

The Parents League of New York

# Review 2008

*Essential articles on parenting and education*

# Helping Children Find Hope in a Difficult World

by Judith Samuelson, The Aspen Institute

*No one has a right to sit down and feel hopeless. There's too much work to do.*

– Dorothy Day, social activist

Sarah, daughter number two, asks the provocative questions in the family. I suppose it comes from being younger than her sister Anna, and the need to be heard at the dinner table. Or maybe it's her inquiring mind and special gift of empathy. This question in particular made me pause.

I think she was twelve at the time. “Mom,” she asked, “if you could live in any age, which one would you choose?”

Now, I am a Luddite – or at least I tend in that direction. I complain about technology in all forms. I actually believe that so-called time saving devices – washing machines and word processors and cell phones and Blackberries – have created more work and cost us more time than they save. I complain about creeping commercialization. I rail at noise and fast food and TV ads. I even refuse to buy Jiffy Pop, preferring to burn my own popcorn on the stove.

So when Sarah posed her question, I naturally thought back to the turn of the century. Ever a romantic, inspired by *Little Women*, *Little House on the Prairie* and too much *Masterpiece Theatre*, I conjured up images of waltzing in long skirts and reading by candlelight. But of course, I don't have servants and butlers or cooks, and my ancestors farmed and preached on the prairie – no gentry in the family tree – so after a brief flight of fancy, I told Sarah that I would choose my own generation.

When she asked why, I reminded her that it wasn't until my generation that women had the freedom to choose their path. To consider a wide range of professions. Whether or not to marry and to have children. To me it had to be my generation – there was no other choice.

Then she asked a question I didn't anticipate, but natural from her perspective, “Then why didn't you choose my generation?” After all, the

opportunities open to our children are even greater than those that were open to us.

What had been a light-hearted exchange turned awkward. I knew the reason immediately, instinctively, but I didn't want to share it.

### A Parent's Pessimistic Worldview

For as I look around the world today, too often I see decline and despair, terror and waste. Natural disasters – and disasters of our own making. Or so-called natural disasters that we may contribute to through our lack of respect for the commons, natural systems and the planet. I tend to see the world in gaps, deficits and excesses. I worry about growing gaps between rich and poor and between our promises and our resources. Deficits in social security and trade. Excessive power in the hands of the undeserving or moneyed interests. I worry about the lack of civility in Congress, the short supply of ethical leaders and excess of greed. I could go on, but you get the picture.

So for all these reasons, I had to swallow hard when Sarah, now a senior in high school, asked why I didn't choose to join her generation. In short, I feared we had peaked, that her class – my children's generation – has been given too tough an assignment to snare a passing grade. I was lacking basic hope about our future.

A month or two after this exchange I came across a book whose author, Scott Russell Sanders, I had not heard of before. Its title, *Hunting for Hope*, caught my attention like a flashing neon sign. Early in the book, Sanders describes a conversation with his teenage son, Jesse.

When Sanders prods his son to tell him what is on his mind, Jesse retorts that his father wouldn't understand, that he is too out of touch. "With what?" Sanders asks. His son tells him that is out of touch with everything that is fun – with television, with movies, with video games, with music.

But that is just the beginning; now son Jesse is on a roll. Like a water hose that springs a sudden leak, the son spills his pent-up frustration. He reminds his father of all the things he hates – like advertising, billboards, lotteries, developers, logging companies and big corporations ... and snowmobiles, jet skis, malls, fashion and cars.

**“Mom,” she asked,  
“if you could live in  
any age, which one  
would you choose?”**

“You’re still on my case because I won’t buy a Jeep?” Sanders retorts, remembering an old argument. “Forget Jeeps,” Jesse responds, “You look at any car and all you think is pollution, traffic... You say fast-food’s poisoning our bodies and TV is poisoning our minds. You think the Internet is just another scam for selling stuff. You think business is a conspiracy to rape the earth.”

“None of that bothers you?” Sanders asks his son.

“Of course it does,” Jesse retorts, “But that is the world.”

His son’s final words cut Sanders to the quick: “Your view of things is totally dark. It bums me out. You make me feel the planet’s dying and people are to blame and nothing can be done about it. There’s no room for hope. Maybe you can get by without hope, but I can’t. I’ve got a lot of living still to do. I have to believe there’s a

## **As I look around the world today, too often I see decline and despair, terror and waste.**

way we can get out of this mess. Otherwise what’s the point? Why study, why work – why do anything if it’s all going to hell?”

If you read the rest of the book, you learn that this conversation and Sanders’s love for his son ignite a search for reasons to spread hope rather than despair. In a beautifully written narrative he tells stories of the restorative power of nature. Of the healing power of community. The importance of fidelity and faith. I agreed strongly with many of the things on his list; others failed to register for me, but it was the conversation with his son that spoke most powerfully. I feared the out-of-touch parental figure could be me.

In Sanders’s case, his cynicism and dislike for the trappings of modern society had caused a riff between father and son. In my case, two smart and patient daughters have tolerated my ranting and soap box lectures about the world going to hell in a hand basket. At least I thought they had. As Sarah and I spoke that day, I realized in an instant that my pessimistic worldview – as it dribbled out in overheard phone conversations and around the dining room table – was a heavy burden to lay on a teenager, and it had to change.

## Searching for Hope

My exchange with Sarah and my encounter with Sanders's book took place several years ago. Now, unfortunately, if one went looking for hope in 2001 and since, I am afraid one needs to be prepared for disappointment. But that isn't the end of this story.

The good news is that holding hope is an internal game. Today, signs of hope and positive change are not found by the uninitiated. It's like the student of art who sees the landscape differently, because he or she is trained to look differently than the unschooled. In any pursuit, study and acquired knowledge allow for a deeper appreciation of the subject matter. Hopefulness is created; it is created out of the desire to find and build hope. And it is important because creating and sustaining a vision of how things can be is the only way that real change takes place.

While I have tended towards a dark view of the world, I have never felt it is the result of bad people or the ill intent of others. I do get angry at small misdeeds – but I think people act in accordance with their surroundings and the signals and incentives sent their way. As a consultant I worked with would say, “The system in which we operate is perfectly designed for the outcomes we see.”

On the other hand, I draw the line at the leaders and the powerful, who are especially able to influence the rules of the game and incentive systems for everyone else. At the Aspen Institute, we work with executives and business faculty on driving ethical questions and values-based decisions into business schools

and through the decision models used in business. I have had lots of opportunity to observe true

**I realized that my pessimistic worldview was a heavy burden to lay on a teenager.**

leaders – people who act in the interests of the wider community and the generations who will come after us – versus the merely powerful. There are many examples of good leaders in every domain of society.

## The Power of Appreciative Inquiry

In my search for hope, a strong beacon is the work of David Cooperrider, a Professor at Case Western Reserve University's Weatherhead School of Management in Cleveland. By temperament shy and unassuming,

David is sought out by everyone from business executives to the UN Secretary General to the Dalai Lama as the guru of a methodology for organizational change called Appreciative Inquiry. Appreciative Inquiry has links to the rapidly growing field of positive psychology. The basic idea is that humans (and importantly the organizations and systems they create) respond more actively and forcefully to a well articulated positive vision – identifying what works well and leveraging it – than they do to crisis or criticism or conventional gap analysis or a focus on what is broken.

In Appreciative Inquiry, one probes for organizational or individual strengths, for what is going well, what is possible, what makes us most proud, what stirs our emotions and ignites our deepest reservoir of strength and courage. The theory and practice involve working with individuals within organizations to find the core beliefs and behaviors that ignite passion and drive collaboration. For example, the same consultant I mentioned earlier began our meetings with business executives by saying, “What is the thing that we know is impossible to change, but that would make the biggest difference if we did?” Some of you are probably familiar with the data on kids and the amazing results that are achieved through consistent and positive reinforcement. (Emphasize only what your kid does right for a change and see what happens.) Appreciative Inquiry is like that on a large scale.

To practice Appreciative Inquiry in a consistent manner may require Buddha-like focus, but we have seen the results in our own work at Aspen. And most of us know from experience that positive vision trumps negative critique. John F. Kennedy’s challenge to land a rocket on the moon in 10 years? No problem. Why was Martin Luther King so effective? Because he assured his followers that he had “been to the mountaintop,” and shared with them his eloquent vision.

Business as well as government – with the right kind of leadership – responds more effectively to vision than to pending gloom. In fact, one of the things I learned long ago and admire most about successful business executives is their disdain for doomsday scenarios. They are too busy inventing and competing and solving problems. Don’t waste your time

telling them how awful the situation is. Give them a problem, and why it matters to the business, and get out of the way while they work to solve it.

Ironically, especially to the Luddites among us, technology also has an important role to play today in bringing about positive change and instilling hope. The In-

ternet turns out to be a powerful tool for the good guys as well as the bad guys. Think back on the citizen-led initiative to pass the UN treaty on

**Humans (and importantly the organizations they create) respond more actively to a well articulated positive vision – identifying what works well and leveraging it.**

land mines – a campaign that was so effective and powerful that it earned the Nobel Prize. In this historically unique example of driving change, the campaigners weren't governments or corporations or even well-heeled nonprofits. They were like-minded citizens, working across countries and continents and languages – linked by computers and IM-ing and text-ing and emailing to a fare-thee-well.

### **What Do We Tell Our Children?**

Most of all, my hope for our children's future is fueled by the belief that it is committed people, acting and responding to a positive vision of change, who can make a difference in the world. The engagement of both young and old in tackling local or even global manifestations of a problem – be it racism or homophobia or homelessness or the need for affordable housing or after school care – putting the shoulder to the wheel in a committed and collective effort to serve and to bring about change, is all about creating hope. In some kind of chemical reaction, concern or even despair about our uncertain future converts into positive energy. Commitment to task generates hope and crowds out despair and cynicism. We have all seen it happen

As for my job as a parent, the message I want to instill in my daughters is the following: This is our community, our government, and this is our moment. There will never be a better one to bring about the changes we envision for our neighborhood, for our city, for our world.

Like so many of our schools do through community service programs, we parents can promote work and goals to make our privileged lives matter for our neighbors and fellow-travelers – especially those who have much less than we do. Importantly, I hope our children are encouraged not just to feel good about volunteering and offering direct service. They should be encouraged to carefully consider the nature and, perhaps, even the root causes of the needs they see; to observe what works and what doesn't; and ultimately to translate on-the-ground experience to the important work we have to do

**Encourage them to consider the nature and root causes of the needs they see; to observe what works and what doesn't; to create the public will for meaningful change through collective action.**

as citizens: to create the public will for meaningful change through collective action. Especially through the ballot box. If our young people replace voting with volunteering – as national

statistics seem to suggest they are doing – we lose our ability to link our actions to systemic change. We can accomplish more in community than we can alone – but this means making government work for us all, not just filling in the gaps we see today.

The challenge we have as parents, as community members, and as leaders is to convert the trials of our day to the fuel that both stimulates the mind and builds skills for action – and converts despair to hope for our future.

*Judith Samuelson is the Executive Director of the Business and Society Program, a policy program for the Aspen Institute. The Program is dedicated to developing leaders for a sustainable global society.*