

Paradise Lost: The Nine-Year Change

Matthew was an angel as a young child – sensitive, well-behaved, affectionate, often joyful, and often dreaming away on another plane. After turning nine, however, he soon changed into quite a different person. He was sometimes rude and critical, and often moody if not downright wretched. He had definitely come crashing down to earth, but what a rude awaking for those around him!

Child development specialists have long recognized that between ages nine and ten children undergo a marked change. Some experts describe this transition as the crossing of the dividing line between early childhood and full childhood, while others speak in more romantic terms of a “fall from grace.” The psychologist Louise Bates Ames has written a series of parent guides describing each year of child development. While her book on the eight-year-old bears the subtitle “Lively & Outgoing,” the book on age nine bears the more somber “Thoughtful & Mysterious” as its subtitle. So what is going on?

Almost a century ago, Rudolf Steiner studied the developmental stages of childhood. He identified three seven-year stages in the child’s passage from birth to adulthood. At birth the child emerges as an independent physical being in the world. But according to Steiner, the unique individuality or ego of the child incarnates or takes hold of this body only gradually. In each of the seven-year stages, the ego manifests itself more fully.

The first glimmer of this individuality occurs when the child turns two. Taking place partway through the first seven-year period (birth to age seven), this stage of development is commonly known as “the terrible twos”! What makes this time terrible is that the child is making his first concerted effort to be recognized as a separate person. An important milestone in this process occurs when, usually around the third birthday, the child begins to use the word “I” and to really understand what the word means.

The second seven-year period (age seven through fourteen) is also marked by a significant watershed after the second year. This is “the nine-year change” or “nine-year crisis,” that Matthew experienced. It is a confusing transition for child and parents that may involve moments of crisis that are a preview of things to come during adolescence.

In the third seven-year period – fourteen through twenty-one- there is another important milestone, also after the end of the second year. Around the sixteenth birthday, the adolescent begins to manifest a deeper sense of self and a fuller maturity. This fuller incarnation of the ego is acknowledged in the tradition of sweet sixteen celebrations for girls and in giving sixteen-year-olds the right to learn to drive an automobile, to work, and to leave school if they wish.

Prior to age seven or eight, most children are sunny, smiling, exuberant, joyful beings – little angels, for the most part. Around the ninth birthday, however, a tinge of melancholy and self-consciousness begins to creep in. Up to this time, the child has lived and learned through imitation, taking the world around and echoing its moods and its patterns. Now, though, the harmonious resonance between child and the world quickly fades. The child begins to separate from the world and finds herself standing apart and alone.

This shift in the experience of self and world is, of course, difficult for the child. In developing Waldorf education, Steiner tried to help children learn the story of Adam and Eve and the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Also, in most Waldorf schools, there is during the Christmas season a performance by adults in the community of the "The Paradise Play," a medieval play that vividly depicts this same story of the loss of innocence and the leaving of Paradise. The children are allowed to watch this play only after they have entered the third grade. The story of Adam and Eve is meaningful for nine-year-olds because they are going through their own inner expulsion from Paradise.

Billy Collins, a Poet Laureate of the United States, poignantly captures the essence of this age in a poem called "On Turning Ten":

The whole idea makes me feel
Like I'm coming down with something,
Something worse than any stomach ache
Or the headaches I get from reading in bad light –
A kind of measles of the spirit,
A mumps of the psyche,
A disfiguring chicken pox of the soul.
You tell me it is too early to be looking back,
But that is because you have forgotten
The perfect simplicity of being one
And the beautiful complexity introduced by two.
But I can lie on my bed and remember every digit,
At four I was an Arabian wizard.
I could make myself invisible
By drinking a glass of milk a certain way.
At seven I was a soldier, at nine a prince.
But now I am mostly at the window
Watching the late afternoon light.
Back then it never felt so solemnly
Against the side of my tree house,
And my bicycle never leaned against the garage
As it does today,
All the dark blue speed drained out of it.
This is the beginning of sadness, I say to myself,
As I walk through the universe in my sneakers.
It is time to say good-bye to my imaginary friends,
Time to turn the first big number.
It seems only yesterday I used to believe
There was nothing under my skin but light.
If you cut me I would shine.
But now when I fall upon the sidewalk of life,
I skin my knees, I bleed.

This is a time of irritability and unsure ness, of trepidation and aloneness. The young child's experience of being part of the world vanishes and she now must learn to stand on her own.

The eidetic or photographic memory of early childhood usually disappears and the child needs to learn to memorize. Emotionally, the child experiences a withdrawal into the self for perhaps the first time, a shutting out of the outside world.

The nine-year-old child can feel constrained by both space and time. Like the adolescent, the child now wants more independence and privacy. The nine-year-old may begin wanting his own room or private play space if he does not already have that. He especially needs space from siblings to read or to just think – or to stare out at the late afternoon light. This new desire for privacy and solitude can be unsettling for the parent: “My little baby is becoming a stranger with an inner, private life of which I cannot be part!”

The nine-year-old typically likes to plan her days and to know what is coming ahead of time. She also feels pressured and anxious about getting done all that she has to do. Now there are chores, music to practice, homework, after school lessons and sports. The parent needs to respect the nine-year-old’s continuing need for non-organized time for play and for just dreaming. Wise parents teach their children, by word and by example, to take one thing at a time and to undertake only what they can comfortably manage. Parents may even take the initiative to limit the child’s activities.

The nine-year-old child is yearning for autonomy, but parental warmth, affection, and support continue to be important. Though the child can be irritable and seems to want to push away, he still needs hugs and comforting from the adults around him. A nine-year-old will sometimes hover near a parent wanting and waiting for a reassuring hug, but hesitant to ask for it. A child will sometimes be more prickly and hypersensitive with one parent more than the other, this being affected by the respective temperaments of child and parents. Sometimes one parent needs to step back and let the other be more involved with the child.

Many children have some psychosomatic symptoms around this time. Heart palpitations, breathing problems, and headaches are not unusual. Nine-year-olds tend to be worriers and some physical symptoms may be related to that. Nightmares – dreams of being chased or being bitten by a snake or even of being murdered – are common and no reason for great concern. Dreams of storms and runaway fires are also frequent.

For the nine-year-old, suddenly cut off from the world, forced to stand on her own, and beset perhaps by physical problems, anxiety is a dominant emotion. Hence, the child depends on the structure and guidance that watchful adults can give to provide stability and a sense of security. The child needs the solid authority of teachers and a firm parental presence. Otherwise she will be overwhelmed by a sense of insecurity.

The nine-year-old likes to have rules. Adults need to be fair and consistent in enforcing them, however. Fairness is important for the nine-year-old. Though sensitive to being corrected, the child will accept remonstrance and even punishment if it seems just and if blame is shared by all responsible. That is because, along with his greater self-sufficiency, the nine-year-old is developing a conscience, and internal arbiter of what is right and what is wrong. He recognizes when he has failed to do right and will even confess a wrongdoing.

to adults because of an uneasy conscience. The nine-year-old expects honesty, fairness and truthfulness from others – and from himself.

Usually during the ninth year, the child begins to reflect on issues such as evil and death. The fairy tales heard at an earlier age have helped prepare the child for meeting the world and its realities. But now the dreamy young child is much more awake and conscious and it is a fairy tale no longer. In grappling with these newly-serious issues, the child experiences that she has something or someone inside that can stand up to these frightening external realities. Some parents change the bedtime prayer at this point to help with the new challenges the child is encountering. When my own two sons were very young, my wife and I used a very simple verse that emphasized protection:

When I go to sleep at night
An angel watches over me
And fills my soul with flooding light
And guides me to the stars so bright
And blesses me each morning....

After our older son turned nine, we switched to something more complex, stressing uprightness and connection to others:

From my head to my feet, I am the image of God.
From my heart to my hands, His own breath do I feel.

When I speak with my mouth, I follow God's will.
When I behold God everywhere, in mother and father,
In all dear people,
In beast and in flower, in tree and in stone,
Nothing brings fear, but love to all that is around me....

Through nine-year-olds may lose the interest in religion they had as eight-year-olds and may not want to go to church or Sunday school, they will pray.

The Waldorf curriculum seeks to help the child in dealing with these challenges. In the third grade, when most of the children are early in the nine-year change and are interested in hearing about people's connection to God, they learn stories from the Old Testament. The fourth grade curriculum provides a quite different experience with the study of the Norse myths. In these, the gods – like the children themselves and also their parents and teachers – have weaknesses, flaws, and moral lapses and can be criticized. These stories give the children the imagination that they are brave warriors who must struggle against adverse conditions. The children live with images of the mighty Thor battling with his hammer and Vulcan beating iron at his forge. In speech exercises and in eurythmy class, the students stamp their feet to alliterative verses such as, "I war with the wind, with the waves, I wrestle..." In many schools, the children engage in outdoor adventure activities during the fourth grade, activities that challenge them to overcome fears and limitation. Also, the introduction of homework indicates to the child that the time has come for more serious things.

The change that children undergo between ages nine and ten can be confusing and challenging for parents, teachers as well as for the children themselves. We adults need to be aware that these changes represent a necessary stage in the development of the child and that they do not go on forever. Also, we need to provide love, support and guidance to our children during this transitional time of inwardness and loneliness. And we need to be ready to let go of our "little angels" and accept them as unfolding young men and women in the making. In the end, this stage will lead to a new self-assurance and sense of independence and identity in the child.

The fourth grade class often does a verse in movement based on the five-pointed star. As the child experiences himself as this star, with two arms, two legs and head as the five points, the verse by Steiner expresses the self-empowerment that is the ideal for the next stage of childhood:

Steadfast I'll stand in the world,
With certainty I'll tread the path of life,
Love I'll cherish I the depths of my being,
Hope shall be in all my doing,
Confidence I'll impress into my thinking.

