

INTRODUCTION

THE QUEST TO SUPPORT OUR CHILDREN'S SPIRITUAL LIVES



Maya Angelou has a wonderful poem in her collection *I Shall Not be Moved* that reads,

Midwives and winding sheets
know birthing is hard
and dying is mean,
and living's a trial in between.
Why do we journey, muttering
like rumors among the stars?
Is a dimension lost?
Is it love?

The sentiment expressed and questions posed by this poem characterize the perspectives and musings of many of us. We are afraid that our contemporary culture has lost touch with love and compassion. In varied ways, we are wondering, what is the nature of life in our time and place? Have we lost touch with what might nurture and sustain us in our living? What might that sustaining force be? How do we connect with this force? These are spiritual questions that shape our adult lives because we do not want to be wandering

through the trials of life without a sense of belonging and purpose. And for those of us who live and work with children, these are questions we ask on behalf of our children, hoping to spare them some of our own doubts and misgivings about life and its meaning. Thus we set out on a journey in search of meaning for ourselves and the children we love, looking around us for resources and provisions to guide and sustain us on our way.

A SEARCH FOR RESOURCES TO GUIDE US

Finding resources can be more difficult than we first imagine. Our culture professes to love children, and our businesses market numerous products to parents and children that they claim are necessary for a “good” childhood. We have “Happy Meals” and *Big Comfy Couch*; we have digital cameras for recording each developmental milestone and video devices for spying on the babysitter. We can buy classic children’s books like *The Cat in the Hat*; *Little Women*; *Robinson Crusoe*; and *Good Night, Moon*, and put them on our children’s shelves alongside contemporary favorites like Tomie de Paola’s *Strega Nona* and the *Harry Potter* books. Disney videos abound for our children’s entertainment; they’ve been joined by *Veggie Tales* and the film industry’s myriad “family entertainment” flicks. But few of these products help us or our children explore the bigger questions in life. We know that the happiness promised in a Happy Meal is fleeting, that we can’t remain sequestered in comfortable places, that images captured electronically don’t tell the whole story, that books don’t explain everything we want to know about our lives, and that movies provide more of an escape from reality than a full engagement with the problems we encounter. Our children experience heartache, frustration, and confusion as well. Both we and they need something more in our lives than the stuff and the fantasies that companies want to sell us. We want to find a more nurturing and dependable source of purpose and meaning. And then we want to establish a connection with this source that will endure throughout our lives and the lives of our children.

Sometimes we suspect that our children are more attuned to

such a source than we are ourselves. We applaud their innocence and purity and wish that we could regain their rather charming naïveté. At other times, we deplore their childishness, wondering what monster has taken over our child's body as we attempt to cope with tantrums, biting, stubborn defiance, and other commonplace childhood events. Life today is such that we want our children to be both innocent and sophisticated, both compassionate and competitive. We know that society judges children primarily by their cognitive abilities. We agree, at least in part, with society's intense focus on containing and channeling children's energies and interests into a productive adult life. We tend to assume, because it is what we've been taught, that childhood today is a training period for "real" life and that children's development is the most important purpose of parenting and teaching children. But training for some future life as an adult is not necessarily the primary purpose of childhood, although it is a very real aspect of children's lives.

If we ask ourselves whether we've lost touch with something that might nurture and sustain human lives, we have an opportunity to shift our thinking away from developmental models of adult-child interactions to models of nurture and sustenance that value both the moment and children as they are in the moment. We can imagine creating places and ways for children to encounter that which sustains their living, however we might define it. We can embark on a spiritual journey with children, both teaching them and learning from them along the way.

Anne Lamott has a chapter in her book *Traveling Mercies* titled, "Why I Make Sam Go to Church." Sam is Lamott's son, and he is less than enthusiastic about churchgoing. But Lamott writes that she still requires him to go because

I want to give him what I found in the world, which is to say, a path and a little light to see by. Most of the people I know who have what I want—which is to say, purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, joy—are people with a deep sense of spirituality. They are people in community, who pray, or practice their faith; they are Buddhists, Jews,

Christians—people banding together to work on themselves and for human rights. They follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their own candle; they are part of something beautiful.

Anne Lamott makes a point that I think is crucial to our understanding of children and spirituality. Our spiritual lives are something we discover and explore as part of a community of faithful people seeking to act in ways consistent with their values. This community can be as small as a household or as large as the major religious traditions of the world. But whatever its size, it is essential to our children's spiritual formation and their acquisition of a language and rituals that help them to identify and express their values and beliefs.

For over a decade, I have been talking with parents and other adults about what they hope for children and children's spirituality. As I've listened to participants in my research projects, parenting workshops, and congregations, these are some of the dreams I've heard expressed:

“Maybe the most important thing [for children] is acceptance for who you are.”

Children need something “to fall back on” in difficult times.

“I want my kids to get positive role models and positive influences from other ‘good’ kids. I want them to learn [in church] the things they don't get in school: how to be a good person, a caring person, and to treat others with respect—to learn to discern who are good kids to play with and who to avoid.”

Children need “experience in leadership.”

Give children “a good place to hang out”—one that is safe and free of negative influences.

Adults need to provide “a broad sense of religion.”

Children should have a “tremendous sense of community” that provides a “feeling of extended family.”

Children need socialization in “basic principles,” for example, fairness, acceptance, equal opportunity.

These are good dreams for children. They point to the fact that one of the primary reasons parents bring their children to churches and synagogues is that we hope the connection with a faith community will provide something that is missing from other arenas of childhood. Whether we name this missing part “morals” or “safety” or “acceptance,” we are seeking something that will take our children beyond the confines of culture into a more spiritual realm where love, compassion, and peace hold greater sway than hate, disregard, and violence.

I want to challenge us, however, to dream bigger dreams than these—to dream that

- Our children will not only discover a safe place to belong but a community that challenges them to discern their purpose and vocation in life as children of God.
- Our children will learn how to resist those aspects of our American culture that have already disappointed us with their empty promises and stress-inducing side effects.
- We, alongside our children, might work together toward understanding how we are to live our lives as spiritual beings.

Some developmental “experts” argue that children who are younger than twelve years old are too young to engage in the spiritual life in any meaningful way. These folks encourage parents and religious educators to focus on promoting trust relationships, building self-esteem, and laying foundations for later beliefs. For them, the primary goal of children’s spiritual formation is keeping children entertained with religious activities until they are old enough to engage in real religious practices. They tend to define “true spirituality” as adhering to a particular set of beliefs and values or a specific way of making decisions. Wonder, experiential interpretations, and intuitively grasped insights into the mystery of God are then given little value, compared to a proper religious understanding of the meaning of life.

Although I do not want to dismiss the value of religious understanding as one aspect of spirituality, I think this perspective fails to

take account of the full nature of the spiritual life. To seek after and be sought by God is a lifelong process of being in relationship with a mystery much bigger than our minds can grasp, even with the maturity of adulthood. We can never stop asking—or encouraging our children to ask—where and how we might share in the loving relationship that we, and God, long for.

Over twenty-five years ago, religious educator John Westerhoff posed a question that captured the concern of many people. He asked, in a book by the same title, “Will our children have faith?” His answer, put succinctly, was that children will have faith if the adults in their lives accompany them on their spiritual journey, providing children with opportunities to experience the life of faith at home and in the religious community. Westerhoff’s book was reissued in the year 2000, in part because his question continues to be a concern of parents and religious communities. We want our children’s lives to be meaningful, and we are afraid there is not much in the twenty-first century that a child can have faith in. We may have lost faith ourselves and not know where to find it again. Thus it is time for us to risk embarking on a spiritual quest with our children, seeking faithfulness together.

CONTENTS OF THIS BOOK

The following chapters serve as guides for this spiritual quest. Chapter One suggests that we begin our quest with an exploration of the concept of faith: what it is, what it isn’t, and how even very young children have it. This chapter also suggests that we cannot talk about faith without considering six other concepts dear to the hearts of most parents and adults who work with children: belonging, giftedness, thanksgiving, hospitality, understanding, and hope. We will look at the ways in which children’s physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development affect their expressions of faith and their spiritual awareness. By focusing on the *capabilities* of children at various ages, we will discover how we can better nurture and support their spiritual formation.

Chapter Two focuses on how we can create a spiritual world for children to inhabit at home and in the religious community. With the omnipresence of images like Big Bird, Mickey Mouse, and Winnie-the-Pooh in our general culture, we are well aware of the power that imaginary commercial worlds can have for children. This chapter explores ways in which we can intentionally create a religious culture for children that is peopled with religious characters, religious symbols, and religious language so that they incorporate the religious into their lives as normal and desirable. It suggests ways in which parents and religious educators can help children inhabit the two worlds of American culture and religious culture simultaneously, much as immigrant families have learned to do in order to preserve their ethnic culture in a new land.

Chapter Three guides us into the art of religious storytelling. We begin to explore ways in which we can help children hear and speak aloud the faith story and their own stories so that these narratives become intertwined in children's lives. This chapter also includes a discussion of different types of storytelling and storybooks, suggesting ways each type might contribute to spiritual formation.

Chapter Four is a guide to the adventure of learning a second language, that is, the language of the religious tradition with which one has chosen to affiliate. The process of becoming fluent in the language of spirituality is similar to the process one follows for learning any language. This chapter helps make the connections between general theories of language acquisition and literacy and the delightful task of learning to speak, "read," and understand the language of the religious life. Its goal is to guide us into spiritual bilingualism.

Having dwelt for two chapters in the good company of words and stories, we move to Chapter Five, which invites us to explore the value of silence and stillness for our own and our children's spiritual formation. Conventional wisdom claims that children cannot sit still or focus their attention for more than a few minutes, but children are capable of more than we typically give them credit for. This chapter distinguishes between the cultural admonishment that children be quiet and the purposeful use of silence as a way to listen to God. It explores the ancient art of lament as a means of connecting children's

daily experiences with the promises of God and provides information about cultivating a variety of prayer forms.

Also contrary to popular belief is the notion that children can encounter abstract ideas about God, faith, and religious experience and order them in positive ways that meet their current spiritual needs. Chapter Six explores how children make sense of common religious concepts. It encourages the adoption of a spiritually formative process of asking questions and receiving answers in order to promote a thoughtful religious curiosity in children. It also offers examples of how children's theological interpretations of central religious stories and of the world change as they develop.

Chapter Seven challenges the assumption that children's faithfulness should be equated with well-mannered obedience to parents and other adults. It explores the many ways in which children are capable of reaching out to others with compassion and service. It provides ideas for nurturing children's respect and care for others and suggests ways we can support children in the development of a dynamic spiritual life characterized by a balanced movement between inward reflection and outward service.

The concluding chapter celebrates the ways in which experiences of religious community can powerfully shape children's lives and the lives of adults as well. It portrays faith communities as partners in the parental quest to nurture children's spiritual lives and suggests characteristics that parents should look for in a congregation when they decide to join a religious community. It advocates the intentional inclusion of children in the life of the faith community and urges familial commitment to full participation in the congregation of their choice.

Throughout the book are stories and examples taken from my own experience as a parent, as well as my work with children, parents, and religious educators as a community speaker and parish pastor for eleven years; my extensive research with congregational children's ministries is also reflected. These stories and examples are meant to be signposts along the way of our spiritual quest. They tell us something about where children dwell in the spiritual landscape, remind us of how others have traveled the road before us, and point

us toward new horizons of thinking. They remind us that nurturing children's spiritual lives is not a theoretical discussion but an aspect of our very concrete lives as parents and educators of children. And they allow us to be taught by the voices and actions of the very ones whose young lives have motivated us to read (and write) this book.