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**Jay Griffiths**

I want to start by thanking Ger for inviting me to speak here. It is an honour and a privilege. As soon as he told me about the Children's University, I was riveted. Kids going to university is something I really care about. It was one of the most important things in my life, and now my nephew is at university, and I'm seeing it through his eyes too.

For me, university was hugely important. I got a grant to go: and I can tell you without a shadow of a doubt that if I had not had that grant, I would not have gone. But I also needed the confidence to go. When I was twelve, my grandmother took me to Oxford, saying “when you're older, you'll come here.” She gave me the strength to take up a place which she herself could not have taken. She physically oriented me towards it, and psychologically did so too and in this she performed for me one of the functions which the Children's University is doing: showing kids that they can belong in that framework, giving them confidence so they do not feel like strangers there. The confidence to have high hopes. To break the glass ceiling - smash it - shatter it. Hurray to that. “To feel what success is like.”

Let me pause a moment and give you an overview of my book, *Kith, The Riddle of the Childscape*. There is a crisis of childhood, which so many people, - parents, teachers and all of us who care about society - can see. In 2007, in a UNICEF report, Britain ranked lowest of 21 industrialised nations for childhood wellbeing; the United Nations refers to a “general climate of intolerance” in Britain towards young people. Kids today are expected to enter adulthood crushed with debts: for college, for university, for a first home. Children and young people are telling us their unhappiness in every language they know, from riots to depression, from dangerous gang behaviour to self-harm.

There are some things you never need to teach a child. One of them is the phrase “It's not fair”: it is actually a very complex thought and it would be very hard to teach a small child this, if they didn't seem to have an eerie capacity for understanding it right from the start. Children have an intuitive sense of justice.

It's not fair: a child of six could govern better than politicians, using this one principle alone, that principle you never need to teach a child. When I was writing Kith, I wondered - what are the other things you never need to teach a child? Well, you never need to teach a child metaphor. The word itself can be hard, for sure, when presented in English lessons. But metaphor as a way of thinking, a stance of the mind, is where children seem to dwell happily.

I was looking after one of my godsons once, when he had barely managed to speak. His parents were just leaving the room to do something outside, and he was on the verge of a tantrum. I saw a blue circular rug on the floor, and an empty Heinz baked bean tin. “Hey”, I said, “this is the sea and here is a boat.” And hey presto, there it was in his mind, and he sailed away for an hour.

Ours is an age which suffers the intellectual paralysis of a deadly literalism, where only what is measured, costed and counted is considered valuable, and in contrast to this, children are musicians of thought, they transpose from the key of fact to the key of magic - through metaphor.

It is part of the free play of the mind - a requisite for the individual child, and essential to art. Playfully taking a line for a walk or playing on words, photographing the play of light or playing a violin, playing with an idea or writing a play, the playfulness within the artistic process is unquestionable. Creativity is a ‘jeu d’esprit’, born of play’s abundance which children know.

Children in imaginative play have this inner abundance. By contrast, children using too much commodified play of toys and products are learning a terrible lesson: they are learning not that they have abundance but that they have a scarcity within, that they cannot provide for their own play, or rely on their own imagination, that they are impoverished beggars of the entertainment industry. And indeed of their parents.

You never need to teach a child to play. Made out of cogs, kazoos and wagglesticks, play is the undeniable instinct of childhood. Play is life-jazz. It dances with the moment when the moment is calling for a dance. Unscheduled, spontaneous, play improvises. Because when it comes to the living of one’s life, there is no dress-rehearsal. Play is how the child practises the greatest art of all, the art of life.

In play, children make believe. Stop a moment on that, for the creation of belief in the human psyche is no small thing. This happens because in imaginative play they talk to themselves in what psychologists call ‘private speech’, planning and thinking aloud. In structured play, this private speech declines. When children play imaginatively with private speech, they learn something vital to their development, the ability to self-regulate: to control their own emotions and behaviour. I'll be coming back to self-control and self-regulation later.

Kith is not a parenting manual, but it is about the Big Picture, about how societies as a whole treat their children. There are huge differences in how childhood is experienced in indigenous cultures, which interests me deeply, and for hundreds of years, travellers, writers, historians and anthropologists have noticed the sheer happiness of the childhood experience in indigenous cultures. My book explores children’s affinity for the natural world, the quest element of childhood, issues of childhood privacy, and contemporary surveillance, the importance of folk tales, children’s relationships with pets and the profound politics of childhood.

If there is one word which sums up the treatment of children today, it is enclosure. We have enclosed our children in school and home, enclosed them in cars to shuttle between them, we have enclosed them with fear, and surveillance and enclosed them in rigid schedules of time. These enclosures compound each other and make children bitterly unhappy. In 2011, UNICEF asked children what they needed to be happy, and in the top three things was, yearningly, ‘outdoors.’

If a puppy is caged indoors and not allowed to play outside, its owners may be prosecuted for not allowing the dog to ‘express normal behaviour’ according to the law. Children wanting to play outdoors are merely expressing normal behaviour and wanting rights equal to dogs.

Partly, obviously, this is an issue of car-culture. Society as a whole has to start addressing the fact that there are needs other than the needs of car-drivers: that children have needs too, and for urban children that includes supporting the many attempts to create safer streets.

Partly contemporary enclosure is a result of the risk-averse society. Tree climbing is ‘unsafe’ say some teachers. Yes, indeed. 1,067 British children were hospitalised falling out of trees in 2006-7. More than twice as many (2,532) were hospitalised for falling out of bed.

Tightly constrained by a risk-averse, health and safety-obsessed society, many children are unable to light fires, paddle canoes, make shelters, use knives or cope with darkness. Further, we learn with our bodies as well as our minds and when we see our physical selves modelling bravery, our sense of moral courage, political courage, or intellectual courage may be heightened.

Rather than learning to trust their own judgement, children are taught to obey the signs of the authorities, so barriers are erected around a Guy Fawkes bonfire, with notices saying ‘Stand back – Danger’ as if children are to take their orders from signage, not from the fact that there is a blazing pyre melting their wellies.

“It's because we'll get sued,” people say. But this is about far more than merely living in a culture where people are ready to sue at the drop of a hat. It is about insidiously demanding that children must always seek permission for the most trivial of actions, that they must obey the commands of others at every turn. Children today are not being beaten into obedience but being eroded into it. The risk-averse society creates a docility and a loss of autonomy which has a horrible political shadow. A populace malleable. Commandable. Obedient.

My kitten has been awarded an Anti-Social Behaviour Order. The reasons involve the toilet, three houseplants, my other cat’s ear and some genetic predispositions including the fact that his mother was an acrobat and his father was a kangaroo.

I’d been in two minds about getting a second cat but a nearby farm had too many kittens and I had houseguests including a seven-year-old boy who arrived in an off-kilter mood. 'Do you want some lunch?' I asked. No. Do you want a biscuit? No. Do you want to see the pond? No. Do you want to find the crocodile in the garden? No. Pause. Do you want to go and find a kitten? Kitten? Enter Otter. The two kittens, one of each species, played together for hours and the child happily strolled over the borders, belonging to the world of brimming animality as much as to human culture.

In childhood, the boundary is quivering because children are liminal. The door is ajar, it opens easily on its hinges. There is a paw scraping at the gate. The hoof is there inside the shoe. Children make friends with animals. They tell secrets to animals, they can feel understood by them. Animals, though, are important to children in a further sense: they are guides to thought. Wondering what a wasp is thinking or what a snail might feel in the wind is part of the mind’s development, practising the quick spring of empathy. Children ascribe meaning, intent and emotion to animals. They become party to extra sensitivities, and a diversity of viewpoints. Having pets increases children's self-esteem and sense of self-control. (Again, this is an important theme for me.)

So crucial are animals for children’s happiness that in a significant UNICEF survey in 2007, children specified that pets were one of the top four most important things for their happiness.

Top of the list of what children told UNICEF they needed to be happy was TIME. Time to think, play or daydream. If I could nominate the guardian angel of reverie it would be the French philosopher and twentieth century Romantic, Gaston Bachelard. “In our childhood, reverie gave us freedom… we still dream of liberty as we dreamed of it when we were children,” he writes.

In daydreams, which can occupy a third of our waking state, the brain becomes highly active in those areas associated with complex problem-solving, because in daydreaming the mind roams freely, broadly and profoundly across one’s life. In the words of daydream expert Dr Schoolen: “For creativity, you need your mind to wander.” As any artist could tell you without an MRI scan.

But the daydream police are out in force. Parents and teachers are told to watch for ‘daydreaming indicators’ which include blank expressions or wandering eyes. Daydreaming children should join 'structured' and 'productive' clubs. Adults should use a ‘timer for planned fantasy periods.’

Children need wild, unlimited hours but many are diarised into wall-to-wall activities, scheduled from the moment they wake until the minute they sleep, every hour accounted for by parents whose actions are prompted by the fear that their child may fall behind in the rat-race which begins in the nursery. Loving their child, not wanting them to be life-long losers, parents push children to achieve through effective time-use. This is not a case of bad parenting - I don't write about good or bad parenting but rather about how society instils a fear of the future which can only be appeased by sacrificing present play and idleness, and children feel the effects in stress and depression.

Historically in Britain, through Puritanism and Methodism, breaking the will of a child was considered essential to child-rearing. But when I was looking at indigenous cultures' ideas of childhood, one very common theme was the importance of respecting the child's will. Will is a life-force for children. Will is vitality, the iridescent juice which makes one’s spirit shine.

Please can I briefly say at this point that I am not offering some daft dualism of 'all indigenous good' and 'all modernity bad' - I have written about some of the ways in which indigenous cultural practices can be cruel to children, and I am fully aware of the vital improvements in medical care, and cultural education for modern Euro-American children. But I am interested in what our culture may have to learn from indigenous peoples.

One of the most incredible psychodramas of childhood was played out in settler America, a phenomenon reported by many people including Benjamin Franklin. Time after time, when children of the settlers were stolen by Native Americans and taken ‘captive’, brought up in those indigenous communities, the children were ferociously happy. So much so that when their real biological family came to “rescue” them, the captors refused to be rescued, in some instances having to be bound hand and foot to force them back to the settler communities. Many of them promptly ran away again, back to their Native American families. The reverse did not happen. When Native American children were stolen by settlers, they never once wanted to stay, but rather seized the first opportunity to return to their tribal villages.

!Kung children of the Kalahari were customarily not forced into obedience - if they strongly refused to do something, the choice was considered theirs to make. Among the Yequana people of Venezuela, coercion was traditionally absent and deciding what anyone else should do, regardless how young they may be, was against their philosophy.

Take a step back for a moment. Letting children have their own way? Doing just what they like? Wouldn’t that be a total disaster? Yes, if parents perform only the first half of the trick. Self-will is often misunderstood as brattish, selfish behaviour, children acting like spoilt gods. Will does not mean selfishness, and autonomy over oneself is not a synonym for nastiness towards others. In fact quite the reverse.

For often when indigenous people have elaborated on the importance of a child following its will, they stress wider social subtleties. That is the second half of the trick. Children are socialized into awareness and respect for the will and autonomy of others, so, for a community to function well an individual may need to rein in their own will but, crucially, not to be compelled to do so by someone else.

Those who would still overrule a child’s will take ‘obedience’ as their watchword as they fear disobedience and disorder and believe that if a child is not controlled, there will be chaos. But these are false opposites. The true opposite of obedience is not disobedience but independence. The true opposite of order is not disorder but freedom. The true opposite of control is not chaos but self-control.

Someone - and I'm pretty sure the finger of suspicion points to Marshall McLuhan - someone once said: “The reason children don't like going to school is that it interrupts their education.”

Much of my education happened at the local library. I can remember as if it were yesterday the afternoon when my mother took my brothers and myself on the regular visit to the library, but this time was different. She settled my brothers in the children's section, then took me into the adult section, walked to the fiction shelves and pulled out a small navy blue book with pages thin as bible paper. “I think you might like this.” I was nine. Jane Eyre was nine when the book begins. It was a homecoming to me. That was where I belonged. And the government is threatening this library with closure.

My chapters on education look at the brilliant effects of Forest Schools and the Reggio Emilia system of Italy, as well as the wonderful work of Anthony Seldon and Rabindranath Tagore. Out of it all, though, it seems to me that there is one clear voice in the education debate. It may surprise you that I say it. That clear voice is the voice of Michael Gove. He is so helpful, because whatever he says gives parents and teachers very clear guidelines - to aim for the complete opposite. He wants regimentation and the authoritarian teacher: good teachers know that children learn well from each other and from their own mistakes and guesses. He wants longer school hours while teachers and children know that they learn so much also in their free time, watching, curious, unsupervised.

Governments want endless assessments and tests. Good teachers and children know that education doesn't work well that way, but rather works through honouring the ways that children actually think. Because - and this would probably shock politicians - children like learning: “Let’s pretend!”, “I’ve got an idea”, “I remember”, “I know”, and “Did you know?” swell with children’s intoxication at thought itself. They are galvanized by curiosity – Why? is the question which really appeals to them. Children are metaphysicians of why before they are pragmatists of what, where and when. Why is the ultramarine question, it comes from across the sea. Why? and the why? before that. (A friend of mine, comically exasperated by a child’s unstoppable whys, eventually came to his final answer and said with an angelic smile: “The Big Bang.”)

Many of the things which appeal to children are in fact mirrors of the learning mind. A pirate plundering a ship’s chest for treasure; a clown making mistakes; an explorer going into the unknown; a detective, a spy, or firework-maker or lock-picker are all metaphors for learning. Children are captivated by spells, stories, secrets, and clues, they cherish keys, passwords, and treasure-hunts, again, all are aspects of learning.

 If many teenagers today seem lost to themselves, in mental illness or drug and alcohol abuse, it is perhaps because young people are given no chance of a meaningful quest, no rites of passage. Neither the twisted anti-heroic rituals of drug-abuse and self-harm nor the bland grades and measured assessments of exams and driving tests fit the bill.

The young must follow what Joseph Campbell calls the hero’s journey. The quest requires many qualities of the quester, represented in the typical folk tale hero. (And sadly too seldom female.) The quester is canny, curious, courageous and kind. She is true to himself and ruggedly irrepressible. He holds to his path, she is tenacious to her quest: he is observant, open-hearted, and open-minded, ingenious and generous.

On the quest, in the woods, in their secret dens, children can practise something invisible on the outside, taking on new identities, keeping a secret place for themselves. Den-making is a worldwide habit of childhood, places of intimacy for self-invention, self-discovery and self-making.

Urban kids make dens, wherever they get the chance, in the building sites, the scruffy, untended bits. Rural children can make forts and treehouses. But very widely, children today are being denied the privacy and outdoor space which combine to give them a place of becoming.

We know that children need attention, but they also need privacy. It seems to me that the constant surveillance which young people suffer and the aggressive staring of adults is particularly bad for them. Staring is a predatory act among mammals, including humans, and teenagers rightly hate it. The fashion for hoodies arose at the same time as increasing surveillance, and I once asked one of my favourite hoodies if one of the reasons he liked wearing his hoodie was so that he felt protected from invasive adult staring. Emphatically, he said, yes.

I want to end with the R-word. Some people use the word 'romantic' as an insult, suggesting sentimentality. It's ignorant and dishonest. The historical Romantics championed childhood in a way which was ferociously political, fighting against years of belief in Original Sin, represented for instance by one Puritan minister who referred to babies as 'filthy, guilty, odious and abominable'. Babies! Contrast this with that hero of Romanticism, Goethe, who adored children, and had his alter ego Werther say: “we treat them as our subjects, these children who are our equals and whom we ought to consider as models.” Romanticism was not merely a historical movement in culture, but rather a perennial truth about the human mind: Romanticism comprehended authentic human nature, and saw how that spirit was being brutalised in childhood. The same is true today.

What Romanticism understands (I use the present tense, because it is a perennial need of the human spirit) what Romanticism understands includes passion, imagination, heroism; a sense of justice and the quest; a desire for the authentic; a will towards self-determination; a need for freedom; an innate love of nature; metaphoric thinking, intuitive creativity; a sense of epiphany and spontaneous time; a feeling for wildness and the transcendent. All these things childhood itself comprehends and values.

Children are filthy little Romantics and childhood itself is the quintessential Romanticism, but wider society also needs the romance of childhood for its very creativity, requiring the reckless rapture of the eternal child within culture, whose incandescence must be tended and attended to, so that its light can flare in the storyteller, artist or dancer, so that the risk-taking, anarchic and flame-like quality, the eternal return of the great romance of childhood which exists within us all, can flame in a resurgent romantic revolution.



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*spent a couple of years living in a shed on the outskirts of Epping Forest but for many years she has been based in Wales. She is an award-winning British writer and author of ‘Wild: An Elemental Journey’, ‘Pip Pip: A Sideways Look at Time’, ‘Anarchipelago’ and ‘A Love Letter from a Stray Moon’.*

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*She has written for the Guardian’s comment pages and feature pages and is a regular columnist for Orion magazine. She has also written for The Observer, the Ecologist, and the London Review of Books. She has broadcast widely on BBC radio, including Start the Week and Woman’s Hour, and the World Service, and has several times been a guest on Phillip Adams’ Late Night Live in Australia.*

*Her latest book ‘Kith: The Riddle of the Childscape’ invited Philip Pullman to comment: “ Jay Griffiths has the same visionary understanding of childhood that we find in Blake and Wordsworth. Her work isn’t just good - it’s necessary.”*