

# Children and Spirituality

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What is spiritual strength? What is the edge that enables some people to withstand the most traumatic events and come through them with love, with a stronger spiritual life, to be loving, to continue to fight for the good of the world and to find meaning in their existence? Why is it that, for others, their experiences may continue a pattern of abuse? They may continue to be re-victimised or fall into destructive patterns of coping, i.e. drugs or alcohol or at least feel that the abuse has robbed them of spirit? Is this spirit for life and endurance something we can teach children or is it something innate? Does our secular society, with its multitude of faiths, but with no common creed to gel us together discourage our spirit for life?

These are some of the questions we find ourselves asking.

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In our experience mental health for children comes from having several basic ingredients; a deep sense of connectedness to themselves and the world around, a clear sense of meaning and understanding of the rhythms of life and a clear code of behaviour based on humanistic values which show responsibility to themselves and others.

What do we mean by spirit? For us it is having a sense of meaning through which to understand the context of life, a feeling of connectedness and a sense of wonder and awe. It is a dimension through which we can know who we are and how we are. It has to do with our identity, our

expressiveness and our creativity. It is our view on the world and our place within it, our home, our culture, our society, our environment, our sense of belonging. We find it in the natural world, in music, art, poetry, in artifacts, in science, technology and in all our relationships, however fleeting. It pervades our successes, our failures, but most of all it lies in the promptings of our heart. We recognise it when our heart sings, our world opens, we touch and are touched.

As transpersonal psychotherapists with over twenty years of experience we believe that this intangible quality, this spirit, is fundamental in the healing process. A dramatic example of this is the story of Lizzie.

Lizzie was a young mother. She was a recovering alcoholic who had survived acts of unthinkable cruelty from infancy, administered by the hands meant to nurture and protect. Her story of abandonment and abuse started at the age of two initially from her natural parents, through her years in social services' care, foster placements and from within the church. Her attempts to tell the truth of her experiences were denied and eventually her fear and silence were interpreted as learning difficulties and later psychosis. Eventually she ran away from home and became homeless in London where further terrifying abuse was afflicted upon her. She escaped this by being admitted to a psychiatric hospital and later settled into a hostel where she met her partner and had her son. She was helped by having a wise and compassionate social worker who recognised the extraordinary love she had for her child, her ability to parent and her commitment to do anything in order to keep her child. She also recognised that the symptoms she was displaying i.e. flashbacks, nightmares, disassociation panic attacks and depression were consistent with symptoms of sexual abuse rather than psychosis. She was then referred for psychotherapy and help for her family.

The therapist's first task was to listen to her story and help her deal with the debilitating symptoms she was experiencing which increased as her memories were released. The therapist worked with her for two years and all this time she never doubted the truth of Lizzie's experiences. The only positive memory she and Lizzie were able to hold on to was a calm, loving voice that Lizzie found in a session when she was drawing. In the middle of drawing she seemed to be in a state of trance; she remained still and calm. Later she talked of experiencing again the person who had come to her many times in her head when she was being abused as a child but whom she had forgotten. This voice told her that she was loved. They returned to this voice many times, grounding the sense of it in drawings and words. The more Lizzie turned to it the more validity she gave it. The

therapist felt her job was to affirm the voice Lizzie heard and to continually to reflect back to her with respect the amazing quality of love she embodied.

This presence which could have been interpreted as an aspect of dissociation was for Lizzie a small voice of faith in herself and in the world around her. She started to recognise that it was not she who was unlovable but those who had hurt her who were unable to love. As she made sense of her past she understood the coping mechanisms she had employed to help her survive. She also understood that the symptoms she had lived with for so many years were not due to innate madness but were a result of the trauma she had experienced.

Where we stand as psychotherapists will determine how we see this very short vignette. We may choose to interpret this as a 'borderline state' and view it as a study of a pathological disorder or, from our transpersonal perspective, we may see it as connecting to her inner essence, her own connection with something 'other'. However we may interpret this experience, in Lizzie's case, affirming her positive inner voice and experience helped her to relocate her inner trust and begin her journey to health.

This case study illustrates some of the original questions we asked. Was this sense of spirit, this inner voice of wisdom and compassion, something that was innate and/or is it something that can be taught? The

answers are well beyond the remit of this paper or our knowledge. However, what we can affirm is that how we see the world and our place within it greatly influences our state of mental well-being and the way we choose to behave in the world. We are writing as transpersonal therapists. This means that we have a belief in something that is beyond our psychopathology and that we recognise within us a unique essence. It follows that a part of our job is to help people, especially children, to identify, affirm and express that unique essence in their daily lives.

The children who come to us are often referred because they are going through a time of stress, They may have experienced abuse, loss, bereavement, or are exhibiting 'difficult' behaviour. They may have learning difficulties and may have been given a label eg. ADHD, ME, Aspergers, Autism. They may be on medication. Their parent(s) may be going through a time of death, separation, loss and the children may be depressed and anxious. Any kind of scenario which leaves a child feeling isolated or adrift in the world may result in a referral.

Whatever their experiences, their diagnosis and treatments, the questions remain the same, how do they make sense of the labels they have been given, how do they find meaning in their diagnosis and their life situation? In therapy we can provide an arena in which children can explore these issues. Through creativity we can help children to explore their inner and outer worlds

and help them construct a positive meaning system to their existence. This article is not concentrating upon how we help children in therapy, through times of difficulty. We have the means to help them locate their inner source of trust and understanding, strength and value. What we are addressing is how do they sustain this in their daily lives and hold that thread of trust within themselves. We are interested, as we said earlier, in the messages and experiences they gain from the adults around them. And how these might help them form their own sense of spiritual strength. As transpersonal therapists we find we are increasingly being called upon to help children to find meaning, to make sense of the world and their place in it. We do this without having the framework that a person who is within a religious context might offer.

As we know, traditionally these messages around spirit, in our culture, were taught by religion. Religion used to be shared by the majority, taught at home, in school and in the mores of the society at large. However our society, specifically in inner cities, is bereft of this common ideology. We have a multi-faith culture and society. We constantly experience a society not at ease with itself. We all know the symptoms, only too well, the epidemic of drug and alcohol addiction, a disengaged youth, a gang culture, all looking for meaning in their lives. In response to this an increasing number of schools are teaching children about citizenship, about tolerating different

perspectives, about accepting learning / physical difficulties, accepting different faiths and beliefs. Some are now teaching emotional literacy, where children are taught about emotions, feelings, relationships. These are positive, humanistic values, and provide a rich base for children. But these alone may not provide meaning, or connectedness, or an understanding of something 'other', something bigger than themselves.

We acknowledge that many parents do not feel they need to identify a spiritual dimension. They manage to communicate a meaning system that can create a sense of purpose and unity without a spiritual framework. There are also many children whose parents who do not feel they are in a position to offer a spiritual framework for their children. They may not want to impose their own religion upon a child, they may have a negative experience of religion, or they may be part of a mixed faith partnership, or have no spiritual convictions themselves. We commonly hear 'we will let them decide for themselves when they are old enough.'

This is understandable in a world where religions can be seen as a cause of war and division. They may also be seen as oppressing people on the grounds of sexuality and gender. The media are telling us stories of the abuse that many clergy, leaders of faiths, have perpetrated upon children. We are not given many examples of religions 'walking their talk'. In many religions, young women and gay people, who would

aspire to positions of power or authority in their faith, are barred. In a wider context, children know that the world is being split apart by fundamental religious beliefs which preach both love and violence. The often quoted platitude; all wars are caused by religion and greed, is only too obvious.

We acknowledge that there are many parents/carers who are able to hold this uncertainty. They are able to give their children a sense of 'safe insecurity'. They can convey the understanding that the world is both dangerous and beautiful, that the rhythms of life, including illness and death, are natural processes and can be faced without fear. We also acknowledge that there are many parents who have a strong and positive spiritual context that can provide this meaning system.

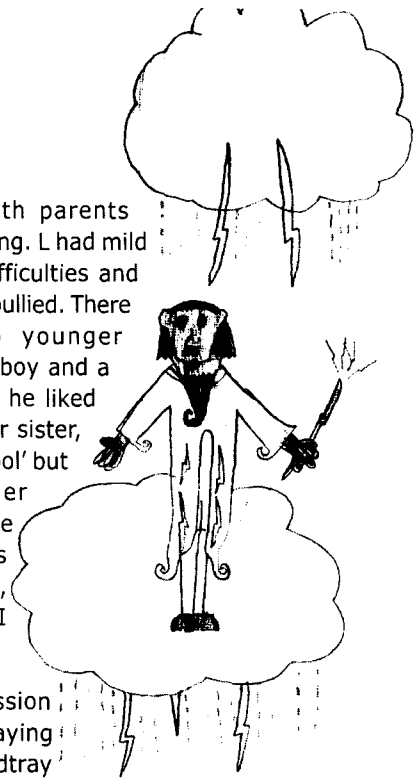
However, as therapists, we are often working with children and parents who crave some sort of moral, ethical and spiritual framework, in order to address issues of life, suffering and death. Those parents and children may have questions which they voice to us; 'Where did I come from? What happens when you die? Where was I before I came here?' For some families the first time they confront these issues is when they are faced with death and change in their own life and there is no framework to hold them.

An eleven year old boy was referred for help. He was having difficulties with settling in to his new school. His father had left home six months before and had moved in with his girl

friend. Both parents were working. L had mild learning difficulties and was being bullied. There were two younger siblings a, boy and a girl. L said he liked his younger sister, she was 'cool' but his younger brother he said was 'boring, nasty, and I hate him.'

In one session he was playing in the sandtray making one of the toy cars crash into the other toys he had put into the tray. The therapist commented that it looked as if there was a lot of anger around. L responded by saying, 'If I died I think I would go to heaven. I think that there is a heaven where everyone will be there, with all the people you love' He continued 'I think that hell is being on this earth.'

There was silence he then said. 'But if I go to heaven where there are all the people I love, that means that Dad's girl-friend will be there too, because he loves her, so she'll have to be there...oh no! OH NO!' He put his hand over his eyes and sat very still for a while, looking at the toys in the tray. He looked sad and thoughtful. Then he said. 'I really, really don't like what dad has done... he's in hell for what he's done... and so are we, Mum, and the rest.'



He was still for a while, the car was no longer crashing into things, but just going round and round the tray. He said 'I like talking about death, you know, it's good for you to think about death and god. It's cool. We'll talk about it again?' 'Yes, we will' replied the therapist.

In our society we have to confront some truths we know. We know that a huge percentage of crime is perpetrated against children and those who are the most vulnerable. We know, also, that one of the most valuable sources of protection is information, but we do not tell children the true statistics about where abuse is most often perpetrated, nor give them information about life and death. We are moving more and more to keeping them in the home projecting danger onto the outside and strangers. We try to avoid these truths in order to preserve our children's innocence and we do not have a means to deal with their fears. Hence we try to sanitise traditional fairy stories and 'Disneyfy' happy endings. We know our children crave magic and ritual for instance, the success of Harry Potter, Star Wars, Lord of the Rings, His Dark Materials trilogy. They like to confront demons and shadow, in books, videos and games. How do we help them to integrate this darker side of life and give it a meaningful context in reality rather than leaving them to play video games of ever increasing violence? Is it by letting them watch more and more violent videos? How do we as society hold this paradox? The paradox between protecting children

in their everyday lives whilst feeding them violence through fantasy. From research we now know that allowing children to watch violence, either through news, TV quasi documentaries, soaps, increases their threshold to tolerate violence. The boundaries between what is fantasy and what is reality are being blurred. How do we help them to differentiate, to integrate the dark with the light so that they have the tools they need for their own protection and survival and can still have an appreciation of the wonder and awe of life?

So we return to our original questions. We live in an exciting age and in a unique society. Our meaning system in life is informed by science, ecology, history and we have access to a variety of humanistic and religious principles. We have great opportunities. What are the fundamental messages that children need to receive in order to offer them the best opportunity to develop this sense of meaning in their lives, that enable them to have a life-long sense of well-being, of connectedness? What are the messages that will act as a guide and support through their lives? What are the messages that will help them face the joys and adversities that are an inevitable part of being human?

This article is the beginning of a process and we would like to develop our research in this area. We would like this to be the beginning of a dialogue. We are developing and collating stories to help children and their carers to explore these issues. We would really welcome your response to this article and your stories.