Parent-Education in a Montessori Lab School:

Picture Books, Lectio Divina and the Daily Examen

By Trudelle Thomas, Mentor, 31 May 2012

Abstract: The essay that follows describes two related topics valuable to young parents:[1] *reading aloud to children as a form of Lectio Divina (or Divine Reading) and the Daily Examen, two spiritual practices that I find to be especially adaptable to parents of young (pre-school) children and their young (pre-primary) children. Included are twenty guidelines for reading and discussing picture books. The essay will be especially helpful in planning parent-education programs. It is also valuable for parents, educators, and those training future educators, including religious educators.*

Many on Xavier University's campus are familiar with name Dorothy Day because of the Dorothy Day Center for Peace and Justice, located in the Gallagher Student Center. Many know that Day was co-founder of the Catholic Worker Movement that led to the counter-cultural *Catholic Worker* newspaper and the Catholic Worker Houses of Hospitality that have reached out to the indigent in cities across the U.S. since the 1930s. But people are less likely to know that Day was also a single mother and later a grandmother. I recently read about her experience as a grandmother, visiting her daughter Tamar and her children, then living in a rural location without electricity. Day made a comment something like this: "This is a whole new level of poverty—caring for sick children, without electricity, without help." Day stayed for months to help Tamar care for the children. (The incident is comment is recounted in *The Life You Save May Be Your Own* by Paul Elie, 2003.)

On our campus we often associate poverty with the homeless, the urban poor, and those in developing countries who are materially poor. But there are other kinds of poverty that are just as oppressive as material poverty. When Day visited Tamar, she was struck not just by the material poverty (Tamar and her husband were trying to establish an intentional community with limited resources) but by isolation and the heavy responsibilities of tending to several children, some of them sick.

During he past year I (a professor of English) have enjoyed being a mentor/collaborator with Lesley Roth (principal of Xavier's University lab school). Our particular shared interest has been children's literacy, but our collaboration is leading to several other endeavors that will extend beyond the one-year Ignatian Mentoring Program. We are reaching out to parents of children in the Montessori pre-primary program because we perceive a need for spiritual enrichment and encouragement. We offered a parent-education workshop at the end of the current school year, and plans are now being made for several such workshops (perhaps five or six) during the coming school year. These will be publicized as "parent-education" and will address topics relevant to both childrearing and to spiritual self-care. Ignatian spirituality will be woven into these workshops. (See the appendix, "*Pragmatics for the Parent Education Workshops*" at the end of this essay for more details.) The essay that follows describes two related topics valuable to young parents:[2] reading aloud to children as a form of Lectio Divina (or Divine Reading) and the Daily Examen, two spiritual practices that I find to be especially adaptable to this life-stage.

The Saturday morning workshop I led was entitled "Tending Your Soul as a Parent of Young Ones." About eight parents (all mothers) attended. I made a presentation and facilitated conversation that led to an impressive degree of candid sharing about the challenges and joys of young parenthood. At the beginning I invited people to go around the circle and briefly introduce

[2] I use the phrase "young parents" rather than the more cumbersome "parents of young children" to refer to parents younger than school age. The phrase refers not to chronological age but to the stage of parenting.

themselves, and the first few mothers mentioned the ages of their children and their outside jobs (if they had one). I interrupted and said, "No, tell me about something that is part of your life that you enjoy apart from your work or children--maybe a hobby or interest." This interruption shifted the focus from the mothers' roles to themselves, and contributed to a noticeable energy shift, as if participants were dropping their masks for an hour or so. It avoided the common division between "stay-at-home mothers" versus "working mothers." This form of introduction contributed, I think, to the openness of the group and the candor that followed.

After leading the workshop, I was struck by the contrast between the lives of these young mothers (in their twenties and thirties) and the "traditional" undergraduate students that I normally teach. Like most Jesuit universities, we seek to attract and retain students by offering an array of services. These include not just stimulating course offerings but also dormitories with cleaning service provided, an award-winning cafeteria, verdant campus grounds, and a range of clubs and social opportunities. All this is meant to make the college years as enriching as possible.

Fast-forward five or ten years, and the some of the very same students are likely to find themselves the parents of one or more young children. As I pointed out to the mothers at the workshop, "There's probably no time in your life that will involve so much responsibility and so little support." Caring for young children is an enormously demanding responsibility, often as consuming as boot camp or a medical residency, but this life-stage is less recognized as valuable and lasts longer (six years at least, more for those with several children). Parenting young children involves not just round-the-clock physical and emotional care, it also involves laying the foundation for dispositions, attitudes and values that will likely influence their children for many years to come. Maria Montessori understood the importance of early childhood and would probably agree with the adage "the first years last forever." Parents who cultivate a spiritual life are better able to reconcile the disconnect between the heavy responsibilities of childrearing and

the lack of practical support for it. Young parents can greatly benefit from the wisdom of Ignatian spirituality.

I offer parents the following definitions of spirituality: "opening ourselves to the intimate and direct influence of the divine in our lives . . . seeking the effect of waking up or expanding our understanding of who we are and what our place is in the universe (if only for a moment)" (from Tobin Hart's *The Secret Spiritual World of Children*, p. 8). Others speak of the spiritual as involving the individual's experience and relationship with a fundamental, nonmaterial aspect of the universe in a way that she finds meaning. Both definitions involve *direct experience* of fundamental, non-material realities. Spirituality can be deepened through what is commonly referred to as "spiritual practices." A spiritual practice (or discipline) is: "an intentionally-directed action by which we do what we *can* do in order to receive from God the ability to do what we *cannot* do by direct effort" (from the *Renovare Spiritual Formation Bible*). A spiritual practice helps a person connect with a Higher Power or God or a larger community than she encounters in her day-to-day life, and thus helps her strengthen a spiritual life.

Moreover, spirituality is different from religion, which involves a set of beliefs, moral codes, sacred texts, rites and rituals, and holidays, often guided by a religious professional (such as a rabbi, guru, or pastor). It is possible to be religious without being spiritual, or to be spiritual without being religious. I believe that, ideally, spirituality is best fostered by participation in a religious tradition combined with personal "practice", but I do not assume that parents in a non-sectarian school setting share this belief.

Caring parents are generally concerned with their children's education and see the value of exposing children to books and stories. Reading aloud to children during the preschool years correlates with later success in school and life, so many parents try to build shared reading into their daily routine, often at bedtime. Reading aloud with children can be linked to the ancient practice of Lectio Divina (Divine Reading), at least occasionally, so that such reading can become a type of spiritual practice *for both children and parents*. If parents learn a few basic skills in

how to select picture books and facilitate meditation and conversation about books, story-time can become a way to nurture their own spiritual lives as well as a time to both teach and learn from their children.

Lectio Divina (or Divine Reading) developed early in the Christian tradition and has taken a variety of forms over the centuries, especially in monasteries; there has been a surge of new interest in Divine Reading over the last twenty years or so among lay people. Historically, Divine Reading was a spiritual practice that involved four steps: read, meditate, pray, contemplate. These steps often overlap and merge into one another. A person might read a short passage of scripture (or a devotional text or a poem) aloud with an open heart, meditate on that passage (using the imagination and feelings, not just the intellect), pray for insight, and then carry the passage forward into the day. She might also memorize the passage (or phrases from the passage) and recall it during her daily routine. The goal is not to study the passage in the academic sense (which might involve researching the historical background and the author, or analyzing the passage). Rather the goal is to absorb its meaning, letting it speak to the heart and soul. To use a homely analogy, Divine Reading is like steeping oneself (like a teabag) or soaking oneself in a particular text.

For young parents and their children, I suggest viewing Divine Reading in terms of reading/listening, imagining, conversing (sharing insights or reactions), and going forth (finding ways to bring the insights to bear on their day-to-day lives). Parents first must choose appropriate picture books to share with children, a step which may be easier than it sounds. "Spiritual picture books" are ones that address spiritual themes or questions. Loyola Press offers a series called "Pray Me a Story" that includes nine different well-known, high quality picture books along with "Parent Guides" that link each story to spiritual reflection and prayer. The Parent Guides are rooted in the Roman Catholic tradition but the picture books themselves are not necessarily Catholic or Christian; they can be linked to other spiritual world views as well. In addition, writers Douglas Wood (*Old Turtle* and *Granddad's Prayers for the Earth* and others) and Rabbi

Sandy Eisenberg Sasso (*God's Paintbrush*, *God In Between,* and others) are two more authors known for "spiritual but not religious" picture books. (Lesley and I are working on a bibliography of picture books that can be used in a non-sectarian school setting or in homes of any faith or no faith. See Lesley Roth's essay elsewhere in this collection for a partial listing or excellent picture books.)

Once a parent has chosen a book, she (or he) must develop the ability to read the book aloud and facilitate conversation in such a way that children can absorb it contemplatively—the Divine Reading process of reading/listening, imagining, conversing and going forth. Lest this process sound too complicated, let me share an example of the process.

The well-loved author Max Lucado has written a picture book entitled *You Are Special* (available in board-book or full picture book size) which tells of a fellow named Punchinello who is part of a town populated by "Wemmicks", wooden puppets who spend all their time putting stickers on one another: gold stars (for the beautiful or strong) or grey dots (for the less "successful"). Punchinello gets mostly grey dots and is understandably downcast until he meets Lucia, a free spirit who happily lacks both stars and dots. People try to affix them to her but they simply will not stick. When Punchinello asks her secret, Lucia explains that everyday she visits Eli the Woodcarver, who lives on a hill nearby; these visits, she says, make her impervious to others' labels. "Why don't you visit Eli and see for yourself?" Lucia suggests. Punchinello reluctantly climbs the hill to visit Eli. Eli greets the lad warmly, saying he has been hoping for such a visit. Punchinello learns that Eli is the actual "Maker" who has carved all the Wemmicks and that he *loves* them all. He actually loves Punchinello and values him regardless of his looks or accomplishments. Punchinello basks in Eli's welcome and when he leaves the woodshop, one of his grey dots spontaneously pops off. Readers are left with the impression that there will be more visits to Eli and that perhaps Punchinello will begin to care less about giving or receiving sticky dots and stars.

Adult readers may readily see the allegory Lucado has created: God has created humans, loves them unconditionally, and will strengthen them when they find ways to regularly "visit" or commune with God. But his allegory goes further in offering a critique of a society which places such a huge emphasis on labeling individuals in terms of success and failure. Labels focus on the person or what I think of as the false self. Lucado goes still further and suggests a remedy for all this labeling: regular visits to the Maker. He does not spell out what form these "visits" will take, which leaves the concept open to interpretation in different families. The story encourages readers to disregard others' labels and instead turn to God for a sense of worth and value. A person's true worth stems from a much deeper source, and humans can make contact with that deeper source.-

The Wemmicks embody a false self that Wakefield regards as the "the old American success ethic . . . which still makes it a shame to admit failure, be it personal or professional . . . . [or to be anything other than] a smiling achiever moving ceaselessly onward and upward from the crib to the great condo in the sky" (Wakefield, *The Story of Your Life*). While achievement is a worthy goal, it becomes a trap when it becomes a persona that eclipses all other aspects of a human being. *You Are Special* offers a way to talk about these concepts in a way a child can understand.

Following this story, a parent and child might have a fruitful conversation something like this:

Parent: Did you like that story?

Bobby: Those Wemmicks were really mean to Punchinello.

Parent: Do you ever see kids treat each other that way?

Bobby: Susie called me a fatso on the playground.

Parent: Kind of like getting a gray dot, isn't it? How did that make you feel?

Bobby: Really bad. I wanted to hit her but I knew I would get in trouble.

Parent: Sometimes I get really mad in traffic and I take a deep breath. Or I give myself a time out by counting to ten.

Bobby: I don't like time outs.

Parent: Punchinello took a kind of time out by visiting Eli. A time-out isn't always a punishement. Could you do something like that?

Bobby: Maybe I could ask God to help me, like my Sunday School teacher says. Or maybe I could sing a song so I wouldn't have to listen to him.

Parent: Let's try not to be Wemmicks in our house. Because I really love you whether you have no gold stars or hundreds of them. Are you ready for another story or do you want to play?

An actual conversation would probably be briefer than this, but this illustrates the general process of reading/listening, imagining, sharing (conversing), and going forth.

Often parents start out reading to children as a way to educate and nurture their children, but in time, they find that the books and children end up educating and nurturing them. At the Saturday workshop, one mother remarked, "I loved *You Are Special*! It's so moving—I'm buying a copy for several of my friends who are moms." Another mother remarked, "The thing I find most difficult about raising children is the feeling that I'm constantly being judged—on my children's behavior, on whether I breastfeed or not, how I discipline, whether I buy organic food or whatever. The worst judges are other mothers." The spiritual picture books I have used are often a great pleasure to read even apart from child-listeners: they have beautiful illustrations and they raise important and interesting questions that adults often have stopped asking.

I could imagine using *You Are Special* as a springboard for spiritual sharing among parents. I like the way that Lucado affirms the value of daily visits to Eli as a buffer against others' judgments, but doesn't specify the form such visits can take. "Visits to Eli" might take the form of daily prayer or even daily religious services, but they could also involve other spiritual practices, such as meditation, mindfulness, creative expression, or "practicing the

presence of God" while breastfeeding or running the vacuum cleaner. A fruitful question (posed in a parent group) is: Do you find ways to "visit your Maker"? Would you like to do so more? What do you do?

Guidelines for the Divine Reading of Picture Books

I offer the following suggestions for reading aloud to children in such a way as to invite spiritual reflection and conversation. Most of these suggestions are adapted from Jim Trelease's important book, *The Read-Aloud Handbook*.

1. Preview the book by skimming it ahead of time. This allows you to spot material you may wish to shorten or to elaborate on. It also allows you to formulate questions for conversation afterward.

2. Remember that listening and conversing are acquired arts. They do not develop overnight. Be patient as you cultivate these abilities in your children. Be patient with yourself as well as you grow in your ability to read aloud and converse with your children.

3. Probably the best thing you can do to help your develop an interest in reading is to LIMIT ACCESS TO ELECTRONIC ENTERTAINMENT. If they have a chance to unplug enough to get bored, they are more likely to develop the attention span needed to enjoy stories and later reading on their own.

4 Children benefit the most from a story if there is a brief pre-story conversation to introduce it and set the scene and another post-story conversation that re-visits the events and connects them with children's experience. It is appropriate to have children participate in this conversation. The adult initiates questions then listens and responds, taking his cues from the child's comments.

5. Make sure the child can see the pictures easily. If you are reading to a group, with children in a semi-circle around you, seat yourself slightly above them so that even the ones in the back can see.

Pre-story Conversation

6. Before you begin, allow your listeners a few minutes to settle down. Mood is important. A stern "Pay attention" doesn't promote receptive listening. Invite them to relax and listen. Sometimes I simply sit down and say to my grandchildren, "I have a spot available on my lap. Is anyone ready for a story?" Then I open the book and start looking at the pictures.

7. Let the children know that books are written by people, not machines. Always read the information on the dust jacket or back cover. Tell your listeners a little about the author. Do the same with the illustrator. This can be very brief, such as: "It says here that Wilfred Writer lives in California and has a pet duck. Do you want to see his picture?" Or you might say: "This book, *The Runaway Bunny*, is by Margaret Wise Brown. She's the same person that wrote *Goodnight Moon*, the bedtime book we read last week. Do you want to read it?" If you are interested, most authors have web-sites, and you can find additional information in the reference book, *Something About the Author* at the library.

8. Sometimes it helps to explain to your children in advance some of the ideas or characters in the book and try to connect them to the children's own experience. Alert the children to any new words or concepts they will encounter. "This book, *Stellaluna*, is about a fruit bat. Do you know what a bat is? Have you ever seen one?"

Reading and Imagining the Actual Story

9. Read slowly enough for the child to form mental pictures. Slow down enough to allow yourself to use vocal expression and to the child to have a good look at each illustration. You may want to point out details in the pictures as you read, or even elaborate on the setting to help listeners imagine it. ("Look at Punchinello climbing that hill. Make believe you are climbing too. You're getting sweaty and out of breath, but there's the wood shop up ahead."

10. When you have extra time, add a "third dimension" by involving other senses. For example, you could bring a pitcher of water and have the children listen to the sound of pouring water after hearing *Goodnight Moon*; this will reinforce the theme of settling down to notice quiet sounds

and sights. When reading *You Are Special*, you could let the children attach adhesive stars to you or to one another, or you could help them make paper-bag puppets after reading.

11. An individual child may do better if he can color or work with beeswax (or clay) while you read. Using hands in this way helps some children to pay attention, much like adults doodle during meetings.

Post-story Conversation

12. Allow time for conversation after reading a story. A book often arouses thoughts, hopes, fears, and discoveries. Allow them to surface but don't quiz or pry interpretations from the child.

13. The best post-story conversations involve the adult asking questions to encourage children to recall parts of the story in their own words. It is important that this not come across as a test but rather as a means of savoring the story itself. For example, in discussing <u>You Are Special</u>, you might ask, "Why didn't Punchinello get any stars? How did he feel when other people got all the stars?" or "What was Eli's workshop like? Do you think Punchinello will be back?"

14. Sometimes the post-story conversation can link the story to events, values, or feelings in the children's own lives. For example, you might ask: "Have you ever played with puppets? Have you ever had a friend like Punchinello?" or "Do you think it's important to get gold stars?"

15. The post-story conversation can also stimulate the child's imagination for the future. Questions might be something like this: "How would you like to have a friend like Lucia?" or "Would you like to live in a town with all those Wemmicks? Do some families (or schools) seem to have more Wemmicks than others? Does it have to be that way?"

16. It is important not to speak too quickly or inundate the children with questions. I've offered more sample questions than I'd ever actually use in one setting. Just a few questions are normally enough to wrap up the story and imprint it on the children's minds. Be mindful of attention spans.

17. Look for other experiences that you can link to the characters or incidents in your favorite book. ("That coach is acting like a Wemmick, isn't he?")

18. Let me reiterate: It is important not to try to teach or test during a post-story conversation—just let yourself enjoy the story with the children, and nudge them toward reflecting more—and let them nudge you!

19. Expect to return to some books over and over again. Children this age like to have books re-read over and over. They will develop favorites and so will you. You may notice details on the tenth reading that you missed on the first.

20. Trelease taught me the importance of reading to your children even after they learn to read themselves. As my own son grew up picture books gave way to early readers then to chapter books, then to series books and longer novels. His father read to him nightly almost every night from age seven till thirteen (while I nodded off nearby). These times of shared reading forged a strong bond between the two of them and are some of our very favorite family memories.

The Daily Examen

On a related note, a time-tested way to "visit your Maker" is the daily practice of the "Examination of Consciousness," also known as the "Daily Examen." It is said that St. Ignatius of Loyola regarded the Daily Examen as the single most important spiritual practice; if his followers had time for only one prayer, St. Ignatius believed this should be the one. As I explained to the parents at my workshop, the Examen involves taking time at least once a day to look back over the previous twenty-four hours and asking "Where did I experience God's presence? Where did I find peace and a sense of rightness?" and also "Where did I experience agitation and lack of peace? Where did I feel not-right or a sense of heaviness?" Ignatius spoke of the sense of peace and joy as "consolation" and the sense of agitation and heaviness as "desolation." (My favorite guide to the Examen is *Sleeping with Bread*, by Dennis Linn et al., which includes suggestions on teaching young children to practice the Examen. Also, XU's Office of Mission and Identity has a valuable pocket-sized card that lists questions to ask.)

In any case, the Daily Examen helps a person become more aware of spiritual experiences throughout the day. It is a type of prayer well-suited to busy parents because it can

be very brief. It can take as little as five minutes and can be done anywhere, at any time even while waiting in line or running. The Examen can be deepened by using the "ART-4" approach—my acronym for these steps: Ask for light; Review your day (thinking back on moments of peace or heaviness), give Thanks for whatever you notice, and think FORward (set your intention for the day ahead and ask for grace). It is not so important to spend a great deal of time on the Examen as it is to do it consistently, day after day. As a person practices the Examen over a period of weeks, even years, she (or he) can develop a greater sensitivity to God's presence and a better ability to make good decisions. As this sensitivity to consolation grows, she (or he) can steadily move toward peace and away from agitation.

If so inclined, you can track your Examen by writing a few lines in a journal every day, listing in two columns the sources of peace and heaviness in the previous twenty-four hours. You might also want to note any strong feelings or insights. Keeping such a journal is by no means necessary, but it can help to have such a record. I have kept such a journal for many years and have found it worthwhile to periodically re-read entries, looking for patterns and blocks that recur. It definitely allows me to recognize the movement of grace in my life.

However the Examen is adapted to a person's needs, it is well worth trying out. It can contribute to a very practical spirituality which translates into more patience with fretful children, for example, or a greater ability to slow down and share a child's wonder and joy. Perhaps you will discover, as I have, an innate spirituality in yourself and your children, waiting to be unlocked.

The End

Recommended Reading

There is a growing body of literature on the subject of children's spirituality. Here are some of my favorite resources.

Hart, Tobin. *The Secret Spiritual World of Children.* Makawao, Maui, HI: Inner Ocean, 2003.

Hay and Nye *The Spirit of the Child.* Revised edition. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2006.

Linn, Dennis, Sheila Fabricant Linn, and Matthew Linn, S.J. *Sleeping with Bread: Holding What Gives You Life*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1995.

Loyola Press. "Pray Me a Story" series. <www.loyola press.com/pray-me-a-story-series.htm.>

Taylor, Betsy. What Kids Really Want That Money Can't Buy. New York: Warner Books, 2003.

Thomas, Trudelle. *Spirituality in the Mother Zone*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2005.

One chapter describes a number of activities that children and parents can share.

Trelease, Jim. *The Read-Aloud Handbook.* 6th ed. New Rork: Penguin, 2006.

Yust, Karen Marie. *Real Kids, Real Faith: Practices for Nurturing Children's Spiritual Lives.*

Appendix: *Pragmatics for the Parent Education Workshops*

We announced the workshop weeks ahead. The workshop was scheduled from 10:00 AM till 11:30 AM and met in a classroom. We hired a student to provide childcare in the classroom next door. We offered light refreshments (bagels and fruit). The agenda was something like this:

Ten minutes for refreshments and settling in.

Ten minutes: Brief introductions around the circle. ("Tell about something that you enjoy apart from your children or your job.")

Twenty minutes: Presentation, which included a one page handout with two thought questions.

Five minutes of quiet reflection on a question.

Ten minutes: Break into pairs and discuss a question for ten minutes.

Twenty minutes. Regroup for additional presentation-content. Questions and answer and sharing insights with the group as a whole.

Fifteen minutes after ending to talk among ourselves, finish refreshments.

The total of 90 minutes seemed just right for a group of this size.

The first topic was: Tending Your Soul as a Parent of Young Ones

I mentioned earlier that we are planning to offer several Saturday parent-education workshops in the coming school year. Five likely topics include:

Divine Reading: Reading Aloud to Promote Spiritual Sensitivity

Celebrating Fairy Tales, Mother Goose and More

"Spiritual But Not (Necessarily) Religious": Helping Children Soothe Themselves and Become More Resilient

Forgiveness and Attitude: Finding the Balance (helping kids stick up for themselves, learning to advocate for yourself and your children; when to let go of resentment and judgments)

Service Rooted in Justice and Love: Teaching Children to Be Generous and Just

Simply Living: What Children Want that Money Can't Buy (opting out of the consumer culture)

If you are interested in offering your own parent-education workshops, I would be happy to share workshop materials as I develop them.

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