

## Some Thoughts on Rhythm

by Susan Gray Weber

Life is full of rhythm! Our bodies are full of it: our heartbeats, our breathing, our organs, for example, all have rhythms. We walk rhythmically, and we talk with rhythm. We dance and sing with rhythm, and we wake and sleep rhythmically.

The natural world also has rhythms: picture the moon and its in and out pull upon the tides as they visit the land, only to leave it again. The growing of the plants, the falling of the leaves, the ripening of apples and tomatoes - each has its moment. Our human activity also traditionally has had many rhythms: planting and harvesting; cutting, splitting, and gathering wood for warmth, household work - the laundry, the baking, the cleaning. And not only was there a rhythm to the week, but the activities had their own rhythms - kneading bread, swinging an ax, plowing or hoeing the field - and there were even songs to accompany work. After the hard physical effort came rest. The seasons had a profound effect on daily life - what people ate, what tasks they did, and even how comfortable they felt.

Today technology has freed us from these natural cycles and much of the physical activity of work. With electric lights and modern communications, with stores open all night, it can be "daytime" anytime at all, seven days a week. Even a day of rest is not often so any longer. And we can eat any food in any season, coming from so far away that we have not even a picture of who the farmer is who has grown our food. The most common rhythm for us may be the hum of the computer or refrigerator! Truly, these aren't rhythms at all; - life filled and varying - but unceasing beats without change. And the beat is not leisurely or natural, but busy and hurried, and is not really rhythm at all, as rhythm is filled with life. These sounds are merely a shadow of the life of rhythm, a droning beat.

It is not that we are not grateful for all that technology gives to us. On the contrary, many helpful and useful things have come our way through technology. But it is helpful to recognize that there are losses as well as gains. Children, especially, benefit from life rhythms. They are in the midst of the process of creating and developing the rhythms of their hearts, their breath, their digestion and sleep. For them, the possibility to trust in regular times and sequences for the activities of their lives brings bodily health and security. In the early months and years, it is the familiar that brings comfort - a familiar blanket, face, hand, or voice; a predictable sequence of events. Regular sequences and times help a newborn baby settle into life, and give a secure foundation from which to get to know the world. All the special people and places, the sounds and smells that greet her are new, and they are her life! For the adult, care giving may become repetitious and uninteresting, but for the child, it is the greatest joy. Imagine the child's joyful anticipation of special time with those who love her, taking care of her: after we eat, daddy will give me my bath, momma will help me to put on my pajamas, a familiar voice will sing to me and tuck me in bed. This familiar sequence and pattern bring delight for the child, and as these sequences become a habit, they later become the source of discipline, because "this is just the way we do it."

Rhythm also helps avoid over-stimulation and fatigue for young children, because the "breathing" of the day - now more active, now less active and quiet - refreshes their energy. It also builds good habits for later life when the pace of our day and the stress of life make us forget to pace ourselves in a reasonable way. This work - play - rest rhythm is a health habit for a whole lifetime!

Dr. Jane Healy, a Ph.D in psychology with a background in neurological development, feels that a rhythmic home life is vital to developing thinking skills. Establishing order from chaos helps develop neural pathways that create routes within the brain that enable us to think. The nursery rhymes and finger games we play with our children, the lullabies and songs all help with this process, and it is their rhythm that both brings delight to the children and helps them to recall them.

The year turns round, over and over, bringing birthdays, family celebrations, travels to visit grandparents. The toddler remembers these events and finds joy in their repetition.

Spending time in nature is a wonderful support to rhythm within our homes. Getting in touch with the seasons bring happiness to children and renewal to us. The young child begins to feel a security in the order of the year - first springtime with the tiny blossoms, spring bulbs blooming, puddles, and new leaves. Then comes summer with its fluffy clouds, green all around, lightening bugs...all at a pace that a very young child can absorb without stress and the confusion of hurry. These slower rhythms of nature can slow us down as well - the breezes, the crickets, the bird's songs, sun sets - and then our internal rhythms become slower, more peaceful, and healthy.

As a popular song of the 1940s (I think!) says, "I've got rhythm, I've got rhythm, I've got rhythm, who can ask for anything more?"

How can we create or strengthen rhythm in our lives? Creating rhythm arises out of a balance between the adult's awareness of the child's needs and the child's naturally emerging rhythm. We begin with the rhythm of waking, sleeping, and eating, for in the beginning this is all there is. As we observe closely, patterns will begin to express themselves, and we can support these patterns in becoming an actual predictable, secure rhythm. As our children grow, play is added, and bathing, and time outdoors. Our children take their cues from the sequence of the day's activity. "If I have just had my walk, now it must be time for my nap", imagines the infant. The repetition of this sequence brings joyful anticipation over time and a willingness to be guided into the transition toward the next activity of the day.

Parents discover that when a rhythm is created, far from compromising their freedom, life actually begins to give more freedom. Children are more relaxed and comfortable, more secure, less anxious and stress-filled because they know that the adult they love and trust is guiding the flow of the day. They relax into this security and often are less clingy or demanding. They need not be preoccupied with making sure that their own needs are met and can be free to play imaginatively, to explore, to observe. For the adult, the possibility to predict what will happen when, to anticipate the sequence of the day with its more active and more restful periods, enables a possibility to imagine how she or he will spend time when a child is napping times or play with the deep engagement that is possible when the security of predictable rhythm underlies daily life. The alternative is a child who becomes preoccupied and at times obsessed with gaining adult attention, with manipulating the environment, or with gaining access to food continuously because she does not know what to anticipate and trust throughout a day. The child who knows, for example, that meals will come on a predictable rhythm, can spend energy on other things.

With a rhythmic life, our children are gently guided toward order from the chaos of their first days of life. We refine our rhythm and recreate it as our children grow and change and as we discover how best to support them.

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