Let it Be

Reframing What Achievement Looks Like

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I remember stepping on the ice for my very first figure skating lesson when I was six years old. They lined us up at the boards and had each child skate across to the other side. I knew very clearly what was going on. They wanted to watch us skate so they could "classify" us. I was terrified of failing. And thus began the long road to learning one of the greatest lessons I would not truly grasp until I hit my 40s.

My Story

I was a good skater and eventually went on to compete at a high level. It was a big deal. I could see it in the way that people talked to and treated me. I saw it in how I was singled out from my peers and siblings. I knew intuitively that there was some kind of honour bestowed upon me in being very good at this thing. This repeated in many other areas of my life: school, where I was bright; other sports, where I also excelled; social dynamics, where I was one of the popular ones.

And yet, over the years the so-called honour of being "good" backfired. I linked self-worth to performance. I knew the game. I knew that accolades flowed when I excelled, which resulted in a hit to my sense of self rather than spurring its growth. I confess I have spent the better part of my "second adulthood" undoing the strength of the connection between performance and self-worth.

My parents did their best to try to sever the connection between performance and worth. I remember being 12 years old and preparing for an important competition. My mom pulled me aside and implored me to remember that no matter what the outcome, she and my dad would always be proud of me.

I heard her with my mind, but not with my heart because I knew the truth: that the world has a love affair with accomplishment and I was helpless to its powerful attraction. Looking back, I am genuinely grateful for the experiences that came with being a competitive athlete. I learned many brilliant lessons in that figurative and literal arena, not the least of which (more lately) is that achievement has literally *zero* to do with the splendour and meaning of life.

Your Story

As parents, it is on us to consider how the culturally perpetuated and pervasive connection between performance and worth will impact the littles we are growing up. I believe there are some key things that we can do to have our children, especially those who are not the "big achievers," stare the world in the eye and see only their infinite value and potential.

Reprogramming

The biggest challenge for any human, parent or otherwise, in questioning the equation of "performance = worth" is to understand the programming that landed you in this belief stream to begin with. According to Don Miguel Ruiz in his book *The Four Agreements,* we are immersed in a process of "domestication" long before we are even born. We are domesticated in a way that has us subscribing to the doctrine of our culture without an awareness of this having happened. The core premise is that there is a giant and intricate web of often unspoken, largely arbitrary, and painfully unattainable rules and beliefs that help us to "fit in." *Do* this to get *that*. *Be* this to *feel* that. And *achieve* to get *love*.

Ironically, if we are constantly on a quest to secure belonging, we will *never* feel a secure sense of it. True belonging must be felt as a natural state of being for it to yield the experience of emotional rest, rather than an angsty pursuit in order to yield a tentative sense of self-worth. This is something that many of us mistake and inadvertently carry within our psyches, which in turn impacts the manner in which we step into our role as parent.

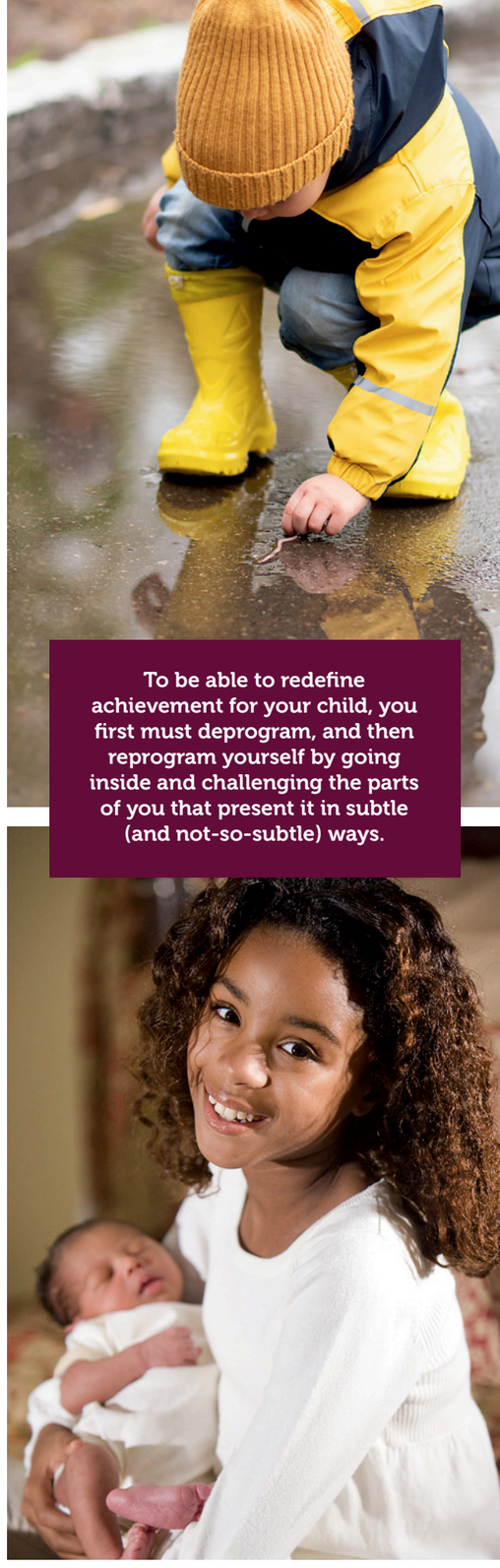
If you have a conscious or subconscious belief that achievement is akin to worth, then it can't help but impact your parenting. How do you know if this is at play for you and your child? Here are some clues: Do you worry your child will be left out or left behind because of a perceived lack of achievement? Or do you worry *you* haven't done a good enough job because your child isn't keeping pace with their peers? If you have these sorts of thoughts or fears running through your mind, then you are running a program of believing that achievement is connected to worth.

To be able to redefine achievement for your child, you first must deprogram, and then reprogram yourself by going inside and challenging the parts of you that present it in subtle (and not-so-subtle) ways. Be on the lookout for an internal dialogue that is keeping this erroneous message alive, and watch how it infiltrates the way you look at the world, including how you, yourself, perceive your so-called "underperforming" or "high-achieving" child. Challenge yourself to change the way you look at things—when you do, the things you look at will also change. Gone will be the domesticated program of worth deriving from achievement, and in its place will be an honoring of all that simply *is*, making room for both you and your child to be championed and celebrated simply for being the best version of your authentic selves.

Redefining

Our cultural dynamic is one that is obsessed with achievement, especially those that involve public accolades, recognition, and dollar signs, and ones that leave the achiever feeling not only accepted, but even idolized, and that they did it "right."

But let us challenge ourselves for a moment to take a much more wide-angled view on how achievement is defined, and even to measure what size an "achievement" is! What about the child who rescues a worm from the heat of a sidewalk after the rain? Or the child who sees that someone else didn't get as many Easter eggs in the annual hunt as the rest and so takes it upon themselves to remedy the situation? What about the child who is extra gentle with their new sibling? Or the child who makes sure the new kid isn't left out of playtime at recess? Are these so-called small things inconsequential because they don't reap public reward?



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If we get stuck to the flimsy façade of popular achievement, we can miss all the brilliance that is actually emerging from our children right under our very noses. Open your eyes to witness the stunning little humans in all shapes and sizes and forms everywhere you look! They are in your living rooms and classrooms and daycares. They have hearts of gold and a yearning to live empathically that is *so* big it might leave us breathless by the sheer force of it—if only we could see it. If only we wore lenses that enabled this kind of sight!

But good news: you can do just that! You can *choose* to frame something differently from what you believed should be, or what you hoped would be. You can put on new glasses today and set an intention to look upon every moment of your child's being with an eye to honoring what actually *is*. And in those moments, you don't need to feel a big urge to rush in and bless it with accolades or recognition, as it might actually work against the unsolicited and altruistic intention. Instead just think of the wonder you have in your heart for this magnificent little human who just sweetly kissed the boo-boo on your hand or took the dogs for an extra walk. Let the energy of that wonder fill your mind and heart and let it show on your face. Let it leak out into the air all around you and wash over your child. Just let the authentic experience of seeing your child for who they really are—a wonderfully achieving little person—fill the space.

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Releasing

Our attachment to achievement is often motivated by a fear of future. When we become so bogged down in worrying about what is to come, we are driven to control circumstances in an effort to contort the future into what we think is right and good, rather than permitting a truly organic outcome.

One of my sons has had some health challenges which require that he get adequate physical activity. In an effort to "do this right" and not see him carry too much weight or be otherwise unhealthy (which would clearly mean we were "doing it wrong"), there was this unspoken push for him to excel in aerobic sport. But he hated soccer from the word go. He also hated running and dance and track and skating and…*well*, you get the picture.

Now rewind for a moment. When he was 18 months old, he traded his beloved teddy bear for—*wait for it*—a red ukulele. He was enthralled with it. He slept with it in place of his teddy bear. When he was six he got his first guitar and whispered quietly to me at bedtime one night that he thought he might be a guitar player when he grew up, and further, that he figured his stage name should be "Old Smokey." I am not even joking. He was six and had figured out what stage names were and what his would be.

When he was nine years old we were visiting my artist mom. She asked him what he wanted to do. He told her he wanted to paint. And so, she did what any artist grandma would have done: she set him up in her garage with an easel, some paint, a spray bottle, and some brushes. He painted for eight hours straight. She had to make him drink water and bring him easily ingested snacks; so intent was he on painting that he did not want to pause for anything.

He is what psychologists call "twice exceptional," meaning he has a very bright mind and struggles to reconcile that with traditional forms of learning in the classroom. He went through some challenging times in early elementary school and the other kids in his achievement-focused classroom weren't always kind to him. So not only did he not excel at school, nor at any extra-curricular sports we tried to get him interested in, he struggled socially as well.

And instead of bemoaning *his* perceived lack of achievements, I began to work on myself and *my own* notions of "achievement." I challenged belief statements like "He should be more active," "He needs to slim down," and "He needs to learn work ethic." I applied a practice called "The Work," from Byron Katie's book *Loving What Is*. I did this not for days or weeks, but for months and then years. Through this, I brought myself to a space of peace and presence with what *is* for my sweet boy, releasing all attachment to form and outcome. That is, my work was not about where he was going to land, but rather about celebrating all that he is. Now, and always.

Releasing it doesn't mean just throwing one's arms up in surrender and passively waiting for whatever will come. Rather it means actively pressing fear out and allowing only love to flow. With this pure intent filling every thought, I stepped in and found educators for him that knew exactly how to honor his unique abilities. I made sure our family meals and activities were well-suited to his health needs. I found dieticians and doctors and fitness enthusiasts who could champion our family and my boy to achieve a healthy lifestyle. But, most importantly: I. Stepped. In.

So, what happened when I gave up focusing on outcomes and worked diligently to clean up my thoughts around all of this? He is *thriving* in school. He has discovered he loves math. It turns out one of his teachers—whom he believes the sun rises and sets on—is a shot-put champion and the school basketball coach, so basketball and shot-put it is. He creates stunning works of art with no instruction. And he makes music—music is in his soul. It is his air. Sometimes when I am lying in bed at night, long after I have turned off his light and bid him sweet dreams, I will hear him quietly strumming his guitar in his room. He is absolutely at peace when he has a guitar in his hands.

But beyond all of that, he is a boy who loves, who cares deeply for all forms of life, who still looks at the world with the spark of wonder. He is a boy who is happy; a boy who is free. He too, has been released. And he is all of these things because achievement is not a measurable outcome in his home. Not anymore.

So, what of this preoccupation with achievement? Let it go. It does not serve you. It does not serve your child. It does not serve any of us. Take time to dig deep and see what is brewing below the surface for you in your belief systems. Learn what it is to love what *is*. Open your eyes. And surrender to the release of all form and outcome. I promise you the sight that awaits will take your breath away. •