

MEETINGS WITH REMARKABLE EDUCATORS

PODCAST TRANSCRIPTION OF

Ali Ronder, Ph.D.

with host

Ba Luvmour

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Luvmour Consulting II, LLC
Portland, OR 97221

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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.

Josette Luvmour: My name is Josette Luvmour and I'm standing in today for Ba Luvmour who just recently went through a surgery and won't be able to do today's podcast. Today's guest, Ali Ronder, is a master of education and distinguishes herself as a community leader who serves on numerous boards of directors of alternative schools and nonprofit groups that support health and social justice. She's a three-time Texas State University appointee to the Clinton Global Initiative, and Ali's learning and teaching experiences span the range of conventional and alternative education approaches.

We are so lucky to have Ali with us today as she talks about the multitude of ways that she supports alternative and holistic and relationship-based education approaches. I'm really excited to have Ali with us today.

Josette Luvmour: Welcome, Ali Ronder, and thank you so much for joining us today on this podcast of Meetings with Remarkable Educators. We so appreciate the work that you do with schools and alternative, relationship-based, holistic education in a wide variety of different schools. Tell us a little bit about your work in promoting and helping schools get started, stay running, and be thriving.

Ali Ronder: Well, for the last couple of decades, I've been working in the alternative education field out of Austin, Texas, and had the great pleasure of launching a nonprofit organization to support central Texas educators, alternative educators, find connectivity and resources for the kind of work that we're doing down here. I had an opportunity to help save a failing alt school and reformat what they were doing, got to launch an alt school that was a really beautiful expression of outdoor education, natural learning relationships, developmental continuum, assessments, et cetera.

Now I'm working for the Natural Learning Foundation, launching and supporting even more alternative schools here in the central Texas area.

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Josette Luvmour: That is so awesome. I don't know anybody else who does what you do. I think what you do is so important. Full disclosure, Ali and I are colleagues, and we met about five years ago I think it was, when you were looking for people to train your teachers in child development and learned about our developmental approach, Natural Learning Relationships, and called me up and said, "I want you to do teacher training at the school I'm working with." That's how we originally met each other, right?

Ali Ronder: That's absolutely true. In fact, your influence even preceded my calling you and asking about your availability to help train our staff in the Natural Learning Relationships, but actually started when I read one of your earlier writings around developing whole children. The closing paragraph in that academic paper then became the mission statement for this idea for a school that I had at the time, which then translated into the actual mission of the real school that I asked you to help me train.

Josette Luvmour: That is so awesome. I just admire the work that you're doing, keeping schools that are not in the mainstream, non-traditional education, keeping them afloat, helping them thrive. Do you set a difference between holistic education, relationship-based education, and other types of alternative education?

Ali Ronder: Well, certainly relationship-based education is a facet of holistic education. Holistic education as it has evolved over the years has taken many, many forms but I do not believe that you can be in the practice of holistic education without a relationship-based orientation between the learners in any school or learning environment.

Josette Luvmour: Yeah, I agree with that wholeheartedly that relationship is at the core of holistic education. This is not an easy field to be in and there are certainly a lot of challenges that you must face as you help these young schools get started. Most people who come to the field of education, I think, come from a passion of the heart and a lot of caring. Then when all of the practicalities of actually starting a school hit them, I'm wondering what kinds of challenges you face and how you deal with them?

Ali Ronder: Well, that's specifically what I am doing these days is helping these fledgling organizations that are typically run by a pretty charismatic, passionate director. She's found some pretty amazing staff to help her, but there's typically not enough bandwidth to fully achieve the mission with all that there is to do. I've seen far too many beautiful programs close in the first three years of existence

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because of just a lack of bandwidth. So my job is to come in and help to define what needs to happen and to provide some support ad hoc.

Most organizations don't have enough money set aside to hire a full-time administrator or development director or grant writer or social media coordinator or back-end organizer. But they can typically fund smaller-sized projects. To that end, that's what I do to help provide capacity-building support for these tiny schools as they grow up into themselves and are able to fulfill the mission internally. And then that allows me more free time to help other schools.

Josette Luvmour: That is so fantastic. Now I know that you studied education leadership and school administration for your master's at Texas State University. But I also know that you're not in this for the money. So what drives you? What brings you there?

Ali Ronder: Well, interestingly enough, this whole field for me started with the birth of my first child. I do have two adult daughters now. My first daughter was a self-starter in every way and absolutely a self-directed learner. When we got to the point where it was time for her to go to middle school, I was working for a Reggio Emilia-based charter school here in Austin. I was supposed to be going to this school fair representing the school and she was going to attend with me as a graduate of the program to talk about how she enjoyed the experience.

Instead what happened was we went to the school fair and she went around and interviewed basically every principal and school leader that was there at the fair, trying to find the right fit for her. She came back and she said, "Mom, I didn't find the school that's going to empower me, but I did find these two couples who have moved to Austin recently. They want to start a Sudbury school." I said, "Okay. I don't know what you're talking about, but that sounds great." She said, "Well, I really want your permission to rise up." I said, "Well, of course, honey. That's what I'm here for is to help you rise up."

She said, "Well, you and your colleagues may consider that dropping out because I'd like to leave the school that I'm currently at. I would like to endeavor to spend the next year or two to help to establish a Sudbury school here in Austin, Texas. It's going to take a lot of time and energy and I need your support."

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Josette Luvmour: How awesome.

Ali Ronder: Yeah. So she started the whole thing for me. She, in fact, put together an annotated bibliography for me that informed my work at the doctoral level at Texas State a few years later, and helped to introduce concepts such as self-directed education and democratic education into the conversation at the university where I was in a program with 25 other administrators and superintendents throughout central Texas, and really helped to provide an education for them, not just myself.

Josette Luvmour: That is so awesome. So often it's our children that bring us new learning. It's the theme of my work, how we grow with our kids. But it's so awesome that your eldest daughter brought this to you in a certain kind of way, and then you branched out into 20 years of work in the field of education. I'm sure you've learned so much over that time.

Ali Ronder: Certainly. And without my daughter I would never have learned about Alternative Education Resources Organization, the International Democratic Education Conference. I would not have been introduced to the work of Zoe Readhead or A. S. Neill. I would certainly never have thought about creating a learning environment where children were completely autonomous in decision-making process around what they want to learn and how their work product is going to manifest.

Josette Luvmour: Right. And democratic schools. So what's your daughter doing now? Is she still in the field of education?

Ali Ronder: She's not in the field of education. She's a 24-year-old living her life. She's got a boyfriend and a cat. She continues to be a self-directed learner. Her work is in the healing arts. Her primary life goal is to found an intentional living community where moms can practice attachment parenting and children can be raised in a democratic, unschooling environment that has a fully functioning, self-sustaining, governance structure and commerce.

Josette Luvmour: How wonderful.

Ali Ronder: Yeah. All of this is going to take some time, and thank goodness, she's got that.

Josette Luvmour: That's fantastic. Is your younger daughter also involved in relationship-based education schools?

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Ali Ronder: Interestingly enough, I tell parents constantly when they come to me and they're looking for the right fit for their child that it's very likely that their children may not have the same needs. The family may have different needs than the child. It is sometimes not possible to get everyone's needs met at the same venue. While my oldest daughter was absolutely ready to be in a self-directed learning environment and helped to be the founder of the *Clearview Sudbury School*, which is now in its 10th year of existence here in Austin, my youngest was not necessarily a self-directed learner. She did enjoy middle school and high school in alternatively-run schools that did practice some democratic participatory form of governance for the kids.

But she's just not an academic, and she doesn't really dig the whole school scene. She thinks that her older sister and I drank too much of the Kool-Aid.

Josette Luvmour: Well, you bring up parents and that raises... maybe you think of the parents that we worked with in Summa Academy and all the parents who are looking at educational options for their children. So often parents get worried about education and are their children going to measure up? Are their children going to meet the standards? Is relationship-based education going to meet their children's needs and prepare them for the real world? Do you have ways of encouraging parents or of helping them understand that these choices don't hinder their children's progress, but actually aid their children's progress?

Ali Ronder: Well, absolutely. I've worked with hundreds of parents over the last several years and most of them come to me because there's something that's not going right for either their child or their family at their current school environment. Rarely do parents just go around school shopping and looking for alternatives when things are really working for them where they're at. So often when parents come to me, they're in some state of distress and they have some sense for what is not working at their child's current school. It's my job to help them parse out what are the most important aspects of a school environment to them and to help them to feel empowered that they do have what they need to be able to find and provide that kind of education for their children.

The first place that I always start with is, is their child happy and what aspects of their current schooling environment they believe are contributing to their child's lack of engagement or happiness? When children are in environments where they feel supported and heard and they're afforded some agency to determine what they're

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studying, when they're studying, and how their work product is being received, those kids tend to feel more engaged and more happy in the process. That's one of the foundational elements of any of the schools that I've helped to launch or design is that the kids at the center of this entire process are not kept out of the conversation.

We're not having conversations just about the kids, but we're involving them in the conversation which is how we enact this relationship where we afford them agency and we give them voice. We respond to what they are saying and feeling.

Josette Luvmour: That's awesome. I know that you not only encourage parents to feel comfortable in the ways that you just talked about, but also encourage them to participate in their children's classrooms in more ways than just copying things or stuffing envelopes. Could you talk a little bit about all the ways you encourage parents to engage in the classroom activities in the schools that their children are participating in?

Ali Ronder: Sure. There's lots of buzzwords that parents hear. One is the home-school connection and how important it is for parental involvement and the home-school connection to be strong. However, since the 1930s when we had almost a quarter of a million school boards in the United States, we had access to the decision-making process about what was happening in our actual schools. Today, we have fewer than 15,000 school boards. So over the last just less than 100 years, we've seen a deep erosion in any real way that parents can actually have agency and involvement in the schools.

Those who do have the time and the interest and ability to be able to spend at the school are often asked to file books in the library or stuff folders for Thursday homework take-home. They're not really given any real function within the classroom structure. So we've never just allowed parents to just come and sit at the back of the classroom and just observe or take notes of what's happening. I find that to be a little creepy. What we would rather have is a parent come in and participate in what's happening in the classroom. So if they're studying Chinese New Year, for example, they can come in and they can read a story to the children around Chinese New Year or show some pictures of the trip that they just took to China or bring in a friend who is a Chinese chef or an author or a world traveler.

They can then have a fundamental role in what's happening in real time, what's really relevant in that classroom, and the children

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begin to recognize these other adults as additional helpers, additional people that they can go to and receive support from. This is real home-school connection when the children see the parents in the room doing things that support the real work that the children are doing. It's not just this place where parents pop in, drop off, and then take off again, but really engenders full participation of every parent who can and wants to spend time with us and build that community.

Josette Luvmour: That's so important. There's so much research out now that parent involvement on the level that you're talking about leads to much better educational outcomes. It's really awesome.

Ba Luvmour: **It's teaching story time.**
Briefly, teaching stories invite us to see the world with a new perspective often featuring a wise fool or trickster animal they can be humorous with many shades of meaning shining through the story. I have told teaching stories for the past 40 years with great effect not only for the listener but for me as I have learned so much about myself through recounting these stories.

Today's teaching story is titled, **"Never Enough"**.

The management of a large factory called all the workers together for an important meeting. "We've been able to mechanize the whole factory and robots will now be taking over everyone's job. There's no more need for you to come to work."

A buzz of concern spread among the workers, but the manager continued. "This is so profitable and so successful that you'll all be able to keep your full salary, your full benefits, and even have lunch in the cafeteria any time that you desire."

Well, the wise fool was the union and labor representative for the entire workforce. He stepped forward and said, "Is there anything else?" The manager said, "No, nothing else. You just have to show up on Fridays to collect your paycheck."

"Not *every* Friday," the wise fool said.

Let's have some fun interpreting this teaching story. Become a Patreon supporter at **[patreon.com/remarkable educators](https://patreon.com/remarkableeducators)**. And you'll 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.

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Josette Luvmour: Going back a little bit now to running a school and administrators of a school, what are some of the ways that you see in your work with administrators or other people who want to start schools? What are the steps that you put them through or you help them walk through, walk alongside them as they go through some of their challenges? Maybe you could outline some of those for our listeners and help them through some of these steps.

Ali Ronder: Sure. That is one of the main things that I do for the Natural Learning Foundation is if an individual is interested in launching a school or an organization, they can come to me and I will happily spend a few hours listening to them and their ideas. If it does sound that their concepts are rooted in a similar philosophy that I have around children and educational models, then I agree to work really as a doula, as a guide, as a coach to help them jump the hurdles from conceptualizing this learning environment to having a fully-enrolled, running program. It always starts with that conversation and just a few hours of listening.

Then I help them to take this nebulous idea and root it in theoretical framework that they have come with, but haven't necessarily tied it all together and to create the business plan. I help them to either file the 1023 for their nonprofit status or to set up their LLC. Everything from setting up the accounting processes, to the back end documents like the employment manual and the community handbook, to planning the professional development sequence for their staff, to planning the orientation process, all the way down to an authentic assessment tool and a developmental continuum framework to guide their teachers after I've left the organization. They can be completely self-sufficient.

Josette Luvmour: That is so valuable that you guide them into integrating a developmental perspective into education. What a wonderful contribution you're making there. Near and dear to my heart, of course.

Ali Ronder: And it's not just for the kids. That's one of the things that I've learned over the last couple of decades is that if we're saying that whatever we're saying is good for the kids, we ought to be able to apply that for the adults in the learning community as well. So if we are using a developmental learning continuum to look at the growth and development of the learners, I believe that this is an approach that should also be applied to the staff as well as the parents. If you're looking at parents on a developmental continuum or learning continuum, you can recognize that there are supports that they

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might need in the form of parent education opportunities. I can help to bring those to bear on the campus.

With regard to the staff, most teachers, they're evaluated on most campuses in a snapshot summative manner where an administrator will come in and in 20 minutes to two hours, take some notes, and give an evaluation of where that teacher is. This data is typically just used to either renew a contract or fail to renew a contract with a teacher the next year, which is a huge missed opportunity because our greatest resource in any school are our educators who've dedicated their lives, years of their time and resources to studying how to be a great educator. And then when you get in the classroom and you're working with actual children, half of everything that you picked up out of books at the university level is completely irrelevant, and then the other half of it doesn't actually apply to the children that you have in the room.

It is a huge learning opportunity. If we are not helping those staff to identify where their learning edge is and then subsequently providing professional developmental resources to support that growth in the future, we're really failing to develop our greatest resource in our schools.

So, I use a formative approach of teacher evaluation where I work with the teacher to help them to identify what are their strengths, where are their areas for growth, and then working as a reference librarian of sorts to curate resources to help them fill in those gaps to only be stronger, better educators at the end of that cycle.

Josette Luvmour: It's so important because teacher burnout is one of the hazards of the occupation. Giving teachers positive support, it's such a tender profession. So many teachers come into the profession out of love and care for children and wanting to nurture and provide educational opportunities for children. If they're not given a lot of nurturing and support, they're on the frontline working day in and day out. The kind of support that you're suggesting is essential to keeping them fresh and alive and to avoid burnout. It's so very valuable for teachers to be supported on a positive note, not always on a...what they're doing wrong note. So that's a really important contribution, I feel.

Ali Ronder: We speak about accountability measures constantly, but they're rarely applied to districts and states. When you work in a micro-school environment, you can really provide that kind of expectation for everyone, 360, in the process. Accountability of an administrator or a school owner to their staff and to providing profound and relevant training and to support their emotional

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bandwidth and their skillset growth is absolutely paramount and not really found in too many learning environments.

Josette Luvmour: I agree. Likewise, how do you support these administrators who are day in and day out dealing with the logistics and the paperwork and the operations of the organization? What kinds of opportunities do you suggest for the administrators?

Ali Ronder: Well, that's actually the reason why we created the Education Transformation Alliance in Austin almost a decade ago. It was about a dozen alternative education directors here in Austin that were all experiencing the same issues, the same highs, the same lows, the same needs, but yet were all functioning in these little micro-environments. None of us had the economy of scale to be able to provide some of the more expensive solutions or more timely solutions to the problem. So we created *the Education Transformation Alliance* as a mechanism to provide support, access, and awareness to all the alternative educators, both administration and staff, so that we could then pool together our resources, our time, energies, to be able to bring in powerful professional development or create a lending library or create a school fair so that we could generate better enrollment for all of the schools in the network.

But by and large, focusing on creating a culturally responsive environment both within and without the administration of your campus is, I think, critical. Principal preparation programs don't really exist at the university level for preparing administrators who wish to do this type of work. There's not a whole lot of support on a national level. So we decided to create a local solution given that we've got dozens of alternative schools here in Austin.

Josette Luvmour: How awesome. Rather than a competitive relationship with other schools, you have a cooperative relationship with other schools. And thus, relationship-based education approaches is right up through the administration. That's a beautiful thing. I don't know many cities that are doing that. You've really brought that forward in Austin, which is really awesome.

That's branched out into an endeavor that you and I and Ba and Nishi and Teri have all joined together to form an International Council for accrediting relationship-based education and schools. We call it *ICARE, International Council for Accrediting Relationship-based Education*. That's actually how you met Ba, when you invited us to join your small group to really form that

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approach to accrediting small schools. You want to talk a little bit about that?

Ali Ronder: Sure. I come across problems that kind of stick in my craw and then I ruminate on them for quite a while. Then for some reason, I tend to always get connected with the right people around that time for generating a solution for that problem. So over the years as an administrator of alternative schools, I've run across this concern where parents will come in and they will ask at the interview process, "Well, is your school accredited?" And 98.9% of the time when I tell the parents, "No, we're not accredited. What accrediting agency would you like for us to be affiliated with or to work with?" I'm met with a blank stare.

Most parents understand that accreditation is desirable, but they do not understand *why* it's desirable. So that was a recurring theme, parents really wanting the school to be accredited. Then I would go further and investigate, "What elements of the accreditation process are most important to you that we participate in?" And again, most parents did not know anything about the process. So I set about learning what is the accreditation process? Who's in charge? Who makes the calls? And to what end does this whole process come to? Why do schools want to participate? What are the benefits of participating in an accrediting process?

Many of the existing [accreditation] programs that I discovered focused primarily on academics and codification of the process at the school, but did not necessarily look at relationship-based education. Did not have a space for collecting data or analyzing the data around the types of relationships that exist in a school environment and how those can be supported and expanded. Because this is such an incredibly integral part of any type of school environment that I would want to participate in, that became the central focus for me, is finding an accrediting program that would actually fill this niche.

Well, I never found one. So I decided to circle back around to some of the thought leaders who existed already in that field. That just brought me right back directly to you and Ba.

Josette Luvmour: That's so awesome. It's going to benefit the schools in so many ways. They're going to be able to use it to apply for grants, offer teachers retirement benefits in Texas, cultivate new customers, parents, students. It's going to translate into a positive budget bottom line. It's going to allow for consumer protection and customer confidence. So many great things could come out of

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offering these kinds of schools an accreditation process. It enhances reputation and recognition. Of course then there's professional development opportunities to stay current and up-level their practices. I just think there are so many wonderful opportunities available that can come out of this for the schools that engage it. It's really awesome.

Well, do you want to add to that, or say anything more?

Ali Ronder: I just wanted to say that I'm really excited to be able to work with Nishi Andra, and Teri Sperry and both of you on this project, because all of the solutions that I've been involved in have been really very local. Although I've gone to the IDOT conferences and the AERO [*Alternative Education Resource Organization*] conferences, all of the takeaway I've enacted locally. So this will actually give us a mechanism to be able to take the work that we've done with the *Education Transformation Alliance* and all of the schools in our Austin network and really expand this on a national level and then an international level, which will help to synergize these schools who prioritize the concept of relationship-based education, and should result in expanding not just our connectivity, but our collective bandwidth to be able to push this relationship-based education agenda into the forefront of the parents of the world.

It's not just a local concern. It's an international concern. We have seen over the last couple of decades the backlash and ramifications of the high stakes testing movement that has impacted children globally. So the solutions must be also global as well.

Josette Luvmour: I think that's awesome. Of course you and I could talk for hours on the value of relationship-based education, but I still get parents approaching me today who will talk to me about, "Our family just benefited so much from some of the things that we learned when you were running the school at Summa." It's pretty amazing to randomly not know the affects you have on people. And then you find out a year later that families still being positively affected. Children learn tremendous amounts from having positive relationships with their educators. It's very, very important.

Ali Ronder: It's so true. I often tell parents that children are super aware and they're watching everything that we do.

Josette Luvmour: That's right.

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Ali Ronder: The buzzword in education is modeling the behavior. For the most part, the adults that I know at least in this country are running around over-caffeinated, dehydrated, malnourished, under-rested and aren't really modeling what it looks like to be an emotionally resilient, well-rested adult in the world. So the more opportunities we have as grown-ups, as teachers and educators and parents to see that modeled by the other adults in our environment, the more support we feel to be able to prioritize those things. That translates into providing the kids with real-time models of what it looks like to be an emotionally resilient, healthy adult in a crazy, fast-paced world.

Josette Luvmour: You bet. We're just beginning to run out of time here. Like I said, I just love talking to you. I just want to ask you before we make any closure, I really want to know if *you* have any last words or maybe a comment or something that I haven't covered that you wish we had covered or anything you want to say to our audience to leave them with. What would you like to say?

Ali Ronder: Well, I think the main thing that if I have the ear of interested parents is that, you have the opportunity to provide an educational experience for your child, whether it's homeschool, unschooled, democratic school, Montessori, Waldorf. It really doesn't matter what ultimately you end up choosing that works for your family, as long as it's working for your family. Trust yourself, but *mostly* listen to and trust your children when they come to you and they express their unhappiness. I believe that the things that we can learn from listening to our children's concerns and observations around their current learning environment can really lend itself to the work that you, Josette, and Ba do, which is helping adults and children to heal and become emotionally resilient through relationship, through listening, through working together and honoring each other as growing humans.

Josette Luvmour: Just understanding that there are so many ways to co-create educational opportunities for our children-

Ali Ronder: That's right.

Josette Luvmour: ... from these kinds of schools that you grow and support so well, to pick and choosing homeschooling classes, opportunities in homeschool collectives. There's so many great ways that children can get educated and receive their education from people they love and not stressful situations.

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Ali Ronder: That's right.

Josette Luvmour: I love the work you do. I am so grateful that you're supporting families and school administrators, which really need that kind of backup. It's so awesome.

Well, thank you so much, Ali, for spending this time with us and sharing your wisdom with our listeners. We really appreciate it.

Ali Ronder: Thank you, Josette. Great thanks to Ba for putting together the *Remarkable Educators Podcast* and bringing together this really amazing resource for parents and educators throughout the world to learn that you're not alone. There are a lot of us that are doing this work, and we have a voice.

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Our sound engineer is Demitri Young. Our webmaster is Nathan Young. Transcription and production is by Josette Luvmour. All podcasts are transcribed with show notes and can be found at **remarkable-educators.com**

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.