The Mystical Child

Glimpsing the Spiritual World of Children

Tobin Hart

While children may not be able to articulate a moment of wonder or a religious concept, their presence — their mode of being in the world — may be distinctly spiritual.

Traditionally, developmental theory has largely ignored or dismissed the idea that children have genuine spiritual experiences and capacities (Goldman 1964; Wilber 1996). Children have generally been seen as having insufficient intellectual growth to manifest anything that might be understood as meaningfully reflective and/or spiritual. For example, even contemporary transpersonal theorists like Wilber (1996, 2) describe children's mode of thinking and being as merely "instinctual, impulsive, libidinous, id-ish, animal, apelike." Assumptions about children's capacities remain guided by Piaget's (1968) stage model of cognitive development, in which young children are viewed as largely incapable of abstract or hypothetical thinking. Tied to this understanding of cognition, there has been a prevalent presupposition that genuine spirituality requires adult abstract thinking and language ability as exhibited in the higher stages of adolescence and adulthood (for a discussion see e.g., Dillon 2000). Most researchers have, therefore, concluded that children, especially pre-adolescents, do not, and cannot, have a genuine spiritual life.

In addition, until quite recently research on childhood spirituality has typically equated spirituality with "God talk"—how children think and talk about God or other religious concepts (e.g., Heller 1986; Tamminen 1991; Coles 1992). Through the imposition of such cognitive and religious standards, children's spiritual expressions often go unrecognized. However, children's spirituality may exist apart from adult rational and linguistic conceptions and beyond religious knowledge. While they may not be able to articulate a moment of wonder or conceptualize a religious concept, their *presence*—their mode of being in the world—may be distinctly spiritual. As

TOBIN HART, PH.D., serves as associate professor of psychology at the State University of West Georgia. He is co-founder and Chairman of the Board of Directors of the ChildSpirit Institute <www.childspirit.net> a nonprofit educational and research hub sponsoring the North Amercian Conference on Children's Spirituality. His e-mail address is <Thart@westga.edu>.

Gordon Allport (1955, 101) suggested, "the religion of childhood may be of a very special order."

Some theorists and educators have recognized children's more immediate, intuitive knowing as an innate source for character and spiritual growth (Richter 1887; Froebel cited in Lilley 1967; Steiner 1965). Rather than focusing on religious knowledge, adherence, or thinking and language capacity, William James (1936) understood spirituality as a more direct and personal experience of divinity—what he referred to as *personal religion* as opposed to *institutional religion*. Personal religion may emerge as a sense of interconnection with the cosmos, a revelatory insight, or a sense of a life force. These phenomena emerge as ways of being-in-the-world, intuitive epistemic styles, and types of immediate, ontologically shifting awareness or perception that may take place within or outside the context of religion (see e. g., Hart, Nelson, Puhakka 2000). Currently, there is a growing body of evidence documenting these kinds of spiritual experiences and capacities in childhood (Armstrong 1985; Hart 2003; Hay and Nye 1998; Hoffman 1992; Piechowski 2001; Robinson 1978; Robinson 1983).

Due to the legal separation of church and state the word *spiritual* is often considered out of bounds in public education. Yet I want to make a distinction between religion and spirituality. *Institutionalized religion*, as William James referred to it, is an approach to spiritual growth formed around doctrines, rituals, and standards of behavior. Spirituality (what James called *personal religion*) is the very personal and intimate experience of divinity. It is about who we are and how we know the world and this is integral to an education for meaning, social justice, character, depth, and wisdom. This consideration of children's spirituality is not about religious values, but it is purely a question of who children are and how they know—fair game for secular education. Said another way, this is about children's *world-presence*, their way of being-in-the-world, not about a worldview that is imposed upon them. This is an epistemic and ontological consideration, not necessarily a religious one. And ultimately how and what we teach our children depends, in part, on our presuppositions about who children are and what they are capable of. If we presume them to be largely libidinous, amoral or simply cognitively primitive, educational practice, not to mention parenting and religion, will reflect this. If on the other hand, we recognize them as having a "spiritual intelligence," how might our perspective and our practice be changed?

Based on five years of research (including interviews with children and families, a statistical survey of recalled childhood spiritual experience, the examination of case studies and the various research of others, as well as autobiographical accounts of historic figures) I will highlight five types of general spiritual capacities: Wisdom, Wonder, Wondering, Between You and Me, and Seeing the Invisible that I have observed in young people. (A more extensive exploration can be found in Hart 2003). My hope for this is that we begin to recognize the innate spiritual range and depth of children and then reconsider what education might be.

Wisdom

The spiritual traditions from around the world are also referred to as the wisdom traditions. In a spiritual life, wisdom seems to be something to both strive for and to use to reach toward the goal. We might reasonably assume that wisdom comes only with a great deal of experience, reserved for elders or for a rare few. However, in spite of their naïveté in the ways of the world, children often show a remarkable capacity for cutting to the heart of a matter, for accessing profound insight and acting wisely.

While the meaning of wisdom is difficult to pin down precisely, we can take a moment to consider it. Aquinas suggested that wisdom involves looking at things from a greater height and involves *gnome*, or the ability to see *through* things (Gilby 1967). Ralph Waldo Emerson captures a further dimension of wisdom in describing it as a blend of the perception of what is true with the moral sentiment of what is right (Sealts 1992, 257). The courageous and very risky acts of people like Gandhi, Jesus of Nazareth, and Martin Luther King imply that wise action moves beyond self-interest. We would not say that their actions were "smart," but they were deeply wise. Finally, wisdom is distinguished from bare intellect especially by its integration of the heart. Remarkably, at times even young children seem to exhibit these qualities.

Early in their new preschool program a three-year-old boy, who was having trouble fitting in, bit Chessie, also three, on the arm. She was naturally upset and was then very vigilant about this boy's whereabouts for the rest of the day. The next day, when he was sneaking up behind her and was just about to pounce, she spun around, pointed her finger at him, and shouted, "No!" like a parent. He stopped dead in his tracks and then moved away, leaving her alone for the remainder of the day.

The next day, he again tried to sneak up on her. Once again, Chessie spun around just as he was about to strike. He stood up straight and froze. She then stepped up and gave him a big hug. From that day on he never sneaked up on her. She made sure he wasn't left out during games or other activities and made certain that he had someone to sit next to during a video or story. As her teacher said, "She seemed to know exactly what this boy needed and took care of him while still setting limits."

As Chessie demonstrates, wisdom is not just about what we know, but about how we live, how we embody knowledge and compassion in our lives and, as Emerson said, blend a sense of what is true with what is right. While this is often the daily challenge played out over the course of our lives, some children seem to express this remarkably well.

Wisdom does not come from amassing bits of information; it is not a thing that's accumulated, not an *entity*. Instead it is an *activity* of knowing that takes us deep into the stream of consciousness, as William James named it. This is often described as involving an intuitive process of knowing. In some moments children find remarkable insight as they access this contemplative awareness that complements the rational and sensory.

Deep into one Sunday afternoon Haley, nine at the time, had a report to write for her class on a significant black figure in history. She had chosen Mahalia Jackson, the great gospel singer who had been a powerful voice for civil rights during her lifetime. Over the previous two weeks, Haley had found a book and downloaded a couple of brief one-page articles from the Internet on the singer's life. She was now finishing typing this report. However, she was not much of a typist, and so this was an arduous process.

As I walked into the room where she was working, it was easy to feel the tension and imagine her teeth grinding away as she pecked with a single finger at the keyboard. She had worked pretty hard on the paper and done a respectable job so far. Most importantly, she seemed to have learned a few things about Mahalia's life and about writing a paper. But as time and patience were running thin, she had reached the point that her goal was simply to finish the thing, which was due the next morning. Frustration was setting in, and she was still in need of a conclusion and desperately in need of a shift in mood. She took a break upstairs in her bedroom.

Fifteen or twenty minutes later, she hopped downstairs. "How ya' doing?" I asked. She said, "Good—I just saw Mahalia." "You did?" I said, not sure what to expect. "I was kinda' surprised that I actually saw her and how easy it was to find her," she announced. She then started to tell me about what Mahalia had said to her. I stopped her in midsentence and quickly grabbed pen and paper so I could take dictation. She then proceeded to tell me a wide range of very subtle and personal information about Mahalia Jackson that I could not find in the materials she had read. I checked.

After nearly ten minutes of relaying this rich material, Haley said that Mahalia wanted to tell her a "main thing" about her life. "Mahalia said that her life was filled with three things: joy, happiness, and fear. She felt joy that black people *and* white people were giving her a lot of attention. She felt happy that she was able to do just what she wanted to do: sing her [gospel] music and sing about love and God. She also said that she was afraid—afraid because she was getting so popular and helping black people and white people to come together that some people would not like it and might try to hurt her." These specific ideas were not at all explicit in the materials she had read. But they seemed to capture Mahalia Jackson's life with riveting clarity and directness.

After I finished taking dictation, Haley added some of this information as a conclusion to her report. She suddenly had a new sense of intimacy and excitement for this woman and for her research paper. Because of her very personal "chat," she now felt like she really knew Mahalia firsthand. This was a very different sensation than she had had just thirty

minutes earlier. A project that had been sliding toward drudgery now became one of inspiration, especially fitting for the nature of Mahalia Jackson's life, whose voice and presence inspired so many.

I asked Haley how she'd gotten in touch with Mahalia. She said, "It was easy; I just got relaxed on my bed ... then, in my mind, I went to <www.mahaliajackson.com> and there she was standing right in front of me. We talked and she told me about her life."

Did Haley meet with the consciousness of Mahalia Jackson? Was this simply a nice example of her creative imagination at work or the value of taking a break in order to clarify and consolidate learning? It is hard to say; but what I continue to hear from children is that they have an ability to dip into the stream of consciousness and find insight and clarity. However we make sense of this, it was clear that she found a source of wise insight in a very intimate fashion (For a further discussion of this point, see Hart 2003.).

Just how unusual is this way of knowing? While there has been increasing evidence that children have direct and profound spiritual experiences, there has been no research as to whether this describes a few children or is a more widespread phenomenon. Naturally, this is difficult question to answer definitively, but a colleague and I conducted a survey based on phenomenological descriptions of a variety of spiritual experiences with 453 adults. These were primarily young adults enrolled in a variety of university introductory psychology courses taught by different instructors at my home university. The results suggest that the recollections of childhood spiritual moments are quite common. By itself this may have profound implications for our developmental assumptions. Related to the seemingly unusual experiences described above and in response to the question, "Have you ever had the experience of receiving guidance from some source that is not part of our usual physical world?" 61% answered affirmatively and 85% of those indicated that this occurred before the age of 18. Asked the question: "Have you ever found yourself knowing and/or saying something that seemed to come through you, rather than from you, expressing a wisdom you don't feel you usually have?" 54% said they had and of those, 80% indicated that this occurred in childhood and or youth (Nelson and Hart 2003; in press). I will refer to different parts of this study throughout this paper to provide some approximation of how common various phenomena may be.

Wonder

Childhood is a time of wonder and awe. The world is sensed through fresh eyes and ears. We hear wonder in the squeal of joy during a first game of peek-a-boo, in the dropped jaw and wide eyes in seeing an elephant up close, or in the curl of a smile in discovering a new favorite food. As adults, we taste wonder in moments when we are stopped by the color of a perfect sky, or maybe as we behold a child speaking, walking, or reading for the first time.

By wonder I mean a constellation of experiences that can involve feelings of awe, connection, joy, insight and a deep sense of reverence and love. It is an opening and acceleration of consciousness that occurs that can serve as a kind of nourishment for the soul. For children (and adults) sometimes these moments open so far and so deep that we find the depths of unity and ecstasy—the *mysterium tremendum.*

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. "Somehow I felt completely overwhelmed, like I had been witnessed grace," Mark said.

The reports from contemporary children like Miranda are often indistinguishable from those of the great mystics of the world. These moments can catalyze spiritual development, as it did for a remarkable number of historic figures, like Catherine of Siena who had her most formative revelation of Jesus at six years old (Vineis 1960), Hildegard von Bingen who at age three, "saw so great a brightness that my soul trembled" (Bowie and Davies 1990, 20) and Ramakrishna who, looking up when he was six, saw the flight of white cranes passing across the dark cloud. In this moment he was completely overwhelmed, "seeing light, feeling joy, and experiencing the upsurge of a great current in one's chest, like the bursting of a rocket. Since that day, I have been a different [person]" (Nikhilananda 1970, 3-4). These wondrous moments provided a touchstone and a beacon for the spiritual life that was to come.

Mechanism, materialism, modernism and their outgrowth, standardized multiple-choice testing, tend to "desacralize" the world, leaving it as inert matter for our manipulation. Wonder helps us recognize the universe as sacred and alive in our midst.

Karen remembers a powerful moment in her own secret place.

> I was fifteen, sitting in silence in my "special spot" outside a short walk from my family's house. I was just sort of tuning in to nature, the little birds and insects here and there. Then suddenly I had this experience of everything being connected. Both in the sense of just part of the same, but then, what was most amazing to me was there was also a sense of everything being equal–the majestic mountain, the blade of grass, and me.

In our study of recalled childhood experiences, nearly 80% of young adults said they sometimes feel a sense of awe and wonderment inspired by the immediate world around them and of those, 85% reported that their first occurrence was before the age of eighteen with 12% indicating their first occurrence prior to 6 years old, 27% between 6 and 12 and 46% between 12 and less than 18 years old. In addition, 39% indicated that they had had a moment of unitive connection ("Have you ever had an experience in which you perceived that all was really connected together as one?") and of those, 70% said it occurred at least once in childhood or youth (Nelson and Hart 2003; in press). Maslow (1971; 1983) referred to powerful moments like these as "peak experiences." The most common "trigger" for peak or unitive moments appears to be nature (Underhill 1961). The natural world remains surprising, mysterious, and profoundly alive; in some equally mysterious way it invites us into a resonance with it.

Powerful moments of wonder can shape a worldview and even the course of one's life. While I have offered somewhat dramatic examples of discrete moments, it may be the everyday way of being and knowing that describes childhood wonder best. Everyday events—a bird's song, a cup of tea, a great game of catch, a loving hug—become extraordinary when we fall deeply into them and simultaneously into that place from which our life flows. This moves us from living in front of things to living with them. And the greatest significance is not in how small or large a moment is, but in how those moments get walked out into our lives. For example, how does a flash of interconnection translate into character and compassion through a life?

A few hours in the surf may feel like a few seconds when we are absorbed in the "eternal now," as theologian Paul Tillich (1957) called it. The capacity for being lost in the moment—absorption—is a capacity that is natural for children and appears inviting of the mystical moment. Indeed, absorption appears significantly correlated with ecstasy and states of flow (Irwin 1985; Nelson 1989; Nelson and Hart 2003).

Wonder and awe not only describe a spiritual *experience* but also a spiritual *attitude*. In Zen Buddhism, this attitude or way of seeing is called *Beginner's Mind*. It means being open to the world, appreciating and meeting it with fresh eyes—just watching it (and ourselves) without preset expectations or categories. In what may be a similar vein, the Bible tells us that: "unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:2). The same hint is offered in Taoism, whose founder's name, Lao-Tze, means "old child." I think it is safe to conclude that this does not mean

childish, but instead childlike and full of wonder and openness, that allows one to see in a more immediate, open, and less categorical fashion.

Yet in a fast-paced, modernist culture and classroom we often discourage contemplative absorption that may appear as daydreaming or idleness (see Hart 2004); it is inconvenient to curriculum agendas. We have an innate capacity and even a need for wonder, but our society, for a variety of reasons orbiting around fear and a desire for control, tends to misunderstand and therefore represses wonder, even in children. In schools, for example, we are not interested in mystery but in measurable certainty and so activities direct children away from wonder, absorption, and depth toward more superficial and predictable activities. The daydreamer is made to pay attention; giggles have little place in a typical classroom; emphasis on material possessions overwhelms mystery; a demand for control closes off openness; fast-food style stimulation (TV, video games, etc.) overwhelms stillness. A child in the midst of wonder is often a source of concern to well-meaning adults—"Are they on drugs?" "Do they have some attention problem?"— and they may be disruptive to a tight schedule and a preset worldview. The vision may be denied and misunderstood, becoming a source of pain and shame for a child ("Nobody else is saying anything like this; I must be weird"). Children often learn that in order to fit in they have to shut down and in time they may come to doubt their own knowing capacity.

Abraham Heschel (1972, 74, 75) reminds us that wonder may be a centerpoint to our deepest learning and longing. He writes:

> Awe enables us to perceive in the world intimations of the divine, to sense in small things the beginning of infinite significance ... to feel the rush of the passing of the stillness of the eternal.... The beginning of awe is wonder, and the beginning of wisdom is awe."

Between You and Me

"Spirit is not *in* the I but *between* the I and you. It is not like the blood that circulates in you, but like the air in which you breathe," wrote theologian Martin Buber (1958, 89). This is a *relational* understanding of spirituality in which the spiritual is lived out at the intersection of our lives; in the "between," as Buber described it. This is about how we treat and how we know one another. Do we know the other as an object to possess or manipulate, or as someone or something to understand, and appreciate?

What we meet—a tree, our neighbor, a book, the day in front of us—may not be as important as *how* we meet it. While modern conceptions generally locate "knowing" in the head, sacred traditions identify the most essential knowing with the heart. For example, the Chinese word *hsin* is often translated as "mind" but includes both mind and heart. Heart knowing is recognized as the eye of the Tao in Chinese philosophy. Plato called it the eye of the soul (Smith 1993). And the power of the heart is identified as "south" on the Native American medicine wheel (Storm 1972). Relational spirituality is about the kind of knowing that is open to communion, connection, community, and compassion. The spirit is brought to life in a genuine and open meeting, and Buber tells us that ultimately, "all real living *is* meeting" (Buber 1958, 11).

There are two general aspects of relational spirituality that children demonstrate. The first, empathy, can lead to the second, compassion.

Empathy has been described as the base of moral development (Hoffman 1990), and it may even be the trait that makes us most human (Azar 1997). Children have generally been assumed to be incapable of genuine empathy, or *feeling into* another, as the German origin of the word translates. There is confusion over the process by which empathy comes about because what is being described is a range of phenomena, not a single event, that are dependent on the process of knowing. Traditionally, empathy is explained as the result of a combination of cognitive perspective taking ("I can imagine myself in your shoes.") and feeling sensitivity. But empathy is often, especially in its most direct expression, an intuitive process, one akin to sympathetic resonance whereby one seems to pick up the feeling or bodily sensation of another (Hart 2000). It is this kind of direct deep empathic connection that many children are entirely capable of.

One woman explains how complicating this way of knowing can be for learning in a classroom:

> School was difficult for me because I tended to be unconsciously focused on what people were feeling. I had this tremendous empathy for someone who was having a hard time, and in the midst of feeling, I would miss the math lesson. I remember my fifth-grade teacher. I would just commune with her as I was sitting at my desk and she was at the blackboard. I would be staring at her, as all the other kids were, and then I would go into this other dimension where I would know what was going on inside of her and inside her life. It really is that feeling of moving into the energy, feeling oneness. But of course I was missing the math lesson.

What would we assume if we have a student or a child who seems spacey like this? Children who perceive in this way may be viewed as slow learners, autistic, attention disordered, on drugs, or given all sorts of other labels because they have not learned a less feeling-oriented way of seeing the world.

Young people have varying proficiency with any skill or ability: Some are remarkably empathic, others seem far less so. However, from our initial survey results it appears that the general phenomenon may be quite common. In answer to the question, "Do you ever feel that at times you know people's thoughts/feelings unusually accurately without being told or shown in any direct, physical way?" 70% in our survey indicated they had. 31% indicated the first occurrence was before twelve years old and 48% said their first recalled occurrence was between 12 and 17 years old (Nelson and Hart 2003; in press).

This way of knowing is not limited to human relationships. Nobel laureate Barbara McClintock described a less detached empiricism, one in which she gained "a feeling for the organism,"—she explored genetics through working with corn plants—that required "the openness to let it come to you" (quoted in Keller 1983, 198). The Other is no longer separate but becomes part of our world and ourselves in a profoundly intimate way and this may result in a recognition of interconnection or what Buber (1958) referred to as a shift from an *I-It* relationship to one of *I and Thou*.

Even small children can feel concern and care for a dead squirrel along the roadway, a dying tree, nature as a whole, or even for their difficult teacher as the following event demonstrates. "I had been having a difficult day and I must have shown it," Kathy, a kindergarten teacher related.

> I was frustrated and snapping at my kindergarten class in a way that felt justified at the time, but seems so utterly embarrassing, even cruel, when you look back on it. Basically I had "lost it" and was taking it out on them. I had insisted that the students be quiet, stay in their seats, and put their heads on their desks.
>
> I was sitting at my desk writing something when the tip snapped off my pencil—no doubt I was pressing pretty hard in my frustration. As I continued to fume, Jamie, risking more of my wrath, raised his head off his desk, got up from his seat, and walked over to my desk. "Here," he said, holding out his hand, "you can take my pencil. We know you're having a hard day." He put the pencil down in front of me, then turned around and walked back to his seat; he put his head back down. My frustration melted, and I felt pretty ashamed of my anger toward these "selfish" kids and grateful for his kindness and his courage. Kids can be so provoking, but here was Jamie offering me this perfect gift.

Wondering

While some children seem prone to moments of wonder or empathic connection, others seem like natural philosophers. Much to our amazement, even some very small children wonder about the big questions. They ask about life and meaning, knowing and knowledge, truth and justice, reality and death. These big questions are precisely what philosophy and religion have attempted to address. For many people the spiritual quest is focused and explored through pondering, puzzling over, and playing with such questions. As we marvel at a starry night or consider some injustice, a yearning to know more may start to germinate inside us, growing into profound questions and a life of thoughtful seeking. For individuals like Gandhi, who was famished for truth even as a child, entertaining the big questions is a way to enter a dialogue with mystery, with the spiritual (Erickson 1969).

Piaget concluded that early on a child lacks the ability to reason and reflect with any degree of sophistication (Piaget 1977). His work has, of course, been hugely influential in shaping how educators view children. However, there is increasing evidence that he was both right and quite wrong or, at least, incomplete. It does appear that children do go through cognitive development in stages. But these stages are general and broad, and represent merely a rough sketch. When we look a little closer, we can find exceptions to Piaget's model. Even young children have shown a capacity for thoughtful consideration of the big questions (metaphysics), inquiring about proof and the source of knowledge (epistemology); they have been successfully taught reasoning (logic), and to question values (ethics) and reflect on their own identity in the world (e.g., see Matthews 1980).

Piaget recognized that young children have an intuitive capacity, but did not see the power in it. Children may grasp a key insight or a broad understanding that captures the heart of an issue. They may not be able to explain in adult logic and language, but they sometimes comprehend deeply. As children grow, both the developing ego and societal expectations of how we *should* think become more pronounced; the intuitive function sometimes gets drowned out by ego-generated analysis and repressed by social norms. However, this is not a developmental necessity as some have suggested (e.g., Washburn 1995; Wilber 2000). So many of the children I have seen have kept their intuitive function alive and well even while developing sound analytic capacity and healthy ego structure. I believe fostering this balance is a critical challenge for parents and teachers interested in nourishing children's full potential.

Children's openness, vulnerability, and tolerance for mystery enable them to entertain perplexing and paradoxical questions. Philosopher Gareth Matthews (1980, 85) has said that children may be especially good at philosophy because they have "fresh eyes and ears for perplexity and incongruity . . . and a [high] degree of candor and spontaneity." Especially important to the consideration of spirituality, they can ponder what theologian Paul Tillich (1957) called "ultimate concerns": "Why are we here?" "What is life all about?" Or as my youngest daughter asked the other day, "Where did the first people come from?" But until this capacity for deep and radical questioning is more fully acknowledged it will be difficult for these natural philosophers to be nourished by their questions, at least in schools.

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 teacher 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.*

Questioning, whether for little children or accomplished scientists, is fundamental. If you are around young children, you may be familiar with ceaseless questioning, Why? Why? Why?—or maybe with children who pose those difficult questions that defy easy answers. At six, Julian asked, "What are heaven and hell?" and "What about the devil? Is it real?" He not only ponders how to get his little brother to leave him alone, but also earnestly puzzles over infinity, zero, God, and death. Radical questioning or pondering like this focuses priorities and provides spiritual nourishment and direction.

But we have come to expect convenient answers at the cost of entertaining rich questions. In schools, one right answer, often on a multiple-choice test, determines value, worth, and truth. Schools do not lack answers; too often they lack depth. Depth is associated more with asking good questions than

with having all the answers. Researcher Patricia Arlin (1990) has said wisdom is the capacity not so much for problem solving as for *problem finding*. Children have a remarkable capacity for identifying problems that we may have overlooked or taken for granted as adults. Four-year-old Dan wondered, "How did everything begin? Just tell me—is there a God?" Julian, five, asked, "Why are there more black people in jail?"

As a parent, friend, or teacher, what do we do when a child asks genuine questions? I remember how much I wanted the truth as a child. If my questions were dismissed or the answers lacked substance or vitality, it was like pouring water on a fire—on *my* fire. I rarely found playful answers lacking substance or vitality though. Sometimes the goofy way of looking at something led to some breakthrough.

And I don't mean that I expected the ultimate truth, although I'm sure I wanted that, but the truth of an honest answer that was thoughtful and genuine. Without deep responses, I remember feeling like I was being taught to lie or at least to live on the surface. But answers that had substance kept the questions alive. Even when I left more perplexed, with even more questions, it felt like I was really living. The tidy answers flattened the world. Honest answers, including and especially "I'm not sure; what do you think?" are nourishing.

Seeing the Invisible

We know the world is more than meets the eye. Much to our surprise, children often have a multi-dimensional awareness. My youngest daughter sees shapes and colors around people and objects. A boy tells us that an angel comforts him before he enters surgery. A young child says she remembers her "other family" from when she "lived before." A boy falls unharmed from a three-story window and tells about being caught by "those guys dressed in gold."

There are numerous maps of a multidimensional universe from both ancient and contemporary wisdom traditions that share commonalities. For example, ancient Kabbalistic writings contend that everything existing in our physical world originates in the nonphysical realm of the Sfirot. According to *The Zohar*, both the individual and the universe as a whole are composed of ten dimensions, the ten Sfirot, meaning "ten emanations" of light. Think of waves of light emanating out from a concentrated center— "a never-to-be-exhausted fountain of light" (Scholem 1995, 79). Each of these waves represents a different dimension or level of consciousness or reality.

Some traditions map this multidimensionality in terms of different subtle energy "bodies," or levels, that make up an individual and, simultaneously, the universe. Imagine finer and finer sheaths of energy surrounding our physical form. The "etheric", for example, represents the subtle energy that is recognized as the life force, or *chi* in Chinese medicine and philosophy, and is closely tied to the physical body (Gerber 1988). The levels beyond this represent nonspace, nontime dimensions of existence, akin or at least analogous to the hyperspace of superstring theory. For example, the "astral" level represents disembodied (i.e., not confined to the physical body) conscious, one in which emotions, for example, have their own reality and may actually be perceived as shapes and colors.

We can image that our awareness makes its way *between* dimensions through a kind of wormhole of consciousness that may be entered spontaneously, in altered states like sleep, or more intentionally through such practices as meditation. For example, during out-of-body and near-death experiences, as well as Dreamtime, as Aboriginals call it, consciousness leaves the dominant magnetic pull of the physical body and awareness opens in another dimension.

So when I use the term *seeing the invisible* I mean that in some way many children are tuning into these more subtle levels of reality as they apparently perceive the multidimensional universe.

Six-year-old Meg, announced to a visitor that she "saw colors around" the visitor. After some conversation about the colors and shapes that she saw, the visitor asked, "How do you see it?" "I see it inside here," Meg said, as she pointed to the center of her forehead. "You don't see it with your eyes?" the visitor asked. "Not really. I see it from my inside." Meg describes was an "inner" sense that appears as a parallel perceptual system to physical sight.

Michael was in second grade and had had a difficult childhood so far. He had been deprived and

abused as a young child, and his aunt and uncle were now raising him. He was still struggling in school, but he had come a long way. One day, very sheepishly and in private, he told his teacher, Mrs. White, about an angel that came to visit him regularly. His teacher said that it was easy to tell by his voice and his demeanor that this was very important and very real to him. Almost daily for several weeks, he would mention that he would see this angel. One day he spontaneously blurted out,

> "Look, Mrs. White, there's that angel!" He was staring outside. We had huge windows, floor to ceiling, in our classroom. I said, "Michael, can you describe him to me?" Still looking out the windows, he looked down at the ground and then he looked up—way up, like twelve feet high. Michael said, "He has a sword in his hand, he is whitish, he's strong." He added a moment later, "He makes me feel safe."

Diagnosable delusion? Fantasy compensation? Mere attention getting? Or spiritual sustenance and comfort? An objective measure is really quite impossible. While such moments are often dismissed or pathologized in contemporary materialist culture, a multidimensional universe makes room for such possibilities. The ancients might have understood Michael's visitor as his *genius*, which meant a guardian spirit. In the Middle Ages, the genius came to be known as a guardian angel (Liester 1996, 1). Socrates called his inner voice of protective guidance, Daimon, which means divine.

Ultimately, it is the quality of the encounter and the information or perspective provided and the impact this has one's life that is most salient for evaluating its significance. In the eyes of Michael's teacher, these visitations seemed as powerfully spiritual and as healing as anything this young boy had ever encountered.

In our survey of recalled childhood spiritual experiences, 90% responded affirmatively to at least one of several questions that addressed non-ordinary perception (e.g., telepathy, clairvoyance, and pre/post-cognition, near-death or out-of-body experience). Sixty-five percent claimed these experiences were a frequent occurrence; more than 85% said this occurred before the age of 18, with 52% indicating that their first occurrence was between the ages of 12 and 17, and 31% between 6 and before 12 years old (Nelson and Hart 2003; in press).

There has been some speculation that while these kinds of perceptions may be possible in young children, they naturally must disappear with the development of ego and abstract thought. Enculturation, especially schooling, reinforces a more or less homogenized way of seeing the world, one that may tend to push these open perceptional capacities underground. However, it is not necessary or desirable for this way of knowing to be replaced by ego-generated consciousness as Washburn (1995) has implied. Neither is this way of knowing simply irrelevant "pre-personal" phenomena as Wilber (2000) claims. The challenge for nurturing multidimensional perception is not *replacing* and correcting "immature" consciousness and perception with abstract concepts, but instead *balancing* natural presence and perception (being) with the world of ideas (thinking). Children may have something to teach us about reconnecting with an open perceptual presence toward the world.

Conclusion

We could say that these experiences of children begin to reveal a "spiritual intelligence." And like intellectual capacity, spiritual capacity is diverse. It is something *all* of us possess to some degree. It can emerge at different times, and it may require cultivation in order to be brought to full bloom. Unfortunately, it has been neglected and even repressed in our consideration of children, and thus many of us are left developmentally delayed as adults. Having lost touch with inner wisdom and a sense of wonder with compassion and deep meaning, with the rich multidimensional perceptions, our lives may come to seem second-hand—removed from the vital directness of our own knowing and experience, too often organized by fear or fashion (intellectual or otherwise) rather than trust and relationship in the deepest currents of our lives.

The growing evidence suggests that our encounter with divinity, our access to wisdom and wonder, does not wait until we have careers or cars. We live it as children, and it forms a center point for our lives; even, perhaps, serving the deepest source of human

motivation. While young people may be naïve in the ways of the world, and can be blindingly selfish and even cruel, they are already spiritual beings, have the roots of character and calling, and have access to wisdom and transformative wonder.

While I have highlighted some colorful examples of the spiritual life, the small, everyday perceptions, feelings, connections, and questions—the ways of being-in-the-world—are at least as significant as the more dramatic or ontologically challenging moments. Developmentally, these early ways of being and knowing—this *world-presence*—provide the foundation for a worldview and for an organic source of direction. And sometimes this also serves as a source of confusion in a world, a school or a household that does not acknowledge these possibilities, one that tends toward an adult-centric, rationalistic, and institutionalized understanding of spirituality.

Understanding this inner world of children may help us to notice the impulse for justice or compassion within the child in a world that often demonstrates callousness. Perhaps it also reveals the unique ways in which a child sees into the heart of the world or the very individualized expression of wisdom. It is hard to see the "angel"—the spiritual life—unless we believe it is possible.

Beyond a fresh lens that enables us to notice whom children really are, the consideration of children's innate spiritual capacities raises questions about what the point and the practice of education is or should be. A base of knowledge and know-how is the currency of education and important for functioning in the world. Information and basic skill acquisition, vocational preparation, or even critical thinking are necessary; however, they are also insufficient for deeper considerations of meaning, social justice, calling, creativity, and deep connection. An education that genuinely takes into account the innate spiritual nature of children would centrally be about the integration, refinement, and expansion of consciousness throughout one's life. Basically, I think this means harnessing the power of the mind and aligning it with the deeper currents of love, wisdom, and transformation (see Hart 2001). This would expand the consciousness of education itself, even turning education toward becoming a wisdom tradition. While there is some question as to whether our school systems are ready to take such a turn, the children I have spoken with surely are.

References

Allport, G. 1955. *The individual and his religion*. New York: Macmillan.

Arlin, P. K. 1990. Wisdom: The art of problem finding. In *Wisdom: Its nature, origins, and development*, edited by R. J. Sternberg. New York: Penguin.

Armstrong, T. 1985. *The radiant child*. Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House.

Azar, B. 1997. Defining the trait that makes us most human. *APA Monitor* 28(11): 1-15.

Bowie, F., and O. Davies, eds. 1990. *Hildegard of Bingen*. Translated by R. Carver. New York: Crossroads.

Buber, M. 1958. *I and thou*. Translated by R. G. Smith. New York: Scribners. (Originally published 1923)

Coles, R. 1992. *The spiritual life of children*. New York: HarperCollins.

Dillon, J. J. 2000. The spiritual child: Appreciating children's transformative effects on adults. *Encounter: Education for Meaning and Social Justice* 13(4): 4–18.

Erikson, E. H. 1969. *Gandhi's truth: On the origins of militant nonviolence*. New York: Norton.

Gerber, R. 1988. *Vibrational medicine*. Santa Fe, NM: Bear & Company.

Gilby, T., trans. 1967. *St. Thomas Aquinas: Philosophical texts*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Goldman, R. 1964. *Religious thinking from childhood to adolescence*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Hart, T. 2000. Deep empathy. In *Transpersonal knowing: Exploring the horizon of consciousness*, edited by T. Hart, P. L. Nelson, and K. Puhakka. Albany: SUNY Press.

Hart, T. 2001. *From information to transformation: Education for the evolution of consciousness*. New York: Peter Lang.

Hart, T. 2003. *The secret spiritual world of children*. Makawao, HI: Inner Ocean.

Hart, T. 2004. Opening the contemplative mind in the classroom. *Journal of Transformative Education* 2(1): 28-46.

Hart, T., P. Nelson, and K. Puhakka, eds. 2000. *Transpersonal knowing: Exploring the horizon of consciousness*. Albany: SUNY Press.

Hay, D., and R. Nye. 1998. *The spirit of the child*. London: Fount/HarperCollins.

Heller, D. 1986. *The children's God*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Heschel, A. 1972. *God in search of man*. New York: Octagon. (Originally published 1955)

Hoffman, E. 1992. *Visions of innocence: Spiritual and inspirational experiences of childhood*. Boston: Shambhala.

Hoffman, M. L. 1990. Empathy and justice motivation. *Motivation and Emotion* 14(2): 151-172.

Irwin, H. J. 1985. Parapsychological phenomena and the absorption domain. *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research* 79: 1-11.

James, W. 1936. *The varieties of religious experience*. New York: Modern Library.

Keller, E. F. 1983. *A feeling for the organism: The life and work of Barbara McClintock*. New York: Freeman.

Liester, M. B. 1996. Inner voices: Distinguishing transcendent and pathological characteristics. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 28(1).

Lilley, I. M. 1967. *Friedrich Froebel: A selection from his writings*. London: Cambridge University Press.

Maslow, A. 1971. *The farther reaches of human nature*. New York: Penguin.

Maslow, A. 1983. *Religion, values and peak experiences*. New York: Penguin.

Matthews, G. B. 1980. *Philosophy and the young child*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Nelson, P. L. 1989. Personality factors in the frequency of reported spontaneous præternatural experiences. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 21: 193-209.

Nelson, P. L., and T. Hart. 2003. A survey of recalled childhood spiritual and non-ordinary experiences: Age, rate and psychological factors associated with their occurrence. <http://www.socialscienceservices.com/papers/Nelson-Hart.pdf>.

Nelson, P. L., and T. Hart. (in press). A survey of recalled childhood spiritual and non-ordinary experiences. *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*.

Nikhilananda, S., trans. 1970. *The gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* (Abridged ed.). New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center.

Piaget, J. 1968. *Six psychological studies*. New York: Random House.

Piaget, J. 1977. *The essential Piaget*, edited by H. Gruber and J. Voneche. New York: Basic Books.

Piechowski, M. 2001. Childhood spirituality. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 33(1): 1-15.

Richter, J. P. 1887. *The doctrine of education for English readers*, translated by B. Wood. London: Swan Sonnenschein.

Robinson, E. 1978. *Living the questions: Studies in the childhood of religious experience*. Oxford, England: Religious Experience Research Unit, Manchester College.

Robinson, E. 1983. *The original vision: A study of the religious experience of childhood*. New York: Seabury Press. (Originally published 1977)

Sealts, M. M. 1992. *Emerson on the scholar*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press.

Scholem, G. G., ed. 1995. *Zohar: The book of splendor*. New York: Schocken. (Originally published 1949)

Smith, H. 1993. Educating the intellect: On opening the eye of the heart. In *Can Virtue be Taught?*, edited by B. Darling. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

Steiner, R. 1965. *Education of the children in light of anthroposophy*. London: Rudolf Steiner Press. (Originally published 1909)

Storm, H. 1972. *Seven arrows*. New York: Ballantine Books.

Tamminen, K. 1991. *Religious development in childhood and youth: An empirical study*. Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia.

Tillich, P. 1957. *Dynamics of faith*. New York: Harper & Row.

Underhill, E. 1961. *Mysticism*. New York: Dutton. (Originally published 1911)

Vineis, R. 1960. *The life of St. Catherine of Siena*. Translated by G. Lamb. New York: Kennedy. (Originally published 1934)

Washburn, M. 1995. *The ego and the dynamic ground: A transpersonal theory of human development* (2nd ed.). Albany: SUNY Press.

Wilber, K. 1996. *The atman project: A transpersonal view of human development*. Wheaton, IL: Quest.

Wilber, K. 2000. *Integral psychology*. Boston: Shambhala.