



Nurturing Children's Spiritual Lives: A Journey of Spirit and Wonder

Melinda Wenner Bradley

When a new baby or child arrives in our lives, into our care, we learn to assess their needs: *What does my crying child need? Is the baby hungry? Does she need to be fed? Is his diaper wet? What does my child need to help them fall asleep?* We learn how to feed, change, bath and soothe a child. And at times we find ourselves overriding a child's wants to meet these needs: *You need to take a bath. You need to get to bed. Do you need a hug?*

And yet, where our children's **spiritual lives** are concerned, parents and caregivers are sometimes uncertain of both the needs and our role in nurturing their young lives. As we continue to explore and grow in our own spiritual lives, this is a place to start – for we are called to be on this journey with them, walking beside them on our own spiritual path and modeling participation as much as guidance. We might consider what tools our Quaker faith offers us in this aspect of our parenting? How might queries be a resource for parents to use when approaching behavior and needs of their children? How do Friends testimonies help to guide and affirm our choices and decisions for our family? How do these foundational practices and beliefs of our faith tradition support our nurture of children's spiritual lives?

Another starting point is to define what we mean when we say, "spirituality." Much has been written, and Dr. Rebecca Nye, in her book *Children's Spirituality: What It Is and Why It Matters*¹, suggests that "Spirituality is not something that likes to be confined in words," and she uses the term, "relational consciousness," to describe the core of children's spirituality. Children feel highly relational to others, to the natural world, to self, to God. Relational consciousness includes transcendental moments of awareness in which one feels connected to "more than just me." When my son was three years old, we were sitting together in a room where the windows were wide open and the floor-length curtains were billowing into the room with the breeze. Noticing, he pointed and simply said, "God." He seemed to be aware of something "more than just me."

Children are not born to us empty vessels, waiting to be filled with the ingredients of a spiritual life. Rather, they come to us with the Light within, ready to shine. Rufus Jones wrote, "Something of God comes into our world with every child that is born. There is here with the newborn child a divine spark, a light within." (Rufus Jones, 1948) Indeed, early Quakers moved away from practices like baptism, which they saw as "form without substance," and rather spoke of being Spirit filled.

It is a unique experience for parents, who are used to providing for a baby or child to meet their needs, to instead ponder how to nurture some part of their child already nascent. Research about children's spirituality emphasizes that children experience their spirituality in the midst of the everyday, not exclusively in the extraordinary (God in the breeze). While integrated and not compartmentalized in this way, children's spirituality can also be erratic in that children are able to move from the profound and abstract to the everyday with fluency.²

¹ Nye, Rebecca. *Children's Spirituality: What is it and why it matters*. London: Church House Publishing, 2009.

² Hay, David, and Rebecca Nye. *The Spirit of the Child*. Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2006.

We do not need to provide the seeds of spirituality, rather our responsibility is to nurture it, and Nye's work also proposes six criteria for how we might approach this as parents and teachers; she uses the acronym SPIRIT: space, process, imagination, relationship, intimacy, trust. SPIRIT describes tools we need to nurture our children, including places where queries, testimonies and silence are resources:

Space can be physical, but it can also be aural and emotional; we can teach and model the value of listening, of leaving space open for silence, worship and continued revelation of Truth. There are "unspoken messages" for us in the physical space of most meetinghouses; in their simplicity they speak to an emphasis on the people in the space, and lift up their direct relationship with the Divine. There is also the "space" created when very young children do not yet have the ability to express their experience verbally; they may teach us about the importance of the non-verbal and what lives in that place before words fill it.

Parents might ask,

- *Where is there room for silence in our family life? (Grace before meals? A quiet walk together? The drive to school?)*
- *In moments of stress or even conflict, how can silence be a tool for finding perspective or patience?*
- *Am I listening to my child? When do I best listen, and when am I challenged to do so? How do I demonstrate that I am listening?*
- *What physical environments nurture my spiritual life? Have I shared and explored these with my child?*

Process is often overlooked in a culture focused on product and achievement. Young children seem to endlessly ask, "Why?" and this question is a good reminder to ponder process – it focuses not on outcome but *how did we get here?* When we *wonder* about questions with children we're honoring their "need to know," and drive to sate their curiosity, while also making space for creativity, and acknowledging that there can be many answers and ways to arrive at them. The image of a labyrinth is also illustrative of process: the journey toward the center takes us closer to it and then farther away, but we continue on the journey inward and once we arrive, begin again. The point is to contemplate the journey, not rush to its end.

Parents might ask,

- *What opportunities are there in our family life for play? What activities make space for process and experiences together that are not focused on outcomes?*
- *How do family stories offer opportunities to enjoy our journey together?*
- *Do we **wonder** together about our experiences, feelings and questions?*³
- *Where are opportunities to model or teach a process: problem solving, resolving conflicts peacefully, following a recipe*

Imagination is an important tool for children and their play. Developmentally, children between 3-7 years old are in a place where play is fantasy-filled and imitative; a gift of this

³ *Wondering* gives permission for there to be many answers, and queries that begin with "I wonder" are both open and invitational. We might add, "I wonder" to the beginning of all these queries, for ourselves!

age is the birth of imagination. Older children continue to need outlets for play and using their imagination.

Parents might ask,

- *How do I provide space and time for my child to use their imagination, be open to leadings and openings?*
- *How does our approach to stories (children's literature, scripture, family stories) provide language and image, but leave space for imagination and wonder?*
- *How do we empower our children to use their imaginations in both their creative life, and problem solving? How are space and imagination tools for stepping aside and letting children find their own answers and solutions?*

Spirituality is about connection and **relationships**. The relationship to what we might call the Spirit, or God, is primal but our relationships to one another are essential, too. For children, their relationships at home and school are primary and formative, laying groundwork for how they approach their questions about and relationship to the spiritual realm.

Also inherent to this relationship is an **intimacy** with our emotions – children need to feel safe (and be safe) to express what they feel and wonder about, to remain open to the big questions they encounter. Existential questions about death, freedom, aloneness/connection, and meaning/purpose are part of our experience as humans, and not outside the experiences of childhood. **Trust** can include a comfort with knowing, and not knowing; spirituality includes trusting in what we cannot see, but know is there. For Friends, gathering in waiting worship is an act of both relational intimacy and trust in the process we enter as we settled into silence individually and as a community. We need to trust in processes we create, trust ourselves and trust our children in order to let go enough to make space for growing.

Parents might ask,

- *When have I wondered with my child about a question or idea? Do I share my own questions and wonderings in ways that model spiritual journeying?*
- *Where do I feel safe, and where do we create safe space for sharing in our family?*
- *What kind of boundaries for sharing feelings and experiences of the Spirit feel right for our family? Do I model healthy boundaries for my child?*
- *What processes have we created as a family for decision-making that allows us to share ideas and feelings in a safe way?*

As we seek to meet a child's needs in our parenting, nurturing their spiritual lives is a natural part of that caretaking. Our Quaker faith offers ways to speak to this concept of SPIRIT, and the queries we lift up are both for us as individual seekers, and for our parenting role. In this duality is a key to Spirit-led parenting: we need not have all the answers, but be on the journey with our children, wondering with them, listening, and staying open to the continuing revelation of Truth. Our children ask that in this way we grow *with them*.

Melinda Wenner Bradley © 2014

