

Book Review

Playful Wisdom: A Father's Adventure. What I Learned from Carly Our First Two Years, Michael Mendizza, 2017. Nevada City (CA): Michael Mendizza & Associates. ISBN: 9781879118034

Michael Mendizza's book, *Playful Wisdom*, is, in a word, fantastic. It shares beautiful and sensitive stories about Mendizza and his new daughter, Carly Elizabeth. The stories are not simply entertaining; they reveal major insights that parents and educators must understand and apply if we are to educate and raise the next generation of healthy and vital children.

Playful Wisdom weaves together the writings, passion, and insights of three well-known and respected experts in the field of child education and development: Joseph Chilton Pearce, Bev Bos, and Michael Mendizza. Bos and Pearce are featured guests in the book, as is Carly. On the left hand pages you will find beautiful and revealing color pictures of Carly accompanied by quotes from Pearce or Bos. On the right is Mendizza's narrative. The book could stand alone with just the quotes from Bos and Pearce, or the eloquent text of Mendizza, or the beautiful and inspiring pictures of Carly. But the synergy of all four elements is both powerful and engaging. Carly's images tell a thousand stories and express an equal number of emotions. Personally meeting Carly was an essential element and major gift of the book. We see that she, like all children, can be a sage if we slow down and just be with her, following a child's innate nature to play. As we now know, the higher brain needs play, like soil needs rain.

Pearce and Bos provided the crucible within which Mendizza's book is written. The numerous quotes are the best from both I have ever read or remember reading. They came from interviews Mendizza did with them in the latter stages of their rich and extensive careers (Bos and Pearce passed last year). The common passion all three share is the critical need to ensure that all children discover and manifest their basic nature – their inherent knowledge and spirituality – lest it be broken, or even worse, lost. Mendizza quotes Bos on page 13:

The longer I do this, the closer I am to tears when I watch children. I can feel that rush. I can feel my eyes well up, observing that freshness, the aliveness, the spirit of children. And the more I'm with children, the more I travel the world, the more I see environments for children, environments that adults have established, the more frightened I become about the light going out in children's eyes because we haven't, as adults, kept that spirit of the child going in the places they are every day, in the places they are cared for.

It is important that future readers know a bit about these remarkable and wonderful (full-of-wonder) human beings. Joseph Chilton Pearce was an American author of 12 books on human and child development and is best known for his books, *The Crack in the Cosmic Egg* (1971), *Magical Child* (1977), *Evolution's End* (1992), and *Biology of Transcendence* (2002). Pearce wrote on themes ranging from child development, mind-heart connection and spirituality. Like Mendizza, Pearce believed that active, imaginative play was the most important of all childhood activities because it cultivated mastery of one's environment, which he termed *creative competence*. He discovered that children who were denied that form of play develop feelings of isolation and anxiety. He also believed that child-parent bonding was crucial, and saw modern clinical childbirth and lack of breastfeeding as obstructions to bonding.

Bev Bos, an American educator who served nearly 50 years as founder and director of Roseville Community Preschool, was a strong advocate of a particular style of learning for preschool children, attempting to foster the experience of wonder and the process of discovery. Bos was more than a preschool director. She spoke at over 6000 conferences during the course of her life's work, focusing on expanding horizons for children and their parents. At 81, she still maintained a busy schedule of national and international speaking engagements. Her philosophy gained popularity after she was featured on ABC's television show *20/20*. For Bos, the basic fundamental needs for early learning are wonder, discovery, and self-experience. She was often quoted saying, "If it hasn't been in the hand, the body and the heart, it can't be in the brain." Mendizza described Bev Bos as a *legend in early childcare and development*.

Michael Mendizza is an author, educator, documentary filmmaker, stage and screenwriter, and founder of Touch the Future. He is the author of four books and an avid student of Krishnamurti. He and his wife also share several art galleries that feature designer jewelry and Michael's photography. He is a long-time member of and advisor to APPPAH, and a consistent attendee and speaker at their Congresses. He founded the

Academy, an important extension of APPPAH'S pre- and perinatal educator program, and an educational force in its own right.

In *Playful Wisdom*, Mendizza describes his experiences of becoming a father again at the age of 65, and narrates his experiences week-by-week with his daughter, Carly. Having interviewed hundreds of researchers and authors, the insights he weaves are rich, intimate, and practical. Carly is the true "star" of the book. Together the four (with explicit support from Carly's mom) teach us poignant life lessons. Carly becomes the recipient of sincere and resonant attention and affection from her father and mother. Their focus is not on who Carly should be, but rather on who she is now. There is no other dream than to follow her inner wisdom as her true self (my phrase) unfolds. If attention and affection were all that were needed, there would be no storyline, no point. It's a particular kind of attention and affection that is necessary, otherwise harm can be done: brain development can be slowed, essential higher brain functions lost, and self-realization (again my phrase) thwarted, perhaps for a lifetime. Mendizza writes on page 147, "... the art of giving ... is what being a parent, and especially a father, is all about: an inner journey of self-discovery, broadening and becoming who we really are, which is so much more than our social labels." Mendizza knows that if fathers practice self-discovery all along the way, their children have a much better chance of doing the same.

Far from gloomy or pessimistic, *Playful Wisdom* is supremely realistic. Throughout, there is incredible hope. Not only can we raise children to survive the next generation, but also by learning about ourselves with them each day, we, meaning the entire human species, can thrive. Mendizza feels certain, as do Pearce and Bos, that catastrophe will not happen if we follow the vision and practice described in the book.

Mendizza's attention, respect, and trust of Carly seep out of every page, providing a basic tincture and model of what is needed, especially from fathers. His every move seems to nurture and coach her inner strength, intelligence, and wisdom as it leaches the same from him. One of my favorite Mendizza quotes (of many) from the book is a simple one. On page 179 he writes, "If we want to enter the kingdom that is Carly's world, it is our responsibility to "become as little children" rather than expecting the child to be like us." This is illustrated in the following story.

One day, Carly climbed a high ladder. Michael watched carefully, while also "assuming competence" in her basic ability to figure things out. When she got stuck at the top, like a cat on a high tin roof, not knowing how to get back down, he waited until she gave him a signal. Without words, allowing her to keep her attention on learning rather than language, he positioned her hand so she could stretch her leg further, to

the next lower rung, and he helped her inch her foot slowly until it touched the next rung. She practiced this six times on her own and then gave him her typical glance that seemed (to me) to mean, "Okay, Dad. I've learned all I need to here. Let's move on." Mendizza commented that being bonded with each other, and having a safe place inside, made it possible for Carly to learn the task and be even more bonded with her father, and vice versa.

Throughout the book, Mendizza (and his wife) model mutual trust, respect, compassion, and love when interacting with Carly. One day, Carly became ill with a virus. On day three, it became worse. She sat crying with her head on her father's shoulder. Fathers tend to want to fix things, like buying helium balloons to cheer children up. Mendizza wisely declined, and simply held her gently and said, "Yes, I know it feels horrible." That was enough to calm and resource her.

Mendizza's greatest goal is for his readers to understand play. He credits David Bohm for crafting the first definition of play, "David Bohm was the first to unveil the true nature of play: inquiry, curiosity, wonder, exploring relationship, complete attention, trust, a willingness to risk, freedom from fixed patterns, humor, affection, kindness, boundless energy – all this and more is packaged in that word play" (p. 181). Mendizza then gives an example of perfect toys, and the less articulated they are the better. For example finger puppets and stuffed animals can work OK as playthings, but clay, water, and sand are much better because they are less culturally conditioned (my word) and offer many more options. He tells the story of Carly playing with ten pounds of beans, and the variety of playing that beans offered her. She scoops beans, pours beans, stuffs them in socks and plants, eats them, poops them, shakes them in various containers, and so on.

Most of all, Mendizza urges us to simply pay attention to our children, and cautions us that not doing so will have life-long negative impacts. He says,

Our failure to give fully and completely (to our children) at the beginning ... causes ... the world untold stress, conflict, and heartache in the future. It is, therefore, in our selfish best interest to suspend our (parental) habits and addictions and relish in the new discoveries this life-changing experience (of child development) holds. Doing so is like depositing money in the emotional bank of humanity (p.23).

Throughout the book, the wisdom of Bev Bos, Joseph Chilton Pearce, Michael Mendizza, and Carly Mendizza resonate in a harmonic pattern that leave no doubt that children need play and imagination much more than they need intellect training and academic preschools. In fact, the four

are saying that anything less is detrimental, and perhaps even harmful to our species. Children thrive when their fathers perceive their roles as adventurous shared-learners, rather than dutiful children.

Playful Wisdom is a brilliant and inspiring book. Thank you, Michael Mendizza. It rests permanently with my collection of treasured books.

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