



2023-2024 Graduate Ethics Essay Prize

2nd Place

A Mother's Lessons to Her Sons: The Significance of Learning About Genocide

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A Mother's Lessons to Her Sons: The Significance of Learning About Genocide.

As a mother, I have always believed in the loving guidance of education to shape minds and hearts. Normally, parents transmit values to their children, such as honesty, integrity, respect, tolerance, discipline, and a passion for life. We also share history and stories with them. Yet, there was one subject I initially hesitated to share with my sons: genocide. Navigating this complex terrain posed a profound ethical dilemma for me, as I tried to balance honesty and transparency with protecting my children from potential emotional distress. However, as they grew older, I realized that avoidance was not an option. It was a lesson I felt compelled to impart, not only for historical understanding but also as a call to action against indifference—something sadly prevalent in our world.

As I contemplated how to approach this delicate subject, I recognized the profound responsibility I had as a parent. I understood that my sons had a role to play in society, and I believed that the values they learned at home could impact their actions in the world. Therefore, teaching them about the significance of genocide went beyond mere concepts; it was about instilling in them a sense of moral duty and empathy that would guide them throughout their lives. The journey into the realm of understanding genocide with my sons began unexpectedly, much like many meaningful quests in life. It was a path I had not initially planned to explore, but as life unfolded, its importance became increasingly apparent.

Travel back in time with me. It is a summer afternoon in 1983, in San Luis Potosi, my hometown in Mexico. I find myself in my brother's room, where a book titled "Los Hornos de Hitler" by Olga Lengyel catches my eye on his desk. I did not realize it at that moment, but that instant will mark a significant shift in my life. The woman's haunting gaze on the book's cover leaves me wondering about her distress. As I peruse the pages and absorb accounts of horrific

crimes and atrocities, a word sticks in my mind: Jews. Growing up in a provincial city in Mexico had sheltered me from the Jewish community; I had only heard snippets from my mother's stories of a lonely Jewish man who owned a dark and dusty store named "La Galatea," which was avoided by all. For me, raised Catholic in private schools, the words "Hebrew" and "synagogue" felt distant, confined to biblical tales of far-off lands.

As I grew older, my perspective shifted when my brother returned from a backpacking adventure across Europe. He recounted an unexpected visit to Israel during his travels, which ignited his newfound interest in Judaism. Suddenly, terms like "kippah," "kibbutz," and "shabbat" became regular topics in our conversations. His necklace adorned with a Hebrew character intrigued me, signaling a world beyond my current understanding. As he shared stories of being warmly welcomed by a Jewish family, particularly highlighting how the kind mother explained details about Jewish culture and how their heritage permeated every aspect of their lives, my curiosity about Judaism deepened even further.

Over time, while living in France as a newlywed, I had the chance to explore fascinating places and magnificent museums, immersing myself in centuries of history and art. However, it was a visit to a Holocaust memorial that left the most significant mark on me. As I walked through the somber exhibition, I came across little handmade dolls crafted by female inmates for their children amidst the horrors of the Holocaust. Witnessing these dolls, I could not help but contemplate the extraordinary capacity for tenderness displayed by these mothers in such unimaginable circumstances. At that time, I did not have children myself, yet I could not shake the chilling thought of the desperation mothers must have felt to protect their children in such a living hell.

Upon returning home, my understanding of the Holocaust deepened through films and documentaries. Eventually, I became a professor at a continuing education program for adults. During one of our sessions, I screened a movie about the Holocaust, and to my surprise, many students had no prior knowledge of such a significant historical event. This realization made apparent the imperative necessity of educating others about the genocide that occurred during that dark period of history.

Then, in 2003, my life changed forever when I became a mother. An overwhelming sense of peace, excitement, and joy permeated every fiber of my being. Determined to give valuable life lessons to my baby, I diligently prepared myself mentally, physically, and emotionally for the extraordinary moment of childbirth. During my prenatal classes, I recall encountering a sweet quote in the waiting room: "The most beautiful baby is born in front of every mom." This sentiment resonated deeply with me, reinforcing my anticipation and eagerness to welcome my newborn into the world.

I imagined the special moment when I would see my baby for the first time, filled with dreams of the beautiful journey ahead. Upon seeing my baby boy, I made a decisive vow to myself: to introduce him to the wonders of our world, the incredible diversity of humanity, and the fascinating creatures that inhabit our universe. I pledged to nurture his heart with simple yet loving experiences, reading him stories, and singing lullabies to ensure he always felt loved and cherished.

Just when I believed my heart could not hold more joy, my second son entered the world. I vividly remember the moment they brought him to the hospital room, nestling him in my arms. This experience remains as one of the most sacred moments of my life, when divinity seemed to intertwine with pure love, embodied in the sweet innocence of the baby I held close to my heart.

More convinced than ever of the importance of experiencing the world's wonders, I resolved to show my two boys the beauty of nature. Happily, we frequently embarked on explorations and camping adventures in a forest reserve near our city. Every Friday or Saturday, I would drive us 45 minutes away, and together, we would immerse ourselves in the natural world, discovering its vast array of sensory delights.

I still remember their amazement as they discovered the smallest worm or felt the freshness of the little river flowing quickly between rocks. Afterwards, we would light the campfire and admire the power and immensity of the flames. Under the bright sky, we could see millions of stars twinkling above. In those moments, I felt immensely grateful for the night sky and the universe, reflecting on the memories and lessons that would stay with my boys forever.

During their childhood, I took my boys on several trips. One of the most remarkable things happened when they were eight and six years old. I took them to visit the archaeological site of Teotihuacan, known as "The place where man becomes God." I still remember how amazed they were when they saw those imposing monuments. At the time, people could climb to the top, and when they reached the summit, they gave each other a hug and screamed "We made it!" at the top of their lungs. These were the kinds of experiences I wanted to share with my sons – experiences that highlighted the marvels of humanity, the capacity of human beings to build monuments that would last for centuries, reflecting a past filled with tradition and culture.

On this trip, I taught my children the importance of valuing our past and ancestors, and how they anticipated the future in amazing civilizations. Every day, before bedtime, we would read a book together, usually stories beautifully illustrated and filled with adventures. These stories not only entertained us but also featured characters who were kind, compassionate, and happy, imparting remarkable teachings to my boys. On this occasion, when I was teaching my

sons the value of family and the importance of sharing memories together, I was also preparing them for another endeavor that I was sure would impact on their lives forever.

Transitioning to a new chapter in our lives, on a hot afternoon of August 2015, I immigrated to the United States with my two sons. They were twelve and ten years old. We arrived with excitement and curiosity, embracing a new opportunity in our lives. I resolved that as soon as possible, I would take them to New York City. Although I had never been to a “City that never sleeps,” I dreamed of its skyscrapers, the diversity of people, and streets brimming with colors and languages from all over the world. There, my sons witnessed people conversing in many languages and encountered the gateway for immigrants like us at Ellis Island, where people arrived with dreams for a next phase in their lives. Through this experience, I shared with my children the values of freedom, opportunity, and the capacity to dream.

Continuing our exploration of history and culture, I resolved to take them to Washington DC. I planned our visit to the Smithsonian Museums, The Mall, The Lincoln Memorial, and The Martin Luther King Memorial. We paused for a moment in front of his quote, "Make a career of humanity. Commit yourself to the noble struggle for equal rights. You will make a greater person of yourself, a greater nation of your country, and a finer world to live in."

They learned about Martin Luther King's decision in favor of a world where people were treated as equals. Lincoln's audacity to fight for the freedom of Black people in America, and the power of discovery when we visited the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum. Once again, they learned how humankind can go beyond frontiers to expand our sense of the universe.

On the last day of our trip, I decided to take them to visit the US Holocaust Memorial and Museum. I felt a weight on my shoulders, knowing that I was about to confront a dilemma as a

parent. While prioritizing my children's emotional well-being, I was especially aware of the possible difficulty for my younger son. This marked the first time I would expose them to the harsh realities that human beings can face: discrimination and murder. This decision posed an ethical predicament for me as a parent, balancing the educational value of exposing children to historical truths including the disturbing realities of genocide and the consequences of ignorance and prejudice, such as anti-Semitism, with the emotional impact, particularly for a sensitive child, regarding such traumatic subject matter.

Moreover, I wrestled with the possibility that they might perceive human beings and the world as inherently dangerous, despite their trust in me. Anxiously, I asked myself: Would they be afraid, confused, or disillusioned with humanity? Would they question why children were murdered? Would they feel safe now because this atrocity happened in the past, assuming everything is fine now? As I reviewed the visitor guide flyer, I noticed that one of the galleries at the museum portrayed recent genocides. How would they react when they see that this is something happening in the present? In their minds, they may perceive the perpetrators as belonging to a certain group only. Should I filter the information at this point just attributing it to the Nazis? Would this visit have an impact on their faith? Would they wonder why, if Jews prayed, this happened to them?

Reflecting on our experiences and my concerns it is important to share that when we were in Mexico, the topic of World War II was not covered until high school, and none of their teachers had discussed genocide. The Holocaust and genocide were not commonly brought up with children the age of my children. My mother had previously warned me against explaining challenging topics to them, because she believed they were not mature enough to understand them, and her argument was that childhood should be a time of happiness not of sorrow.

However, for me, it was important to consider that children may encounter difficult subjects in numerous ways. I believe that providing age-appropriate explanations can help them understand the world more fully, even if it means talking about challenging topics. As a parent, I assumed that guiding them in learning about genocide could be through the lens of understanding the importance of the choices we make and how they affect humanity. It is about recognizing the necessity to consider every person as inherently deserving of existence.

Given this context, solemnly, I spoke to them about World War II, opening their eyes to a new reality. What they were about to see would reveal the cruel evidence of the dark side of humans. As we viewed the panels in the permanent exhibit, they learned how prejudice, ignorance and hate can culminate in abominable crimes against fellow human beings, particularly understanding how anti-Semitism can precipitate atrocious actions with devastating consequences. Artifacts, photos, and films portrayed the reality of evil. It was a moment that challenged me as a parent, however during the final part of the visit, my two sons decided to light a candle at the memorial in front of the wall with the name "Chelmo" on it. I reflected on the purity of children's hearts, capable of compassion and caring to honor the lost lives of others.

A year later, a chance observance with an advertisement for the Dallas Holocaust Museum at the airport prompted me to visit the museum. One day while I was downtown, I decided to go by myself. There, I learned about the successful attempt to stop a boxcar filled with prisoners on April 14, 1943,¹ which was incredibly inspiring to me. Additionally, witnessing docents guiding student groups at the museum left a profound impression on me. Seeing their dedication was very moving. As a result, I decided to get a couple of books for my

¹ "Who Stopped the April 19, 1943, Train to Auschwitz?" Discovering Belgium, Accessed February 17, 2024, <https://www.discoveringbelgium.com/april-19-1943-train-auchswitz/>.

sons and registered myself to volunteer at the museum. I vividly remember my first day as I parked in downtown Dallas for my 9:00 am shift.

As I continued my journey as a volunteer at the museum, my passion for educating others about the Holocaust only grew stronger. Each day brought new opportunities to learn and collaborate with remarkable individuals who shared a deep commitment to preserving history and promoting understanding, I then became a Gallery Docent.

During one of my shifts, a fellow docent mentioned a Holocaust Studies trip to Poland, led by Dr. Rick Halperin of Southern Methodist University. Intrigued by the prospect of going deeper into this crucial period of history, I wanted to learn more about the trip. However, upon discovering that it coincided with Christmas time, I reluctantly dismissed the idea. For my family, Christmas held special significance—a time of joy, celebration, and reuniting with loved ones in Mexico.

Nevertheless, in April 2023, as I saw a presentation with photos of the trip, the idea resurfaced in my mind. I thought that the only way I could have this experience was to take my sons with me. I reflected on how impactful it would be for them to visit the places where genocide occurred almost 80 years ago. Once again, I found myself struggling with an ethical dilemma, contemplating whether it was right to expose my sons to the haunting realities of genocide by bringing them along on the trip. I realized the potential for both profound education and emotional anguish, but also acknowledged that sadly, anti-Semitism and other forms of hate are still prevalent, despite the terrible crimes committed in the past. As I shared plans with my family, my youngest son, who was now eighteen years old, immediately expressed interest. He was serving as a member of the Junior Board at the museum, had been exposed to historical information and has had meaningful conversations with fellow members. Additionally, during

the Spring Survivor Series program, he volunteered and had the opportunity to meet Holocaust Survivor Max Glauben in 2022.

On the other hand, my oldest son now twenty years old, was reluctant to go to Poland during the holidays, as that was the only time in the year when he saw friends and family in Mexico. He too had met Max Glauben and was totally impressed by Max's happiness and enthusiasm. During the encounter, this survivor shared some valuable lessons applicable to my son's new college life. Finally, I convinced him to join me on the journey. Despite some friends expressing concern about the emotional toll of visiting such traumatic sites, I remained determined to embark on this tour. As I prepared for the trip and reviewed the itinerary, a trace of an intense feeling invaded me. The names of the places we would visit stood starkly on the page: Auschwitz, Treblinka, Sobibor, Chelmo, Belzec, Majdanek. These six death camps, specifically built to extinguish the lives of the victims of the Holocaust, carried a weight of history and tragedy that I knew would leave an indelible mark on us.

Many people reassured me, noting that my familiarity with the history of the Holocaust would provide some level of emotional preparedness for what lay ahead. Nevertheless, upon our arrival at Stutthof, the first concentration camp we visited in Poland, I realized that nothing could have adequately prepared me for the emotional impact of confronting one of the most horrific places on earth. Here, amidst the silent witnesses of walls, artifacts, and nature itself, the chilling reality of genocide became all too real.

And there I stood, completely disoriented, facing something unspeakable, with my youngest son by my side. My oldest son would join us a day later. What lesson could I possibly impart to him at this moment? Emotions overwhelmed me as I struggled to find the words to describe what I was feeling and to offer some semblance of explanation for the chilling chamber

before us. However, in that instance, it was he who would teach me a profound lesson. With deliberate steps, he approached the gas chamber, placing a remembrance stone as a significant acknowledgment of the beautiful lives lost.

We departed the site in solemn silence, each of us trying to cope with the weight of what we had witnessed. Once again, within the barracks, we encountered examples of bravery and the tender care of mothers who, amidst unimaginably fearful experiences, attempted to assemble a doll or a stuffed animal for their little ones. As a mother myself now, I understood more deeply than ever the fierce determination with which mothers strove to protect and provide love for their children, even in the face of unspeakable distress and pain.

During the day as we traveled by bus, I looked through the window, taking in the familiar sights of the landscape—farms, fields, and scattered houses. I could not shake the feeling of unease that gripped me. Despite the clarity of the day and the apparent tranquility of the surroundings, my perspective was completely different. I could not see the landscape through any other lens; to me, it was irrevocably intertwined with the history of genocide that had unfolded there. Every field, every farmhouse, seemed to whisper about the murders that had taken place, casting a shadow over the otherwise serene scene.

On this trip there were also twenty-six college students. During the excursion, I reflected on the parents who had supported these children in undertaking this trip. Some of the students had shared how their parents encouraged them, knowing the significance of this journey for their lives. Surrounded by trees, the death camp Treblinka stood as a silent witness to the horrors of the past. Thousands of rocks served as memorials to the victims, with one name, Janusz Korczak, standing valiantly after all these years. Korczak, the loving doctor who dedicated his life to

providing a dignified home for orphans, adamantly refused to let them face their fate alone.² As we arrived on that rainy morning and walked in silence, the students slowly made their way to the site, each lost in their own contemplation, and I kept thinking about their decision to visit these sites of genocide during their holidays. It struck me how far they were from their families, many experiencing a trip far from home for the first time.

As I walked back with my two sons, I could not shake the feeling that the forest itself seemed to mourn. Raindrops fell incessantly from the leaves, creating a melancholic melody that echoed the sorrow of all those who had perished.

We visited the Jedwabne Pogrom Memorial which stands as a reminder of the horrors that arise when complicity and silence prevail within a community. The Memorial recounted the tragic events that occurred in July 1941, where Jewish residents were brutally massacred by their non-Jewish neighbors, demonstrating the devastating consequences of indifference and inaction in the face of prejudice³. As we concluded our visit, a student read a poem in memory of the victims, while another participant offered a prayer. Together, we united our voices in remembrance of the victims.

Reflecting on this dark chapter in history, my sons have learned about the impact of complicity. They now better understand that the silence of the town, the willingness of individuals to ignore the suffering of others, only served to enable the atrocities that unfolded.

² US Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Janusz Korczak Memorial," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Accessed February 17, 2024, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/janusz-korczak-1>.

³ World Jewish Congress, "This Week in Jewish History | Hundreds of Jews massacred in Jedwabne pogrom," World Jewish Congress, Accessed February 17, 2024, <https://www.worldjewishcongress.org/en/news/this-week-in-jewish-history--hundreds-of-jews-massacred-in-jedwabne-pogrom>.

The trip served as a sobering reminder of the importance of speaking out against hatred and standing up for those who are marginalized or persecuted.

One day, during the evening session, Professor Klein encouraged participants to reflect on their emotions. Some students had already reached out, expressing their sadness and a desire to find emotional support.

The following questions were posed:

- What unexpected emotions are you feeling?
- Where do you find hope in this experience?

Personally, I felt a deep sadness and a sense of helplessness in trying to comprehend why genocide occurs and why people become complicit in it. Were they driven by envy, fear, or coercion?

My 18-year-old son shared his perspective, expressing how seeing the gas chambers evoked thoughts of how a young person like him, filled with dreams, friends, and excitement for life, could have their existence shattered by prejudice and hate. He commented the following with the group: “We say we remember the horrors of the Holocaust so that history does not repeat itself. But how exactly? By actively remembering and visiting the places where such genocide occurred, we ensure that our lives are forever marked by this experience. Every time someone asks, “what was the Holocaust?” we can share our firsthand experience, with the hope of changing that person’s life for the betterment of humanity — a hope that was stripped away from the victims of the Holocaust.” Through his discernment, my initial dilemma regarding his emotional well-being was resolved, as I realized the deep impact of this experience on shaping his understanding and commitment to prevent such atrocities. Finally, He expressed gratitude for

the numerous opportunities in his life and the loving family he was part of. He reflected on how fortunate he was to have never experienced war or separation.

The next day we visited another terrible place: Majdanek. Majdanek was dark and somber as we walked between the barracks, facing the ominous barbed wire fence. Towering structures loomed before us, storage spaces once used for sorting and storing belongings. How ironic it seemed that possessions were meticulously preserved while lives were considered disposable and worthless. Standing beside a crematorium, the oven door stood as a haunting reminder of the mass murders committed here. Behind us lay the remnants of the now silent souls of thousands of people, their existence extinguished by pure evil.

I wondered about the countless mothers, fathers, families, neighbors, coworkers, teachers, musicians, poets, and writers who perished within these walls. How many dreams, aspirations, and innocent games of children were silenced forever? Across from the camp stood modern apartment buildings, their windows offering a direct view of the haunting landscape. I wondered: can people sleep peacefully knowing the history that lies just beyond their walls? Do they wake up each morning to the stark reality of genocide, or have they become numb to the terrible reflection of hate?

At that moment, a terrible freezing wind swept through the area, sending chills down our spines. One of the students, visibly struggling to button her jacket against the biting cold, stood shivering. Without hesitation, another student stepped forward, helping. Moved by the display of kindness, I hurried to help too, zipping up her coat to shield her from the biting wind.

In that simple act of consideration, I thought about the innate human instinct to offer support when someone is in need. Throughout the trip, I observed numerous instances when

students extended other similar gestures of kindness, whether it was sharing a bar of chocolate or offering a comforting word to a distressed peer. These moments were vivid examples of the impact of compassion, another meaningful lesson for my sons.

Another learning opportunity presented itself when, during our visit to one of the memorials commemorating the resistance of the Warsaw Ghetto fighters, students began to elaborate on the impact of solidarity and the refusal to surrender⁴. They discussed how these acts of defiance may have inspired other groups during the Holocaust, igniting a spirit of resistance against overwhelming odds. As they commented on the bravery and determination of those who stood up against oppression, the Mile 18 memorial came to mind. It stands as a testament to the resilience of those who chose to fight rather than submit, symbolizing a dignified struggle against indifference and oppression, even in the face of bystanders who chose only to watch taking no action. This experience served as a profound lesson for my sons, illustrating the enduring power of solidarity and nonconformity in the face of injustice.

In the final phase of our trip, we stood as a family before the remnants of the wall of the Warsaw Ghetto. Each of us shared our reflections and memories. My older son mentioned the significance of aiding others, emphasizing the important effect of individuals who helped during the Holocaust. He spoke passionately about how even the simplest acts played a crucial role in supporting Jews during that dark time. My younger son shared the inspiring story of Irena Sendler, a Polish social worker who fearlessly organized a network to save children from the

⁴ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Warsaw Ghetto Uprising," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Accessed February 17, 2024, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/warsaw-ghetto-uprising>.

horrors of the Warsaw Ghetto ⁵. Her bravery and selflessness served as a beacon of hope during one of history's darkest chapters.

I, too, contributed to our memorial, speaking about the concept of a "mensch" – individuals of integrity and honor who risked their lives to hide, help, and save others during the Holocaust. I spoke about the extraordinary story of Gertruda Babilinska,⁶ a young Polish girl of only nineteen years old. Despite the immense dangers, Gertruda courageously saved the life of Michael Stolorow, a Jewish boy she had cared for as his nanny. She not only protected him but also raised him as a Jew, despite being a devout Catholic herself. Her courageous actions, even decades later, continue to exemplify the enduring power of compassion and humanity.

On the final night in Poland, as the trip ended, all participants were given the chance to reflect on their experiences. Students expressed how intensely their perceptions had shifted and how these lessons would resonate with them for a lifetime. In a heartfelt moment, my oldest son publicly thanked me for bringing him on this transformative journey. He spoke of feeling a deep sense of responsibility to share his understanding of the lessons he had learned with others, and how now he feels compelled to stop instances of anti-Semitism, which had occurred frequently at his university.

As my younger son prepares for college next summer, he will carry with him not only memories of our adventures, science projects, and trips, but also the important lessons of respect, tolerance, and the consequences of hate and discrimination. This, I believe, is my legacy to my sons—a legacy of compassion, empathy, and the importance of standing up for what is right.

⁵ Yad Vashem. "Righteous among the Nations Data base. Irena Sendler." Yad Vashem, Accessed February 17, 2024, <https://collections.yadvashem.org/en/righteous/4017433>.

⁶ Yad Vashem. "Righteous among the Nations Data base. Gertruda Babilinska." Yad Vashem, Accessed February 17, 2024, <https://www.yadvashem.org/righteous/stories/babilinska.html>.

The journey of imparting the significance of learning about genocide to my sons has been an intense one. Through our experiences and reflections, I have come to realize the importance of action, the necessity of exploring the past, and the clarity that comes from knowing the facts.

I have been deeply moved by the compassion of docents who give their time to preserving history, as well as the collective effort of scholars, educators, and donors who ensure that future generations understand the importance of remembering. It is through their dedication that we can instill hope in the inherent goodness of human nature and work towards a future free from the horrors of genocide. Unlike other trips we have taken, this journey shook us to our core with a cold, undeniable truth: we are responsible for being vigilant and raising awareness when signs of discrimination and dehumanization surface. This experience served as a powerful wake-up call, reminding us that complacency is not an option when confronted with injustice.

By embracing discomfort, we open ourselves up to growth and change. The journey of navigating the challenging topic of genocide with my sons has left a permanent mark on my approach to parenting and education. From this experience, I have gleaned the deep importance of addressing difficult subjects with sensitivity, honesty, and empathy. By choosing to be direct with my children about harsh realities, I not only upheld my core values but also empowered them to develop into compassionate and informed individuals capable of confronting injustice with understanding and resilience. I hope that they will continue in their own lives to honor the memory of those who perished by standing up against injustice, nurturing compassion and understanding others, no matter their race, religion, ethnic origin, or gender.

As a mother, I am truly proud to see how willingly my sons embraced this quest. Witnessing the stories of individuals who, amidst the darkness of the Holocaust, chose to help and make the right decisions has been truly inspiring for us all. These examples serve as powerful reminders of the potential for caring and courage in the face of adversity. This experience has deepened my understanding of ethics in real-life situations, emphasizing the delicate balance between frankness and sensitivity in both parenting and education. As I continue to guide my children through life's complexities, I carry with me the invaluable lessons acquired from this ethical journey, forever shaping my approach to nurturing young minds and hearts.

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