

“Soul-Tending: Using Picture Books to Nurture Spirituality in Young Children”

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Introduction

Dr. Montessori believed in a spiritual force that guides human development; referring to this force as “*an individual spiritual embryo*” (Montessori, 1972, p. 109). In educating the young child, she urged teachers to respect this spiritual force and to follow the natural inclinations of the child—understanding that the direction of a child’s life is contained within his own soul. Montessori writes, “*Our care of the child should be governed, not by the desire ‘to make him learn things’, but by the endeavor always to keep burning within him that light which is called the intelligence*” (Montessori, 1965, p. 240). Consistent with her observations of the young child, she believed that the first six years are exceptionally significant to the holistic and spiritual development of the child. Unfolding in the child are unique sensitivities or critical periods of learning in which, “*the young child literally ‘incarnates’ the world around him. The things he sees are not just remembered; they form a part of his soul*” (Montessori, 1972, p. 63). It is in these privileged moments of teaching and these silent moments of personal reflection that the Ignatian principles resonate deeply for me—tending, mending, and nourishing my soul.

Acknowledgments

The Ignatian Mentoring Program lights the way for significant spiritual and intellectual growth. My friend and mentor, Trudelle Thomas, has blessed me with her time, patience, honesty, expertise, and spiritual guidance. She skillfully choralizes my unending questions and thoughts regarding the Ignatian principles into guided practices including meditation, the *daily examen*, and the spiritual exercises. This year of mentoring and discernment continues to cultivate the *magis* in my personal and professional life; affording me the moments to follow the questions and trust in the answers. Trudelle has also inspired me to pursue my efforts of developing and presenting a comprehensive workshop on literature as relevant and pertinent to the spiritual development of the child. With many cups of coffee, lunch meetings, and phone calls we gathered research on the spiritual development of the child, discerned children’s literature relevant to the topic, developed teaching strategies to cultivate spirituality in the young child for parents and educators in sectarian and non-sectarian settings, and have been accepted to present on this topic at the American Montessori Society National Conference, March 15, 2013.

The following article provides a comprehensive view of the spirituality of the child in relation to literature as tending to its development.

Development of Topic

“It is the spirit of the child that can determine the course of human progress and lead it perhaps even to a higher form of civilization”

Dr. Maria Montessori

Unique to the Montessori Method of education is the cross curricula emphasis placed on the spirit of the child. Over the past two decades professional discourse regarding the topic of spirituality and its stance within the realm of children’s education and development has been growing. This is due, in part, to an increased sensitivity toward cultural diversity and to the significant proclamation issued by the 1989 U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child confirming that children are entitled to spiritual nurturance indistinguishable from other necessary needs.

Indeed, spirituality in the Montessori classroom is not a fabricated lesson that finds itself on a shelf to be used briefly and then returned; rather it is embedded in the lessons, conversations, activities, and daily interactions that occur harmoniously in a school day. Conversational language, storytelling, and book reading provide fertile and accessible terrain for children to explore their spiritual growth, identity, and relationship with self and others.

The Voices of Children

Our ability to communicate with one another is perhaps the most transforming social quality of our humanness; it is often the path in which we share a deeper dimension of ourselves. According to researchers, David Hay and Rebecca Nye, children’s thoughts and feeling about spiritual and religious themes appear to be a natural part of human development and if their abilities are sufficient they may employ language to verbalize their spirituality (Hay and Nye, p. 142). Over the years, my awareness of this idea has heightened and I have become more “present” in these privileged moments with children, to this point I share an excerpt of one of my young students gifted to me over 12 years ago.

There is an idea that comes into my mind that I wish I did not think about ...it is that the world could be destroyed... My hope and prayer is that the families and children of those at war are able to stay strong and get thru the pain. If I had one wish, I would wish for world peace and that food would be plentiful for everyone.

Dylanne (8 years old)

Dr. Robert Coles noted that in numerous conversations with children regarding spiritual concerns there appeared, regardless of cultural and religious background, a common desire to understand the universe and their place in it. This was often articulated through words, gestures, songs, stories, and drawings. In addition, children often combine spiritual musings with ethical concerns, e.g. wondering why there is injustice in the world and often expressing a wish to influence the entire universe in an effort to improve its condition.

Rebecca Nye explains that while conducting her research in two primary schools, children were willing and enthusiastic to talk with an adult whom they hardly knew, about their feelings and thoughts. Through these conversations, Dr. Nye noted that as children expressed themselves their unique spiritual self emerged.

Ruth, a seemingly quiet, happy, and articulate 6 year old, had a pronounced sense of wonder and delight. Her individual way of commenting and answering questions were imaginative in response, often drawing on nature, her senses, and appreciation of the mysterious transformations that occur in life. (Hay and Nye, pp. 95-96).

Ruth's own individual signature, if you will, or her aesthetic appreciation of the natural world, directed the form of her spiritual responses.

What does this mean in considering our own perceptions of spirituality and our sustaining relationships with children? How do children experience their environment and, in particular, their spirituality? These are personal and professional questions worth time and reflection. As educators we are skilled in initiating dialogue, listening to children's conversations, extracting information, and asking pertinent questions—this is familiar territory, yet if we heighten our awareness and become more intentional in our practice to cultivate and nourish the spirit of the child—we begin to pause and listen differently, honor the conversations as transcending and transforming, and seek to follow the questions.

Through their research, Hay and Nye discovered that dismissing conversations of a spiritual nature with children is detrimental to their spiritual growth so much that after the age of seven children will suppress fundamental questions to the point that they insist they were never asked. By listening to children thoughtfully without imposing easy answers, teachers and caregivers can foster open-mindedness and also supply some language and concepts as scaffolding for spiritual expression. (T. Thomas, working book draft).

Language emerges with experiences in speaking, visualizing, thinking, reading, and writing. For the young child, the critical period of sensory exploration and language acquisition is particularly significant to the spiritual development of the child which is also unfolding and revealing itself during these formative years. Therefore, it is important to create an environment in which young children feel safe, honored, and respected in sharing their innermost thoughts and feelings.

Literature provides another option in which children can relate experiences and make meaningful connections. Discerning books of spiritual relevance including those related to emotions, values, compassion, solitude, joy, and wonderment is paramount in the process of shared reading and conversations with children. Matching children's literature using Dr. Fowler's stages of spiritual development is one method that supports the child in this process. Although there is some debate among researchers as to the concept of spirituality being structured in such a definable manner, most agree that certain common themes prevail relative to a child's psycho-social and spiritual development.

Fowler's Stages of Spiritual Development	Literature Criteria to Support Stages of Spiritual Development
<p><u>Intuitive Stage</u>: Pre-images of the Holy or Divine. Security and Protection Rooted in their surroundings-nature Ages: 2-7</p>	<p>Mother figures, maybe in stories related to animals and other characters Security, protection, love, and caring Nature oriented themes</p>
<p><u>Mythic Stage</u>: Prosocial behavior Moral issues Empathy Self-esteem Comfort and Security Achievement Ages: approx. 7-11</p>	<p>Narratives Stories that apply to values Imagery Can create and retell stories about spiritual experiences Problem Solving Learning how to deal with the world Cosmic awareness</p>

In the unique development of each child approximations are inevitable, this table is intended as a reference tool, serving to direct literature to meet a child's social, emotional, and spiritual needs.

The process of discerning literature as relevant to this topic became a hobby and mission of sorts. It is quite easy to become immersed, even as adults, in the stories, illustrations, and characters of children's picture books. Throughout the course of this year, Trudelle and I have categorized picture books and aligned them within the context of subject matter. I have included those subject areas in this article to support your *own* engagements with children. We have learned much in this year of reading with children and listening to their conversations; perhaps most importantly we have forged our efforts to bring the conversation of children's spirituality to a broad audience including parents, students, and educators in sectarian and non-sectarian settings.

References

- Fowler, James. (Ed.). (2001). *Stages of faith: The psychology of human development and the quest for meaning*. San Francisco:Harper.
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Literature Topics to Foster Children's Spirituality

1. Seeking Wisdom

“Wisdom” refers to the ability to make good choices and to recognize what is most valuable, righteous, and enduring. It involves setting priorities and devoting the most effort and time to that which is your highest value; in this regard, it implies discernment, that is, not just the ability to make choices between right and wrong, but also between competing goods.

Reading aloud with children, sharing your own stories, and listening to children with respect are all ways to foster wisdom. Wisdom-seeking involves asking questions about value, about the big picture, and about consequences of actions. To reinforce wisdom, many picture books explore themes of love, generosity, fairness, modesty, humility, self control, loyalty, and more. Such books help children to learn positive values and ideals.

Jonathan Haidt in The Happiness Hypothesis has explored wisdom traditions from around the world to come up with 24 virtues that appear recurrently. The ones most associated with wisdom are these six: 1) Curiosity; 2) love of learning, 3) critical thinking (good judgment) 4) creativity; 5) social intelligence, and 6) perspective (ability to step back).

An important aspect of wisdom is simply to respect and live with the questions: There are often no simple answers, but even so it is important to keep asking questions. A few books that offer wisdom are the following:

Muth, John J., The Three Questions. A young boy seeks counsel from, Leo, the wise turtle who lives in the mountains as to the three questions; “When is the best time to do things?”, “Who is the most important one?”, and “What is the right thing to do?” While Leo does not give him the answers directly it is the experiences of the young boy that leads him to the answers he is looking for.

Demi, The Greatest Power. Based on a fictitious story about the boy emperor Ping, who is known for his love of harmony, he sets a challenge to the children of his kingdom: show him the greatest power in the world. According to the Emperor, “To know the greatest power in the world is to know the greatest peace.” The children of the kingdom set to work with their own ideas of what the greatest power might be; money, weapons, or beauty; with the exception of a young girl name Sing. As she reflects upon the challenge, Sing wonders how any of those things, which cannot last forever, could be the greatest power in the world. Certain of something even more powerful, she contemplates on the source rather than the pleasure of the emperor. This lyrical text enraptures young readers and encourages contemplative thought as its story unfolds. In the realm of spirituality, the idea of interrelatedness, wisdom and harmony are depicted beautifully.

In addition, an abundance of folk tales, fables, fairy tales, and other wisdom tales from cultures around the world are readily available. Educators can help them see the common ground among different traditions.

Moreover, folk tales often transmit values by telling stories of animals and fanciful creatures. Here are a few that feature African or African American settings:

Aranjo, Frank. The Perfect Orange (Ethiopia)

McDermott, Gerald. The Magic Tree: A Tale from the Congo.

Paye, W. and Lippert, M. Head, Body, Legs: A Tale from Liberia

Step toe, John. Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters: An African Tale.

2. Becoming Your Own Person

Young children will benefit from stories that encourage them to trust themselves and become who they are meant to be. This is not the same as building self-esteem through verbally affirming children. Rather becoming one's own person involves growing in self-knowledge, listening to one's own experiences and desires, and taking action to contribute to the world. This includes a cluster of practices and questions: Who am I? Who am I called to become? Listening to one's inner voices and intuitions. Finding one's voice and using it. Self-mastery.

Drs. Hay and Nye explain that becoming one's own person "involves a child's sense of relationship with their own identity and her own mental life." This includes the relationship to one's own body and consciousness, questions from children include: Why am I here? How did I get here?

As children learn to become their own person (and avoid becoming someone else) they are likely to grow in resilience, perseverance, and confidence. Biographies of people who had dreams and aspirations as children fit into this category. This includes children who overcame obstacles in order to follow a dream.

Pavlova, Anna. I Dreamed I Was a Ballerina: A Girlhood Story. This is a picture book which tells a girl who saw a performance of "*Sleeping Beauty*" at a theatre and eventually, with much determination, went on to become a ballerina who danced on stages all around the world.

Cannon, Janell. Stellaluna. A small fruit bat is taken in by a mother bird who nurtures her along with her other babies. Stellaluna never really fits in with the rest of the family, but they value her anyway. Eventually she discovers her true identity as a bat and teachings her old "siblings" bat-skills, just as they helped her learn bird-skills.

Fox, Mem, Whoever You Are. This short story portrays children around the world joined together by their similarities rather than differences. It calls on familiar childhood experiences and relates them to those of all children, i.e. pain, love, and joy. The text is written for young children with two lines on each page. A replication of a hand-carved gold frame, borders each of the vibrant pictures. The framework is a point of interest for children and inspires a valuable quality to the text and pictures (framed art is often special). Looking at artwork is glimpsing into the window of an artist's life. This is a rather abstract concept of spirituality for the young child. If we use this story to talk about the frame as being the outside of the window the perspective is narrowed. Help children create their own frames; this is often as easy as stopping by the local art supply store for donated scraps of matte board. Let children frame their own work and ask, Children may be encouraged to discuss these questions with each other.

3. Unplugged Time

The increasingly hectic pace of life and electronic over-stimulation may contribute even more to stress in children (adults too). Alone time is especially important for children who are introverted or sensitive by nature, but it is important for all children.

Of the five categories on this list "alone time" is the one that is least affirmed by our culture. It is vital that parents and teachers find ways to let children know it is good and healthy for children to spend time alone—time truly alone, not plugged into gadgets. There are many ways adults can foster alone time—taking a child on a nature walk, teaching a child breathing-meditation or guided imagery, providing a sandbox or other hobbies that foster solitary play. Bird watching (at a feeder) or visiting museums also

can foster quiet. Architect Sarah Susanka recommends that every home have an “away room” where a person can escape activity; if this isn’t possible, a quiet nook or corner or even a tree-house or fort can provide an oasis of solitude.

On a similar note, quiet time is valuable, even when a child cannot be alone. One mother insisted her four children have “read and rest” every day after lunch during summer breaks; kids could read or rest in their shared rooms. Even though they were not actually alone, they were resting quietly and came to value this daily quiet time.

Many creative adults regard quiet times as essential to their creative process. Authors Barbara Kingsolver and Aldo Leopold and many others have written about the time they spent alone in childhood as essential to their creativity. The same is true of many inventors, artists, and musicians.

Teachers can use picture books as a way to reinforce the value time spent away from busy-ness. Such books can be used as a springboard for conversation. “How do you know when you need time alone?” “What do you do when it gets too noisy?” “Do you think Little Bear felt lonely when he was all alone?” These are some of the questions that can help a child to name and honor the value of time alone or in silence.

Boynton, Sondra. One Two Three (rhyming board book). A counting book that goes from 1-10. The best lines are on the last few pages: Ten makes a celebration LOUD, LOUD, LOUD, and one is wonderful after a crowd. This book will appeal to quiet spirits.

Carle, Eric. The Very Quiet Cricket. A baby cricket is eager to make a sound by rubbing his legs together, especially as a wide assortment of creatures greets him (a worm, a dragon fly, a cicada). No sound comes out until the very end when he meets another small cricket.

Barbara Cooney, Miss Rumphius. A tale of a woman who wanted to travel the world when she grew up and then live by the sea, just as her grandfather had done. Her grandfather had asked her to do something to make the world more beautiful. In her aging she realizes that the random scattering of lupine seeds grow into the most beautiful gardens in her neighborhood.

4. The Golden World

Researchers Hay and Nye write “Mystery-sensing” as a central aspect of children’s spirituality (1998, p. 66). “Mystery involves the awareness of life experiences that are in principle incomprehensible.” Talk of mystery involves acknowledging that reason and human knowledge, valuable as they are, are limited. There is much that humans do not know but can still appreciate.

Wonder comes naturally to young children who are discovering the world for the first time. Indeed, one of the pleasures of being around young children is the chance to re-experience the wonder of simple things: a flame appearing when a match is struck; the sunset, water coming from a faucet, or a butterfly. In her famous essay, environmentalist Rachel Carson writes that “To keep a sense of wonder alive, every child needs at least one adult with whom he can share it.” Otherwise, sophistication and coolness can set in, sometimes as early as age 6 or 7, and deplete a child of this innate, life-enhancing capacity. Otto explains that experiences of wonder are not taught but caught; they can be awakened and affirmed

Books that address themes that are beyond human understanding reinforce the value of wonder and awe. These include those that affirm the importance of gratitude and giving thanks and underscore the importance of wonder and openness as well. But even when person begins to understand something from a scientific point of view, she can still hold on to the amazement and wonder it inspires. A child can

learn that the Grand Canyon was formed by many years of erosion and still stand in awe of its majestic beauty.

Jonathan Haidt, who studied world wisdom traditions (mentioned above) saw these six enduring virtues as contributing to a sense of transcendence: 1) gratitude; 2) ability to appreciate beauty/excellence; 3) hope; 4) humor and playfulness; 5) enthusiasm or zest; 6) spirituality (defined as a sense of purpose).

Muth, Zen Shorts. This book combines stunning illustrations and spare language to deliver three classic Zen stories of enlightenment and love. In this picture book, three siblings view the world differently when a giant panda moves into the neighborhood and tells each of them an amazing tale. This unique book offers real-life lessons in a gentle way -- and will foster thoughtful discussions about how we should treat ourselves and others.

5. Widening the Circle

Researchers Hay and Nye coined the term “relational consciousness to describe a heightened awareness of being related to things, other people, to oneself, and the divine. They found that young children are generally more aware of the interconnectedness of being (hence their interest in animals). This is in part because of their obvious dependence on parents and others. But even so, at times they experience a heightened sense of this connectedness, of the interrelationship of all things—spoken of as an “waking up” or an intense “noticing.”

Hay and Nye contrast relational consciousness with the “possessive individualism” which is seen as normal for many people in the Western world. Most people see themselves as individuals first and foremost, and view ties to other people and to nature as secondary. This individualism is often defined in terms of things they possess, whether material goods or abilities.

While becoming one’s own person is important, it is equally important for the child to remember that she is always connected to others and will “become oneself” within this context.

Self and others (especially mother, family)

Self and animals

Self and world

Wood, Douglas. Where the Sunrise Begins. In posing the question, “Where does the sun rise begin?” This book explores a series of possibilities including a marsh, a lake, a treetop, a far off country, until it materializes that the sunrise begins in you. Beautifully illustrated and not too text heavy.

Brown, Margaret Wise. Runaway Bunny. A small bunny tests the love of his mother by proposing situations that encourage his mother to respond. The mother bunny dispels every situation with an unconditional response of love and devotion.

Sources Consulted and Recommended Reading:

Haidt, Jonathan. The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Times. 2006. Basic Books:

Hay, David and Nye, Rebecca. The Spirit of the Child. 1998. Harper Collins: London

Broad criteria to use when you choosing children's books:

- A good story. Something you and your child/children may want to hear.
- Beautiful illustrations / something you enjoy looking at.
- A worthwhile message without being too overt.
- Not too much text on the page.
- Something both the child and adult can enjoy over and over.
- A few well-chosen books are better than a big pile. Try to avoid bad art, commercial images; anything that's too didactic or too sentimental.

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