks and feels, the child learns to dissemble and its innocence is destroyed. Soon it will join the ranks of the numberless people who say helplessly, "I do not know who I am," for, having hidden the truth about themselves for so long from others, they end up by hiding it from themselves. How much of the innocence of childhood do you still retain, is there anyone today in whose presence you can be simply and totally yourself, as nakedly open and innocent as a child?

There is another more subtle way in which the innocence of childhood is lost: when the child is infected by the desire to become somebody. Contemplate the crowds of people who are striving might and main to become, not what Nature intended them to be – musicians, cooks, mechanics, carpenters, gardeners, inventors – but somebody: to become successful, famous, powerful; to become something that will bring, not quiet self-fulfillment, but self-glorification, self-expansion. You are looking at people who have lost their innocence because they have chosen not to be themselves but to promote themselves, to show off, even if it be only in their own eyes. Look at your daily life. Is there a single thought, word or action untainted by the desire to become somebody, even if all you seek to become is a spiritual success or a saint unknown to anyone except yourself? The child, like the innocent animal, surrenders to its nature to be and become quite simply what it is. Adults who have preserved their innocence also surrender like the child to the impulse of Nature or Destiny without a thought to become somebody or to impress others; but, unlike the child, they rely not on instinct, but on ceaseless awareness of everything in them and around them; that awareness shields them from evil and brings about the growth that was intended for them by Nature, not designed by their ambitious egos.

Here is another way that grown-ups corrupt the innocence of childhood: They teach the child to imitate someone. The moment you make the child a carbon copy you stamp out the spark of originality with which it came into the world. The moment you choose to become like someone else however great or holy, you have prostituted your being. Think sadly of the divine spark of uniqueness that lies within you, buried under layers of fear. The fear that you will be ridiculed or rejected if you dare to be yourself and refuse to conform mechanically in the way you dress and act and think. See how you conform not only in your actions and thoughts but even in your reactions, your emotions, your attitudes, your values. You dare not break out of this prostitution and reclaim your original innocence. This is the price you pay for the passport of acceptance by your society or organization. So you enter the world of the crooked and the controlled and are exiled from the kingdom that belongs to the innocence of childhood.

One final subtle way you destroy your innocence is when you compete and compare yourself with others. When you do that you exchange your simplicity for the ambition of wanting to be as good as someone else or even better. Think of this: The reason why the child is able to preserve its innocence and live like the rest of creation in the bliss of the kingdom is that it has not been sucked into what we call the world – that region of darkness inhabited by grown-ups whose lives are spent not in living but in courting applause and admiration: not in blissfully being themselves but in neurotically comparing and competing, striving for those empty things called success and fame even if they can be attained only at the expense of defeating, humiliating, destroying their neighbors. If you allow yourself to really feel the pains of this hell on earth, the utter emptiness it brings, you might experience within you a revolt, a disgust so powerful that it will shatter the chains of dependence and deceit that have been forged around your soul and you will break loose into the kingdom of innocence where mystics and children dwell.