

Merlin's Message

By **T.A. Barron**
Parents Magazine
November, 1998

When she was three years old, my daughter, Denali, sat outside on our lawn, trying with all her might to ram a sharp stick into a stone. Soon enough, the stick shattered. She grabbed another one. The same thing happened. With a huff, she tried again.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

More impatient with my ignorance than with her own lack of success, she replied: "Can't you see? I'm trying to put the sword in the stone."

"Why?" I asked meekly.

"So I can pull it out again. Like King Arthur." With a flourish, she added, "You know, 'Lo and behold!'"

She was, of course, reliving that famous scene from the tales of Camelot, a scene she had heard me describe many times. Having written several books of Arthurian lore, I have grown accustomed to having the residents of Camelot take over large portions of my life, as well as my house.

In the classic tale of the sword in the stone, young Arthur ultimately believed that the sword would come free—which was, perhaps, why it did exactly that. And in the same moment that he draws forth the brightly gleaming blade, he draws forth an even brighter destiny. (Denali, too, was ultimately successful—once I helped her fashion a "stone" out of soft clay, a feat that instantly transformed me in her eyes from a bumbling dad into a latter-day wizard.)

As the father of five young sword-pullers—three boys and two girls, aged 2 to 11—I am more amazed than ever by the strength and diversity of their youthful dreams. And I am convinced that our job as parents—much like Merlin's job to young King Arthur—boils down to helping them discover their best selves. Their truest motivations. Their brightest swords.

All this is easier said than done, of course. Merlin himself understood that the truly wise man knows how little he really does know. If that's true, then parents, humbled daily by their kids, must be truly wise indeed. Even so, I've often wondered what Merlin must have learned during his years as mentor to a future king. How did he inspire Arthur to become the greatest leader of his time? Like today's parents, Merlin faced daunting challenges—not just externally, but inside the child himself. For Arthur's self-esteem was sometimes as low as his ideals were high. He may always have been able to pull that sword free, but he didn't always believe it.



So what would a modern-day Merlin advise parents who wish to inspire their kids? Here are three ideas that he would want us to impart:

Follow your passions. Merlin often instructed Arthur not by talking, but by listening. He tried hard to hear the boy's inner voice, and to draw it out, so that Arthur himself would come to hear it. And, eventually, to trust it. Merlin's approach helped Arthur grow to know his own passions, his own goals. Tempting as it must have been, Merlin didn't pour his dreams into the boy as one pours juice into a cup. Rather, he encouraged Arthur to discover his own dreams—and then follow them.

In a similar vein, when my seven-year-old son, Brooks, began learning to play classical piano, he struggled mightily but made little progress. Then my wife, Currie, found a different piano teacher whose repertoire included ragtime and popular music along with Mozart and Bach. Suddenly Brooks was practicing—and enjoying himself—much more. Asked what had changed his attitude, he replied, "That's easy. I like these songs better."

Ride out your storms. Last year my younger son, Ben, changed schools. Unfortunately, the first few months were rough going. He was excluded and teased by his peers. With time, though, he began to make friends, and to excel. By the end of the year, his classmates had elected him their representative to student council. But as happy as he was to have been chosen, he was far happier to have survived those initial months. Having met that challenge, he is now more confident than ever about meeting other ones.

In one of my books, *The Lost Years of Merlin*, I reveal the wizard's boyhood. In a pivotal scene, young Merlin climbs a tree. All of a sudden, a violent storm strikes, thrashing and pummeling him. He barely survives. Yet when the storm finally passes, he gazes in wonder at the fresh, rain-washed forest, where mist rises from every glade. He realizes that, like the forest, he feels newly born. And that, also like the forest, he can survive even the most terrible storm.

Years later, when Merlin had become a full-grown wizard, he would surely have remembered that experience. So in guiding Arthur's early years, he helped the boy achieve many small successes—and survive many small storms. Merlin knew that the confidence flowing from those successes would strengthen Arthur for the larger challenges ahead.

As Merlin knew, every positive comment adds another brick to a child's foundation of confidence. Even something as simple as saying, "My, what a terrific hug you gave me!" will spawn more successes for your child. (Not to mention more hugs for you.)

Explore your world. Thanks to our kids, our house holds an ever-changing display of shells, rocks, pinecones, sprouting seeds, and dilapidated nests. Sometimes when I sit down on the couch and hear the crunch of an eggshell, I wonder whether we live not in a house at all, but in some sort of natural history museum.

Yet I can't get angry at the kids. They are natural explorers, who see the world afresh, and who love being out in nature. They appreciate its beauty, its mystery, and its humor. And in

appreciating the wonders of life, they are also growing to appreciate the wonders within themselves.

Some of my favorite scenes from the classic tales are when Merlin magically transforms Arthur into different kinds of creatures. Arthur becomes a goose, a fish, and even an ant. Why did Merlin do this? To help the young king explore the world around him—from his own point of view, as well as from others.

For the same reason, when my family sits down at our dining table, we sometimes try to imagine the world from different perspectives. What would life feel like if you were a cheetah? Or totally blind? Or from a distant time—say, the Druid era when Merlin himself was young? Or from another universe entirely? This kind of imagining helps our kids to explore, to expand their own worldviews. And it also helps me: As you might guess, the conversation over food at our table (as well as the food itself) often creeps into my manuscripts. So do the themes—such as love, inspiration, and surprising connections—that we discuss.

I find it nearly impossible to believe that our daughter Denali, who long ago tried so hard to plunge that stick into the stone, is now almost a teenager. Do her mother and I worry about whether her still-strong self-concept will survive? Of course we do, especially given the barrage of debilitating messages that our society continues to beam at its young people.

But as Merlin knew well, each and every child harbors hidden capacities. Hidden gifts. And hidden magic, as well. He also knew that a child's inner magic can triumph over negative messages—especially if that magic is mixed with generous portions of love, trust, and confidence.

Though our children are with us for only a brief time, we can still do much to help them discover and appreciate their own inner voices. If they can hear those voices, they can shape their own lives. And if they can shape their own lives, they can certainly shape the world around them.

And then, Lo and behold, each and every one of them can pull a sword from a stone.

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T.A. Barron is currently completing a five-book epic on the youth of Merlin, *The Lost Years of Merlin* (Penguin).