Once Upon a Child

WRITING YOUR CHILD'S SPECIAL STORY

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TO OUR CHILDREN

Lawren, Meagan, and Mary Ryan

David, Finley, Cole, and Blair

"To be nobody but yourself—in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else—means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight; and never stop fighting."

e. e. cummings, "A Poet's Advice"

Many thanks to Judy Marine, principal of the Westminster Elementary School, for her help and encouragement in the very earliest stages of this book; and to my husband, George McChesney, for his patience in hearing the same "seven" pages read in many changing forms.

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"Books are the quietest and most constant of friends, they are the most accessible and wisest of counselors, and the most patient of teachers."

Charles Eliot, *The Happy Life*

How young we are when we begin to wonder who we are, what our friends and family think of us, and where we are heading. As a parent, it is difficult to love our children without unconsciously imposing our opinions and hopes on their dreams. In responding to them, we praise, criticize, and judge. *Once Upon a Child* is a path to finding the unique qualities in your child. It is a diary based on the belief that all children are good—honest, compassionate, full of wonder, and capable of living in harmony with each other and the earth.

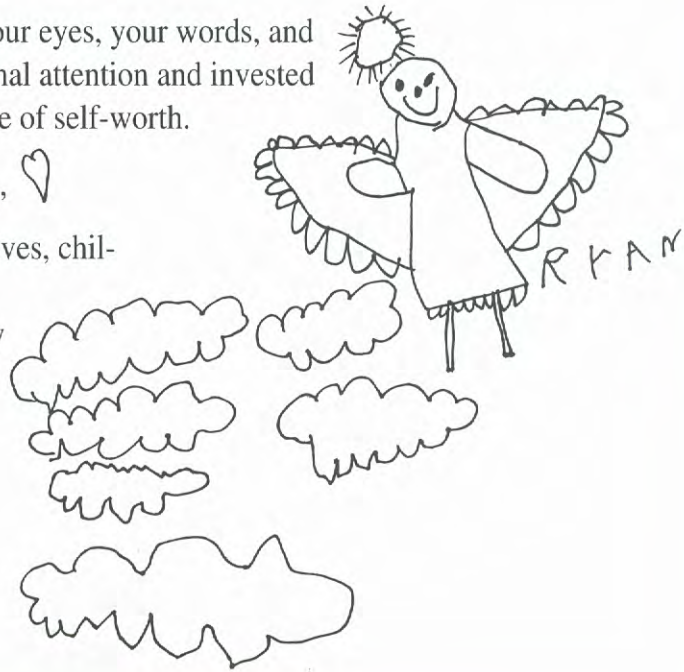
"Ryan's Christmas pageant was tonight. While on stage, she was very nervous—white-faced and tight-lipped. Lawren winked at her, and Ryan relaxed and smiled....Magic."

Lawren,
December 21, 1993

What a wonderful gift to bestow on your child— a book of your thoughts, appreciation, and unconditional love. In its original form, this book is an open slate containing some thoughts from me, its author, some lovely illustrations from the artist, and lots of blank pages. It is my hope that each copy of this book becomes some child's special story.

In twenty years of working with children and their families, first as a teacher and then as an educational therapist, I have observed an increasingly competitive world in which our children are tested, measured, and over-scheduled. Their time for unstructured, imaginative play is often limited to small segments squeezed into a hectic routine. In the pursuit of our children's academic excellence, athletic achievement, and exposure to the arts, we often unknowingly compromise the development of the whole child. As a society, we tend to emphasize and label these tangible aspects of our children's lives as all-important, while overlooking intangible qualities such as wonder, compassion, truth, and peace. I believe these four qualities, strong and intact, are essential for the building of character and self-esteem. They are the necessary cornerstones for future happiness.

Children see themselves through your eyes, your words, and your opinions. Through your personal attention and invested time, they develop an intrinsic sense of self-worth. Self-esteem gives each child the ability to say, "I am a good person." In accepting this fact about themselves, children set aside the need to impress others with negative behavior. They continue to trust in themselves and respond with spontaneity and joy to the world.



The idea for *Once Upon a Child* is the result of a crossroads between my professional life and my role as a mother. As an educational therapist, I am continually reminded of the importance of self-esteem in children. As a mother of three, I realize the challenging task of recognizing and responding to each of my children's individual talents and gifts with enthusiasm, steering clear of empty praise. All three of my children have their own book which I have written in since they were small. I continue to find these journal books a place to pause and reflect on each child, alone. I often write on the compassionate spirit of Lawren, the playful imagination of Meagan, and the uncompromising honesty of Mary Ryan. Don't let me mislead you—my children don't even swing from the lowest branch of the perfect tree, but they have great moments, and those moments are many. There are times when the simplest of their gestures is so magnificent that all of their imperfections are invisible. These moments, evidence of their essential goodness, fill a book, just as drawings, clay pottery and various concoctions of aluminum foil, construction paper and glue fill a hope chest. Time buries treasures such as these unless you save them.

"I know why you lose teeth—so the fairies can come and get them and God can put them in the new babies' mouths."

Ryan, September, 1994

ou can capture your child's unique moments through writing anecdotes, stories, and quotes, but the uses of *Once Upon a Child* are limited only by your imagination. I sometimes write letters to my children in their books and leave them open on their bed, or encourage them to write a poem or story in their own books. Their books make wonderful bedtime reading, especially at the end of a difficult day. Please do not think of this book as a behavior modification tool or reward system. It is rather a mirror where children may see good reflections of themselves.

The stories you write in *Once Upon a Child* are not fairy tales fabricated in your imagination, but true accounts of your child's unfailing charm. What you write is a reflection of your child's special gifts: the time they rescued a hurt bird, played with a lonely child on the playground, or told the truth under stress. Keep in mind that children love to read and hear about themselves. Quotes, sentences, sentence fragments, or incomplete thoughts can become magical in the eyes of your child. As you record the good acts performed by your child, the story grows and your child recognizes him or herself as the hero or heroine of the book. Write often about efforts, not just successes. Show faith and trust in your child; write about his or her dreams.

After arriving in Jamaica, I said, "Look kids—they drive on the wrong side of the road!" I was quickly corrected by Lawren, who said, "No, Mom—not the wrong side of the road, just different."

Lawren, March 1993

One final note. My father was a man of few words. Perhaps it was because he was a man of many thoughts. Four years ago he died. What I have left of him are a few pictures and a few letters which I have stitched together to enhance my memories. In the years since my father's death I have come to realize the importance of his encouragement in times of difficulty. Mingled in with the grief is a wish for that feeling of support to have texture and realness. As the years stack up against these memories, his words become echoes distorted over time. *Once Upon a Child* will give permanence to your thoughts and truth to your child's memories. They will be able to relive those good moments, the feelings, the words and the color of the sky that day. And when you are finished writing they will have a part of you that will belong to them alone. Whether your child is four or forty, the words you write will sit patiently on the pages waiting to encourage, lift spirits, and fortify. It is often intimidating to write in a new, clean book, but take heart—this book truly begins only after your marks of lead and ink have been made. And when this book is old, torn and tattered, your simple words will be there through time and over distance, holding your love for each one of your children.

"I have to be honest because you trust me."

Meagan,
February, 1993

"But there is so little time to say things.
I am always putting away things that are too real to say, and then they never get said."

Anne Morrow Lindbergh,
Hour of Gold, Hour of Lead

A sense of wonder is a child's portable playground. It is a way of seeing the world as an enchanted and exciting place. Through the eyes of a child, a scarf becomes a wedding veil or a fisherman's net. A split in the bushes can lead to a new dimension, an Indian footpath, or a palace courtyard. Children within their innocence are the master creators of dreams. They are glowing comets in a dark sky.

> Know you what it is to be a child? It is to be something very different from the man of today. It is to have a spirit yet streaming from the waters of baptism; it is to believe in love, to believe in loveliness, to believe in belief; it is to be so little that the elves can reach to whisper in your ear; it is to turn pumpkins into coaches, and mice to horses, lowness into loftiness, and nothing into everything, for each child has its fairy godmother in its own soul; it is to live in a nutshell and to count yourself king of infinite space.
>
> Francis Thompson, "Shelley Essay"

A child's desire to question, to learn, and to enjoy life stems from a spirit of curiosity and innocence. This fresh sense of awe leads to exploration and invention, where possibilities are endless. By writing the stories of your child's many wondrous encounters with the world, you make the profound statement that life soars with imagination and that innocence reveals truth. As parents, we confirm our children's wonder of the world. We give flight to their dreams.

"If a child is to keep alive his born sense of wonder without any such gift from the fairies, he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement and mystery of the world we live in."

Rachel Carson, *The Sense of Wonder*