

Slow It Down and Keep It Simple

☞ Give your child time to savor the moment ☞

Ours is a society that places a high value on achievement and acquisition. Do you find yourself speeding through life? Do you feel propelled forward by a relentless cycle of activities--your children's play dates, lessons, school, parties, etc.? Do you notice a subtle pressure to keep up with what other parents are offering their children? In this valley in particular, there is a "DO MORE" attitude that permeates the culture. It hangs in the air, unsettling parents and children alike. It makes parents question whether they are doing enough for their child. The result is often additional *stress* on families as they struggle to keep up. Parents find themselves busier than ever--but enjoying it less!

It's a new year. This is a good time to take stock of our family life and evaluate where we are and where we'd like to be. Maybe it's a good time to examine our priorities.

Most of us live on the run much of the time. We often feel pulled in multiple directions. Too often, we are in so great a hurry that we don't have (or make) the time to shape and enjoy the kinds of meaningful interactions that nurture a family and each of its members. Only by slowing down do we make time for one another. Only by stopping long enough to take stock of our lives can we make the small (or large) adjustments that are needed to stay on course and bring greater form and meaning to our lives. Our children need this kind of pause. And so do we.

Last year, one of our Mandala parents gave me a book that profoundly changed her life and the direction of her family. In fact, they ended up making a complete life transition as a result of rethinking their goals and family values. I want to share some of the thoughts from this book with you in this newsletter because the ideas are relevant to all of us. The book is a collection of reflections for "mothers in a hurry" called *Mitten Strings For God*, by Katrina Kenison. She is a writer and editor, a mother who works part time, not unlike many of us who juggle family and career. Hers is a heartfelt book that speaks to every mother who longs for a slower pace and a chance to savor her life and the precious people in it. (Note: this is not a religious book, but it does speak to the value of encouraging "heart" and "spirit" in our children.)

THE "SHOULD'S"

"So often, we do things because we think we should...or for fear of being judged or left out if we don't... or because everyone else is doing them.



How good it feels to release ourselves from "shoulds" and to tune into a different rhythm...to have a life that is rich, but not hectic."

CHOICES

It's easy to forget, Kenison reminds us, that most of us *can* make choices about our lives. "We have the freedom--more so, perhaps, than any previous generation--to define our lives, to live according to our values, to set our own boundaries." We have all been influenced by the pressures of our times. But we may need to remind ourselves that we do not need to judge our daily lives by how much we accomplish. There is real value in simply *being present* to our children and family in the time we have. With this in mind, let's open ourselves to taking a look at what each of us really wants for our family.

SIMPLICITY

Have we lost the knack of “appreciating the ordinary”? Do we “do too much and savor too little”? Are we setting the bar too high—for ourselves and our children? Are we slipping into over-indulgence?

When we take on too much, or when we feel compelled to turn small “doings” into big ones, or when we fall prey to our child’s insistence that he have the latest piece of electronic equipment, we often realize (when stewing with resentment) that *we* are the ones who complicate our own lives. Just think about it. It’s no longer good enough to create a Halloween costume from the dress-up bin. Our children now need elaborate costumes from the store. Dying Easter eggs used to be done with vinegar and food coloring alone. Now we suffer guilt pangs if we don’t buy the special kit that marbelizes and the one with glitter and stencils, too. Birthday parties, which used to consist of birthday cake and ice cream and a few friends, have become all-out affairs that take the planning of a wedding!

We have been sucked into the thinking of our culture that tells us “living well means partaking of all that is offered.” Marketing companies have gotten very good at finding new ways of creating in us desires for things that didn’t even exist a generation ago. What’s the result? We frequently end up offering too much to our children and taking on too much ourselves.

“We mistake activity for happiness and so we stuff our children’s days with activities and their heads with information, when we ought to be feeding their spirits instead.”

What message do our own excesses send our children? Kenison suggests that in our efforts to create special occasions for our children, we may be losing sight of what’s really important. She wonders if these elaborate productions may be “crowding out the kinds of simple, heart-felt celebrations that truly enrich our lives and delight our children.” Young children do not require a lot to make something special. In fact, young children are actually much happier (and have fewer meltdowns) when they are not overwhelmed by countless choices and too much stimulation.

All parents confess to how difficult it is to state with conviction, “THAT IS ENOUGH” – whether it is enough activities on Saturday, enough guests at a birthday party, or enough stories at bedtime. It’s hard to feel confidence in our own choices and limits when everybody around us seems so sure that *more* is better! But there is another way. We can take back control. We can make small inroads by making different choices. We can introduce simplicity into our lives. Here are a few ideas:

☞ Downscale holiday celebrations. Keep the focus on family, on meaningful rituals and

traditions, and on simple activities. Give fewer gifts and take more time to enjoy them. When asked, children often remember the simple things they loved the most (i.e.: listening to Christmas stories huddled around the fire, an annual dinner with the neighbors next door, a trip downtown to see the holiday lights, etc.)

☞ Set a limit on holiday gatherings. More is not always better! Celebrate birthdays in a way that honors the qualities you love in your child. They don’t have to be big productions. Make them expressions of love instead--a special meal, an outing with a friend, a birthday ritual carried on year after year. (Note: The author has a birthday candle waiting for each child on the breakfast table, and at dinner time each family member offers a birthday wish for the coming year.)

☞ Remember the *process* is more important than the outcome!! Whether you are decorating the Christmas tree, making

latkes, or coloring Easter eggs, remember to keep the process simple and your child will enjoy it more.

☞ Set limits and stick to them. For instance, in one home, the children are not allowed to wear their Halloween costumes until Halloween night. It’s hard, but the anticipation builds for the kids.

☞ You don’t have to prove anything to anybody. Birthdays don’t have to be blow-outs. A dinner party can be a potluck.

☞ Celebrate small blessings and offbeat occasions. Once we take the pressure off ourselves to do things in a big way, we

find more reasons to celebrate life’s little moments. Make a cake for getting toilet trained, for “sleeping in your own bed,” or for a half-birthday. Celebrate the first day of spring or the first day of school with a special poem or song or snack. It doesn’t take much to connect us to the natural order of things. For children, everyday holds potential for celebration and ceremony!

“Yesterday we colored our own Easter eggs. I kept it simple. Five bowls of colored water. There was magic enough in that.”

WANTS vs. NEEDS

Every one of us feels the lure. On the one hand, we wish to live simply (without as much fuss), but on the other hand, we feel drawn to buy new things, go to beautiful places, or have new experiences. Our children experience similar desires. They want every new toy that is advertised on television, every new cereal they see on the aisle in the grocery store. As parents, we are constantly challenged by our children’s whining, pleading, and bargaining. It’s exhausting!

We know that our children often cannot distinguish between that they WANT and what they NEED. That's what makes them such easy prey for advertisers. They want what they see. But we adults are not all that different, says Kenison. We, too, get confused. Unfortunately, many of us get so buffeted by the media's demand for our attention and so inundated by consumer goods, that "we have little sense of our own genuine needs from one minute to the next—let alone those of our children."

When we feel good about what we have right now, we teach our children a valuable lesson.

◆
We help them accept that they can't have everything they want, and we reassure them that they *do* have everything they need.

When we fail to distinguish real needs from wants, we focus on what we don't have--rather than the abundant gifts that are already ours, Kenison reminds us. "When we are consumers, we teach our children that it is good to consume. When we try to resolve conflicts or buy happiness by spending money, we teach our children to look outside themselves when they feel needy. We are living in a consumer society that resolves around instant gratification. We shop for recreation and spend and buy things we don't really need. Unless we want our children to perpetuate this kind of materialism, we must show them another way. We must give them faith that their real needs (for love, attention, and acceptance) will be met."

- ☞ Reassure your children that they DO have everything they need, even though they may want more.
- ☞ Help your child learn to wait in small ways and develop patience.
- ☞ Make gratefulness a daily practice. Have your child tell you "One thing I am thankful for..." every night.
- ☞ Lead by example. Be aware of your own impulse shopping.
- ☞ Talk about how you really want something because the TV ads make it look so good, but you are going to *think* about whether you really *need* it or not.
- ☞ Children learn by hearing us talk about how we make decisions. Let your children hear how you decide to make purchases.

QUIET

One common symptom of modern life is that there is little time for thought. Being quiet in an "age of noise" can be a real challenge. But we each need quiet moments for contemplation and reverie. We need quiet to let our impressions of the day sink in. Creativity flourishes in these spaces. Children need this just as much as adults do.

Try clearing a space for silence if the noise of modern life has seeped into every corner of your home:

- ☞ Be conscious of all the different kinds of noise that you allow into your life. Begin to eliminate any that don't enhance the present moment.
- ☞ Start and end each day with a time of quiet throughout your home.
- ☞ Protect your children from noise overdoses. Allow them to grow in—and to grow into—silence.
- ☞ The best sound effects are those that children make themselves. Avoid too much of electronic games that talk, beep, or make other noises.
- ☞ Turn off the sound track in your life. If your family has grown accustomed to television or music as background noise, experiment with intervals of silence.
- ☞ Begin meals with "quiet bites"--a few minutes of centering silence. Then enjoy one another's company without the accompaniment of the TV or CD player.

"I know a mother who came upon her two-year old sitting alone, lost in a day dream, and she worried that he was 'wasting time'."

RECIPE FOR PRESERVING CHILDREN

Ingredients:

1 grass-grown field
several dogs and puppies (if available)
pebbles and sand
1/2 dozen children or more
1 brook

Method:

Into field, pour children and dogs, allowing to mix well.
Pour brook over pebbles, until slightly frothy.
When children are nicely brown, cool in warm bath.
When dry, serve with milk and freshly baked gingerbread.

Old Family Recipe (K.K.)

☞ Thoughtful parenting requires time to THINK. Give yourself a few quiet moments alone first thing in the morning to lay down the foundations of your day. It can help you sort out your own priorities and start the day in a more peaceful state of mind.

PLAY

Have you ever thought about why we over-structure our kids? If we're honest, much of the structure that we impose on our children's lives is really intended to make our own lives easier. Kenison contends that we don't want to give up our freedom and so we fail to grant our children theirs. It's easier to sign up for sports or science camp for a week that to allow children to follow their own inclinations at home. Every mom understands this. But the next time you think about fitting in another "worthwhile" activity for your

child, think about his or her *developmental need* for unstructured, unorganized play time.

Children need havens from the adult world. All children need time that is utterly their own. Children need time to dream, time to create secret places, time to let their imaginations run wild. They need closets to hide in, a patch of dirt behind the garage to dig in, bugs examine under rocks and bushes. Children need freedom to explore. This is the source of wonder and mystery for all children. In free play, children make discoveries and let their imaginations take them to far away places.

Believe it or not, play in this form is as critical to a child's development as formal education. Children who have time for play develop rich inner resources. They later draw from this source to help them solve problems, comfort themselves emotionally, and get along with others.

Give your child the gift of a day without a schedule:

- ☞ Turn off the TV.
- ☞ Turn a deaf ear to any whining that "I'm bored." It's not your job to entertain. This is an opportunity for creativity to grow.
- ☞ Give your child a pile of boxes and a stack of pillows.
- ☞ Offer an old card table with sheets and blankets for tent-making.
- ☞ Or, hand him a pail and shovel and send him out back.

The rest he'll do for himself!!

MEAL TIMES

Family meal times may be at the top of the list of social institutions that may not survive into the twenty-first century. Nearly all of us grew up gathering around the family table on most nights that we were called to dinner, year in and year out. But today, our crazy schedules "pull us away from the table and each other." We quickly grab fast foods on the way from one activity to another. Rarely do parents feel like they have the time to be home preparing and serving meals. Ask any mother and she'll tell you that she wonders if it's even worth the effort. There's the shopping, the preparation, the complaining about the food, the disruptive behavior—who needs it? (It can easily feel like we're putting out more than we get back.) So we wonder...is this ritual really worth preserving after all?

"After many struggles...I finally realized that dinner—at least at this stage of our lives—is not really *about* food.



It is about love, and about learning how to be together."

Kenison reminds us quite beautifully that meals are about more than food. Meals are a time when we "reweave our connections with each other." If we give up the very customs that bind us, she cautions, we run the risk of losing each other, both physically and emotionally.

It's easy to skip the frills when feeding children and we're in a hurry, but "our children learn powerful lessons right here, in their homes, at their own tables." Remember that children who grow up in an atmosphere of thoughtfulness and courtesy will become thoughtful and courteous themselves. Maybe it's time to rethink our goals and aim for a congenial mealtime, letting go of the rest. Maybe we should abandon our role as "the food police" and try to restrain ourselves from nagging and negotiating about food. There are more important lessons being taught.

If your family has lost touch with the simple pleasures of mealtime, Kenison's suggestions may inspire you to return to the table together:

- ☞ Few of us can manage a family dinner every night of the week, but we can surely commit ourselves to one or two. If you can't come together at dinnertime, do Sunday breakfast instead. Be flexible with the arrangements, but honor your commitment to the goal of gathering as a family to nourish bodies and souls.
- ☞ Create a mood of warmth and celebration at your table. Light candles, arrange place settings with care, pick a bouquet of flowers, or invite your children to devise a centerpiece. (The author says her family uses candles nearly every night throughout the fall and winter and usually cloth napkins and placements, too.) Children love ceremony and given the opportunity, will generally rise to the occasion. Even a humble meal is enhanced by candlelight.
- ☞ Agree that TV's and stereos and other background noise will be turned off, so that you can tune in to each other. Let the answering machine pick up the phone. If you treat your time together as a special occasion, so will your children.
- ☞ Keep conversation to subjects that invite everyone's participation. This is not the time to air the day's grievances or describe the latest

AFTERNOON TEA

One dark, rain afternoon, I found myself out on the road at 4:00, running errands with two tired, hungry children in the backseat. My husband was out of town and it suddenly occurred to me that there was no rule requiring dinner at six. We could have tea at 4:30 instead. I pulled into the bakery for scones and cake, and we headed for home. While the kids set the table with china teacups and flowered napkins, I cut cheese into little cubes, washed strawberries, made tiny peanut-butter sandwiches, arranged our treats on pretty plates, brewed a pot of mint tea. My two robust sons were completely enchanted. We sat down together, lit the candles, and feasted until not a crumb was left, just delighted with ourselves. There was no need of dinner and the rest of the evening stretched before us like a gift.

(K.K.)

controversy at the office. Enjoy one another's company instead. (One family has great fun with Table Talk cards, each of which asks a provocative question meant to get everyone thinking and talking. There's a children's version and one for adults, too.)

- ☞ Figure out what is most important to you at mealtime and try to achieve that. Keep the ground rules firm and simple. (Example: require your children to try one bit of everything, to refrain from complaining about the food, and to carry their plates to the sink when they are through.) Be realistic about your expectations. Be relaxed about the things beyond your control. Strive for harmony. Keep the mood light, and don't get sucked into arguments! Remember – aim for progress, not perfection!
- ☞ Excuse the children when they have finished, then treat yourself to some adult conversation. You can teach your children that you expect to be left alone (set a timer!) for a few minutes at the end of dinner and they can learn to keep themselves occupied. Just because children are capable of eating a meal in ten minutes doesn't mean parents have to. One mom even demands those few quiet minutes, at the end of dinner, when she's home alone with her kids.
- ☞ Be spontaneous. Do something creative and different. Take an idea or two from the author's delightful story about her afternoon tea with her two young boys.

EARTH'S BLESSING

Earth who gives to us this food,
Sun who makes it ripe and good,
Dearest earth and dearest sun,
We'll not forget what you have done.
Blessings on our meal and each other.

values and *your* beliefs. Some families hold hands and say thanks together. Others recite a simple blessing (see box for an idea). Others ask each person to say one thing they are grateful for or "tell one good thing" that happened to them that day.

☞ Invite guests to dinner. A guest is a surefire way to turn an ordinary meal into a celebration. Children love to make room at the table for one or two more, and they are as delighted to have their friends over for dinner as we adults are to have ours. Encourage them to take part in helping with the meal, even if it's just English muffin pizzas!

☞ Start your own "Gratefulness Ritual." Children love rituals and traditions. Rituals like these make us aware of the abundance we *do* have. Make your rituals fit *your* family, *your*

BREATHING

Karina Kenison talks about "breathing" as a wonderful practice to teach our children. She reminds us that "breathing is the essence of life, the link between our bodies and the world around us." I couldn't agree more. I found her comments especially interesting, since breathing is one simple tool I have been using often lately with young children who are having a difficult time "slowing their motor down" or "calming the volcano in their tummy." The teachers have been using deep breathing in the classroom, too. It's amazing. It really works! Now some children are able to quickly switch gears (when starting to get upset) and do their deep breathing instead, with only a small prompt from their teacher.

Breathing in, I calm my body.
Breathing out, I smile.

Thich Nhất Hạnh

Helping children learn to calm themselves after a tantrum or an "emotional hurricane" teaches them a strategy to regain control of themselves. Try this the next time your child is flattened by her emotions. Watch for a particular moment that you can intervene and say, "Let's take a deep breath..." (One, two, three, four...). Breathe with your child, finding a rhythm that calms and soothes, together. In doing this, your child is not only reconnecting to her body, but also to you.

When we help children to breathe deeply, we are "guiding them into a safe haven, a place where they can release their pain and anger and come back to center again." With practice, children will eventually learn to do this for themselves. The Eastern traditions have long known the secrets of deep breathing as a practice that brings inner peace. There is wisdom here for us as adults, as well. When we are overwhelmed by our own windstorms, we might gently remind ourselves to breathe in calmly...and count to ten!

BALANCE

We want to do so much for our children, to give them everything they need to grow and succeed. At the same time, we want to live our own lives fully – to be productive and creative and useful. One of the greatest challenges to parents is how to nourish our children – and nourish ourselves, too. This is the quest for balance we are all in search of. For each family, the choices will be unique and different.

RED FLAGS OF IMBALANCE

1. Resentment
2. Fatigue
3. Depression
4. Whining Kids
5. Cranky Adults
6. Unexplained Tummy Aches

What about your family? Are things out of balance? Look at the "red flags" in the box and take an honest inventory. Resentment and exhaustion are two of the greatest 'spirit killers' in parenting. Each of us has a list to make. Think about your own days and weeks. Take a good hard look at your schedule. Then do the same for your children.

Now is the time to examine your choices and make decisions thoughtfully from the heart. Learning to live in balance is always a challenge.

- ☞ **What are the things that you absolutely have to do?** Write them down. If the list seems overwhelming, brainstorm some ways to shorten it. What can you delegate? Can you possibly hire someone to help? What would you eliminate if you had to? (Forget about what people will think of you if you do!) What do you want to rethink for the future? Remember, your children need you every day, and it is up to you to be in good shape for the job. You're not the only one who pays a price when you take on too much; they do, too!
- ☞ **What are the things that you love to do?** Are you doing them? If not, make at least one of them a top priority. Balance means taking care of yourself as well as those who are dependent on you for their well-being.
- ☞ **What are the activities and obligations that steal your time?** How could you get some of that time back? Karina Kennison tells this story: "Three years ago, spurred on by a magazine article, my next-door neighbors and I formed a working co-op. One night a week, I make dinner for two other families as well as my own. In return, they each make

☞ ENOUGH ☞

"With our pitchers we attempt sometimes to water a field, not a garden," wrote Anne Morrow Lindbergh. How easy it is to find ourselves sprinkling droplets over a field, spreading ourselves too thin, giving without replenishing, accomplishing nothing of real value. And so I strive to keep my garden small, but to care for it joyfully and well. We bloom here.

When I keep my balance, I feel empowered, for I am guided then not by fear or pressure, but by the small, quiet voice within that whispers, "Enough."

By author Katrina Kenison

dinner for our three families on the following nights. We keep the food simple and good; and those who are receiving dinner are responsible for picking it up, in their own bowls, at six. This arrangement has been a great success because it gives all of us a bit more time. If you're cooking anyway, it's easy enough to make more—especially when the payoff is two nights off."

- ☞ **Which of your undertakings get in the way of the simpler life you wish to lead?** Which activities complicate your life; which truly enhance it? One woman's son hated his piano lessons and was making slow progress. She hated the hour-long commute there and back every week. But when asked her why she was insisting on something they both dreaded, she replied, "It just seems as though he *should* learn piano. Shouldn't every kid play an instrument?" This spring they quit. Mother and son decided that they would spend Monday afternoons rollerblading together instead—a happy decision for both.



So often we do things because we think we should, or for fear of being judged or left out if we don't, or because everyone else is doing them, or because our children want to sample every new activity they hear their friends talking about. In the midst of this conundrum, Kenison gives us hope. She models a different way, sharing her experiences of letting go of the non-essentials in her family's life in order to find more balance. "How good it feels," she writes, "to release ourselves from 'shoulds' and to tune into a different rhythm—to do things just for the fun of it, to have a life that is rich but not rushed, happy but not hectic." What did she find? Freedom. Just that.



Remember, balance is not an achievement. It is a journey. We are always on the way there. Above all, remember that it's not what we *do* as mothers or fathers, but who we *are* as human beings that will make the most deep and lasting impressions on our children.

• How To Find Our Balance •

Thoughts for Reflection...

- Is what we're doing now working for us as a family? (Are there Red Flags?)
- Is our lifestyle giving my child the core values I want him or her to take into adulthood?
- What does my child *really* need in order to be successful in life?
- Childhood is about "process"—not "product"!
- Are there alternatives to what we're doing now?
- What is important for me? For my child? For us as a family?
- "Balance" is an individual family thing.
- What would bring us more balance and reflect our core family values?
- What fear holds me /us back from making changes?

What do I see in my family?

List any red flags...

- ❖
- ❖
- ❖
- ❖

Finding My Own Answers...

- ❖ What is giving me the most satisfaction now?
- ❖ What most "stresses me out"?
- ❖ Which activities truly meet my child's needs?
- ❖ Which things are too stressful for my child?

Sources

Mitten Strings For God: Reflections For Mothers In A Hurry by Katrina Kenison, Time Warner, c.2000.

Busy But Balanced: Practical and Inspirational Ways to Create A Calmer, Closer Family by Mimi Doe, Griffin, c.2001.

