# Only Those Who See Take Off Their Shoes: Seeing the Classroom as a Spiritual Space

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***Background/Context:*** *Spirituality refers to a way of being that includes the capacity of humans to see beyond themselves, to become more than they are, to see mystery and wonder in the world around them, and to experience private and collective moments of awe, wonder, and transcendence. Though there is growing interest in spirituality and education, there is little evidence that it is intentionally included in most public school classrooms.*

***Purpose and Focus:*** *The author's personal experiences as a classroom teacher, adult early recollections of spiritual experience, and children's responses to literature with spiritual themes are used to illustrate three points: (1) Although practice of spiritual discipline may help teachers to be more sensitive to spiritual experiences, it does not necessarily follow that they know what to do with them in the classroom. (2) Early recollections of spiritual experiences and reflection on what these mean for classroom practice may be a way of helping teachers learn how to identify and support spirituality in the classroom. (3) Teachers need to recognize that children's spirituality is part of their being in the world, and honoring it in the classroom requires providing opportunities for its expression within the ordinary events of classroom life.*

***Research Design:*** *The article is an essay, juxtaposing literature on children's spirituality with the author's personal experiences as a classroom teacher and researcher to make an argument for classrooms as spiritual spaces.*

***Conclusions:*** *The possibilities inherent in discovering and coming to know—possibilities that are hopeful and open us up to the "more-than-ness" of being human—are often closed off in the day-to-day press of classroom life because teachers are not prepared to consider them, and they are not considered part of the curriculum. The author concludes that educators need to learn how to see the spirituality inherent in the everyday acts of learning, in*

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*coming to know, and in being in the classroom and to make space for the unseen. Further research is needed to articulate both theory and practice related to children's spirituality in the classroom.*

Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1864) wrote:

> Earth's crammed with heaven,
> And every common bush afire with God:
> But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,
> The rest sit round it, and pluck blackberries,
> And daub their natural faces unaware. . .

To explore the classroom as a spiritual space, I draw on my own experiences as a classroom teacher, adult recollections of spiritual experiences in childhood, and ongoing work that looks at children's expression of the spiritual. In doing so, I hope to open possibilities for seeing classrooms as spiritual spaces. I choose to begin with these lines from Elizabeth Barrett Browning's long and complex poem, *Aurora Leigh*, because it seems to me that the classroom *is* a spiritual space, but we do not always recognize it as such. Or, to paraphrase Browning, it does not occur to us to take off our shoes at school.

Education in the deepest, most inclusive sense is a spiritual endeavor, and human beings are inherently spiritual. Classrooms are spiritual spaces whether or not we intend them to be or recognize that they are. Everything that is done in schools, and in preparation for school activity, is infused with the spiritual experience (Huebner, 1993/1999).

In this article, spirituality refers to a way of being that includes the capacity of humans to see beyond ourselves, to become more than we are, to see mystery and wonder in the world around them, and to experience private and collective moments of awe, wonder, and transcendence. Spiritual experiences are a natural form of human awareness, transcending religious and cultural boundaries (Elkins, 1998; Hart, 2003; Hay & Nye, 1987; Hyde, 2008; Palmer, 1998–1999; Scott, 2001; Wright, 2000). As Huebner (1993/1999) put it, "the human being dwells in the transcendent, or more appropriately, the transcendent dwells in the human being" (p. 404).

## CHILDREN'S SPIRITUALITY

To what extent can the child be said to experience spiritual life, and how can we know, particularly if spiritual experience is characterized by its

subjectivity and inwardness (Russell, 1986)? A number of perspectives on the nature of children's spirituality have emerged as researchers have begun to turn their attention to study of children's spirituality. Perhaps the predominant construction of children's spirituality views it as part of a developmental process "during which spirituality is experienced in incrementally more 'evolved' ways" (Levine, 1999, p. 122). Levine challenged this view, arguing that spirituality is not a point along the way in cognitive development. Calling for a phenomenology of cognition, Levine concluded that "the cognitive skills of children must be understood as cognitive strengths within the sphere of spirituality" (p. 137). They are the same skills that adults draw on in spiritual practices rather than capacities unique to childhood.

Placing spirituality at the "core of what it means to be human," Nye (1996, p. 110) argued that children's spiritual experience can be seen in their perceptions, awareness, and responses to ordinary activities. Nye (1998) posited a core construct of relational consciousness defined by an "unusual level of perceptiveness" (p. 5) in the way children feel related to themselves, other people, animate and inanimate objects in nature, and God. Nye sees spirituality as unfolding from within, rather than the acquisition of spiritual knowledge or religious instruction.

Radford (2006) cautioned against defining spirituality in a way that contributes to dualistic thinking about mind and body. Rather than locating spiritual experiences inwardly, he urged that the range of experiences that comprise human spirituality involving relationships, emotions, and connection to the natural world all be understood as ways that spirituality is articulated as part of a public world of meaning. This harkens to Phenix (1966), who pointed out that spiritual experiences are not limited to "striking and unusual happenings, but also the perception of the wonderful depth in what is usually considered ordinary events of life" (p. 35).

If children's ability to experience and understand the transcendent is a part of their natural capacity for creation of meaning, it should not be limited to a subject taught at school; their total school experience should be open for its expression (Rodger, 1996). Building on Nye's core construct and drawing implications for religious education, Reimer and Furrow (2001) urged that more research be done before attempts are made to develop new educational strategies to teach children to be spiritual. This call underscores the difference in stance by those who see spirituality as inherent part of being a human of any age, and those who see it as something that children possess in nascent form but that needs to be taught or built through adult intervention.

Champagne (2003) considered spirituality a way of knowing and being,

commenting that "if spirituality can be related to children's expressions of being, if it is related to the *children's being*, it may then be possible to recognize it in different concrete situations, and even more so in their activities of daily life" (p. 44). Spiritual experience as a way of being can potentially be manifested in any human activity, including the activities of classroom life with young children. Drawing on practical theology, phenomenology, and hermeneutics, Champagne studied 60 children from three day care centers in daily life situations, identifying three interrelated *modes of being* or *being in the world*: sensitive, relational, and existential. *Sensitivity* refers to the child's connection to the world through sense perception. *Relationality* refers to "experiences of closeness and separation from significant adults and relationships with friends" (p. 50). It is through "filiation" that the child finds "a *home* for *being-in-the-world*" (p. 50). *Existential* refers to time, space, and existence. For children, the present is the moment, the "unfolding of the child's existence" (p. 51). Champagne suggested that understanding children's modes of being in the world can make us better witnesses of children's spirituality.

Hyde (2008) conceptualized children's spirituality as *weaving the threads of meaning*—or the process through which children appear to use their sense of wonder in expression of their spirituality—drawing on different "frameworks of meaning, cultural traditions and worldviews they had been brought up in so as to make meaning of events and to piece together their own worldview" (p. 239). In exploring spirituality of children in Catholic schools in Australia, Hyde drew on the idea of personal narrative (Erricker & Erricker, 1996; Erricker, Erricker, Sullivan, Ota, & Fletcher, 1997). Children construct meaning from personal experience, within their own personal narrative, and it is through this narrative that they express their spirituality. Hence, educators must learn to listen to children with their particular experiences and ideas rather than supplying a narrative that may or may not match their own (Erricker et al.). Along similar lines, Trousdale (2005) concluded from studying Christian and Jewish children's responses to picture books with a explicit spiritual focus that adults should not impose their meaning on children's responses, nor should they anticipate that their responses will either match adult understandings or be similar to those of other children.

However, although the literature suggests that there has been a growing interest in spirituality and education, including children and their spirituality since the mid-1990s (Coles, 1990; Hart, 2003; Huebner, 1993/1999; Ota & Erricker, 2005), there is little evidence that this interest has made its way into public school classrooms in intentional ways (Mountain, 2007). Furthermore, research has only begun to give attention to children's own descriptions of their spiritual experiences

(Champagne, 2003; Hart; Trousdale, 1995, 2005), and implications for public school classrooms.

## LEARNING TO SEE

Unfortunately, the way in which terms such as *learning* and *knowing* have been used in schools limits their possibilities to certain mental operations and behavioral expectations that are more readily observable to the human eye and more readily assessed than a way of being or an indwelling of transcendence. The possibilities inherent in discovering and coming to know—possibilities that are hopeful and open us up to the "more-than-ness" of being human—are often closed off in the day-to-day press of classroom life not because they are absent, nor necessarily because they are considered unimportant, but because there is rarely time to consider them at all. As Huebner (1993/1999) observed, "The problem of the school is not that kids are being taught moral and spiritual values, the problem is—the schools are not places where the moral and spiritual life is lived with any sort of intentionality" (p. 415). Even more so, in this age of standards and accountability, school curriculum is focused on more measurable outcomes than *being*. The challenge for professionals who work with children and youth is to teach ourselves to see the spirituality inherent in the acts of learning, in coming to know, and in being in the classroom, or, to extend the image from Browning, to learn to take off our shoes and leave them at the door.

One of the most practical ways of learning to see spiritually or teaching others to see is to engage in practice of spiritual discipline—for example, meditative practices—not only for their personal benefits but also as a way to be more sensitive to spiritual experiences. For example, the connection between the teacher's spiritual practices and their focus on holistic education practices is considered in Conti's (2002) work on the spiritual lives of teachers and furnishes the rationale for programs such as those developed by Palmer (2003).

## RECOGNIZING AND DEVELOPING OUR OWN SPIRITUALITY

Huebner (1993/1999) pointed out that "it is futile to hope that teachers can be aware of the spiritual in education unless they maintain some form of spiritual discipline" (p. 415). For Huebner, this includes finding others who can help us identify both personal and collective idols (I infer that he is including idols such as *standards, effectiveness, measurement, control,* even *research*—any of the things we award godlike status in education). Huebner (1993/1999) said we need to be able "to name

oppression, and to undergo the continuing transformation necessary in the vocation of teaching," and educators need go about "developing an imagination that has room for the spiritual" (p. 415). Harris affirmed the importance of the teacher being in touch with his or her own spirituality, citing Rigby (2005) in arguing that the spiritual awareness of the teacher "is foundational to any discussion of the impact of the spiritual on education" (Harris, 2007, p. 267).

However, even if teachers practice some kind of spiritual discipline, even if they engage with a supportive community of educators who have both appreciation of and sensitivity to spirituality of teaching and learning, it is not so easy to see "the bush aflame" in the day-to-day press of the classroom.

For example, I come at my interest in spirituality from the perspective of a Christian who engages in spiritual disciplines of meditation, reflection, and prayer—individually and in a faith community. This has been true throughout my professional career, and I have admittedly been more disciplined at some times than others; even so, it is both a value and a commitment. Yet, sometime ago, when I began trying to recall specific moments in my own career as a primary school teacher that I recognized as spiritual at the time they were happening—when I had enough sense of them to take off my shoes, as it were—I found it rough going. In all my preparation as a teacher, the child's spirituality was never mentioned, and it did not occur to me that it should be seen as a natural part of the classroom even though I was committed to holistic educational experiences for children. In fact, any mention of spirituality was connected to religious practice and seen as something to avoid in keeping clear boundaries between church and state.

There were moments, however, when I was stopped short by experiences so deep and powerful that I knew them for spiritual as they were happening. I recall when 6-year-old Jeff stood next to me slapping his stomach and doing a little dance. "Why Jeff, what are you doing?" I asked, thinking I was going to have to redirect an extreme case of the wiggles.

Jeff took delight in everything around him, eagerly engaged with classroom experiences, had a wonderful sense of humor, and seemed to be in perpetual motion. He seemed to have little supervision after school. I ran into him in the neighborhood at all hours of day and night, skipping in the alley, exploring garbage cans, or gleefully running in the park. "Got fleas," he replied, pulling up the T-shirt he had been wearing uninterrupted for at least 2 weeks. Underneath was a very dirty stomach covered with flea bites.

Somehow, in that moment with Jeff, I was singed with the realization that this little person standing next to me was of infinite worth, flea bites

and all. Jeff and I were equal, not equal in power or privilege, but in our humanity. We were on a shared, relational journey (Champagne, 2003). It took every bit of professional strength I could muster to keep from bursting into tears—not tears of pity for Jeff's situation, but from knowing that I was standing on holy ground. Some 40 years later, I can still feel the power of that moment.

As a classroom teacher, I always carved out space for poetry in my classroom, and by the end of the school year, my kindergarteners or fifth graders—age had little to do with capacity to fall in love with poetry—would have a repertoire of poems they knew by heart. I never asked them to memorize poems, we just enjoyed them together. Once, near the end of the school year, we were returning from a field trip. Being with a busload of first graders who are tired and cranky can be an ordeal. But the bus had no more than pulled out of the parking lot when one of the parents who had come along started "Who stole the cookies from the cookie jar?" It was not in our repertoire, but everybody knew it. When it ended, there was a pause, and suddenly Cindy piped up, "'Someone,' by Walter de la Mare." As was our custom when a title was announced, everybody joined in, "Someone came knocking. . ." When the last lines of the poem faded, another little voice, maybe it was Bernie, said, "'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,' by Robert Frost," and on it went until they'd been through all 30 or so of our poems, and we were pulling up at the door of the school. As I got off the bus, the driver shook his head and said, "Lady, I don't know what you've done with these children, but they can ride my bus any day! I've never seen anything like it." Nor had I. It was an experience of awe and wonderment—they'd gotten it, they'd really understood the transcendent joy of being in and with a chorus of beautiful words and images. These children were engaged in a mode of being in the world that was all at once sensitive, relational, and existential (Champagne, 2003).

I recall how 6-year-old Estella, who had been sent to live with her uncle and aunt after her parents were tragically killed in an auto accident, kept saying, "Teacher, my mommy and daddy are dead." All I knew to do was to say, "I know, Estella, and I am so very sorry," intuitively honoring her need for "a *home* for *being-in-the-world*" (Champagne, 2003, p. 50).

I had only my understanding of child development and my own spiritual guidance to help me interpret these experiences. I am struck with how few come to mind even though my values and commitments might have been expected to make me particularly sensitive to spirituality in the classroom. The experiences were undoubtedly there, but they did not stop me in my tracks at the time because I was not prepared to see.

Considered in light of the literature on spirituality and education, my

personal experience suggests that although teachers may need to engage in spiritual discipline in order to recognize spirituality in the classroom, they must also learn how to look and listen for it in their interactions with children and young people. The implication is that teacher education classrooms might also be considered spiritual spaces, and prospective teachers and teacher educators might intentionally discuss what that means. Although it may employ a specific pedagogy (for example, Miller & Athan, 2007) or involve reviewing the growing body of scholarly literature on children's spirituality, it may also include reflection on our own early spiritual experiences and what they can teach us about children's spirituality.

## PLUMBING EARLY MEMORIES OF SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES

Drawing on Palmer (1998) and Day, Kington, Stobart, and Sammons (2006), Fraser (2007) looked at teachers' descriptions of their personal and professional experiences and how they link their spirituality to children's spirituality. The teachers in Fraser's study consciously created spaces for children to consider issues related to life and death and belonging, reflected in the themes of the study. Fraser argued that teachers need the "intuitive feel for moments where children (and teachers) need space to express important concerns" (p. 303).

Several years ago, drawing on earlier work in which I looked at pre- and in-service teachers' early recollections of school (Schoonmaker, 2002), I began collecting adult early recollections of spiritual experiences. This work is focused on early memories rather than adult experiences, which have been the subject of research by Conti (2002) and Fraser (2007). Typically, I have gathered stories from small groups of adults (often in retreat settings), asking them to create a symbol for an early recollection using craft materials of their choice. The theoretical underpinnings of this work are to be found in Adler's (1964) notion that here are no "chance memories" (p. 351). In Adler's words, "Memories are important only for what they are 'taken as'; for their interpretation and for their bearing on present and future life" (p. 352). The simplicity and compression of these early recollections suggest how deeply embedded spirituality is in the child's way of being. Hearing them has helped me to connect to my own classroom teaching experiences in a new way. And they suggest ways for me, as a teacher educator, to think about how to help teachers conceptualize classrooms as spiritual spaces. The following examples illustrate my point that teachers can learn about how to create spaces in which to nurture children's spirituality through reflection on early recollections of spiritual experiences, and the implications of their

recollections for practice of other teachers. I contrast these with my own recollection.

In creation of a symbol for one of my earliest recollections of a moment I can name as spiritual, I shape a pink piece of paper into a series of folds. In my recollection, I am at an informal evening worship service at church. I am almost 4 years old at the time. My mother and older brother are with me. A man plays the accordion, and as he pulls it open and shut, I listen to the unfamiliar sounds and notice that the folds are pale pink. I begin crying, and my mother leans over to ask me what is the matter. I recall being unable to tell her anything except that it is so pretty.

Kris constructs a paper doll from red paper, remembering a time when friends of the family were coming for the afternoon and dinner. Her parents were excited, and there had been all kinds of preparation for the occasion. As it grew close to the time for the friends to arrive, her mother helped her put on a new red velvet dress, white lace tights, and black patent shoes. Five-year-old Kris waited in the garden among the flowers, sunlight streaming around her, feeling pretty and full of anticipation of the wonderful time to come. She recalls thinking, "I want to remember this moment the rest of my life."

Heeral creates a paper lamp to symbolize her memory of observing the Diwali festival as a child. "This is a festival where we pray to god to bring harmony and happiness to our loved ones," she explains. "Hindus follow the lunar calendar, and Diwali always falls on a no moon night. The diyas are lit all over the house to welcome god to come and bless our home. I was always fascinated by the beauty of flickering lights against the dark night."

Like Kris, Heeral, and me, many adults report early recollections of spiritual experience that involve moments of heightened sensitivity associated with aesthetic experience. Kris brings her experience to the present, noting the multiple images in her memory—the sensitivity to beauty and connection to family and friends are all important in her spirituality as an adult member of a faith community.

Meghan remembers the death of a sibling when she was an adolescent and how her family prayed with and over him, gathering the grace to give him permission to die when what they wanted most was for him to live. She talks about the contradictory feeling of anguish and peace that surrounded his passing.

Linette sits on the floor of the retreat center where we are creating symbols for early spiritual experiences. She deliberately chooses a sheet of blue construction paper and begins tearing it into tiny bits. Linette lifts her hands in the air and lets the bits of blue paper fall. "These are my tears," she declares. As a 5-year-old, Linette was repeatedly sexually

abused by a stepfather. On one occasion, she returned to her room and sat on the floor sobbing. Suddenly she felt unseen arms enclose her, gently holding and consoling her. She knew then that she not alone and that there were sources of consolation outside the terrible space in which she was trapped as a child.

Like Meghan and Linette, many people recall early spiritual experiences that are associated with grief and pain. These experiences involve heightened sensitivity and vulnerable feelings. In fact, many adults have recollections that are excruciatingly painful. Such feelings are to be treated with respect and caution. For others, like Tom, nature prompts spiritual response. He describes his anticipation at seeing the Rocky Mountains on a family vacation, his disappointment when he mistook the foothills for the mountains, his weariness from the long car trip and falling asleep. Then the mountains were before them; he awoke and was overcome by a "feeling of absolute wonder that permeated my being as an 8-year-old" upon seeing the mountains for the first time.

These are some of the ways in which adults have talked about their earliest memories of spiritual experiences. They prompt a number of questions. Among them: In Heeral's memory, there is both beauty and the mystery associated with religious observance. What space is there in the classroom for beauty and mystery? What space for art, music, poetry, and dance? What space to talk about religious observance and honor religious celebrations? Kris's memory draws on multiple sources of wonder and beauty. Like Tom, anticipation plays a role in her experience. What opportunity does the classroom offer for anticipation, wonder, joy, caring relationships? Both Meghan and Linette have painful memories and prompt us to wonder how and where children can grieve in school and how the classroom as a community can be with them in their pain.

These recollections remind us of a truth that Dewey (1904/1964) pointed out in his essay on relating theory to practice in education. Most of us have plenty of personal experiences that can furnish illustrations of important principles about how children engage with the world.

Thinking about classrooms as a spiritual space involves those of us adults who occupy the classroom, as well as the children and young people we meet there. It seems reasonable to suppose that we can learn to recognize children's spirituality through our own practice of spiritual discipline and through mining our own earliest spiritual experiences. But we must also make a conscious effort to learn how to see children's spiritual experiences as they, not we, experience them, naturally as part of their being in the world.

## THROUGH THE CHILD'S EYES

Some time ago, a group of doctoral students and I conducted a phenomenological study of children's spirituality, rooted in the belief that if researchers want to know about children's spiritual experiences, they need to listen to them and create opportunities for children to talk about them.[1] From the outset, we identified children's literature as an appropriate venue to prompt engagement with young children in ways that might be more apparent than in other routines of classroom life.

We were making a conscious effort to learn to "see" children's spirituality, knowing that learning to see requires more than looking. It requires practice in listening and asking questions that will open rather than close off expression. We also wanted to think about ways teachers can honor children's spirituality by carving out small spaces for it to flourish. To prepare us for this work, we began with several meetings in which we shared our own earliest recollection of spiritual experiences and talked about what they might teach us about how to engage with children in the classroom. And we talked about important books that we remembered from our childhood.

Madeline L'Engle (L'Engle & Brooke, 1985) pointed out how children's books have messages of power, love, courage, spiritual awareness, and inner light, messages that were formative in her own experience of becoming. Each of us gathered a collection of picture books with themes similar to those L'Engle identified and found a few children—family, neighbors, anybody we could conveniently locate between 3 and 6 years old.[2] Each of us also began by giving the child the opportunity to select a book, and we or the child read it aloud. Then we engaged in a conversation, asking about choice, special parts of the story, and the like.

We talked with approximately 30 children 3–11 years of age (although most were between 4 and 6, one of us found an 11-year-old who wanted to participate), boys and girls from Caucasian, Hispanic, African American, Indian, and Chinese decent with various religious and nonreligious traditions (Catholic and Protestant Christian, Hindu, Jewish, and others). Not all families of children we talked with were active in a religious tradition. We met one on one in different settings, including the children's homes, our homes, schools, and Sunday schools.

## MISSING THE POINT

The first thing that we noticed was what we failed to notice. We came back from our first round of conversations saying that they were a wash;

the children were not bringing up spiritual matters. Then we looked at the transcripts of our conversations and found that children saw burning bushes while we were, in effect, daubing our faces unaware. For example, Maria feared that she did not get anything from 6-year-old Ben, but when we look at the transcript of her conversation with him, here is what we discovered.

Maria asks Ben to tell what made the picture book *The First Forest* (Gile, 1991) wonderful to him. He chooses a picture.

> "My favorite is this one." He points to a picture in which branches from two trees reach across a path and almost touch.
> "Why?" Maria asks.
> "Because it looks like part from *ET*. When ET and the little boy touch fingers and it heals his cut."
> "Hmmm," Maria responds.
> "Like that," Ben refers to the picture.
> "So do you think both of these represent something?" Maria wants to know.
> "Yes," Ben replies.
> Maria probes, "You do? Why do you think this reminds you of ET?" Ben shrugs.
> "The friendship?" Maria offers.
> "Uh-hum."

Ben connected the picture to a very powerful spiritual moment in *ET*. Maria had been thinking of the hands of God and Adam in Michelangelo's *Sistine Chapel* painting. The power in Ben's response escapes her in the moment, and Ben seems to move away from it almost as quickly as he encounters it, whether because Maria has directed the conversation in a place he is not interested in going, or because the experience is complete for him.

In spiritual experience, there is a coexistence between event and participant, past and present. But entering into it requires that one recognize that it is there to be entered. The children we talked with were open to "otherness." They seemed to enter into narrative and suspend any sense of self in present versus text, living the experience of the text. They were able to see themselves in the story and the similarity between themselves and the events in the text—coexisting with the story. Their responses were aesthetic, feeling, what we called extra-logical because they were not bound by logical rules, and they were full of wonder—all aspects of transcendence. And their spiritual insights usually came in short bursts before they were off and gone on to the next thing.

All of us involved in the study were experienced teachers and, with the exception of one, had years of experience and expertise in early childhood education. All of us, without exception, had read countless stories to children—in school and in our families—and we were comfortable interacting with children. But to our surprise, we often missed children's spiritual responses or moved to interpret them too quickly in our interactions around picture books. Perhaps we were looking for something unique while the children were simply *being*, moving in and out of experiences that were natural and comfortable to them.

## BEING IN THE MOMENT

Six-year-old Ethan has chosen a picture book version of the Hebrew Bible story of Daniel in the Lion's Den. After reading it to him, I ask, "Tell me, what did you like about this book, Ethan?"

> Ethan replies, "I liked how he never feared and he was uh, calm."
> "What do you think made him so calm?" I wonder.
> God?" asks Ethan.
> "Do you think he trusted in God?" I ask. Ethan nods his head yes. The discussion ends. I wish I had said, "Say more about that," or "What makes you think so?" when he asked, "God?" But I was leading rather than following Ethan.

Erricker and Erricker (1996) argued that in research with children, " in order to avoid putting ideas into the children's heads or giving the impression that there is a right answer to a question, the style of questioning has to be very open-ended and the interview child-led" (p. 193). Although time-consuming and not without frustration, it does protect the process from folding into adult "God-talk." By moving in too quickly to follow on Ethan's response and asking if he thought Daniel trusted in God, I introduced God-talk on my terms and shut down the discussion that might have allowed me to know more about what Ethan meant by his question.

In reading with his niece Fiona, Pete wanted to know, "Can you think of something that [the story] reminds you of that makes you happy?" Fiona thought of sunsets.

> "Why?" asks Pete.
> "Because sunsets are beautiful," Fiona explains.
> Pointing to a picture in *Adam and Eve's First Sunset* (Sasso, 2003),
> Pete asks, "And does this remind you of anything?"

> "This is most beautiful, too [pauses] everything is like the sun [pauses] it is beautiful," says Fiona.
> "Does either book make you think of something that has happened to you?" Pete wants to know.
> "It makes me think of a sad time," Fiona replies.
> "What was that sad time?"
> "When my uncle died." [Fiona's uncle, her mother's twin, had lived on the same street until he died suddenly a few months before.]
> "I remember that—that was very sad. Why does it make you think of that?" Pete asks.
> "It makes me think of—I'm not sure why," Fiona replies.
> "Do they make you think of a happy time too?" Pete asks, missing the opportunity to be with Fiona in the moment and allow her to reflect on her sadness.
> These are examples from many instances when, reviewing the data, we were reminded of Huebner's (1966) admonition, "Perhaps it is better to remain speechless, awed, with a child who is overcome by a sunset than to say 'how beautiful,' thus labeling and reducing to . . . words an experience which transcends words" (p. 105).

## ON HOLY GROUND

There were, thankfully, many glorious moments in our conversations with children when we were on holy ground and we knew it. Sometimes children seemed to experience awe in the story itself. Tom and Brandon were reading *The Wonderful Happens* (Rylant, 2003). Tom asks why Brandon found the book interesting.

Brandon says, "Because the flowers and the bumble bees, [pausing to pick up on Tom's wording] this book is really interesting."

> "How come?" Tom asks. [His question gives the agenda back to Brandon.]
> "Because they grow." Brandon is silent for a moment before continuing, "and the flower, too. [pauses] They open up, they open up everything. [pauses] They open up and then these bees they go and eat the dandelions and then they put it in their hole and then they make honey with those."

Tom does not rush Brandon. He senses and knows this is a sacred

moment for Brandon, who is almost breathless in his expression of wonderment.

Luke, 3 years old, immediately chooses *Coyote Places the Stars* (Taylor, 1997) when he and his older brother Ethan and their friend Morgan visit me to read stories. They decide to take turns reading and then meet together at the end. Morgan and Ethan convince Luke to leave *Coyote Places the Stars* behind until his turn.

> "What do you see here?" I ask as we open the book together.
> Luke, looking at the picture of a starry sky, leans into it, patting the pages, "Stars, stars, stars, the moon!"
> "I don't see the moon!" I exclaim.
> Luke seems to ignore me, still looking at the page. "Stars, stars, stars—the moon!" he repeats.

Luke, who is ordinarily so active he could dismantle the living room furniture in moments if left to himself, is still, absolutely still. He seems transfixed. Fortunately, I am able to be in the moment and recognize that there is something wonderful about the book to him, this page in particular, and I know I must respect this and wait for him. We are still and silent together, taking in the wonder of it. It is several minutes before we go on with the story, and later we come back to "Stars, stars, stars—the moon!"

He does not want to let go when we finish. So we sit for a while. Then he keeps the book, bringing it back when all three children return to share stories together and asks for it to be read again. He takes the book home with him when we are finished.

## FINDING BETTER WAYS

More often than not, we were researchers who approached our study from an adult research paradigm, becoming more concerned about our questions than those of the children, being so afraid that we would fail to find any spiritual moments that we blundered over and past them. Along with Huebner , we recognize the need to "continue to struggle to find better ways of thinking about children" (1959/1999, p. 7)—and *with* children, we would add. Fortunately, the children in our study led us beyond where we might have gone if left to ourselves.

As policy makers, our study underscored the need for schools to have time for wonder. An education agenda that focuses exclusively on knowledge measurable by objective tests feeds on an alienating curriculum.

Huebner described this as the "functionalizing of education," or a "concern with technique and efficiency" (1959/1999, p. 7). Such an agenda does not leave room for delight, whimsy, silence, welling up, imagination. Despite these challenges, we are not without hope for possibilities available to teachers. Even in a classroom driven by a narrow policy agenda, a library corner with rich choices for children to enjoy at school and take home carves out a space for wonder. Even brief moments for a story with children or a poem provide opportunities to engage with children's spirituality and honor our own.

As teachers, we were reminded that honoring children's spirituality in the classroom requires more than providing opportunities. It requires learning to listen in ways that we are not accustomed to listening, and it requires that we be with them, sometimes in silence. Palmer (2003) noted that "many of us who do the asking have so little experience at educating the soul, so few models for doing so, and such scant institutional support, that our initial efforts are clumsy and flawed" (p. 379).

Our experience reminded us of the need for attention to helping teachers learn how to recognize the transcendent "crammed" into ordinary experiences around them and create spaces—even small ones—for the transcendent. Hunter (1961) wrote, "We cannot talk with children if we do not listen to them. Many of us never do listen to them, really. . . Both we and the children are the poorer for our not listening" (p. 1). Trousdale (2005) cautioned that adults who are interested in exploring children's responses to literature should bear in mind that it is they, not we, who need to fill in the "gaps" in a text, and it is the meaning they make, not the meaning we bring to a text, that matters.

The children we talked with were open to the world in ways that were surprising and often more powerful than we realized in the moment. Despite the times that we were clumsy or insensitive, they were ready to pour out their experience. They did not have to be drawn out or led into spiritual thinking as if it were some other compartment of existence. It was a part of their being in the world.

## MAKING SPACE FOR THE UNSEEN

Once defined outside the interest of school practitioners, research on children's spirituality is beginning to show how the ordinary events of classroom life are "crammed with heaven." Teachers waiting for guidelines for practice may find that developing their own spiritual discipline and engagement with a community of educators on a similar journey can help them to be more sensitive to spirituality in the classroom. But such engagements may not be sufficient to help teachers know how to

recognize and support children's spirituality. Thinking about early recollections of spiritual experience and their possible meaning for classroom practice may be a way to deepen our understanding of how to carve out spaces for children's wholeness within the classroom and deepen the journey we are making with them. Listening to and learning from our own experience helps us to the extent that it aids us in learning how to look and see, listen to and hear children in their expressions of being. Teachers who are ready to provide space for children to express their spiritual nature not only nurture its development but are, in turn, enormously enriched.

## *Notes*

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1. Peter Cummings, Meghan Fitzgerald, Susanna Kochan-Lorch, Heeral Mehta-Parekh, Maria Molnar, Thomas Roepke, and Timber Washington were all members of the seminar and contributed to an AERA paper, "'God Doesn't Wear a Baseball Cap!' Exploring Children's Spiritual Experience Through Picture Books," presented at the 2005 AERA meeting in Montreal.

2. Susan Stires, then at Teachers College, worked with us to identify an array of appropriate choices. Her expertise in children's literature and personal interest in our project were invaluable resources.

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