

MEETINGS WITH REMARKABLE EDUCATORS

PODCAST TRANSCRIPTION OF

Marcia Ososke

with host

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Meetings with Remarkable Educators

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Ba Luvmour: Welcome to ***Meetings With Remarkable Educators***. This podcast is brought to you in part by you, our friends and supporters at patreon.com/remarkableeducators. Each podcast is a dialogue between me, Ba Luvmour, and an educator who sees the greatness in their students and touches the whole of their being. These educators defy generalizations. So here's a little bit about what they've done and how I know them.

Who doesn't expand in nature; who doesn't understand that connection with nature brings connection to ourselves? Thankfully more and more people appreciate nature and have started to see it as integral to education. Yes, but who has the courage to start a school with engagement with nature as the basis for all education? Not many, but today's guest, Marcia Ososke, is one such person. I believe she embodies a core feature of holistic education. Marcia is cofounder of the John Muir Magnet School in Ashland, Oregon, a K-8 natural sciences and outdoor art school where students spend at least one day a week outdoors and often comment that it feels more like a family than a school. As students stretch their personal boundaries through empowering personal and group challenges, hands on projects and backpacking trips where they learn both self and team reliance.

She's highly involved in holistic education on many levels and is proud and grateful to have collaborated with many Southern Oregon University colleagues in their recent book, *Imagine a Place: Stories from Middle Grades Educators* [Marcia Ososke wrote chapter 5]. Her personal passions include multi day rafting trips, biking, back country snowboarding, backpacking, gardening, and just about everything outdoors. This fuels her desire and her fire for getting students outside as much as possible and helping them soulfully connect to the natural world.

So, I attended your workshop seminar this morning and I was blown away in such a great way because I've been a practitioner and author in terms of activities that bring forth a sense of who we are and even our academic skills. And you seem to have taken that to a degree I never did. So what pulls you? What pulls you?

Marcia Ososke: I have a quote that I don't know who said, but the quote that says that, “we do not quit playing because we grow old...”

Ba Luvmour: George Bernard Shaw.

Marcia Ososke: That is it, you're correct.

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- Ba Luvmour: Yes, I have it. It's in my book.
- Marcia Ososke: Nice. But of course we know that we all need to keep playing. And to me that, and I'm not even finishing the quote, but that is my passion. So playfulness and it's ... I feel like we can do that everywhere. We can bring it everywhere and in everything we do and then we will never grow old.
- Ba Luvmour: So you do it through these incredibly intelligent icebreakers that develop community that call forth our different skill sets. Are you evaluating students while you do that? I don't mean in some sort of distant way, but are you getting a meaningful sense of their strengths, their weaknesses, their ways of interacting?
- Marcia Ososke: You're getting all those things that you never ... people that are so focused on data and spreadsheets and assessment, the things that you can't always really show. But it's so incredibly present and prevalent. And yeah, sometimes I'm just playing with them. Other times I'm spying a little bit to see who I should put in intense group or in a hiking group or who might work well together, who might have certain leadership capabilities or who might not know how to step back and not always be the leader. And so I think I am constantly looking at that. All the layers involved with our personalities. And when it's a group challenge, I think the most important part is recognizing that we're all trying to be successful as a group, but that sometimes we have to take a step outside of our comfort zone to help someone else do the same.
- Ba Luvmour: The ... I'm trying to formulate this question. Do you ever choose certain games because you want to either see a certain thing with a student or among students or as a way to further say interpersonal skill-building or something like that?
- Marcia Ososke: Definitely. I think you can be super strategic with that. I think that when I know that my group needs healing in a certain area, I can sneak in a game that I know will incorporate that healing. But it's not ... I'm not going to directly lecture it. I'm not going to point it out even it's going to be more of a self-discovery, just inquiry based kind of thing. And as I facilitate it, asking them questions of what came up for them, what was challenging or are they growing through this? Most definitely.
- Ba Luvmour: So you are working at the John Muir in, do you call it an outdoor school?

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- Marcia Ososke: We are ... our focus is on the outdoors so we teach all. We have to teach a lot of the same state standards, national standards, but we always get to say that how we teach it is up to us. So our kids are outside at least one day a week usually up to about 50 days a year though. So it's more than that.
- Ba Luvmour: So this is an Oregon Charter School.
- Marcia Ososke: It is not. It's a public school, but we are a magnet school with our draw towards the outdoors and natural sciences and arts.
- Ba Luvmour: So tell us, how do you bring science, math, and the subjects parents have so much concern about to the children through the outdoors and then also tell us how you let the parents believe in that?
- Marcia Ososke: Yeah. I find it easier to ask them to just kind of hang on and watch this and see what happens. Yeah. I can give you some samples of lessons. So anybody who's going to go on a hike would want to know, how long would it take to get there? Anything like that. So an example would be a pacing with math and science and I can tie in reading a topographic map, reading contour lines, checking the weather, checking your physical abilities, knowing the lowest common denominator of our group in terms of physical needs and abilities. And starting kids with measuring down the hallway as simplistically as that gets and measuring their pace after predicting it. And then they can graph it and chart it and measure everybody's. Then I can take them to uneven terrain in inclement weather, put a pack on their back, take them downhill.
- Take them with youngers, with olders and have them be ... just understand the actual application of it. We've done things for backpacking trips where we were looking at different camp stoves and different gear that we wanted the kids to realize why we purchase which gear. We've had them do science experiments, how long it takes to boil water with the lid off, with the lid on. If you're in the wind, if you're not in the way, if your fuel canisters almost empty, if it's brand new and full. All of these things, rather than me standing up there and teaching them, "here is how you do this," "here's how you backpack." Letting them just discover everything. And then again, as their self-confidence is building, it spills over into everything. It spills over into their math, it spills over into risk taking, into trusting their colleagues and their peers and just trying new things and working together and problem solving. And so we're not always just turning the page and looking at number 18. We're figuring it out.

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- Ba Luvmour: That's ... I mean it sounds revolutionary, but it also sounds absolutely classical in terms of how we grow, how we learn, how we know ourselves.
- Marcia Ososke: So me, sometimes it just feels like a no brainer. It's how we would want to be taught and it is how we know ourselves. I know that if we're going to do that, any of that kind of stuff, anything. Even learn how to stay dry out in the rain for a few days, and then we have to do it. And we can't simply have someone tell us their experience because their experience is theirs.
- Ba Luvmour: So for, I'm sure for some students, although they're probably self-selecting, some of the challenges are really quite hard. So how do you deal with that when a student is telling you the challenge is overwhelming even if it might not be from your perspective?
- Marcia Ososke: Yeah. That's where we get to use our heart and our gifts. I had a student just yesterday in the mountains with those physical symptoms of a tummy ache and a headache and I could tell darn well that it wasn't. I could tell she was quite nervous. She was new to the school. She was more comparing herself to returners who seemed comfortable and confident. She knew she wasn't and I knew it was manifesting in this way. But I knew that all I needed to really do was distract her and focus on her strengths. And by doing that in just a little bit of time, there was no headache anymore. There was no tummy ache anymore. It was more of, wow, really we can do this. And Wow, look at this, here's this, here's this beautiful insect over here. And just it was no longer an issue. So that's one small example, but...
- Ba Luvmour: So you find the student's strengths and then you participate in their strengths with them. And then once they feel, okay, I've actualized that strength, then they can go more towards things that they don't think they can do.
- Marcia Ososke: Yep. And I always tell them, you know, every time what you're doing is you're filling your little suitcases that you carry with you. You get to take them everywhere they go, they don't weigh you down. They're your bag of tricks and everyday you're filling them up more and more and you take them into the next experience. And now you have all these things you're taking with you. So even a student who's been in our school for nine years who might be able to hike the 50 mile trip that we're about to do. No problem. Well then that student's going to take on a bunch of extra leadership roles, just extra passion. They know that they're going to help me focus on a student who doesn't have the experience and potentially not the self-esteem to do it either. And that we're gonna work

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together to make sure that we get everyone down this trail, whatever that may be. And that as soon as anybody says they're not ready to move on, then we're in, we're always in it together. But then we really are. Then we work together and see how we can push people but never too far, you know, outside of their comfort zone because they'll limit themselves often by not knowing what they are capable of doing; but then just little bits, little bits, little bits. So...

Ba Luvmour: So tell us a little bit more about John Muir School. How many students are in it?

Marcia Ososke: Around 130. It's a lottery base school simply because there are only five teachers and only so much room. We were originally four teachers, we are K-8. And so with the five, what we've done to be able to expand the school is we just took in a larger group that's kind of moving up through the school. But we teach multi age and I think that I always think about us as adults. None of us get married at the same time; have kids at the same time. It doesn't work like that. So I don't know why we tell children that life works like that and send these messages. So multi-age teaching to me would be another no brainer and the only way I could ever do it. So our school has mixed grades, K-1 and then a 2-3 and a 4-5.

And this year we have a straight 6th [grade] which is moving up. And then I teach the 7th-8th. And we get kids outside, like I said, at least one day a week. Our kindergarteners go to the park every week if not other places. We all have other groups that we collaborate with and places we go and we do stewardship. But ideally our goal is that every child at every age is comfortable sitting in the woods, being present, journaling, observing. Sometimes that's spiritual, sometimes it's scientific. But we don't want to see more and more people that run from the car to the store with their heads covered. I want to see them catching snowflakes on their tongues and being comfortable outside. And yeah...so our hope is that they're learning how to think for themselves.

Ba Luvmour: So in your 7-8 (grades), have most of those kids have been through the earlier grades or do you get new people in the seven, eight classroom?

Marcia Ososke: Both. This year I happened to have a bunch of families actually move away about four or five that had actually moved out of state. So I had openings, so I've got some new students in and I've had students that have been on the wait list for eight years that have been able to get in. And that just varies year to year. But it's a real nice mix because the returners really helped to just kind of teach them the culture and the expectation. Our school's really familial.

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It's very, very much like a family. Just like if we were going to go on an expedition for a month together, there really is no room for a butthead. Nobody's going to be that person. Because we're cooking together, we're camping together, we're playing together. And it just, it doesn't really work to be that person. So it helps ... I find that it helps everybody to be their best self, kind of in an almost social obligation type of a way. And so we have a lot of little mantras that we do. We have a mantra where we always say, *what if everyone did as I am doing?*. And that goes both positive and negative so that can go, that's a great one to think about. And yeah, we have a lot of those....

Ba Luvmour: And so there's a staff cohesion and staff consistency. By that I mean you have the same staff year after year?

Marcia Ososke: You know, we've had a quite a bit of turnover. I'm the only co-founder left. The others did retire.

Ba Luvmour: Oh you're a founder?

Marcia Ososke: Yeah. One of ... with humility, I'm a co-founder, but the others were, it was the, towards the end of their career and so they have moved on. And one is still teaching locally. She's also about to retire. And then we were stoked when we can keep our educational assistance. We're in our 11th year and I think one of my co-teachers who is now sixth grade. I think he's been with us for six years and the others are on their third year. But we just happened to have some turnover, so we have a real solid team now. Great, great team.

Ba Luvmour: It must take quite a lot though to create such a team because the goals and the aims of the school aren't mainstream education as we know it. So do you do a lot of staff work, staff building and sort of agreement on values, that kind of thing?

Marcia Ososke: Yes. Very much agreement on values, you know, very, very much. We all know that we're teachers in a public school. Yes, we want them to do well and reflect our school well. But we honestly all feel that the social emotional piece and the restorative justice piece of just teaching them to be great human beings comes way, way, way first before anything else. So we really focus a lot more on that and then we weave in our academics, but we really just hold such a rigorous standard with the social emotional piece and respecting one another.

Ba Luvmour: So, I think that's one of the hidden aspects of holistic schools that we have to spend a lot of time as staff. If every teacher knows every

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student, if we're all trying to do this event that has an understanding beyond mainstream approaches then, “How do we do that together?”, is a big question. And how do we stay in touch with each individual student? And I think staff development is very much underappreciated generally in the education world.

Marcia Ososke: I would agree with that. And I think that you touched on something pretty important there. You know, we say that they are all our kids. So I'm not going to come to another teacher and tell them about something one of their students did. I'll handle it. Even if it's a third grader and I teach the eighth graders, they're all our kids. And I think that knowing some students that I know that are in a more traditional school, they've told me they after years, they don't even know who the adult helpers are in the room. They don't even know their names. And I don't even believe how that could possibly be because ...

Ba Luvmour: Oh, believe it.

Marcia Ososke: It's amazing to me. You know, we switch up classes; we will lead social emotional circles for each other. We'll play games together. We'll sing together, we'll lead hikes together, we will always. Because I fear that otherwise the message we're sending children is that anyone that's an adult is an enforcer and you have to do whatever they say, and that's crazy to me. No, we're all the aunties and the family and the. We're all in this together and so we need to mix it up.

Ba Luvmour: It's teaching story time.
Briefly, teaching stories invite us to see the world with a new perspective, often featuring a wise person, a wise fool, or a trickster animal. It can be humorous, and often have many shades of meaning shining throughout the story. I have told teaching stories for the past 40 years, and I love them, and I have to tell you, each time I tell one, I learn much more in myself.

This teaching story's entitled, “At Court.”
The wise fool appeared to court one day with a magnificent turban on his head. He knew that the king would admire it and that as a consequence, he might be able to sell it to him. *How much did you pay for that wonderful turban*, the king asked.
A thousand gold pieces, majesty.
A minister who saw what the wise fool was trying to do, whispered to the king, *Only a fool would pay that much for a turban*. The king

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said, *why ever did you pay that amount? I have never heard of a turban worth a thousand gold pieces.*

Uh, your Majesty. I paid it because I knew that there was in the whole world only one king who would buy such a thing. The king ordered the wise fool to be given 2000 pieces of gold and took the turban pleased by the compliments. You may know the value of turbans the wise fool told the minister later, but I know the weaknesses of kings.

Let's have some fun interpreting this teaching story. Become a Patreon supporter at **patreon.com/remarkableeducators**, and you have access to our detailed comments on how this story applies to education and parenting. Of course, that's just our perspective. The fun comes with community dialogue as the many shades of the teaching story come alive. See you there.

Ba Luvmour: I taught a course in graduate school at Portland State about teacher burnout. And in the beginning people think, well, I need more time to hug my cat or hang out with my family or whatever. But to a person, they all said we don't have relationship with our students and we're not nurtured in the educational exchanges. And that is the essence of teacher burnout. It's got very little to do with issues that unions bring up or whatever. And all to do with, is our humanity allowed to be present in our teaching? Wow. So, how did you come to this? What's your background? How did you come to this and what made you know in the deeper sense of know, as a being know it? How did you know if this was ... this was Marcia's is world?

Marcia Ososke: It's interesting you say that because all I do know is for here and now that it is. And I'm always curious where I'll take it or where it will take me. Almost every morning I wake up... My personal background was the classic experience of getting to go to outdoor school in sixth grade. But more coming ...

Ba Luvmour: In what educational environment?

Marcia Ososke: Portland public schools did—the state of Oregon's outdoor school—the resident outdoor school, where each one went and for five days you had a high school counselor that stayed with you, you had your cabin groups, but you studied different sciences throughout the day. Then, of course, you had the magic of your first exposure to the magic of camp and campfires and those bonding experiences where

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it didn't matter. I remember I was the kid who was wearing a trash bag because I didn't have rain-gear.

That didn't matter. It didn't matter at all. Those boundaries were broken down and each person's strengths. It didn't matter who was good at math or who had fancy clothes. It just ... what was so nice is it took that out. And that magic to me became addicting and soon as I got to high school, I requested I went to the higher ups and I requested that I wanted to be a counselor more than the one week you were allowed to go. And I think I went back for four years as much as I could and I just had to keep up on my studies and then they let me keep going. And then I started just running camps, adventure camps, outdoor schools all over Oregon and Washington. And what I was finding was I loved it and I was passionate about it, but it did require a lot of self.

It required real seasonal work. You really couldn't quite be established. It's kind of a little bit of a transient lifestyle, which was great. But there is a time and a place where you kind of want more. And I knew that I wanted to take it further and take it higher. And so went back and pursued the Master's in Education and get the teaching license and everything else. And just to be able to really take it, and take it on, and take it to where it could go, and I'd still love to see where we can go.

Ba Luvmour: That's so interesting. Almost every one of us in one degree or another put in time in different ... in closely related professions or really not even related professions. And then something went, no, this has to happen in this other way. And many of us went back to school later in life. You're much younger than me. But Josette didn't get her PhD until she was in her mid-fifties. So that's a really interesting aspect that I'm finding among the holistic community is wait a minute, there's something more. I know there's something consistent or there's something else that can be done and I'm willing to back up, put in my time and to take it forward in a better way.

Marcia Ososke: That's a nice way. You just paraphrase it. That's perfect. Yeah. Yeah.

Ba Luvmour: It's been a revelation for me in listening because I live with Josette, so I've been stunned by that. But to hear it is so common. Wow.

Marcia Ososke: I think, I could be wrong, but I'm also noticing that nature tends to be one of the common themes that so many of us, we know that's how we all - you speak of burnout - that's how we rejuvenate. I bet you that's what most people are going to say other than other types

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of self-care, but that we need to be able to unplug from this world so that we can check in with ourselves. And I think that many of us holistic educators are trying to weave those two worlds and we know that that is ... that's getting back to our truth, and our rhythm, and why we have a heartbeat, why we're here. And tying it in rather than segregating it as so many traditional schools and traditional placements do and instead they're rotating children through a language arts class and a math class and a science class and there's no. We're not teaching interconnectedness and awareness and so I think those of us in this field are striving for what, we know from our heart we need also.

Ba Luvmour: And it is true for me that nature is the endless teacher, rejuvenator and place of presence. Our first learning center was in the Sierra mountains in California, way out in the Sierra mountains.

Marcia Ososke: I would have loved to have been there.

Ba Luvmour: I miss it at times. I do. So, what is your challenge? Where are you challenged right now in what you're doing?

Marcia Ososke: I think the bureaucracy is always the heaviest part. I find it the gum I just stepped in.

Ba Luvmour: That's a bumper sticker.

Marcia Ososke: Oh man, there are these incredible ideas and then the doubters that are out there that want to put these boundaries around us and that's why I'm always finding it easier to just say, *just trust me and watch this...rather than telling me all of the hurdles, and why it can't happen, and putting up roadblocks. Just trust us. We're professionals*, you know, and this is what we know is best for kids and let us fail. If that's ... then you can say you're right, but let us try and let us show you what we could be successful at. And I find that really challenging. I could spend my energy prepping more activities, prepping things to do with the kids. Or I could spend my energy doing data and spreadsheets to show you the points, gains in certain areas that we're going to look at one time and not again, and I do value some of that. I most definitely see a value for it, but the emphasis that's on so much of that versus the whole child is sometimes mind boggling to me in this profession.

Ba Luvmour: Well, as a founder, how did you become a magnet school and didn't you have to make many steps on the gum?

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Marcia Ososke: Oh, so many. It's been. We've been swimming upstream for a long time. We've almost been shut down twice. Just certain things with, you know, if it's everything from the school board and Superintendent telling us we had to be budget neutral. Okay fine. You can start this school but we're not necessarily going to financially back you. So if you can do it with that then you guys can do it. That's pretty hard because every other school is getting a budget. Now we're getting a budget, you know, of course, but it's been quite an uphill battle. At one point they wanted to make us just a K-6 and that's where I was grateful that I was tenured because I stood up to my school board and my superintendent at a public meeting and said, *that is not what's best for kids*.

There are families that want this and we need other options and we need other models and just trust us and watch, watch what will happen. This will work. And I'm grateful that that did work in that sense that I was able to find that strength and do that. Because, there you go again just stepping out of your comfort zone and teaching from the heart. But a lot of uphill battles...very, very many still. And just ideally we would have our own campus up in the mountains. We have our outdoor education campus at two locations which are up in the mountains. But our actual all day school, for budgetary reasons, we need to share custodians with other schools and we need to share a library and we need to share specialist support. So our schedule and our piecemealing things, we sometimes do feel like the stepchild of the district or whatnot. We're kind of, we get the leftovers, but we're also kind of embracing that with pride, you know. We're like, fine, we'll be the black sheep. We'll wear that medal of honor and we like that now. It's come this beautiful full circle.

Ba Luvmour: So you mentioned that you were tenured when you brought this forward, so had you been teaching as a public school teacher then, for a while?

Marcia Ososke: Yeah, before we switched, we're in our 11th year now. Before then I was in the middle school for a long time and I struggled with that because you had bells ringing and you had self-contained classes and you couldn't take your kids anywhere. And if you wanted to do something it affected your whole team. They had to also agree to do something. If you wanted an all-day field trip, everybody had to plan an all-day field trip and not everyone wants to do that. A lot of people just want to close the door at 4:00 and go home. I tried to start up an outdoor program in the middle school and it's pretty hard to do that with bells ringing every hour or less. So it was really successful and it was its own tiny thing, but it was just more of a seed I think to see what else we could really do. And then this, this

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program, you know, just really other teachers that brought their talents from their school and their core program. And then I bring in the middle school section over and then us meshing our ideas just really exploded.

Ba Luvmour: So it sounds like the, Oregon's commitment and Portland public schools commitment to outdoor school actually was a step in this whole process of this becoming. I'm saying this because I want that program to continue as much as, and expand as much as possible, but it looks like one went to the other, one to the other.

Marcia Ososke: Yeah. And again, for me on my personal journey, that was the ... whatever, I don't know the gem that got me started, for sure. Right now, the state of Oregon passed this and now they're working on how to fund it. But ideally it would be ...

Ba Luvmour: I voted to pay for it.

Marcia Ososke: And the bottom bill might go towards some of it and some of these great things and ideally every fifth or sixth grader will have an opportunity to do this and get outside. In our school we're saying, okay, that's great. One week would be great. We all know how we feel after a retreat and how wonderful it is. But then we often get back into our routine and that kind of falls to the wayside. So to be able to do it like we're doing it and getting kids out every few days is kind of keeping that vibration higher. And we feel really, really lucky that now the district's so supportive and now we're able to do that. The transportation is supportive and everything. And Yeah.

Ba Luvmour: There was a question this morning to the general assembly about bringing holistic practices and sort of into public school areas. And, you've done that. I mean, everything you say is exactly, well, is very much the ideas around that flow through this conference. But, what would you say to educators who feel this stirring and understand that there's an authenticity to be found in genuine holistic education for themselves as well as the students and the students' families? What would you say to them? How could they go about that?

Marcia Ososke: That's great. That's the conversation we just had moments ago at lunch and everyone at the table was saying, *yeah, I'm not the spreadsheet person. You're this spreadsheet person, but I'm the 'this' person.* And so each person really finding their own strengths. And I think our conversation at lunch came about from a presenter this morning who encouraged people to think about whom they

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really looked up to, who they saw as a visionary and then to find the correlations between their own self and their strengths.

Ba Luvmour: Was that Prapapat [Niyom] from Thailand [*Roon Aroon School*]? Who said that? I think it was.

Marcia Ososke: It may have been.

Ba Luvmour: I hope I pronounced your name right, Prapapat.

Marcia Ososke: And to really follow those and embrace those. And you know, for me, I'm the dorky, playful one on the team. That's my strength. I need to feed that and I need to be allowed to do that. I'm not the one who wants to sit there and make the Excel spreadsheet nor do I know how to. And so I honestly, my message to those people would be to just really, really take it and just go out on a limb. You know, we all know that's where the fruit is. Run with it and it's okay to fall every now and then because you just, you know, you can get back up, you can find another way and you can try another way. And I know that can sound preachy, but if you take it down to the reality, it isn't at all. It's what we would do. We would just try until we were successful. That's what we ask kids to do every day. So it's only fair that we would try.

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This is Ba Luvmour reminding you that holistic relationships with children leads to joy and self-knowledge with the adults in their lives, with respect for you and for children everywhere.
See you next time.

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