

FAITH AND SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT IN CHILDREN

BIRTH TO PRESCHOOL

As human beings, one of our first tasks is to trust and to explore who we are in relationship to those we trust. The child who goes to sleep in a crib, in a dark room, is not only expressing trust in his parent, but also communicating a basic trust in the Creation. “I am safe” “Living is good” “I am cared for”

Awe is a primary response of children in this stage of development—so much is wonderful, beautiful. There are so many “wows” in the world. Creation is experienced as magnificent, and the Creator (while not conceptualized at this age, but felt in the experiences of wonder and amazement) must be magnificent as well.

This is also a time when we are learning how “real” real is, and gaining some mastery over ourselves. While an infant is wholly dependent for a short time, s/he soon learns to feed herself, to roll/crawl to retrieve a toy – or a speck of dust. Toward the two year mark the child is able to retain a concept in his head of the unseen: the toy is truly under the blanket – object permanence. As children begin to self-differentiate, even this young, they tend to develop a sense of who they are by being in relationship to others. As this includes the unseen it means that not only is the toy real, but “I” am real, when I do not see my mother or father they are still “real” – and whoever or whatever is the ultimate “parent” is also “real” though unseen. Charles Schultz, the creator of Charlie Brown and Snoopy drew a frame where Charlie is in bed with Snoopy curled at his feet. “I get it,” says Charlie, “God is like having a nightlight!” 

The bedtime, or mealtime prayer may become a standard during this age period. Or, if a family is not specifically religious they may yet want to instill a sense of connectedness, of thankfulness and family oneness in their child. So, relationships take on a feeling of mutuality for the child – something special happens – gratitude is a good response; someone takes care of me – saying a thank you “prayer” is appropriate.

Children at this stage can also have their special demons, too. Where trust is broken, where needs are not met, where relationships are hurtful rather than loving the child can develop a fear that the “ultimate parent” does not care, will not care, and will probably also abandon the child.

A child who is ill, in the hospital at this age has fewer things to be “awed” about positively. But they may certainly stand in “awe” of their doctor, the infusion pump, the big bed and hard, cold floor. These are the “other side” of what we typically think of spirituality or faith, but nevertheless they are major constituents of how the child experiences the numinous.

PRESCHOOL/SCHOOL AGE (7/8)

Children become more discerning between 2/3 and 6 or 7, and can articulate what makes sense to them. They tell their “faith” stories easily and comfortably. One child came running to her mother exclaiming about the walk she just took with Jesus. “We held hands and he told me I never, ever had to be really afraid because he would always be close to me, even if I couldn’t see him. And I asked him why he was wearing funny-looking shoes and he said they were sandals and where he lived once there was a lot of sand on the ground so the shoes let the sand in and let the sand out!”

Children are beginning to take some responsibility for the family rituals such as prayers at meal time or bedtime, they will initiate them, remind elders when they haven’t been observed and are very in-



trigued with new forms and creating their own rituals. If they are learning the stories of faith – or the stories of meaning as the family makes meaning – they are able to retell the story, insert themselves in it and change it to make sense of their particular world. Christopher wanted the Chaplain to read the story of David and Goliath to him each time she visited him in the hospital. For several days she simply read the story and observed that Christopher became calm and focused during and after hearing the story. Christopher was four and had

a brain tumor; his mother was very anxious and afraid to take a strong role in giving him any meds or doing mouth care, etc. He had learned his regimen and saw to it that it was followed. He was a David facing the Goliath of his disease. Not only did he “live” this story, he was able to articulate it when the Chaplain asked him what he liked most about it. “David was very brave, even when other people were afraid [perhaps like Christopher’s mother]. He said to Goliath, ‘You can not beat me.’ and he believed it.”

Children are presented with so much that is new during these years. They are assimilating information that is somewhat familiar and cataloguing it with other bits of knowledge. They have other experiences that give them absolutely novel information and they need to accommodate that to their life and body of knowledge. Major shifts in worldview can happen for the child. If they have been successful during their earlier years, become established in a general attitude of trust, these can be exciting while still a bit destabilizing. But if trust has been damaged, or unable to be built, new experiences can become shattering. Of course, there is a wide continuum and children may fall anywhere along it – as well as travel back and forth along it as knowledge, anxiety, newness increases or recedes.

Children during these developmental years still live in the realm of the “WoW!” They observe the hugeness and the smallness of nature and are intrigued by why God makes mosquitoes and worry if they hear that the Polar Bears might not have any snow to live in. They imbue all things with spirit, and honor them. God is very real and God’s ability to be everywhere, all the time is unquestionable. Creeds and prayers become important and “do unto others” a vital part of how they understand relationships—they ought to be fair! Children want to help others, worry about others, care deeply for the sadness or worry they feel in others. They want to help make it better—this is a reflection of their experience of family, but also of the spiritual realm which is about beauty, truth, and compassion.

When children are ill during this period of spiritual development the illness itself can take on an aspect of reality somewhat beyond the actual truth. But most children understand that the world is bigger than this particular experience; beauty and love, giggles and cookies, still exist. Helping a child remember, and have fun is a spiritual endeavor.

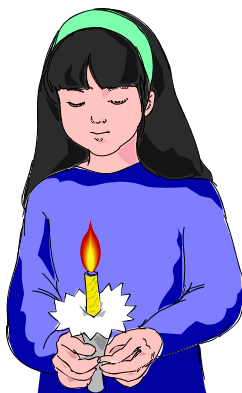
It is important to note that faith development stages overlap. There is no perfect trajectory of development in any area of life. How we develop is always influenced by the systems in which we are embedded, the experiences we have and the ways we integrate them, and the meanings we draw from our experiences and relationships.

One developmental stage will always be built upon the stage which went before and therefore carry some of the successes and failures experienced during that time. But all the future stages are also nascent within the child and fully potential, even when the child is dying.

During this time period children's focus moves from family to school, play turns into work, and children are interested in beginning to build their competencies. Fair is fair according to the judgments of the child, and what is not fair is simply not acceptable. At the same time they are being absolute about their sense of justice and meaning, they are carefully observing others to determine how their judgments fit or do not fit with others'. They may become more adamant about being "right" but they may also become more hesitant, particularly if they have had significant experiences of shame or doubt.

This is also a time for religious rites of passage: first communion, confirmation, youth group, first "real" Bible. These are Christian examples, but most faith communities have similar rites – bar/bat mitzvah, etc. The symbols of the faith community have real power and majesty: the Ark, the Cross, the Qur'an. Children are using them – turning them over not only in their hands, but also in their psyches looking for meaning, imbuing them with special authority and effectiveness. Prayer, blessing, and ritual are very special for children during this time frame. They love any kind of hero and anyone or anything can become heroic. Using familiar hero stories or helping them create their own can be an important spiritual activity as they look for the hero within.

When the paradigms do not fit the present experience – when a child is ill, s/he may be more likely to question themselves than the paradigm. "Why am I sick, what did I do wrong? I thought God was supposed to take care of us – why isn't God taking care of me?" This can be an opportunity to look more deeply at the familiar stories with the child as well as to look for alternative paradigms. Options include the Lament Psalms and the story of Job from the Hebrew/Christian Bible. But there is the rich world of storybook and movie as well. Death and Evil/evils are realities for Harry Potter, but there is also love which provides courage, strength, and hope.



11/12 AND OLDER

Faith and virtue become very personal and will unite them with others of similar views. These values are an integral part of identity and not available for objective analysis. Differences with other around faith/values is experienced as a difference in the sort of person one is – not a mere difference in belief

No one would doubt that this is a time in which children are frantically (almost) searching for a concrete sense of who they are and what they are about in the world. They are striving to locate themselves within themselves, the world, and their belief system. They are very susceptible to charismatic leaders whose structures and expectations provide cohesiveness and continuity. They are drawn beyond family in many ways, but may feel ambivalent about the distances created in relationships. They bond with anyone who seems “like” and reject anyone who is “other”. They frequently feel that no one “gets” them. But they are still looking for ways to make sense out of their experiences; dramatic changes are often experienced as traumatic and these may lead to more expression of the child’s “spirituality” – read belief system. While they may not be deeply involved in a faith community that is easily recognizable, they have a set of values and an ethic that is strong and influential. They have a significant sense of the mysterious as consistently available and full of potential. Providers need to be open to the myriad ways the preteen and teen is expressing their experience of the numinous.

SOME OTHER PARADIGMS OF FAITH/SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

HAY AND NYE

David Hay and Rebecca Nye are British researchers, respectively a zoologist/theologian and a psychologist/theologian, who began to study the spirituality of children in the 1990s. They call this a geography of the spirit. Awareness-sensing: Here-and-now, Tuning, Flow, Focusing
Mystery-sensing: Wonder and awe, Imagination
Value-sensing: Delight and despair, Ultimate goodness, Meaning

By awareness they are talking about paying attention, staying alert. Children have a deep connection to the here and now and can be amazed by the simplicity of grass growing. This vividness is a spiritual realm for children. Tuning is a raised awareness that we sometimes link to aesthetic experiences. Tobin Hart tells this story of Mark and his eight-year-old daughter Miranda in his Book *The Secret Spiritual World of Children*. They were at a quiet beach and Miranda went to stand about waist deep in the waves, gently moving back and forth with the water. Mark watched her for her for a quarter of an hour, a half an hour, an hour, and nearly an hour and a half. He wondered if he should check on her, disturb her. But he continued to sit and watch. After that hour and a half Miranda came up to him and sat down. She said nothing but was obvious calm and happy. Waiting a few minutes Mark asked her what she had been doing. “I was the water,” she said softly. “It was amazing. I was the water. I love it and it loves me. I do not know how else to say it.”

Flow is the sense one has when one is fully engaged in an activity and the sense of time is lost, or when an activity is so natural that it is accomplished without thought. It is connected to doing and being where each flows into the other and one feels most fully one's self and yet beyond one's self.

Focusing is about paying attention to the body, the felt experiences, the wisdom that comes from what the body has undergone, is capable of and not capable of, its strength and its weaknesses, but also the emotional feelings that are associated with bodily sensations.

Mystery surrounds us. Wonder and awe can also be described as fascination or curiosity and amazement or fear. They are very close emotions. They can be profound experiences whether simple or complex. Imagination helps us make sense out of mystery, out of the wonder and awe – it helps us ask the questions that take us inside mystery and formulate the hypotheses about what something is or means. Imagination helps us “use” religious symbols and take the journey through them to the meaning behind them. In children's play, stories, artwork much of their “work” at comprehending the mysterious will be available for us to hear/see and use to assist children in further meaning-making.

Value-sensing is about going beyond analytic, cognitive assessments to exploring the realm of affect. “Children readily express their ideas of worth or value in the intensity of their everyday experiences of delight or despair.” (73) Children who are nurtured, loved, kept safe from birth on typically do have a sense of ultimate goodness – if the parenting is good they extrapolate that the world is good. And meaning, for Hay and Nye, is not only the cognitive experience of figuring out what is life, who am I, what am I to do with this life. It can very well be a sensed wholeness in which everything comes together without collision or plan, and yet fits perfectly.

PRUYSER

Pruyser was a clinical psychologist who spent many years at the Menninger Clinic. He wrote a book in 1976 called *The Minister as Diagnostician*. He wanted to help local church pastors understand the religious/spiritual personalities and needs of their congregants. It comes from a very Christian and a very adult perspective, yet the categories he suggests that pastors use as guidelines for diagnosis can be quite helpful.

By awareness of the holy, Pruyser means is anything special/ sacred to the individual. Does s/he revere anything? How does this demonstrate itself in the person's life? Are they wholly dependent, seeking guidance at every juncture or do they have an inflated sense of self and no need for other? Does this person every feel a sense of awe, or bliss? Who or what is the person's God or gods or idols.

Providence is related to the person's sense of what gives life meaning; is there anything or anyone “out there” who knows, and who cares about me? Does the individual experience a balance in the good and bad aspects of living or is it all one or the other? Does the individual feel completely at the mercy of God, or the universe – or is the individual's relationship centered on his/her own core of power and competence.

Faith is not only the subscription to a certain set of tenets, but is also related to whether a person has an affirming or negating stance on life. Does a person's “faith” open up the world to her or close it down to a few square feet of what is safe and good?

Grace or gratefulness: does one see one's self as flawed but loveable? Perfect and in need of nothing and no one? Do they feel blessed or do they want to be blessed? This is more than mere gratitude, though it encompasses it.

Repenting is about change, the willingness to change, the awareness of one's role as agent in their living. As with each of these there is a continuum: is this person feeling guilty for everything – or for nothing!

Communion is related to community – how a person feels embedded, reaching out, caring, being cared for. Is a person alienated or connected, do they see themselves as continuous or discontinuous with the rest of humanity and nature?

Sense of vocation is not about finding one's life work, it is, rather, about a person's willingness to be a participant in life. Does one have zest, vigor, dedication, a sense of purpose? And is one alert to that which seeks to harm and destroy – not only in the world, but in one's self – and a willingness to control or wrestle with it.

MERCER

In the Journal of Pastoral Psychology, May 2006 Mercer (an Associate Professor of Practical Theology and Christian Education at the Graduate Theological Union at San Francisco Theological Seminary) wrote about understanding the spirituality of children and its significance for clinical work. She uses the descriptors Mystics, Activists, Sages and Holy Fools

The mystic carries the idea of being in touch with mystery. It is part of their sense of limitlessness, ultimacy, and the cosmic. It is everywhere and nowhere, can not be described very well, but known and felt and very, very real.

The activist is her metaphor for children who live out their spirituality – what they believe is right and good. Their experience is that the practice is the value, the truth, they believe and which they believe is the proper one for them. This is so whether the "activity" is saving pennies for the local homeless shelter or playing soccer with all one's "heart."

The sage is talking about that dimension of a child which we have experienced as wisdom far beyond the child's age or experience. Their awareness of the feelings of others – especially those who are somehow "fragile" – elders, peers with special needs. They have insight that is intuitive even if not well developed and can often reach out to others dramatically.

The Holy Fool is the prophetic voice, the truth teller who softens the sting with humor – or not. Unfortunately too many adults think the child who is the holy fool is merely cute and miss the power in the truth telling.