

## **Wisdom from the Alligator Purse**

by Emma Berndt

Once upon a time I sat in a miniature chair in a parent-tot class and became smitten with ‘the lady with the alligator purse.’ Remember her from the playground rhyme “Ms. Lucy had a baby” that children sing while playing hand clapping games? If not then here’s a refresher. A baby by the name of Tiny Tim drinks all the bathwater and then tries to swallow the tub itself. Understandably he doesn’t feel so great afterward. Ms. Lucy calls the doctor, who calls the nurse, who calls the lady with the alligator purse. The doctor looks at Tiny Tim and declares he’s sick with measles and the nurse says it’s the mumps. But, in the version read at parent-tot that day, the lady with the alligator purse declares the doctor’s and nurse’s assessment of the situation nonsense. She says there is nothing wrong with Tiny Tim and then she orders pizza for everyone. That’s the end. And, listening to the story that day I was struck with the feeling that I’d spent time as a mom to first one and then two small children desperately needing more of her wisdom. Could I get her number?

After my second son was born, I left the workforce with no immediate plans to return. At the time, I had trained myself over nearly two decades of climbing the ranks in the working world to spend a large portion of my day in a state that I now refer to in my head as “robot.” In “robot” mode, every email that popped into my inbox would cause my heart rate to speed up and a small surge of adrenaline to course through my body. I prided myself on how quickly I could dispatch various tasks and the sheer volume of work I could process. I wanted to excel in my job, and like many people I know, a lot of my very identity was wrapped up in my work.

And so it’s not surprising that slowly, in a way that was fairly imperceptible to me at the time, I adopted the values of the organizations that I worked for as my own. These weren’t necessarily bad values, but they tended to be limited with a focus on efficiency and always being available. In too large a dose, they impeded my ability to be

patient, slow down and sometimes take a deep breath and order a pizza. The exact skills it turned out I needed most the moment I had young children.

There is something about learning the ways of little kids that is hard to absorb except experientially. Mastering the tone of voice; learning how to ‘narrate’ actions in a way that doesn’t feel absurd; gently yet firmly guiding a young child to follow routines and schedules without getting locked in a power struggle; these are things that I have only been able to learn through trial and painful error. And, most importantly, through watching others.

This more experiential way of learning has been frustrating for me because my instincts all tell me that the way to learn is to sit down with a book. And, while there are some wonderful books out there, not only was it hard for me to absorb their lessons as a new parent, many also operated with the assumption that there was some slack in my life. That the tantrum my child had just thrown at Target hadn’t already thrown off a packed schedule. And so the time that was now recommended I take to abandon a full shopping cart mid-aisle in order to take my child home mid-tantrum, then wait for him to calm down and re-connect with him only to later attempt the shopping all over again wasn’t pushing me from late to missing an obligation—or string of them—entirely. And this assumption about slack was the *polar opposite* of the assumptions embedded in my working life which revered being busy, packing schedules, and having “too much on my plate.” I struggled to toggle between the two extremes and competing world views. No book I consulted really addressed both. And so, with my “robot” mode ascendent, instead of absorbing the lessons of the books, I scoured them hoping to find one or two easy-ish “tricks” to implement. I didn’t have room in my mind or my life for the inherent messiness, both literal and emotional, of raising children. I had unknowingly sent the lady with the alligator purse packing.

When I decided to step out of the working world, I came to the decision slowly as a thought that originally seemed like a faraway daydream started to grow more immediate in my mind. I wanted to spend my time on things that mattered to me and I was ashamed to realize that I’d thought of raising children full time—what is often called ‘staying at home’ although I dislike the term since it is comically non-descriptive and entirely defined in opposition to having a paid job instead of by the work itself—as

outside of what I believed success looked like. Success was an impressive title, good salary, and great looking business wardrobe, right? Success was power. I'd swallowed narratives of success that were focused almost entirely on individual achievement in the paid (most likely male-dominated) labor market. How nurturing small humans fit into my ideas of success was fuzzy and undeveloped.

I was also well aware that it's the moms who usually step out of paid labor to care for children and I felt a certain amount of unarticulated amorphous dread that this decision might now reduce me to an anachronistic gender stereotype. It took me a while to realize that the very notion that women need to enter what has traditionally been the men's arena to be considered accomplished and have prestige was itself dated and one-sided and of course depends on the age-old practice of devaluing traditionally feminine roles. And so, with a little planning and some hard conversations, I walked away.

That's how I found myself sitting in a parent-tot class determined to learn more about the lady with the alligator purse. I was surprised and at first disappointed to discover that many of the early variants of rhymes in which she appears do not have her prevailing with her calm and cool assessment of the situation but instead actually agreeing with the doctor and nurse. Who was this lady?

Then I came across the groundbreaking book *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* which documents the schoolyard rhymes of 5,000 children in the United Kingdom in the 1950s. And, right there in the introduction was something that was both obvious and that floored me. Schoolyard rhymes are part of an oral tradition that children have passed *to each other* over generations. They endure—sometimes for centuries—largely apart from adult meddling. I was shocked to see a version of a rhyme I sang as a child in Massachusetts in the 1980's that started "not last night, but the night before..." as being sung by children in England in the early 1900s.

That's when I realized, it doesn't matter who the lady with the alligator purse is—she's most likely a Rorschach test anyway, reflecting back what we want to see. I now know *why* I had found her so appealing. Like the rhymes themselves, I had seen her as the embodiment of the kind of wisdom that is passed through generations. And, I loved how the version of the story we read in parent-tot seemed to value this kind of slower

more patiently accumulated knowledge. As I was embarking on carving out a new role for myself defined primarily by caregiving, I found it reassuring that this lady had somehow become a respected voice helping children and families outside of any known power structure. And I admired her strength in the face of uncertainty. I mean, she could live with the unanswered question of *why* Tiny Tim tried to eat the bathtub. And, rather than rush to slap an easy-to-understand label on things (measles!), she was confident enough to contradict the doctor and the nurse, sit with the weirdness of the situation and move on to dinner as we all sometimes have to do.

Power in caring. Strength in uncertainty. Confidence to carve out our own roles. Those are all things we could use more of right now. And so I say, whoever she is, long live the lady with the alligator purse.



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