

The Spirituality of Children – and the Child Within You

Mother's Day, May 11 2014

Rev. Roger Jones, UU Society of Sacramento

Special Music: [Dwight Trible](#), voice & [Ross Hammond](#), guitar: "Throw It Away" and "Deep River" as closing music.

Hymns: #361: "Enter, Rejoice and Come In," #51, "Lady of the Seasons' Laughter,"

Shared Offering:

For the American River Natural History Association and its [Effie Yeaw Nature Center](#). [words at end]

Reading: Shel Silverstein's poem

"Forgotten Language"

Once I spoke the language of the flowers,
Once I understood each word the caterpillar said,
Once I smiled in secret at the gossip of the starlings,
And shared a conversation with the housefly
in my bed.
Once I heard and answered all the questions
of the crickets,
And joined the crying of each falling dying
flake of snow,
Once I spoke the language of the flowers. . .
How did it go?
How did it go?

-

SERMON

I hope you'll forgive me. I hope you won't hate me. I had intended to speak today about the spirituality of children and the child within us. That's what I put in the May newsletter for today. But on this Mother's Day, I am haunted by an ongoing story of human cruelty to children. A few weeks ago, nearly 300 girl students at a school in northeastern Nigeria were kidnapped. Men from a violent rebel group known as Boko Haram entered the school, lied to lure the girls out of the school, and burned it down. Then they took them. (Economist 2014)

Boko Haram is translated as "western education is forbidden." *Haram* is an Arabic word meaning *forbidden*. Females should not be

educated, these men say, asserting their tradition and *their perversion* of the religion of Islam. The leaders plan to sell the children as wives and traffic them as sexual slaves. Yet theft is forbidden by Islam, like the theft of people from their families, and burning their school. Sex outside of your own marriage is haram. So is killing, so is slavery, all forbidden. They defend their crimes as an expression of God's will. This makes me furious.

The only reason they've kidnapped those girls is because they could get away with it. Violence has no reason; it makes its own reasons.

Those girls have teachers and families who had wanted them to have a better life through learning and growth, and now the girls are gone, their families desperate and bereft.

I've been thinking about those girls. I've been inspired by the stories from a few of them who, as they rode in open trucks passing under tree branches, grabbed a branch, pulled themselves out of the truck, and tumbled onto the ground so they could run to safety. I've been praying for them, and praying for those who didn't escape.

What is it they are being robbed of? What are those girls being denied? What spiritual things are common, no matter where we live and who we are? What does everyone deserve, every child and the child within every one of us? I have a few thoughts about it.

First is a sense of safety. For an infant, this feels like not being hungry or cold, or alone for too long. As a baby, our crying alerts those who care for our, and their meeting our needs will build a sense of safety. As we grow, we need to know we have a safety net, so we can take risks, stretch ourselves, and learn by making mistakes. As we age, we need to take responsibility, feel the tension of risk--but we need to know we have backup. If we are lucky, our backup, our safety net, is made up of our families, teachers and schools, our congregations and other forms of community.

For countless generations, many people have expressed their sense of safety in the divine, and their trust in the care of some larger Love that will never let us go, no matter what. Some who have come through ordeals of assault, abduction, or abandonment have claimed that it was trust in their God that brought them through. Others made it through by keeping their mental focus on the faces of those who mattered in their lives. Others kept

their mind stayed on their sense of purpose. What gives life meaning, why do you want to survive this, rather than give up? Because you have a duty or goal to pursue.

All of these are spiritual matters. What helps you get through is a spiritual question. Matters of survival are spiritual matters.

In addition to safety, we want a sense of belonging and closeness. The spirit is nourished by physical closeness with others and simply spending time together. Kids know this, and long for it. I think we still do, whatever age we are. I remember my own longing for it in childhood.

I was born when my parents were older and my brother was nearly out of the house. They were busy, distracted, and not very happy. I longed for more contact than I got, real contact, not only time in the same house, or time spent while shopping.

We were moderate churchgoing Protestants, but we had no rituals at home, no bedtime prayers or grace before dinner, and few conversations together over a meal at the table to reconnect after the day.

As a boy one Saturday I got my father to sit by me in his recliner and read me the Bible aloud. How could he refuse such a pious request? The Book of Genesis, I think it was. The King James translation, so I wasn't sure what it was about. It was tedious. But for half an hour I had the physical contact of my dad, squeezed in the chair with me and heard the sound of his voice, just for me.

My mom and I went to church by ourselves, and sat side by side in a wooden pew, the middle one on the right side. We sat in prayer together and heard the sermon and had communion together--once I was old enough to receive it.

Every week I saw her put a check in the offering basket—\$20, a lot of money in the 70s. This got my attention. I learned habits of stewardship and giving to charity from watching her. We sang together. In one hymn she pointed out that to stay in the meter of the song, you need to sing the word “pierced” as two syllables, as in “Christ’s pierce-ed feet.”

Sometimes we got the giggles about something silly in the sermon or about the people in front of us, and we’d sit there shaking, stifling laughter. Counting the drive to and from church, that hour and a half on Sunday was the longest time in quiet presence that I spent with Mom every week.

Kids will seek ways to be together with others, but at any age we long for a sense of closeness and belonging.

We want to be heard and seen, known and understood. It can seem that Facebook and the online world can link us with more people. Of course, it can be a lifesaving way of connection sometimes, but it may also distract us from closeness. So much time online has reduced the amount of real time we can spend getting to know other people, up close with more depth, or being with those we care about, in person, or by the sound of their voice on the phone. The voice conveys our spirit and our emotion. It can be comforting.

Now and then one of my Facebook friends will announce they are taking a break, going *offline* for a time. Instead of being always *on*, reading every post as it goes up and posting what they are doing or thinking, they are practicing an online Sabbath. This is a chance to remember that sitting side by side or facing another person across the table in a kitchen or coffee shop shows caring and connection, it is reassuring.

Kids long to be seen and known like this. I think we all do.

We long for connection to others and to life and the mystery behind life. In her book *The Gift of Faith: Tending the Spiritual Lives of Children*, UU minister and grandmother Jeanne Nieuwejaar says that children are inherently spiritual. There’s nothing we need to pour into them, no switch to turn or process to control. We need only pay attention, and respond with openness. With kids, at times we need to act as if some things are *not a big deal*. At other times, we must understand that EVERYTHING is a big deal.

She says kids are “natural mystics. For example, they can become totally absorbed in the progress of a caterpillar or the movement of the clouds, losing all sense of themselves.” In the words of Shel Silverstein, “Once I spoke the language of the flowers;/ Once I understood each word the caterpillar said.”

Observing teenagers, Nieuwejaar says: “They lose themselves in music and in dance, blending into the rhythm, feeling one with all that is.” Kids know how to be *in the flow*. The child within us can remember that impulse, can learn again how to be absorbed and lose oneself. I can feel awkward about showing such freedom, losing

myself, perhaps more than many others do. So I make sure to hang around with kids and with my elders. I talk and listen to them. They remind me about the flow. There is no good reason for this to stop at any age or stage of life. All of us long for connection to life and the mystery behind it.

Nieuwejaar says kids are natural theologians too. We need not fear conversations with them about spiritual terms and ideas. Even when feeling awkwardness or discomfort, we can try to stay open and curious. After all, if we have a kid in our life, it's likely we've already made the hardest spiritual commitment.

UU parents and educators Tracy Springberry and Sarah Conover write that a commitment to children in our lives will throw us “onto the path toward spiritual wisdom,” and it's not an easy path. In their book *Chaos, Wonder and the Spiritual Adventure of Parenting*, they write: the spiritual is

felt, touched and communicated daily as the tone and color of [our lives together.] We hear, taste, breathe, and touch the spiritual through the ways we attend to countless sunrises, meals..., celebrations, frustrations, grief, joys, laughter and responsibilities. We feel [the] press [of the spirit] in the disparity between the path we hope to walk—full of kindness, love and forgiveness—and the path we actually walk. (Springberry and Conover 2011, xii)

Sometimes parents of young children start coming to church because their kids are asking questions about faith and spirituality: God, heaven, death, why the grass is green and the sky is blue, why are some people mean, unfair, or cruel.

After attending church for a while--“for the children”--the parents may find that they are the ones who need spiritual depth and refreshment, discovery and reflection.

Many parents and grandparents have told me they are seeking practices to center themselves and find peace. *And* seeking extra time in the day to do those practices. African American poet Lucille Clifton took a question from the audience once after she gave a reading: “Why are your poems always short?” Ms. Clifton replied, “I have six children, and a memory that can hold about twenty lines until the end of day.” (Nieuwejaar 2012)

When adults care for our own spiritual health, and show the fruits of that care, we are teaching children about spiritual practice, about ease and compassion, generosity and joy. It's a win-win: we are better, and kids learn how to live a more open and rich life. When we engage in spiritual conversations and rituals of connection together, adults and children feel a sense of belonging, closeness, and safety.

Nobody is an ideal parent, just as nobody is a perfect child or a perfect adult. Even Reverend Nieuwejaar, the minister who wrote the books on the spirituality of children says, “I wish I had done better.”

This is important for parents and the rest of us to learn and live by. Not perfect, not having final answers, sometimes not having any answers, just the gift of our presence and attention. Not perfect, but working to be open and brave, trying to be mindful. This is a good lesson for the kids around us to see and learn, and for the child within us to re-learn, and live. We are here to support one another in this.

Perhaps you'll talk with others after the service about your longings, for our children and the child within you. The last kind of longing I will mention now is this: In this fragile world of ours, where children are kidnapped, we long for compassion and healing. I pray those young students are remembering the faces of their family members, their faith communities and teachers. I pray they are somehow trusting in a larger Love, and looking for a way to escape and run to safety. In this fragile world, we try to help. We long for hope.

The [Second Principle](#) of our UU denomination is that “We affirm and promote justice, equity and compassion in human relations.” We have a kids' version of this, in our Spirit Play class. In the Rainbow of Promises, O for orange means “Offer fair and kind treatment to others.” This phrasing is great--as a starting place, says Reverend Nieuwejaar. But as parents and as a congregation, we seek to move to the “richer concepts” of empathy and compassion, to the challenge of justice and social equity. Just as “we delight in challenging our children” and ourselves to grow in other skills, she says, we can delight in stretching one another toward more compassion, toward putting our values into practice.

Nieuwejaar cites a story about a conversation a mother had with her four-year-old, Meredith. “Meredith asked... ‘Mama, if God made the world, who made God?’” Nieuwejaar calls this a “classic theological mind twister,” a familiar one to seminary graduates. The mother said: “What a great question!” Such encouragement was a good thing, but the mom was really stalling for time. “Weelll, who do *you* think made God, Meredith?” Another question showing openness and curiosity, and another stalling tactic. Meredith answered right away, as if the answer was completely obvious and she was just checking. She said: “God’s *mother* made God. Her name is Hope.” (Nieuwejaar 2012)

We do not have to deny kids access to spiritual words; they will find them on their own. Instead, we can guide the discussion to reflect our values. The word “God,” for example, brings up many feelings and images. In this world there are many perverted understandings of the word “God,” and cruelty done in the name of God.

Likewise in the world there are many perverted understandings of the word “Love,” and many cruelties done in the name of Love. We can learn otherwise and live otherwise. We can take responsibility for the care of the children in our midst, and the child inside our own heart. And we can make room in our heart for every child of the human family.

We can grow in our compassion, empathy, generosity and courage, grow to be a force for healing in our world. Whatever our age or stage of life, may we live in compassion and hope.

So may we live, in compassion and hope.
So may it be. Blessed be. Amen.

Ministerial Benediction:

As you go out into the world, may you perceive with all your senses the blessings this world holds for your life. And may you know in your mind and soul the blessings you can bring to this world--by the way you live your life.

–Roger Jones

“For all who see God,
may God go with you.
For all who embrace life,
may life return your affection.

For all who seek a right path,
may a way be found...
And the courage to take it,
step by step.” –Robert Mabry Doss

Shared Offering words by JoAnn Anglin:

It was Good Friday afternoon, three years ago, when my grandsons – Giovanni and Giacomo – and I were on a trail at the Effie Yeaw Nature Center -- not far from the little museum that houses snakes and owls and exhibits -- and less than 10 minutes from the river’s edge.

The boys had already checked the pond for possible sightings of the bullfrog or turtle that live there. We’d already seen woodpeckers, many wild turkeys and Canada geese, scads of pipevine butterflies, and several baby rabbits. It was a little too early for the deer to make their way to the meadow.

Suddenly, as we rounded a slight curve, there was a coyote, not 30 feet away. He quickly ran off as soon as he saw us. To this day, the boys still recall the thrill of that close-up sighting. This sense of discovery, and of being in the midst of nature, is available on the edge of Carmichael – only a 20-minute drive from my house.

It is one of the highlights of living in Sacramento.

For many years, this treasure was part of the County Park System. Then it almost closed, due to the financial stresses of local government.

Luckily, the nonprofit American River Natural History Association stepped up to run it with groups of volunteers and a skimpy staff. Now it depends on grants and donations from such as us.

It remains a prime educational resource for school kids, birders, photographers, hikers and painters. It holds classes and trail walks for families every weekend. Many come there for quiet and restoration.

Unless you indicate otherwise on your check, half of what you put in today’s collection basket will go to help the Effie Yeaw Nature Center.

Works Cited

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