

## Brief Thoughts on Reading the Works of Alice Miller

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When I first read Alice Miller's work I felt like I had encountered a kindred spirit. It's always that way when one comes across a person whose life work is dedicated to looking through and passing those ideas that so many of us have taken for granted for so long. Alice Miller's writing challenges, clarifies and puts before us truths that so much of what we learn tries to hide.

I was first exposed to the writings of Alice Miller when my colleague, Dr. Karen Polonko, referred me to *FOR YOUR OWN GOOD*. For many years I had been teaching a course called *Understanding Violence*, and Karen had given me the key to understanding the 'enemy making process' as it relates to the relationship between children and adults. When discussing relationships between adults and their children, I felt uneasy with the word 'enemy'. 'Enemy' was a word that fit when discussing hate violence, institutional violence and war. Somehow, however, it was inadequate to an understanding of the relationships between children and adults. With regard to this relationship, 'enemy' seemed to have connotations for my students that interfered and confused their thinking. Enemy for them had an international flavor. For my students, enemies were communists (if raised during the cold war), or Saddam for those raised after the cold war.

With my introduction to the writings of Alice Miller, the adult-child relationship and its connection to violence against children became much clearer. After reading of 'Poisonous Pedagogy', I understood that 'the other' and 'the different' were much more important words to understand this aspect of violence in the lives of children. I understood the adult need to maintain this difference, to separate themselves from children and indeed from their own childhoods. The persistence of this approach to adult-child relationships throughout the centuries gave voice to my understanding of adult behaviors and attitudes toward children. I now saw how the belief in the necessity of controlling and restricting children's behaviors and

adult-centered attitudes toward children (which value adults and devalue children) which now seem so 'natural', were really myths masking this poisonous history. Recognizing this helped me discover and articulate the power of alternative behaviors and attitudes which nurture and recognize children (and our childhoods) as our companions in living.

It was reading Alice Miller's work that I begin to understand another perspective on childhood and child development. I realized that our approach to child development relegated childhood to the shortest period in our lives. However, Alice Miller taught me to think differently. If our childhoods are always with us, then childhood is the longest period of our lives. Childhood's traumas and nurturings travel with us from the beginning to the end. They never leave us and we never leave our childhoods. We do not somehow 'develop out' of childhood, we continually wrestle with and draw upon our childhoods. This is a powerful perspective. It informs us and makes childhood and its experiences valuable to adults as nothing else does. If we can make childhood valuable to adults then maybe we can make children valuable as well. And since we nurture and not hurt what we value, seeing childhood as valuable might make nurturing children more important than controlling them.

Finally, Alice Miller also showed me the power of not facing the truth. Her writings helped me recognize how many of our denials in relation to violence of all types (or the vastness of the nastiness we have towards each other) have their roots in the depths of the childhoods we carry with us throughout our lives. Our tendency to redefine violence as something other than violence, our tendency to deny the harm of violence, our tendency to blame victims upon whom we inflict violence, all of these techniques for making bad into good, reflect our defensive reactions to the violations of our dignity experienced as the first victims of violence, ourselves as children.

In her latest book, *THE TRUTH WILL SET YOU FREE*, Alice Miller summarizes, synthesizes and builds upon her earlier work. Here she finds support for her vision in recent research on brain development in children. In this research we began to see clear evidence for and explanation of the process that makes our adult perspectives on childhood a part of our childhood struggles to survive by coping with childhood trauma. In this book Alice Miller provides an accessible guide to understanding and breaking the centuries old 'cycle of violence'. In addition, she helps provide insight into how acknowledging our childhood

experiences can help in developing a 'cycle of nurturing' that can lead us as individuals and a culture in more authentic, engaged and creative directions.

The writings of Alice Miller strike a cord that resonates with the underlying characteristics of our culture. Forced for so long to deny the authenticity of our childhood and the creative selves that we lost, we create a culture immersed in phoniness and virtual lives and images. Having had to deny our substance as children we created culture without substance. We emphasize method and technique and loose sight of substance, purpose and meaning. Alice Miller's insights make visible the struggle of creativity after trauma and the joy and connectedness of creativity without trauma. These writing point to a way out of the 'cultural knot' (drawing on R.D. Laing's KNOTS) that our adult relationships with children and with our own childhoods create and perpetuate. In nurturing creativity in children we nurture creativity in ourselves. In contacting the authenticity of children, we contact authenticity in our adult lives. Symbols and images represented in the adult / childhood categories disintegrate under the power of the real. What is in the immediate takes on new value and demands new attention. This is what I take away from my reading of Alice Miller's work. I thank her for her daring and courage in bringing these insights to the attention of so many.