

# Parenting Lessons from Tribes Around the World

Written by Michelle Henning

Monday, 01 June 2015 00:00 - Last Updated Friday, 15 September 2017 08:19

A conversation with photographer Jimmy Nelson.

Last year, while heavily pregnant, I attended a talk by acclaimed photographer Jimmy Nelson in our local café here in Amsterdam. He was speaking about his new book, *Before They Pass Away*, and showing spectacular images of the indigenous tribes from all over the world that he had spent time with.



Left: Yanomamo Tribe, Terra Mundi, Yanomamo Islands, 2010  
Below: Chukchee Tribe, Chukotka, Russia, 2012



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A conversation with photographer Jimmy Nelson

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Last year, while heavily pregnant, I attended a talk by acclaimed photographer Jimmy Nelson in our local café here in Amsterdam. He was speaking about his new book, *Before They Pass Away*, and showing spectacular images of the indigenous tribes from all over the world that he had spent time with.

A year later, I have a crawling, climbing, energetic baby on my hands, and the constant bombardment of parenting advice sometimes makes me question my own choices. My desire for a natural parenting style—home birth, co-sleeping, and baby wearing—inspired my curiosity about how these indigenous people raise their children. I reached Jimmy saying that he lived nearby, so I reached out to him. He agreed to come over for tea, and with my daughter happily sitting on the kitchen table between us and looking Jimmy's phone, he shared with me how the indigenous tribes have influenced his own parenting methods.

Let's start at the beginning. How did you get into photography in the first place?

I was a very creative kid. I went to a Jesuit boarding school, but I was not academic—I'm dyslexic. Then, at the age of 16, my hair fell out in one day. I was given the wrong antibiotics. I woke up and looked in the mirror, and I was bald. Now it's irrelevant, because I'm in my mid-40s, but when you're a 16-year-old teenager, it's quite heavy especially in the mid-west in northern England, everybody's judging you.

I left school at 17, and I disappeared off to the one country in the world where everybody else was bald, and that was Tibet. I thought, "I'm going to find myself amongst a lot of monks." I traveled the length of Tibet, by accident, I took a few pictures to document the journey. They were published, and that's how I started, at 17.

That's amazing. Now, in *Before They Pass Away*, you spent time with tribes all over the world and took amazing pictures of them. In your observations of the tribes, what are you focusing on initially? The aesthetic. These tribes are some of the world's last

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I left school at 17, and I disappeared off to the one country in the world where everybody else was bald, and that was Tibet. I thought, "I'm going to find myself amongst a lot of monks." So I walked the length of Tibet, by accident. I took a few pictures to document the journey. They were published, and that's how I started, at 17.

**That's amazing. Now, for Before They Pass Away, you spent time with tribes all over the world and took stunning pictures of them. In your observations of the tribes, what are you focusing on initially?**

The aesthetic. These tribes are some of the world's last traditional cultures. They have not been presented in an iconographic way, a way in which we could look at them with far more praise and respect, and realize they perhaps have something that we don't have anymore, and we're on the edge of losing it forever. The only way to do that is to put them on a pedestal, to celebrate them. The only way to do that is to make them into icons, into art.

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Once you make pretty pictures, people go, “What pretty pictures!” Then they look beyond the pretty pictures and go, “Wow, who are the pictures of? Aren’t they amazing? Who is this?” They start asking questions which we’ve not asked before. And if we don’t find answers soon, these people will go.

If that happens, the world will go upside down, because these tribes give us the balance of culture, of knowledge of the world’s last natural environments, traditions, languages. The world can’t be all about progress and material wealth. It must also be about consolidation of what we already have, which is a natural, spiritual, mental, cultural wealth. We’ve kept ourselves busy for many, many generations, believing material wealth was the only way forward. We have to regain that balance. That’s all the book is about—it’s about putting these tribes on a pedestal, to start that discussion.

**When you were with them, did you notice anything that made you think, “This aspect is so important to their life and their existence and their identity,” but they themselves didn’t feel that it was anything special?**

The majority of them know how significant the natural setting is that they live in, and how pure that is, because they’re the last of their groups. Ninety-nine percent of their people have already moved away to the cities, and live in boxes under bridges. Some of them have returned and told them what city life is like, so they are aware.

Then again, I think they still don’t truly understand how important it is. You know, 100 years ago, an American photographer called Edward Curtis photographed the Native Americans. You may know those sepia pictures, of Chief Sitting Bull.

**Yeah.**

He spent 30 years traveling around America, photographing the last Indians. Everybody laughed at him. Everybody said, “This is a waste of time. These people are dirty. They’re covered in leather, and they’ve got feathers in their hair, and they sing silly songs. It’s far more important we get rid of them, or they get rid of their cultures, and we move on.”

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One hundred years later, look at America. In my opinion, it's one of the most culturally impoverished and socially sick places on the planet. They all have the biggest cars, but also the biggest bellies and the biggest guns. That, I would argue, is because they've lost their cultural roots. Who am I? Where am I from?

I don't want us to lose that cultural history on an international scale. I'm being very melodramatic and of course it's not as black-and-white as this, but just to illustrate what I'm trying to do with my work.

**Regarding health, how do the tribes look after themselves? They don't have access to medicine like we do.**

It's a survival of the fittest. If you're not healthy when you're born, you die; it's as harsh and simple as that. Those who are born healthy, functioning, they live, and they live a healthy life.

A lot of the illnesses we suffer from here are self-inflicted. They're self-inflicted from food, sugars, salts, all the synthetic aspects. They're self-inflicted through our lifestyle. We believe we have to live for happiness. None of these people have the term "happiness," because they don't worry about the future, or when they're going to be happy. They just are.

**They don't think about goals, or "This will make me happy if I do this"?**

No, it's about today. It's about what matters now, about what I feel now. It's about today, and this evening when we eat. We, on the other hand, worry about 20 years from now, our pension. It's a bit of a catch-22.

**I'm particularly interested in their child-rearing practices. Here, everybody talks about routine, about sleep training, about when to give solid foods. In the tribes, did you see any small infants being fed solid food?**

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No, they're all fed by the breast. They feed them until they're 4 or 5 years old.

### **Really, that old?**

Why not? It's 10 times healthier, coming out of your breast, because it's clean. It builds their whole immune system. And there's no structure to it. It's just when they're hungry, they eat. There's none of this, "They should eat, they shouldn't eat, it's now bedtime, we're going to have to wean them off." All these communities, the best food comes out of your breasts.

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### **So the babies are constantly on the mothers?**

Yes, they're never left alone. If the parents are working, the other brothers and sisters carry the babies. They're always sleeping between the parents, or the brothers and sisters, and from when the day begins, they're attached to another human being. Everywhere you go, that is a common denominator. Obviously, in the colder climates, they do that for warmth, but even in the warm climates.

### **Do the babies then still whine and cry?**

Hardly at all, no. There's always human contact. All their needs are being met. They're constantly on the boob. They just need the warmth.

### **And during the night, do they wake a lot, nursing?**

You never hear that they're awake. They nurse all night, so they sleep like my children were

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brought up, next to their mother. If they're hungry, they get something. There's never any process of screaming or yelling.

### **Do you think this parenting style is possible in our society?**

Our first one was attached to me, 24 hours of the day. I had this long wrap sling, and she grew up facing me, and then when she got older, she'd be facing out, and fall asleep. Everywhere I went on the bike, I had her in my sling. She lived in there, for about three years; so much so that when you took her out, she would scream, because she wanted the contact. She just came with us. If she fell asleep and we weren't ready to go to bed, she would stay attached to me or my wife. Come bedtime, we would just put her down and we'd all sleep together.

It depends on how enthusiastic and committed you are as a parent. We live in this world of 1,001 opportunities and distractions. To keep the child away from that requires you to apply yourself as a parent, on a far greater level than most people ever do. Unfortunately, being acknowledged as a mother is not significant anymore. We believe it's far more important to be somebody, and have a title.

**I find women are really conflicted with the pressure to be everything—successful at their careers and a great mother. We're trying so hard to do everything right, which of course is impossible, and then we fail, we get tired, we shout at our kids, then we feel like bad mothers.**

Yeah, we've made things so hard for ourselves. Also from a physical point of view—we've all decided to have kids in our late 20s, 30s, even 40s or 50s, which I think is a disaster. In the tribes, they all have children in their teens.

I think there's nothing better than having a child when your body is as strong, healthy, elastic...and when you are as fearless as you are when you're in your late teens.

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I had my eldest when I was 25. I would have done it two or three years earlier, if I could have. In fact, we're encouraging our kids to have kids as young as they feel comfortable.

### **Really? That's interesting.**

I think physically, they're going to be stronger. They're more adaptable. They're healthier. They need less. They're happy to take care of the kid, they're more mobile. They have less expectations, less structure. Come the age of 40, you've got kids who have left the house, and then you can go and do other things.

### **What else have you witnessed on your travels that influenced how you raised your kids?**

Many, many things. Interestingly, my wife of 23 years now, traveled extensively before we met. One thing we experienced, and what I still experience when I go off into the bush, is how everyone sleeps huddled together. Even if you're a stranger, and especially if it's cold, you put your hands and your feet in each other's groins and armpits, to keep warm.

When my wife and I had children, from Day 1 they were in our bed. My wife said: "Here's the baby, and the baby is going to sleep here." I was a little bit upset at the beginning, but 18 years later and now with three children, we all still sleep in the same bed. We've got two mattresses together. My two eldest daughters have boyfriends, so when the boyfriends visit, they go to their own room. If there are no girlfriends or boyfriends, we all sleep in the same bed.

That's probably the most significant thing we've adopted from experiences that we've learned on our travels. We're looked upon as very strange.

### **That's incredible.**

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How my kids grew up is the polar opposite of how I grew up. I grew up not knowing my parents; at the age of 7, I was sent to a boarding school with Jesuit priests for 10 years. My concept of physicality and nudity and the opposite sex was seriously handicapped, from my youth. Nothing was ever discussed. If it was discussed, you're going to go to hell, and you're going to die.

Now here I am, I've grown with the kids, in our physicality. We walk around naked when we're getting dressed in the morning. Nobody bats an eyelid. That all comes from growing up as a unit. I think that gives us a strength that many other families don't have, so when it all hits the fan—and it does—the children have a deep sense of self-security and confidence from that.

### **That's wonderful.**

In general, our society is overly protective of our children—because everything is so transparent. We now know all the dangers. We only have to Google every accident we could ever imagine, and it's available, so we've become terrified. We don't do anything anymore, and don't let the children do anything.

When you go to some of these communities, the children grow up in the environment with everybody. In Papua New Guinea, there is a group of people living in treehouses, 40 meters up from the ground. The treehouses don't have a fence. The children crawl freely; they just don't go over the edge.

I think you have to let children find their own borders. We live in a city. My children are allowed to go and come in the evening as they please. We are, again, judged by other people that give curfews and deadlines. My wife and I say, "They're going to get out anyway. They're going to find a way." We used to smoke, we don't smoke anymore. We don't do drugs. But we say to our children: "If that's what you want to do, do your thing, and you'll learn accordingly. Please keep in touch with us. Please communicate with us." If you don't trust them to have their own adventures, they'll intuitively fight against it, they'll want to go and have those experiences.

Seeing my teenagers now, how free they are and how happy they are—it's harder work as a parent, because there's more freedom. You've got to be on the ball. Each child is different. You have to trust them in their own adventures, allow them their own disasters, and to make their



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own mistakes. Otherwise they won't learn.

### **My mum understood that, too—that is how she raised me.**

I think we dissociate ourselves too much from our children. In the tribes, there isn't really a separation of child and adult, or old person, or teenager. The children are as important as the old people, but they have different strengths and weaknesses. Everybody works together as a community, as a unit, because you need each other to function and survive.



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