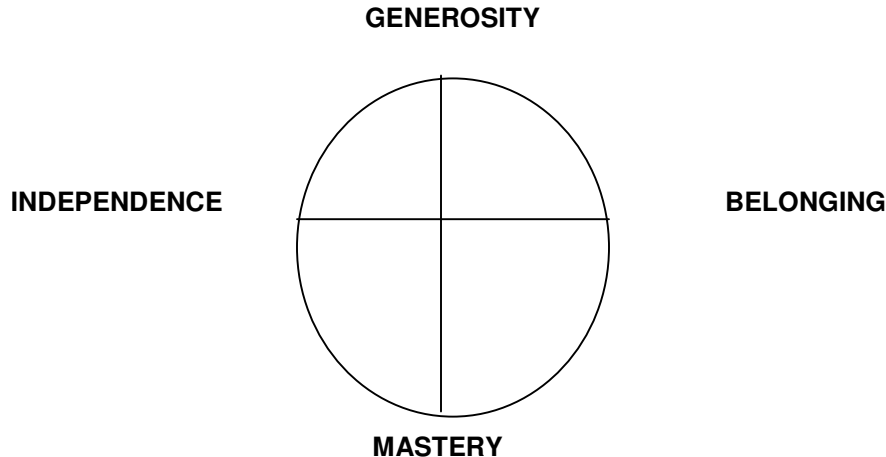


THE CIRCLE OF COURAGE

Adele Hamilton, a journalist and associate editor at Move magazine, was guest speaker at our Annual General Meeting on 30th August. We asked her to speak about the Circle of Courage. Below is a summary of how she introduced this very significant model of raising children.



I am not an expert in parenting. I'm a keen amateur, with an interest propelled by the day to day challenges of raising two sons, aged 6 and 13. As my oldest son reached his teens, it slowly dawned on me that my greatest achievement as a parent would be to confidently let go and allow him to move into his individual role in society. Whatever it may turn out to be.

As Westerners we tend to think of our children as beasts that need taming. They need to be instructed away from their natural urges, moulded into a shape that society finds suitable. Recently, I was sitting with a few friends, and the conversation turned – and doesn't it always? – to our children. One woman, single parent of two teens, looked into her tea cup and said: "I feel so isolated. I have no-one to tell me if I'm doing the right thing."

Two things came to mind:

- Firstly, that as parents we still tend to think that there's an elusive "right thing" that we should be doing in every situation. We think if we come here to the Parent Centre, we'll receive a book of rules, and then everything will be perfect. But children and situations can't always be predicted. And we need to have a much more holistic guideline.
- My second thought, looking at my friend, is that she was not the only one who is isolated. Even those of us who have partners in parenting can feel that way, unsure if our expectations and actions are the best way to deal with our children.

CIRCLE OF COURAGE EXERCISE

Each audience member was given a quarter of a circle and they had to find people who had the colours to make up the full four-coloured circle. Each quadrant had one of the four values written on it.

Conclusions at the end of the exercise:

- You need all four quadrants to make a circle.
- If you have too little of one colour, the circle cannot be completed.
- You have to cooperate to create a complete circle.
- You may end up joining a number of different groups who need your colour.

Our little circles were a crude representation of the Circle of Courage, a concept developed by Larry Brendtro, Martin Brokenleg and Steven Van Bockern.

- Based on Native American view on life. And as you will see, with a lot of resonance and similarity to own value of ubuntu.
- A wheel that balances various attributes that make for a happy and effective person.

These attributes are *belonging, generosity, mastery and independence*.

Belonging – This is a feeling about our own value, feeling protected and important within a group.

Where do we get this sense of belonging from? Particularly in this society where the family can take many shapes and forms, it is not always easy for children to be given that strong, unshakeable sense of being part of something bigger. It's not a huge leap to see how a lack of this sense of belonging could lead children to grab onto gangs, drugs and other activities which in the end may leave them feeling more alienated than ever.

The Native American view, which is very similar to our African view is that we are all related to everyone we know. This means that a child has not only one mother, but many. Many people speak with affection about their childhood, when they were free to run around the neighbourhood from one house to another, and they would always get a meal if they needed one, and be protected. Unfortunately, this is no longer the case.

This weekend one of the mothers at our soccer club told me about her neighbour, whose 8 year old child disappeared on Friday. The child was playing in the front garden of her home in Maitland. How do we teach our children to trust in everyone as their mothers and fathers, when they are not safe in their homes. I have no easy answer to that. But I do believe that others have valuable things to teach my children – whether it's the teacher, the soccer coach, my mother.

Generosity – understanding the true joy of giving to others.

How do we display generosity?

Most children are naturally generous. I'm sure we've all seen the one year old giving half of his soggy biscuit to his friend. It's usually only when we realise that resources are scarce that we tend to start thinking about keeping things to ourselves. There is so much need in this society, that we can easily become jaded. We want bang for our buck, we want to get a payback on our generosity.

Yet there is so much joy in the giving.

Mastery – feeling competent in our abilities.

What are some areas where you as an individual feel mastery? No-one came forward claiming their areas of mastery. We all feel shy to admit where we feel mastery, but if we are going to pass them on to children, we need to own our skills. Mastery means being unafraid to look unskilled, and always seeking more knowledge. But without mastery, we fear failure. We remain dependent on others, and may end up resenting them. I recently interviewed Nolufefe Mtshabe – a township choir mistress who has been all over the world thanks to her mastery and passion. She also shared her experiences of the jealousy and rumours that have followed her because of her success. She said to me:

“They say I am using muti. I say – then you go get the same muti.”

It's a muti we could all do with – the mastery of a skill, and the passion and commitment to follow it all the way.

Independence – Feel in control of our own lives and our behaviour.

When can children achieve independence? It's a slow process, I watched my 6 year old on a foofy slide this weekend, and my heart was in my mouth. But when he had done it, he came running back to me and asked if he could go again.

Of course, I don't always get it right. This morning I was standing ironing my teenager's shirt for school, wondering what he was learning about mastery and independence...

Those who do not develop a sense of independence are easily led into trouble, and will blame the world for their troubles rather than look to themselves for a solution.

I leave you with these four statements, that we can hold in our hearts as a wish for every child to be able to say showing that they have achieved all four of these vital attributes:

A child who has a sense of belonging can say: I am loved.

A child who has internalised generosity can say: I have a purpose for my life.

A child who has achieved independence can say: I have the power to make decisions.

A child who has mastery can say: I can succeed.

What more could we wish for our children than to complete their own circles?