

The Spirituality of Children<sup>1</sup>  
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READINGS: Two Stories from "The Mystical Child" Tobin Hart

#1 Mark and his eight-year old daughter Miranda were at a quiet beach one warm, sunny day. Miranda soon wandered into the soft and steady waves pulsing against the shore. She stood in the water up to her waist, just moving back and forth with the waves. Ten or fifteen minutes passed and Mark thought that her eyes were closed. Thirty minutes went by and she was still swaying in the gentle surf in the same spot. After an hour, he found himself swaying with her as he sat and watched from the beach. It was as if she were in a trance. He wanted to make sure she was all right. "Was this some kind of seizure?" "Does she have enough sun screen on?" he wondered; but he managed not to intrude. It was nearly an hour and a half before she came out of the water absolutely glowing and peaceful. She sat down next to him without a word. After a few minutes, he managed to gently ask what she had been doing. "I was the water," she said softly. "The water?" he repeated. "Yeah, it was amazing. I was the water. I love it and it loves me. I don't know how else to say it." They sat quietly until she hopped up to dig in the sand a few minutes later.<sup>2</sup>

#2 Jim, fourteen, looked back on his school career:

I couldn't get my teachers to take my questions and ideas seriously. I thought this was what school was going to be about. There was such a big deal about going off to first grade, but I kept waiting for us to talk about life—you know, why we're all here, what this world's about. The nature of the universe. Things like that. When I'd ask or say my ideas just to sort of get things going, there would be dead silence, and then the teachers would move on to spelling or something. I thought, *OK, I guess we're getting the basic stuff this year, and then we'll get into the good stuff in second grade. I can wait that long if I have to.* Well, second grade came and went and it wasn't any better—maybe worse—since we didn't even get to play as much. By fourth grade I remember thinking, *I must be an alien. These people don't understand. I'm not a social zero; I have friends. But no one, especially not the teachers, are talking about this. School seems not to be very interested in my questions or any questions really; it is all about the answers. We're only supposed to give them the right answer.*<sup>3</sup>

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2 From "The Mystical Child: Glimpsing the Spiritual World of Children, by Tobin Hart, in *Encounter: Education for Meaning and Social Justice*, Vol. 17, #2 (Summer 2004), p. 41. Reprinted online at [http://www.westga.edu/share/documents/pubs/000471\\_94.pdf](http://www.westga.edu/share/documents/pubs/000471_94.pdf)

3 Ibid., p. 45.

## SERMON

A little girl was busily working on a picture.  
Her father asked, "What are you drawing?"  
She replied, "A picture of God."  
"But no one knows what God looks like," said the father.  
She replied, "They will when I get finished."

A couple months ago I was talking with a young mother. Her children were beginning to ask challenging questions, about God, about death, about suffering. She thought that she had found answers for herself many years before. But now, her answers felt inadequate, felt too small somehow, in the face of their curiosity and their need. She didn't know what to say to them. She found herself questioning everything that she thought she believed.

Children can challenge us at the deepest levels of our understanding and our being. Children can turn our knowledge on its head, open new doors, and expand our perspective, if we are willing to open our hearts and minds to them. Tobin Hart, a psychologist at the State University of West Georgia, recounts an unexpected conversation with his seven year old daughter Haley.<sup>4</sup>

They were finishing a bed-time story, and he was saying goodnight to her, when she announced that children could see their angels. He asked her, *Do you see your angel right now? Just a minute*, she said, and she quieted down, began to breathe slowly and deeply, and closed her eyes; after a few minutes she replied, *Yes, I see her now*. Hart asked some gentle questions, and Haley reported answers from her angel that were full of deep insight and wisdom, far beyond what he thought a child might be able to understand. They continued to converse for almost 15 minutes. Near the end, Hart asked, "What does your angel do for you?" Haley replied, "My angel reminds me that I am loved and helps me to see things better."

Hart was moved by that experience to begin research into the spiritual lives of children. For a time, psychologists believed that children were not capable of abstract thought, or deep emotion, or spiritual experiences, but all of that has now been called into question. Hart spent five years interviewing children, parents, and adults as well as looking at the literature of mystics and spiritual teachers from around the world. He discovered that many many people report spiritual experiences that occur at a young age.

Author Alice Walker writes about learning to meditate as an adult. Suddenly, she found herself immersed in a state that was already familiar to her, an experience that had been a part of her childhood. When she was a child, being outside in the fields and woods, she often experienced a sense of merging, of losing her separate identity and becoming part of everything that existed around her. She hadn't experienced that unity for many many years.

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<sup>4</sup> Tobin Hart is author of *The Secret Spiritual World of Children*, (Inner Ocean, 2003). This story was reported at <http://www.aquarius-atlanta.com/jan04/spirit.shtml>

J.D. Salinger wrote an account of a child's insight into divinity in his short story "Teddy."

"I was six when I saw that everything was God, and my hair stood up, and all," ... "It was on a Sunday, I remember. My sister was a tiny child then, and she was drinking her milk, and all of a sudden I saw that she was God and the milk was God. I mean, all she was doing was pouring God into God, if you know what I mean."<sup>5</sup>

Do you remember your inner world as a child? I remember looking for ways to be alone, and loving the silent times after communion during Mass. I remember, after moving to a new town at the age of 12, I found a big rock hidden in the hedgerow behind the field near our house. It was a rock large enough to sit on, and in that quiet space under leaves and branches, I could express to Jesus and Mary all the feelings that I couldn't feel anywhere else. I remember moments of feeling loved by a force larger than human, feeling safe and treasured and known.

Tobin Hart talks about five different kinds of spiritual experiences in children: He describes them in this way: wonder, questioning, wisdom, empathy, and seeing the invisible. Just as our experience as adults are diverse, so children's experiences are not uniform. But a majority of young adults in one study reported significant experiences of awe and wonder occurring during childhood or youth.<sup>6</sup>

Artist and author, Frederick Franck, wrote,

"I was five and lying in high grass. A bee hummed close to my eye and frightened me.

Then the bee started to suck honey and at that very moment I became sun, bee, flower and grass. "Me" had evaporated with my fear.

"Then when I was eleven, on a country road, I saw a snow flurry approach from afar. The first few snowflakes fell around my feet from the dark wintry sky. I saw how some of the flakes melted immediately on impact, others stayed. Again, Me disappeared, melted with snowflakes, became one with road and sky and snowstorm."<sup>7</sup>

"Wonder" is a word we give to a sense of connection to the mysterious, a sense of awe and gratitude and love and beauty. Wonder is at the root of religious experience. What do children need from us, to stay attuned to the natural wonder that comes alive in their hearts? So often, in our society, children are discouraged from the activities that are openings to such encounters. Daydreaming is channeled into paying attention to the lesson, playing outside has been superseded by video games, and mystery is squeezed into multiple choice questions and answers.

I think we can help them, first of all, by making time for them to be outside, making time for them that is unstructured, time to explore and be quiet and be curious. I think we can help them by respecting what they share with us, and sharing our own moments of wonder and mystery. We can offer language to identify experiences that are hard to put into words, the language of

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5 J.D. Salinger, "Teddy," 1954

6 "The Mystical Child," p. 42.

7 In *Fingers Pointing Toward the Sacred*, quoted in *Spiritual Literacy*, ed. Frederic & Mary Ann Brussat, p. 504-5.

gratitude, beauty, appreciation, connection. Most especially, we can refrain from discounting or contradicting their experiences, telling them something is not real, or doesn't exist. We can welcome their experience as a chance to grow and expand and deepen our own spiritual journeys.

Somewhere I heard it said that spirituality is caught, not taught. If that is true, then the most important thing we might do to foster the spiritual awakenings in children, is to attend to spiritual growth in our own lives. I know that my own spirituality as a child was nurtured by witnessing the very deep spiritual expression of my father. Prayer came alive in our house, because it was alive for him. We can only share what we ourselves experience, and when we make time for wonder and awe, when we share moments of beauty and connection with nature, we make room for children to welcome and appreciate their own experiences of this kind.

Children don't see things in the categories in which we see them. They hear things in a different frame. Sometimes it comes out funny. A father was reading Bible stories to his young son. He read, "The man named Lot was warned to take his wife and flee out of the city, but his wife looked back and was turned into a pillar of salt."

His son asked, "What happened to the flea?"<sup>8</sup>

Sometimes, children's questions are as big as life and death. Tobin Hart called it *wondering*—that capacity for asking the big questions—what is life all about, why are we here, what happens when someone dies? Some children are natural philosophers. In our reading today, fourteen year old Jim talks about how surprised he was that his big questions had no place in first grade, when he started going to school. He started feeling like an oddball, because all that the teachers offered were answers, and all that they wanted were for the students to repeat back the right answers.

Children need a place to ask big questions. They need to feel that others are also wondering about those questions.

A teacher asked her Sunday School class to write a note to God.

Johnny wrote, Dear God: Instead of letting people die and having to make new ones, why don't you just keep the ones You have?

Norma wrote, Dear God: Did You mean for the giraffe to look like that or was it an accident?

Many times I have talked to newcomers to our church who shared that when their children started asking about God, they felt at a loss. It was the questions of their children that brought them to church. Some churches are quick to provide a list of answers. I remember some of the questions and answers that I learned in the catechism when I was a young child. *Who made me? God made me. Why did God make me? To know him, love him, and serve him, and be happy with him in heaven.* On the positive side, at least we were introduced to the questions—why am I here? What is it all about?

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8 [http://www.reflections-online.net/en/spiritual\\_jokes\\_4.php](http://www.reflections-online.net/en/spiritual_jokes_4.php)

But, on the negative side, the focus was all about memorization, learning the answers by rote, rather than wondering about them. Too many people who have high level knowledge and understanding in all sorts of fields of study, never progress beyond rote answers in the realm of religion and spirituality. The answers are not satisfying and so they move on. But they haven't had a model for holding on to the questions.

I think children need to know that we wonder about the questions. They need to learn that different peoples have responded with different answers, and they need an opportunity to explore those answers, so they have some options to ponder. But they also need to know what the adults in their lives think and feel about the questions. It is okay, and helpful, to share how we make sense of the meaning of life, and how we get through challenging times. We don't have to have all the answers. But we can't really be comfortable and supportive of children's questions, if we are not willing to enter into the questions ourselves.

As Unitarian Universalists, we encourage each other to wrestle with the big questions of life, to sort out our own answers. We must make room for sharing this process, at all ages.

Another area of spiritual experience that Tobin Hart speaks about is *seeing the invisible*. Children describe experiences of seeing angels who help them, or seeing colorful auras around people. I remember one Halloween, in an effort to counter the stereotypes of ugly old witches, I was telling my six year old step-daughter about the good witches who lived a long time ago and were healers. She told me that she remembered being a witch back then.

Grownups can be tempted to correct what seems like fanciful or imaginary stories of children. We get very attached to objective thinking and scientific reason. But we might do better to be curious about these stories. We might explore with children the emotional qualities of their experiences—are they helpful or scary? How do they make you feel? Is this a monster under the bed, or a helper who makes you feel safe? What do you need right now?

Our culture has pathologized experiences of alternate reality, but in many cultures, these multiple dimensions of reality are acknowledged, honored, and even mapped out. Guardian spirits or angels were considered essential to creativity and wisdom. What might children teach us about regaining our own access to these expanded perceptions?

One day when Jesus was preaching, people brought little children to him, for him to bless them. The disciples turned them away, but Jesus said, "Let the little children alone, and do not stop them coming to me; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs."<sup>9</sup> Children are not saints—they can be selfish and cruel, as well as empathic and kind. But they bring to the world an open heart and perceive everything with open eyes. The Buddhists call it Beginner's Mind.

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9 Matthew 19:13-14.

I hope for our children that we grownups can cultivate Beginners Mind in ourselves, that we are willing to learn from their open eyes. I hope we can listen well, honor their experiences, and help them with putting their experiences into language. I hope we can take the risk to explore our own questions, and share our own experiences of wonder and mystery. Our children offer us a wonderful opportunity. I hope that we might be courageous and playful enough to accept their invitation. Blessed be!

#### CONVERSATION:

I now invite us into a short time of conversation. I invite anyone who wishes to share your observations and questions about the spirituality of children. We won't try to answer the questions, just speak them aloud with each other now, in the hopes of inspiring an ongoing dialogue.

#### CLOSING WORDS

Remember the story:

A child was working on a picture,  
and her father asked her, "What are you drawing?"

A picture of God, she replied.

The father said, But no one knows what God looks like.

They will when I get done!