



# RAISING *healthy* children

BY CHARLIE LAYMAN

**Educators from Carolina Friends School, in Durham,  
explore the relationship between health and education**

Looking out from the classroom I saw my first- and second-grade students making their way from the gym. They had just finished their physical education class, which was undoubtedly full of exciting movement and energy.

My plan, before beginning the lesson I had prepared, was to engage the children in a “centering” practice. It was a technique I had been practicing with them the previous two weeks. This time, however, I was going to begin a little differently. Instead of guiding them through the centering practice, I decided to begin by just centering myself. As the children began to enter the room, I closed my eyes and focused my attention on my body’s width, length, and depth. I directed my attention to my breathing. My shoulders relaxed and I began to notice more space in my body with each breath.

Even though I was feeling relaxed, some doubts and questions came into my thoughts. I began to ask myself: Is this going to work? Shouldn’t I be instructing my students to hang up their jackets, use the restroom, and get water? Do they need me to lead them through this practice one more time? I resisted the impulse to direct them and let go of my worries. I simply brought my attention back to my breath and body. Again, I felt myself relax and I just waited patiently for the children to join me.

Within a few minutes the chatter and movement began to subside and then the room became completely silent. A noticeable

calmness was present. I continued centering myself a few moments longer as I enjoyed this stillness with my students. When I opened my eyes the children were standing quietly, most with their eyes closed, and fully engaged in the centering practice. I couldn’t help but smile. I thanked them for joining me and we sat down to begin the lesson I had prepared for them.

## **RECOGNIZING OUR BODIES’ WISDOM**

The centering practice I was sharing with my students is a technique I learned in one of several Mindful Coaching workshop/retreats led by Doug Silsbee. Over the past two years, my learning experiences with Doug, a gifted teacher, writer, and professional coach, have helped me understand ways to live with more awareness and purpose. Doug works with executive coaches, teachers, CEOs, and other professionals teaching valuable skills that empower people to make real and sustainable change in their lives.

Doug incorporates the work of Richard Strozzi Heckler, a skillful practitioner who has written extensively about the wisdom inherent in our bodies. He recognizes the potential we have to heal physically and emotionally as we explore and attend to the physical signals in our bodies. Although Doug would probably not consider himself a healer, my experiences and learning with him have been a catalyst that has launched a journey of personal inner healing.

My job at Carolina Friends School involves both teaching children and offering support to the faculty in a variety of ways. The training and reading I’ve done in my work with Doug have helped me develop skills of self-observation, artful questioning, and restorative body practices. This new learning informs the work I do with my students and colleagues. The tools and practices I’ve applied to my own life allow me to be more present and effective in working with others.

Through self-observation I’ve become aware of patterns in my thinking and behaviors that had gone unnoticed previously. Paying attention to physical reactions and sensations in my body led me to be more curious about their origins. Cultivating the observer in me has led to new ways of thinking and being in the world. I’ve been more present in my interactions with colleagues and students and I’ve incorporated daily practices that sustain and renew my body. Observing ourselves without judgment and in a spirit of curiosity can open new possibilities and insights.

At the core of all this work is the practice of being present. I am moved by the words in an essay entitled “The Power of Presence” by psychologist Debbie Hall. She describes the “healing power of connection created by being fully there in the quiet understanding of another.” She says, “...it is not only something we give to others...It always changes me—and always for the better.”

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Charlie Layman has been employed at Carolina Friends School for the past 17 years. He teaches language arts and design technology to children in the Lower School and also serves as Staff Clerk, a role that supports the faculty in a variety of ways. This support includes personal and professional coaching to fellow staff members. Carolina Friends School is an independent Quaker school serving students 3-18. Contact the School at: 4809 Friends School Road, Durham 27705; Telephone: 919-383-6602; [www.cfsnc.org](http://www.cfsnc.org).