

# Z and Me

Don Reneau

## I.

I suspect that children play as important a part in adult “growth and development” as we adults do in theirs.

— R.D. Laing (1997: 7)

**M**IDWAY THROUGH THE CHILDREN AND THE ENVIRONMENT PLANNING PROJECT, my three-year-old became interested in sizes. He knew that our address began with 2600, so for a while all kinds of things became 2600 big, or not 2600 big. I learned to ask questions like whether seven-twenty-six-hundred was bigger or smaller than twenty-six-one-hundred-ten. Z always knew the answer. Scotty Pippen, the basketball player, became the standard for very tall. A tape measure Z liked to play with helped him get a fix on long and short. One day he asked me to “put the measure tape high up as big as Scotty Pippen.” I guessed six foot seven or so. “No,” he said, “taller. Taller than the ceiling.” Then his eye fell on the workbench. “Here,” he commanded. “There. You hold this there.” He pulled the tape to the other end of the bench, studied for a moment the still indecipherable numbers, and then pronounced with satisfaction, “Yup, that’s how long it is.” Then he dropped the tape and toddled off in pursuit of another endeavor.

Our work in the planning project at that time concerned how to evaluate the activities we had organized with inner-city teens. Four groups of approximately a dozen young people had each been charged with identifying problems in their environments, learning about what caused them, and proposing solutions conceived from their own point of view. The precise difficulty we faced as the organizers of the work was how to prevent our evaluation of their efforts, in this case daily monitoring reports on how the young people conducted their activities, from taking over the activities themselves. We didn’t want our measuring instrument either to deform or blunt the young people’s own initiative, nor to predetermine our understanding of what they were up to. We didn’t want to organize tests that would, in the evaluators’ eyes, transform the participants from a group of creative, unpredictable individuals working together into a collection of good or bad test-takers.

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Little Z, working with his measure tape and his fledgling grasp of language, commented more tellingly on formal measuring methods than we adults were managing in our sophisticated discussions. Things that you measure, he seemed to know without knowing he knew it, always turn out to be precisely as big — or as small, or as valuable — as your measuring stick tells you they are. Listening to him exercise his still untutored intelligence helped me see how the answers we seek to questions are often inscribed, not necessarily visibly, in the conventions we deploy at the outset of a questioning process. To the extent that we seek innovative answers to seemingly intractable problems, it is necessary to call those conventions themselves into question. The parallel activities of working with young people in the planning project and fathering Z underscored for me the way that meetings across boundaries of age, class, race, and personal experience can operate to focus critical attention on unconscious, often unhelpful, conventions. Boundary crossing, if accomplished in mutual good faith, deconstructs authority; it qualifies narcissism, bringing unwarranted habitual assumptions to light and exposing prejudice; it opens a space for creative movement into a future that cannot be conceived abstractly or one-sidedly in advance of the movement itself.

I find myself, in the aftermath of the planning project, repeatedly discovering that what I wish to say to Z — how I want to answer his questions, to pose questions of my own — forces me to examine what I'm willing to embrace myself, and ultimately to question what self of my own I'm willing to accept. The idea that a child's comprehension is limited, while true, is also a dodge. How many things he hears in his daily doings that he doesn't comprehend, in this sense of his passing limitations, and yet how hard he listens and how hard he works, not yet in fact to know, but to go on discovering a way to be in relation to all of what he hears. It is not always easy to respond in like spirit to the challenge he poses. When I stumble over a response to his blank ponderings on death, I feel my fear of mortality being stirred. If a certain uneasiness flavors a frank discussion of human cruelty and injustice — by which I mean grappling with the reality of it, rather than rehearsing a standard adult explanation — it comes from not knowing how to justify my privilege, and his. To the extent that I find myself unable to model a hopeful politics for him, I'm left either with a bankrupt, purely abstract ideological self-righteousness, a tired sentimentalism, or a feeling of impotence that is not comfortable for a father to bear. Z causes me, if I'm honest with him, to be honest with myself.

Like Laing, with his children as with his clients in psychotherapy,<sup>1</sup> we took participation to be one of our three or four founding principles in this planning project. We sought the active involvement of other adults, drawn from various locations in the broader community of those concerned with issues of public health and youth, and we sought ways to meaningfully engage young people in our thinking. Participation of this sort turns out to be both easy and difficult to occasion. On the one hand, all you have to do is open a space for expression and

listen. To say that I was consistently astounded at the depths of awareness, intelligence, imagination, energy, and eloquence the young people were able to contribute to our work together is to confess a prior ignorance of what should be obvious to us all. On the other hand, under the pressure to “get things done,” it is frightfully easy to turn what is heard into something other than what it was, to rationalize it in alien terms.

Effective participation is not tokenism. It is not simply a marshaling of other voices in support of preconceived ideas and values. There is a world of difference between really engaging children — maneuvering with them into a space of mutual and equal communication — and instructing them in correctness or, for that matter, collecting and parading their ideas and opinions as cute or arresting or oddly wise beyond their years. I find myself feeling secure in my awareness of that difference, when what Z says or does causes me to think or act differently than I otherwise would have. Engaging him means being with him, not supervising him, and I emerge from good encounters as changed as I often think he is. His participation, in short, is best measured by the change I experience in myself.

It is perhaps the broadest claim of our project, and others like it, that youth participation in community affairs, evaluated in this way by the impact it has on adult perspectives, leads to both radical and salutary social change.

## II.

Laziness and cowardice are the reasons why so great a portion of mankind, after nature has long since discharged them from external direction (*naturaliter maiorennnes*), nevertheless remains under lifelong tutelage, and why it is so easy for others to set themselves up as their guardians.

— Immanuel Kant (1963: 3)

“Out of the blue” is a phrase I find recurring in the journal I keep of my exchanges with Z. The words mark the way he surprises me with a thought or concern I had not anticipated. “Clouds are the lowest planets in the world,” he says one day, turning from the window simply to offer the information, “because they cover up the suns.” My surprise at such moments is misplaced, because it implies that I have noted something about him, when what it inevitably refers to is my failure to maintain a fitting sense of the wholeness of his mind and spirit or to escape adult narcissism sufficiently to appreciate him as a carrier of his own seamless reality.

I remember gazing at the sky myself as a child about his age, made uncomfortable by a feeling of not being able to fathom personal identity against the depths of space. “I,” I would say silently to myself, and “me,” repeating the words, intensifying my bewilderment for as long as I could endure it, listening to the words fail to capture a meaning commensurate with the feeling they evoked. This

memory, prompted by Z's questionings and pronouncements, helps me realize that he is moving through a time of spiritual imprinting, when guidance — more precisely, the kind of guidance offered him — probably has lifelong consequences. He is undertaking his last good-byes to infant symbiosis; he will emerge with a sense of himself in the universe that I suspect will persist.

Dogmatic instruction is conceivably the most common and least appropriate form of adult “stewardship” in these circumstances. If the dogma takes, then I imagine what it seeds is either personal limitation, when the repression of unresolvable wonder is more or less complete, or that endless, often destructive skirmish with doubt that is so characteristic of Western philosophical being. Z teaches me that the difficult alternative to adult dogmatism — of which there is a complex liberal variant as well — requires me to surpass my own imprinted uncertainties and doubts, not in the direction of more certainty, but rather toward mutual, open-ended exploration. For me to share in his cobbling together of meaning from experience — to “shepherd it,” to use another oddly obsolete religious term — I have to learn to let little Z's speculations and momentary convictions become as valid as my own. I have to allow mine to become as relative as his.

What seems to be at stake here is the difference between mobilizing drama and language as a way to grow and to heal, which intact children do very ably, and seizing on “meaning,” attempting to impose it on youth, as an adult's abstract antidote to unmastered pain and fear. Our culture is abuzz with anxiety about teaching our children the rights and wrongs of the world, whether of mathematics and physics or morality and religion. The Dan Quayles and William Bennetts of the contemporary cultural scene would turn back the clock to allegedly simpler days by sheer dint of propaganda. “Virtue” in this sense, as Bennett himself conceded in a radio interview some years ago, falls awkwardly on sophisticated adult ears; the moralistic little nostrums compiled in his popular *Book of Virtues* (Bennett, 1993) have, as he put it, a frankly “corny” ring to them. Yet, so runs his argument, were children not exposed to any alternative, were they to be engulfed in a nostalgic adult's discourse of abstract virtue, they simply wouldn't know any alternative to the “virtuous” life he prescribes. The national anti-drug campaign, in addition to having staged a shooting war in the inner-city, relies on the same rhetorical strategy: if adults stay relentlessly “on message,” the children will follow without having discovered any paths of their own.

This is Kant's dictum posed imperialistically from the perspective of the guardian. It betrays the functioning of dogma, not as education for the young, but as a form of illusory reassurance to the old. Adult authority wielded in this way functionalizes youth narcissistically. It reminds me of the evil queen in “Snow White,” who wants to see in her mirror only a flattering reflection of herself. She is confronted instead with an ineradicable vision of fresh youth, which is not herself but an image of her obsolescence, telling her that she has already faded and is destined to die. The lesson of “Snow White,” as I allow it to be informed by my

experience with a child, is that adult talk very readily becomes a narrow discourse of a doomed authority. Moralists like Quayle and Bennett would drive what is native to youth underground, where, I would suggest, it either seethes and slowly cripples its frustrated carrier or erupts later in the genuinely ugly display of real life anger and violence. At work here is a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy: the image of dangerous youth that must be contained is actually only an externalization of the ugliness we shy from perceiving in ourselves. A recent *USA Today* article called blithely for the construction of yet more prison capacity on the basis of the brute demographic fact that more children than ever are entering their teens.

It is easy, from an unreconstructed adultist view of childhood development, to read dismal future outcomes into behavior that makes an entirely different kind of sense to a child.

“That green thing comes off, too,” says Z one day at the playground, struggling to dismantle a brand new toy.

“It does?” I say, casting a wary eye at his strong little hands tugging at what I’m not sure will withstand the force.

“Yeah, but I can’t get it off right now.”

“A really hard one, huh?” I’m sure he hears the subtle note of relief in my voice.

“No. I just have to drop it from a really far distance. Then it’ll come off.”

I often find myself warning Z that he’s about to break something. I spontaneously want him to value objects as I do, not as a stimulus to his curiosity, an occasion for testing his strength and ingenuity, but as a thing that is precious instead ultimately for the money it cost. It is quite possible in this way for us to suppose that we are discouraging “consumerism” in our children, while at the very same time we relentlessly enchant bought objects by bathing them in an aura of exaggerated and, to a child, mystical monetary value.

Another day Z invents the Super HXX Killing Machine, a construction of duplo blocks that he deploys against the collection of meanies I’m charged with playing in our game. I’m supposed to knock the top parts off his machine, an assortment of farm animals and a couple of propellers, by bombarding it with a variety of toys and smashing it with a dragon. Z chortles with his victories and quickly, calmly rebuilds, recovering from momentary defeats. My job is to keep up an energetic attack until he tires of the carnage, until he has had gotten enough of whatever it is that he knows he’s getting from it.

Z plays with undivided concentration and intensity, while I’m left fighting my battle on two fronts. First, I have to contend with the spectacularly tough and resilient Super HXX Killing Machine itself. But the more difficult task is to quiet the voices inside me that are telling me to censor his delight. I suppose I was punished as a child, as many children are, for breaking things, because the first line of attack on the internal front is always to worry that these objects, these mass-produced, readily replaceable or easily forgotten consumption items I otherwise disdain, will be injured.

Should I cop to this inconsistency, my mind immediately mobilizes a specter of the strained family budget; I question whether Z is learning to value things appropriately. Past these worries, I hear murmurings of testosterone poisoning and start wondering from that angle whether I'm cloning a monster. The thought runs through my mind that if he plays like this at school or at a friend's house, my parenting will be called into question. Z excavates, in other words, an archaeology of discipline that is buried in myself. He confronts me with the choice of mindlessly passing it on, permanently installing it in the nether regions of his consciousness, or following his lead, discovering, possibly, in my own terms and for my own purposes the difference between navigating by judgment and reacting by reflex.

There are, of course, compelling reasons for adults to instruct the young in the effective application of consensual knowledge, to pass on the fruits of accumulated findings, including examples of successful virtue. Inherent in each moment of intergenerational transmission, however, is also the power — the temptation — to cultivate in the young the encompassing feeling of what they do not know rather than what they do, of how they are not adequate rather than how they are, of what they do wrong rather than right. If there is any validity to the suspicion that expression left undeformed by relations of unequally distributed authority finds its way easily to relevant truth, then there emerges reason to suspect further that the effect of authoritative discourse, which may be well-meaning, is in fact authoritarianism. Working with young people in the planning project, alongside being with my child, left me with an acute sense of how slippery is the slope between authority, an irreducible aspect of intergenerational relations, and authoritarianism. The condition of walking securely at the top of that slope is the active cultivation of a countervailing power, a force pushing up, from those who, for the moment of their youth, walk along the bottom.

The alternative to adult dogma, to the imperialism of nostalgic virtue, is surrender to the labor of ongoing, often uncomfortable adult development. It is to take advantage of encounters across the boundaries of generational difference to pursue, unlazily, what Kant calls maturity. It is to surpass archaeological reflex in the direction of freedom.

### III.

Growing up at that time in America, it wasn't any different than any other small towns and cities, if you had the right influences, and the right people telling you you were doing a good job, you were probably going to be a pretty good young man or woman. Whether you come from a small town or city or suburban area, I think it's just who you know, people have impressed you as you were growing up, your parents and your family, maybe the first place you have a job. And it's about telling the truth. I remember in our household when you didn't tell the truth, my mother,

well, she would find a bar of soap if you used a four letter word or didn't tell the truth. You had a long memory of the, uh, in your mouth, filled with soap. I mean, my mother made all my sister's clothing and passed up ours. I always got the good stuff, I was the older brother. But, uh, we were poor, by standards, poor in some respects, economic, but we had, uh.... My parents didn't finish high school, but they were good people.

— Robert Dole<sup>2</sup>

“Had, uh, what, Bob?” I want to ask. What lies behind the rhetorical stutters, preserved in the otherwise self-consciously crafted biographical video made for the 1996 Republican convention? What precisely is the good in Dole's nostalgic image of impoverished rural authoritarianism that ought to be resurrected and passed on? Dole's words accompany images of ranging cornfields and deserted streets, a boy on an antique bicycle delivering morning papers. There are old black-and-white portrait stills, arresting because of the way the children seem to be scowling into the camera.

Dole's Kansas, meanwhile, is lost as irretrievably as his presidential campaign. But if it's not Kansas anymore, the question is, what is it?

One night on the local news there is a report on how to safely execute an ATM withdrawal from your car. A female reporter goes through the motions. Then she appears on screen with a male expert. “What did I do wrong?” she asks. He says: “You parked too far away from the ATM. Someone could have gotten between it and your window and threatened you. You put the car in park. Don't ever do that. Keep it in drive with your foot on the brake, so you can get away when you need to. And you didn't look once in your rearview mirrors. Always keep a lookout for suspicious behavior.” The reporter runs obediently through the maneuver again, acting more like an agent making a pickup in a Cold War spy film than a mom on her way to the grocery store. Now, of course, I find myself rehearsing the maneuver whenever I stop off to pick up some cash, noting at least abstractly the frightened thoughts that go with it. Snared in a ritual repetition, my thoughts turn to children learning to perform the stations of the cross in catechism school or mastering the bodily postures of Islamic prayer.

We are surrounded by fearful images. There was a letter in *Vanity Fair* a few years back from an irate reader. An article had, in her eyes, made light in some way of the crime problem in the United States. How dare a magazine not take crime seriously, she wrote, “in an age of rising murder rates, rampant drug wars, rape, burglaries, and drive-by shootings...”? She signed the letter from Sheridan, Wyoming, a town of modest population and a crime rate to match. A convenience store billboard in Berkeley sports a gigantic blow-up of an abducted girl: “Because we care if something precious is missing from your neighborhood.” A familiar hysteria rises here to an obscene crescendo in the implicit comparison between a missing child and a midnight package of cigarettes or an early morning carton of

milk, marking the point at which cultivated fear passes over into unwitting second nature. Peter Jennings on the national news reports the latest findings on Sudden Infant Death Syndrome: infants, he says, have a just measurably better chance of not up and dying on you if you put them to sleep on their sides or their backs, but “never, never, like this on their stomachs.” There’s an image of an uninformed mother recklessly risking minuscule odds by putting little Johnny to sleep the wrong way — instead of finding encouragement in her peacefully sleeping child to gain what comes of an honest confrontation with the feelings of mortality, irrevocability, and ever-impending loss that new life awakens in all of us. It is difficult not to note an element of compulsive repetition in all this fear mongering, in the ceaseless construction of a threat inside what purports to be a remedy.

Instead of Bob Dole’s Kansas, we live, even in Sheridan, Wyoming, inside an equally deluded, now endless stream of alarming messages: this is right, this is wrong, and almost everything is dangerous. Culture in this sense becomes an externalized superego, an enormous, fearful construction with which we treat ourselves, in the same way that we treat children whom we fear to be constantly on the verge of deadly misbehavior.

The point is not to register yet another variant of some universal decline, which would merely represent another variation on the same culture of fear. The point is rather to focus on what might be the difference that remains between the organization of a child’s fresh perception and how we adults, often in reference to children, go about organizing our own. Parents inevitably become aware of their children’s fears, recognizing most of them as groundless even while, one hopes, treating them with respect. It is more difficult to view our own fears in that same way, distinguishing what is real from what has simply become an anchor for our free-floating anxieties.

Halloweening with Z last autumn, along with a small group of parents and their children, we caught sight of a television screen through an open door. The pictures flashed by so quickly that it was impossible, without the sound, to decipher what the program could possibly be about. One parent noted ruefully that children’s programming requires edit cuts every two or three seconds; he had a friend whose video piece, in which there was an average of five seconds between cuts, was rejected by a broadcaster for that reason. I mentioned the popular reaction to early travel by train. Fledgling rail passengers were made intensely uncomfortable by the way the landscape shot by the windows, as if a dangerous acceleration had been forcibly injected into nature itself. People got nauseous and found themselves unable to sleep the night following a journey. Writers moralized grandly about the baleful effects of speed on human beings. “Trains were too fast,” offered one mom, and we laughed. I wanted to say more, to press the point, thinking about succeeding panics: that postcards would ruin our ability to correspond by subjecting written sentiment to an artificially limited space; that phonograph recordings would put an end to worthwhile musical experience; that television stunts children’s neuro-



logical development or spells a disastrous end to 500 years of popular literacy. Listening to us talk, finding myself unable to imagine the harm involved in humanity going through another round of visual skill development, it was impossible not to think that what I was hearing were the stodgy or, more to the point, fearful prejudices of an aging generation.

A few days later, I happened upon a radio interview (Martin, 1993) with the French author of a new book on Prohibition. His view is that the movement against alcohol was at bottom an attack on otherness, on the more indulgent lifestyles brought by primarily southern European and Irish immigrants to the new world. The argument struck me as persuasive to the point of obvious, leading me to suspect that a similar sort of classism and racism informs the otherwise well-intentioned hoopla about sex and violence in the media. "Today's media portrayals of teens," in the words of a report published in a recent issue of the magazine *Extra!*, "employ the same stereotypes once openly applied to unpopular racial and ethnic groups: violent, reckless, hyper-sexed, welfare-draining, ignorant" (Males, 1994). It is not upper-middle-class white kids in their private schools whom we tend to think of when we hear that too much TV watching is wreaking ruinous effects on the young.

I am not unaware of the startling statistics and well-intentioned reasoning put forward by media critics: American children spend a stupefying number of hours glued to the tube; the fare they are presented with there contains a staggering rate of violent incidents per hour; our media industry is vastly more concerned with exploiting sensation to sell advertising time than it is with what can reasonably be understood as the education of viewers, young or old; that same industry is relentlessly and probably irrevocably driven by an international marketing strategy that reduces drama to motion because mindless action is easier to export across language barriers; and so on. The fact of the matter, however, is that alarmed media critics, in study after study, fail to produce good empirical evidence to support their claims of a compelling connection between virtual consumerism and real-world behavior (Goodman, 1994; Males, 1996).

Meanwhile, the likely causes of common childhood misadventures are abundantly evident in the real-world experiences of children. It becomes necessary to question why all the attention is directed at the media, as opposed to disastrous life conditions: defunded schools, devastated neighborhoods, jobless parents, hopeless prospects. If there is little reason to believe that violence or sexuality in the media are the proximate cause of unwanted behavior, then there is just as little reason to believe that our children or the future are being served by attempts to sanitize the airwaves. It all starts indeed to look like yet another old-fashioned temperance movement, which may be the peculiarly American form of authoritarianism.

Observing Z in his relatively ideal conditions, I believe that the process of his exploration, learning, growing, suffering hurt, and healing himself is a delicate

one, and subject to myriad adult subversions. My feeling is that all kids are as relentless as he about their development, but that self-healing in particular is very easily driven underground, where, frustrated, it runs the risk of deformation. Television may be one deforming force, but what can be its effect compared to homelessness or woefully substandard daycare? Alongside victorious reports that some media watchdog group has gotten industry executives to agree to consider attempting to reduce violent incidents in their programming by, say, a whopping 10%, we all read more or less daily about the impossibility or inappropriateness of action elsewhere. Generous parental leave is pronounced too expensive for American industry. Public budgets would be overwhelmed by a merely adequate funding of daycare or public education. The business judgment that creates joblessness in the inner cities is represented like a force of nature, not to be tampered with. Meanwhile, the ongoing expansion of prison capacity is represented as an obvious response to an increase in the population of children.

Fear is a commodity in contemporary America as surely as were chewing gum and baseball mitts in bygone Kansas. Compulsive repetition, cycling endlessly from constructed fear to false reassurance, is in these circumstances an understandable but unhelpful response. When we are not being afraid for our children, we are being afraid of them. In neither of those conditions are we being with them, passing on to them what we know, learning from them what they have not yet forgotten. On the one side we have the macabre population of milk-carton kids, on the other the specter of violent youth out of control. On the one side are the made-for-adults nightmare movies of the news media, on the other the soothing meaninglessness of made-to-order Hollywood dreams.

#### IV.

“Do you know what mama means when she says nightmare movies?”

“Uhh, no. Do you?”

“Yes. She means movies that when you watch them at night instead of in the daytime they make you have bad dreams.”

“Oh. Do you think that’s right, that movies make you have bad dreams?”

“No.”

We’re arriving home from school. Z thinks things over as I park the car.

“What if,” he continues, “there were movies where only the bad guys won and at the end there weren’t any good guys left because all of them were dead?”

His eyes are lit up with the dangerousness of the mere thought and his voice is pitched a touch higher.

“Would that be a nightmare movie?”

Now his voice crackles with a nervous laugh. “Yes, of course that would be one!”

Z’s movie watching career began with *The Lion King*. He was barely three and watched it the first time with his eyes glued to the television screen. He rejoiced so hard he jiggled when little Simba sang about being the future king and doing

just what he liked. He chortled when Simba made fun of the evil Uncle Scar. And tears poured silently down his face when Scar flung Mufasa, Simba's father, from the rocks and killed him. When Simba, now grown, announced his resolve to return to the pride lands and challenge Scar, Z rose in one smooth motion from his pillow and shut off the VCR.

"That's enough," he said.

The next morning, he told me the story again, ending it before Simba takes up the challenge of his adulthood, by returning Simba not to the pride lands to reconquer his rightful legacy, but to the games of his infancy with his playmate Nala. In Z's first version, the story cycled endlessly from tragic loss to the contented oblivion of prematurity. Eventually, he watched the movie through and then many times over, thrilling to Simba's victory as once he wept at Mufasa's death. In a short stretch of time, I watched Z climb the movie like a ladder to a sturdier and more understanding self. I've seen him do it a number of times since, with all the movies that really capture his attention, watching them over and over until he wears them out, transforming fright into security. I ask him occasionally if he wants to have another look at *The Lion King*. "No," he always says, simply and without elaboration. He's through with it, on to other things. It's over definitively for now, perhaps to return someday decades hence in a burst of middle-age nostalgia. Meanwhile, he has moved from a primal fear in the face of unthinkable tragedy to a playful imaginative experimentation with wickedness and evil.

"Who do you want to be?" Z asks me one day in the kitchen, while I'm preparing dinner. I'm aware from an earlier play session that he wants to inhabit one of the characters from what we call the mouse movie, and he's looking for a playmate to reenact the drama.

"Joanna," I say. Joanna is a lizard, errand girl, guard, and all-around agent for the meanie poacher McLeach. "Who do you want to be?"

His eyes get a little too bright and he adopts a conspiratorial whisper. "McLeach."

Bruno Bettelheim (1991) has made us aware of the importance of fairy tales for children, focusing on the way they foster development in precisely this way, by stimulating artificial fear in a secure setting, helping young listeners learn to master their real fears in the real world. It may be that there are important differences to be noted between being read to by an adult and watching movies, certainly between the former and zoning out in isolation in front of the baby-sitter tube. Z, however, has no interest in watching movies alone. He delights in discussing them as they go along. And he maintains a lively interest in being read to. Often we watch a movie and then read the book, or vice versa. Then we talk about the differences between the two.

"What did you like better, Z? The *James and the Giant Peach* movie or the book?"

“The book.”

“How come?”

“Because in the book Aunt Sponge and Spiker get smashed flat as pancakes by the peach.”

In the movie version, the evil Sponge and Spiker don’t die. “You know what’s really silly in the movie?” Z continues. “Aunt Sponge and Spiker just drive across the water in their car.”

“That’s how they get away?”

“No, they end up where James’ giant peach is.”

“On that spike on the big building?”

“Yeah. And then they come at him whacking with an axe.”

“With an axe?!”

“Yeah.”

“Then what happens?”

“Uhh, they miss. James is on this red thing and he just moves his head.”

“And that’s the end?”

“Yeah. No. In the movie they don’t die.”

Z wants Sponge and Spiker to die because they are meanies. In the exaggerated terms of his evolving moral machinery, dread villainy is answered satisfyingly only by the direst comeuppance imaginable.

Adult movies, as a rule, operate the same way in terms of their essential dramatic structure. Meanies are installed into the story early on, often disappearing for a time toward the end so they can reemerge precisely at the moment of the good guy’s apparent triumph. Sponge and Spiker survive in the movie so they will be available to reinvigorate the threat to good, lending James’ ultimate victory an added oomph. So it is with *Ransom*, the popular Mel Gibson film of late last year. It tells the story of a wealthy couple, mother and father to a beautiful child. In the merest moment of inattention on the part of Mel, the loving father, the child is abducted by a diabolically clever band of kidnappers. A string of rescue misadventures follows, until finally Mel loses his patience and calls the kidnappers’ bluff. Rather than paying the ransom, he decides to devote the entirety of his over-proportioned resources to hunt down the evildoers and destroy them.

It is typical Hollywood fare. We are kept on the edge of our seats, riveted by fear even while we have not a moment’s doubt that good will prevail. Mel finally scores what seems to be the final victory, returning the child safely home, but just as quickly the illusion of safety is exposed: the kidnapper is back, inside Mel’s home this time, unrecognized, perfectly situated to recapture the child; vengeance figures into his own intentions now, which could not be more obvious or more ominous. Then the little boy suddenly appears. He recognizes the kidnapper’s voice — and pees in his pants. The thin stream of urine trickles out onto the floor. Mel immediately registers the boy’s fear, which allows him to identify the threat at the last possible moment and heroically turn the tables. He lures the kidnapper

back into the public world of male action, out of the home, and in a gruelingly extended flash of hand-to-hand combat, the bad guy ends up dead.

The little boy doesn't speak; he pees. His father reads him, not as a whole human being, but as a malfunctioning organism, an object for which he is responsible. This has been the boy's role throughout the film — precious, helpless, endangered; he has all the native subjectivity of a cash register.

The difference between *Ransom* and *The Lion King*, or between adults consuming the one and Z absorbing the other, is that adult movies of this sort, rather than fostering mastery, rather than encouraging development toward a stronger or more discerning self, return viewers to exactly where they were at the start. There is no narrative mechanism to insert distance between the adult viewer and the hero, just as nothing operates to make the child real outside the terms of his parents' fear. *Ransom* operationalizes "Snow White" for adults, leaving the evil queen's narcissistic mirror intact. Youth exists entirely for adult purposes; the carefully wrought mechanics of viewer identification see to it that no confusion can arise on the boundary between the two generations. We leave the theater feeling more than a little like larger-than-life Mel. Then we return to our fear-ridden doldrums, waiting for the next hit to come along to give us a temporary boost. Compared to the development I see in Z, adult movie watching can look very much like compulsive repetition. The cycle goes round and round, like little Z the first time with *The Lion King*. The movie generates fear like a dynamo, cancels it like magic, going nowhere, except to the bank.

It happens that I saw *Ransom* with a Syrian filmmaker who was visiting the United States for the first time, in New York for a festival. He was as gripped as I was; he tensed in all the right places and laughed at the spots scripted for relief. "It is horrible," he said afterwards, "that filmmakers would use a child in that way."

We are all using children in that way, to the extent that we assume it is possible to guide them into the future without understanding quite comprehensively, in great detail and in their own terms, who they are in the present. To achieve that understanding, it is necessary first of all to ask them. After that, and more difficult, comes allowing what they say in response, not merely to inform our judgment, but to transform it.

## NOTES

1. For a radical statement of the virtues of participation across boundaries of presumptive authority, see Laing (1967: 90).

2. Republican National Committee, "An American Hero," video biography of Robert Dole, Republican National Convention (August 15, 1996).

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