

## Lyrical Resonance, and Humility

A line from a timeless Crosby Stills and Nash song came to me the other day, as if from nowhere. The line was "your father's hell/ did slowly go by," from the Graham Nash song, "Teach Your Children." I started singing what I could remember, and remembering a few lines made me curious about the rest.

### Resonant Lyric

The lyric resonates right now for many reasons. One is that I've been reading [Hauntings: Dispelling the Ghosts Who Run Our Lives](#), by James Hollis. The book is a brief (and still somewhat wordy) exploration of the way our genetic and cultural heritage—the mistaken notions and broken dreams of our ancestors, parents, families, teachers and culture—are foundational and pivotal to the assumptions and belief systems that underlie and drive our individual attitudes and decisions.

"Teach Your Children" sings itself directly into that same territory—first inviting the father to recognize with humble wisdom that his own cobbled together "code that you can live by" needs to be offered to his children with caution. His own "hell" has slowly gone by, leaving a certain, necessarily suspect "knowing". That code got him through, but the wisdom that gathers through the many twists of living call for an open mind. One person's wisdom is not directly transferable to another.

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That's the first part. Nash wrote it the mid 1960s, after he saw the 1962 Diane Arbus photograph "Child With a Toy Hand Grenade in Central Park." Consider the image; you'll see what made the young Nash thoughtful, and inspired the song.

Another reason Nash's lyric touches me now is that one of my closest friends is in that fragile place of her father's last years. He's in his mid-eighties, and has been enjoying a slightly manic phase of activity as he recognizes and resists noticing some undeniable winding-down.

photo credit  
Boy with Toy Hand Grenade in Central Park © Diane Arbus

## Leaning Out

When a gasoline engine is running out of gas there is a point when it races for a moment, as the fuel/ air mixture “leans out” just before it quits. Many of us go through these times and survive, but when the lean-out is combined with age, overworked internal organs, and general weariness, it sharpens the argument that one of these periods will be the last. I’ve been there with my parents and other friends. It’s different for each of us, but I know it’s big, no matter what. I’m aware this will be me and my kids, in another blink.

The second half of “Teach Your Children” shifts perspective to the children. “You of tender years/ can’t know the fears/ that your elders grew by.” Here’s the other side, the invitation to consider that youth needs humility as well. Maybe your elders have done as well as they can, under trying circumstances.

But the elders need your youth as well. They need your strength as their’s fades, your dreams as their’s come up short, your patience as they lose patience with their own dissolution.

We do best when we cut each other slack. I’m not saying we need to suffer abuse—that does no one any good. But when we can operate with respect for ourselves and others, we honor the realities of our individual paths.

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## The Turnaround

The turnabout comes as we look at one another across the ages with understanding and open-minded humility. I am you and I’m not you; there is no conflict here unless we lock down on one side of that continuum. Our individual dreams can feed both ways. Just as elders have to recognize that children have to go through their own hell in order to pick a dream they’ll know life by, children do well to respect that their elders had to do the same thing—and it probably didn’t come out as they hoped, or planned.

The same invitation closes the children’s part of the song as did the elders’: “Look at them and sigh. Know they love you.” Sometimes words won’t do what love will.

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