

# Burbank Leader

## In Theory: Should kids break records?

November 18, 2010

*The news is filled with stories of young people performing record-breaking feats of athleticism, from Zac Sunderland and Jessica Watson, two teens who recently sailed solo around the world, to Jordan Romero, 13, who this year became the youngest person ever to summit Mount Everest. Now a boy from Nepal, 9-year-old Tseten Dorje, will attempt to break that record by climbing the world's highest peak. Some argue that these adventures should only be reserved for adults; that kids are in no physical condition to undertake such feats, feats that could take a severe toll on their young bodies (and are usually backed up by ambitious parents).*

*What do you think? Does inherently dangerous record-setting have an age limit? Or can these feats encourage kids to reach for their dreams? What would you say to parents who wish to send their kids on an adventure that requires the skills and stamina of someone twice their age?*

Answer:

The topic for this week, relating to parents pressuring their children to excel in various ways, reminds me of an inspiring piece written by Lebanese poet and mystic Kahlil Gibran in his book, "The Prophet." In that book he writes about our children:

*They are the sons and daughters of life's longing for itself.  
They come through you but not from you,  
And though they are with you, yet they belong not to you.  
You may give them your love but not your thoughts,  
For they have their own thoughts.  
You may house their bodies but not their souls,  
For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow,  
which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.  
You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you.  
For life goes not backward nor carries with yesterday.*

Whether the parents are a Nepalese father who pushes his 9-year-old son to climb Mount Everest, American parents who pressure their children to excel in academics or other pursuits at the risk of their own health and welfare, or parents of any religious tradition who frighten their children into blindly accepting the doctrines of their faith without question, I believe they have sacrificed their children's well-being for their own sense of accomplishment and control. As both a parent and a minister, I am convinced, with Gibran, that we have an obligation not to do that.

That is not to say that we should just let children do whatever they want when their physical or psychological health is at stake. Our job as parents is to love our children and to encourage and support them in finding their own ways in life — setting an example for them by making responsible decisions ourselves. But because I am a Unitarian Universalist who affirms "the inherent worth and dignity of every person," I am convinced that anything we do to coerce others, including our children, to follow our ways of thinking or acting is, at best, unproductive and, at worst, abusive.

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There is nothing to be gained by taking foolhardy risks, especially for young people who may not yet be masters of their own decision-making, and when the parent may have lofty ambitions for the child. And yet, while great care is needed, we should not stifle genuine possibilities, whatever the age.

That said, the athletic success of young adventurers gives a hint that it is often possible to go beyond established limitations. Some limitations are well grounded in experience and common sense; others may be more what society has grown to accept. We sometimes forget, too, that our adult limitations are frequently self-imposed, and it's easy to overlook that a child is typically not belabored by the opinions and conclusions that limit the adult.

Each individual inherently possesses a relationship to God that guides us throughout our lives, the "still, small voice" heard by the prophet Elijah after realizing that God does not create doom (see 1 Kings 19). In that sense, we benefit ourselves and our offspring when we know that God governs our being, regardless of age or circumstance.

Adults have much to learn from young people, not in being childish, but in cherishing and utilizing the childlike innocence and fearless confidence that is actually native to each of us because we each have that God-inspired spiritual side. The challenge is to be aware of this in the face of odds that otherwise look daunting.

Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science, wrote in "Science and Health With Key to the Scriptures, "Jesus loved little children because of their freedom from wrong and their receptiveness of right. While age is halting between two opinions ... youth makes easy and rapid strides, " for example, in realizing what can be done.

Perhaps the question isn't so much whether restrictions should be placed on the attempted feats of young persons — indeed, there is reason not to attempt what is truly unrealistic — as what we all can learn from seeing the childlike attributes that we all have, in dismissing unrealistic fears and unlocking our own true potential.

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I'm uncertain that this question is especially spiritual in nature, except that maybe man, even immature man, can do amazing things, and by so doing, glorify God who created him. God is amazing, and he's made man amazing. In his foreknowledge, God knew that he would incarnate as that amazing creature, with the purpose of redeeming us. He didn't come as a talking wolf or some bizarre possible creature of divine machination, he came as Jesus, and Genesis says "in the image of God he created" (Genesis 1:20). Its meaning has been debated in Christianity for millennia. Did God mean "spiritually" or "spiritually and physically," since he knew in what form this incarnation of mankind would take?

Whatever the theological ramifications, God made us unique among living things, and by nature we seek the impossible; we push the limits, and we enter the Guinness Book of World Records. History records the efforts of those brave enough to venture peaks, push limits and lift records. We seek greatness and through this, God is glorified.

As for age, just this past weekend I took my child to a spiritual father/daughter weekend excursion at Hume Lake in the Sequoias. At one point, my 9-year-old was flying past me on a 600-foot-high zip line across a pond assailed by lightning bolts. We were tripping! Two fingers up, big smiles all around; she was in the zone, and I was happy to provide her the opportunity. Perhaps this will give her oomph in adulthood to stretch and attain greatness. I can only hope.

I can't judge parental choice in supporting childhood spectacular endeavors, but when it's right, you know. These amazing things glorify God, be they Christian or even pagan. But it's the Christian accomplishments that last beyond death. Winning a spot in "history's greatest" is cool, but someone will succeed that is better, faster or more talented and accomplished, and temporal accomplishments fade away. That's why the Bible reminds us, "whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31).

The Rev. Bryan Griem

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In my opinion, this entire spectacle can be summed up in one sentence: adults acting like children, and children acting like adults.

The fact is that children aren't fully capable of understanding the ramifications and difficulties involved in trying to break athletic records and achieve extreme goals. It is almost always adults who convince innocent kids to undertake these dangerous challenges. I would, therefore, tell the parents of these youngsters to act their age, and recognize that their role should be that of protector and caregiver rather than daredevil trainer.

Inspiring a young person to believe in their own potential and to reach for the stars as they mature is one thing, but I fail to see how a loving, sensible parent would unnecessarily put their child in harm's way.

Encouraging a child to accomplish a world record — and in the process put their life in danger — is highly irresponsible. These extraordinary athletic feats test the extremes of human endurance, pushing against the limits of both mental skill and physical ability. I say let a child be a child, and when he reaches adulthood, let him make the decision of whether or not he wants to achieve a world record for himself.

I believe that much of this phenomenon of forcing children into impossible physical challenge is less about children "reaching for dreams" and more about the narcissistic aspirations of their parents. Several months ago, the world was riveted by the story of Abby Sunderland, a 16-year-old California girl who almost died while trying to achieve a world record in sailing. It turns out that it was her parents who pushed her to try this feat. This story, and several others like it, brought this outrageous trend of irresponsible parenting into the headlines.

When talking to parents about their obligations to their children, I stress the importance of recognizing that we don't own our children. God loans us these precious souls with the explicit understanding that we will cherish, protect, nurture and raise them properly until they reach adulthood and are able to stand on their own. Doing anything to the contrary is not only a breach of parental responsibility but also an affront to God, who has entrusted us with the most sacred task of child-rearing.

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In my humble opinion, there is no age limit for those seeking adventure. I believe young people who undertake greater than average feats are role models for other children.

But how do we *really* know these adventures require skills and stamina of someone twice their age? What measurement is being used? There couldn't be any comparison studies because there haven't been enough children who have accomplished difficult outdoor adventures.

I was *much* more adventurous as a child, was agile, had loads of stamina, and now, am pretty much gutless as an adult. From what I've read, mountain climbing requires an accompanying crew, which would provide the "safety net" for the young man who will be climbing Mount Everest.

Would I have allowed and encouraged my own children at that age to climb Everest? Yes, provided they trained—preferably wilderness training and rock climbing — had adequate preparation, and knew exactly what to expect. Then, I would hold them in prayer and remember the scripture, Philippians 4:13: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

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When I was a youngster, I played a lot of baseball, and like many a dreaming young boy, would have liked to have been good enough to play in the Major Leagues. One of my memories from those days was the question of whether a teen-age boy under 16 should learn to throw a curve ball. The worry was that the attempt to do so might ruin his arm forever. I have no idea how that debate turned out, and since I wasn't a pitcher, I wasn't personally interested in the outcome. But I do remember the controversy.

As far as today's young people are concerned, my tendency would be to allow them to achieve what they want to achieve. I would try to emphasize, however, that by choosing any one particular thing, they are also choosing *not* to do several other things, such as hang out with their friends or be in a rock 'n' roll band. True, it might border on being an irresponsible parent to allow or even urge a 9-year-old to try to climb Mount Everest. But how could you, in good conscience, keep your child from doing what he/she has wanted to do for a long time? Not only is the child making a choice, so is the adult. And both should understand as much as possible that some choices turn out to be the wrong choices.

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