

**SPIRITUAL TOUCHSTONES: CHILDHOOD  
SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE IN THE  
DEVELOPMENT OF INFLUENTIAL HISTORIC  
AND CONTEMPORARY FIGURES**

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**ABSTRACT**

A surprising number of influential historic as well as contemporary figures describe spiritual experiences and capacities in childhood that profoundly shaped their development. This article describes five general types of these experiences through the autobiographical accounts of significant figures. Understanding these phenomena may help us recognize heretofore largely unacknowledged influences on development.

**INTRODUCTION**

From object relations to trauma, it has come to be a truism in psychology that early experience influences later development. Along with those early dynamics that have been so well explored, another coexistent source of motivation, morality, and meaning may be of a very different order. Childhood spiritual awareness and experience may serve as powerful catalysts for psycho-spiritual development.

In considering the early life of some significant historic and contemporary figures we discover that their childhood moments of wonder and wisdom, compassion and questioning, shaped their psyche, their worldview, and provided a touchstone for the influential life that was to come. A variety of types of

experiences from various faith and cultural traditions are drawn from autobiographical accounts and are briefly presented here. Understanding these early experiences may help us reconsider and recognize the spirituality of our children and also help adults draw on the power of their own formative memories and ways of knowing. These considerations also provide an adjunct to the structural hierarchical maps and conceptions that so dominate and virtually define developmental thought today. That is, these early spiritual influences and capacities have infrequently been acknowledged or integrated into developmental understanding or applied in directions such as moral formation.

Until very recently there has been little appreciation for the spiritual experiences and capacities of young people. Psychology has generally assumed that children are developmentally immature, without sufficient ego and intellectual capacity to have anything that might be called meaningfully reflective and spiritual. The general presupposition has been that children may conjure up a funny image of what God is and they may be able to repeat a prayer they have memorized but, for the most part, they have no conscious experience of an intimate connection with the divine or the capacity to ponder deep questions of meaning or move beyond natural narcissism to genuine compassion. Most often when researchers have looked at children's spirituality, they have limited their consideration to "God talk," how children think and talk about God. These researchers have generally concluded that children do not and cannot have a spiritual life prior to adolescence. These conclusions are derived from defining spiritual life based on the rational thinking style of adults and on religious concepts such as knowledge about a particular faith (e.g., see Dillon, 2000). By such standards children's spiritual expressions reflect a sometimes cute but immature religiosity. However, there has been a growing appreciation of the spiritual nature of young people (e.g., Armstrong, 1985; Hart, 2003; Hay & Nye, 1998; Hoffman, 1992; Piechowski, 2001; Robinson, 1983) and its significance for later development.

In considering what is meant by spiritual we will draw first from William James' general orientation. Rather than focusing on religious knowledge, adherence, or thinking and language capacity, James (1936) emphasized the significance of *personal religion* as opposed to *institutional religion*. Institutionalized religion implies approaches to spiritual growth formed around doctrines, various practices or rituals, and standards of behavior. Spirituality—what James called personal religion—is a direct and intimate experience that may emerge as a sense of interconnection or compassion, a revelatory insight, a quest for meaning and so forth. These phenomena emerge as ways of being-in-the-world, intuitive epistemic styles and types of immediate awareness or perception and ethical orientation that may take place within or outside the context of religion (see e.g., Hart, Nelson, & Puhakka, 2000). Spiritual experiences are direct, personal, and often have the effect, if only for a moment, of waking us up and expanding our understanding of who we are and what our place is in the universe.

It is important to clarify that it is not only extraordinary moments that are referred to here but also and especially often a general way of knowing or being that provides a reference or source for adult spiritual or moral consciousness—a kind of touchstone. The power of a compassionate act, communion with nature, a small moment of courage, or a deep question is just as much the stuff of a spiritual life.

More specifically, recent research on the spiritual life of young people has conceptualized spiritual experience and capacity along several interrelated dimensions including wisdom, wonder, empathy and compassion, wondering, and multi-dimensional perception (see Hart, 2003, 2004, 2005). In some instances these may also represent spiritual styles, for example, one person may embody a spiritual orientation especially through their *empathic* way of knowing whereas another may pursue the spiritual quest especially through their *wondering*, questioning, and search for meaning (e.g., “Who am I?”). While these are hardly rigid or mutually exclusive categories they may help organize predominant themes of spiritual experience.

In what follows we will attempt to describe a range of experiences and their developmental influence through the autobiographical accounts of several significant historic and contemporary figures noting how their worldview, moral orientation, and spiritual development was specifically shaped by these early spiritual touchstones.

### WISDOM AND GUIDANCE

A guiding vision or sense of calling has sometimes been claimed as providing direction for a spiritual life. For example, in the tradition of catholic saints, Catherine of Siena had her most formative revelation of Jesus at six years old that led to a life of extreme devotion (de Vineis, 1960). Hildegard of Bingen, claimed her first divine vision at three (Bowie & Davies, 1990); Joan of Arc said she heard the voice of God first in her father’s garden as a young teen (Sackville-West, 1964). In each case the visions or voices provided a sense of calling and guidance, although they required interpretation, engagement, and also discernment (not all visions or voices are created equal.). The same general phenomena take on a variety of different forms and are described across faith and cultural traditions. Examples from Black Elk and Eleanor Roosevelt offer two quite different kinds of experiences that appear genuine.

Native American Black Elk was revered for his wisdom that guided the Sioux nation during the very difficult times of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. At five and nine years old, he had the dreams that would shape his life and that of his people. In his most formative vision, he was led by a horse and an eagle through a rainbow doorway into a teepee where there were six old men sitting in a row. He reported that the old men said, “Your grandfathers from all over the world have called you here to teach you” (Neihardt, 1988). Each offered a medicine—a

power—that would help form his life and lead his people. He was unconscious for 12 days after the vision and nearly died (p. 21).

Black Elk said he was just speechless in trying to convey his own childhood spiritual visions:

As I lay there thinking of my vision, I could see it all and feel the meaning with a part of me like a strange power glowing in my body; but when the part of me that talks would try to make words for the meaning, it would be like a fog and get away from me (pp. 40-41).

He described how he was changed by his vision and explains that visions have to be explored throughout our life in order to reveal their meaning:

It was the pictures that I remembered and the words that went with them; for nothing I have ever seen with my eyes was so clear and bright as what my vision showed me; and no words I have ever heard with my ears were like the words I heard. I did not have to remember these things; they have remembered themselves all these years. It was as I grew older that the meanings came clearer and clearer out of the pictures and the words; and even now I have known that more was shown to me than I can tell (p. 41).

Black Elk further emphasizes that you do not get the power of your vision until you walk it out on the earth for people to see. Essentially, the developmental arc of visions requires action and moral engagement for it to become embodied for both self and others.

Eleanor Roosevelt's childhood wisdom emerged in the form of fantasy or imaginary play that appeared to represent clues to her life's calling. Eleanor had a very "gray" and "unhappy" childhood. Both her parents, who were largely unavailable to her to begin with, died before she was nine. She was withdrawn, hostile, and isolated, yet she kept a fantasy alive that provided the clue to her purpose and an enduring source of direction. She wrote, "I carried on a day-to-day story, which was the realist thing in my life" (Roosevelt, 1960, p. 18). Eleanor's story involved her imagining that she was the mistress of her father's large household and his traveling companion. While classic psychoanalytic tradition would label, and in so doing largely dismiss, this as perhaps representing an Electra complex toward her father, the understanding of this imaginary play as a tug from her life's calling may offer a compelling alternative way. James Hillman offers this interpretation:

Their [her fantasies] caring and managerial content was purposeful preparation for the dutiful life she would later live. The fantasies were invented by her calling and were indeed more realistic in their orientation than her daily reality. Imagination acted as a teacher, giving instruction for the large ministering tasks of caring for the welfare of a complex family, of a crippled husband, of the state of New York as the Governor's wife, the United States as its first lady, and even of the United

Nations. Her attending to “Father” was a preliminary praxis into which she could put her call, her huge devotion to the welfare of others (Hillman, 1996, p. 22).

In this sense her imagination served not merely as wish fulfillment in a Freudian sense but a genuine creative force. We might say her imagination held and drew her toward her future. We may catch little glimmers of this wisdom in children in the form of a vague tug, anger at some injustice, an obsession, a love, a curious affinity for someone or something, or a fantasy.

Black Elk’s and Eleanor Roosevelt’s vision, although quite different in how they appeared, both provided a guiding force for their lives of service and leadership. Visions are commonly described in native traditions in relation to adolescent rites of passage. A vision typically serves as accepted direction for the individual and, at times, provides service or guidance for the community. While there have remained rites of passage as ceremonies in religious context and some renewed appreciation for the value of ceremony to mark coming-of-age in contemporary society, perhaps acknowledgment and decoding of such visions may hold a powerful and largely missing element for calling and moral development as it did for Roosevelt and Black Elk.

### WONDER AND AWE

In his study of the ancient Hebrew prophets, Heschel (1972) concludes that awe and reverence provide an opening to spiritual insight.

The loss of awe is the great block to insight. A return to reverence is the first prerequisite for a revival of wisdom. . . . Wisdom comes from awe rather than from shrewdness. It is evoked not in moments of calculation but in moments of being in rapport with the mystery of reality. The greatest insights happen to us in moments of awe (p. 78).

A connection to the natural world can evoke moments of awe and wonder and open one to a profound sense of interconnection that may ultimately forge our ethos and guide our actions.

Thomas Berry is a pioneer in the field of spirituality and ecology. He has served as a monk, a cultural historian, an author, and teacher. His work emphasizes human interconnection with the earth as recognized through a profound sense of reverence.

As a child of 11, Berry’s awareness opened in some inexplicable way and formed a centerpoint for the moral orientation that he claims has endured throughout his life. His family was having a new home built at the edge of a small town. Downhill from the house was a small creek and across the creek was a meadow. Berry recalls:

It was early afternoon in late May when I first wandered down the incline, crossed the creek, and looked out over the scene.

The field was covered with white lilies rising above the thick grass. A magic moment, this experience gave to my life something that seems to explain my thinking at a more profound level than almost any other experience I can remember. It was not only the lilies. It was the singing of crickets and the woodlands in the distance and the clouds in a clear sky. It was not something conscious that happened just then. I went on about my life as any young person might do. Perhaps it was not simply this moment that made such a deep impression upon me. Perhaps it was a sensitivity that was developed throughout my childhood. As the years passed, this moment returns to me and whenever I think about my basic life attitude and the whole trend of my mind and the causes to which I have given my efforts, I seem to come back to this moment and the impact it has had on my feeling for what is real and worthwhile in life.

This early experience, it seems, has become normative for me throughout the entire range of my thinking. Whatever preserves and enhances this meadow in the natural cycles of its transformation is good: whatever opposes this meadow or negates it is not good. My life orientation is that simple. It is also that pervasive. It applies in economics and political orientation as well as in education and religion (pp. 12-13).

Moments such as these have a noetic dimension—an experience of some direct knowing; although this kind of knowledge may be difficult to articulate or fully grasp at the time. For a child, this knowing and the worldview that may be shaped by it does not have to be carefully crafted in logic and language. Instead it can be built from direct spiritual experience and housed in a feeling, an image, a sense of belonging or truth that evolves over time. As Berry said, this experience had a direct “impact on my feeling for what is real and worthwhile” (Berry, 1999, pp. 12-13).

As another example of childhood awe setting the course for a spiritual life, consider a six-year-old boy who was walking in a large open meadow when a huge dark rain cloud filled the sky above him. Looking up, he saw the flight of white cranes passing across the dark cloud. In this moment he reports being completely overwhelmed, “seeing light, feeling joy, and experiencing the upsurge of a great current in one’s chest, like the bursting of a rocket” he said. “Since that day, I have been a different [person]. I began to see another person within me” (Nikhilananda, 1970, pp. 3-4). Within his body he said there were two persons: one the devotee and the other his Lord. This young boy began to experience the Divine as immanent, that is, in form, right here and right now, in him and in all things.

One day he was taking food as an offering to the Divine Mother. The custom was to place it on an altar as he said prayers. This day he stopped as he was approaching the altar and noticed a cat nearby. He said, “I clearly perceived that all this was the Divine Mother—even the cat” (p. 15). Instead of leaving the food on the altar, he gave it to the cat.

He described another incident a few years later, during his adolescence:

I felt as if my heart were being squeezed like a wet towel. I was overpowered with a great restlessness and a fear that it might not be my lot to realize Her in this life. I could not bear the separation from Her any longer. Life seemed to be not worth living. Suddenly my glance fell on the sword that was kept in the Mother's temple. I determined to put an end to my life. When I jumped up like a madman and seized it, suddenly the blessed Mother revealed Herself. The buildings with their different parts, the temple, and everything else vanished from my sight, leaving no trace whatsoever, and in their stead I saw a limitless, infinite, effulgent Ocean of Consciousness. As far as the eye could see, the shining billows were madly rushing at me from all sides with a terrific noise, to swallow me up (pp. 14-15)!

This boy was Ramakrishna, born in 1836. He became one of the spiritual leaders of 19th century India. The heart of his insight was that divinity is immanent—it is here and now in all things, including you, me, and even the cat.

Children's sense of wonder may be especially attuned to the existential and immediate as it was for Ramakrishna. This type of revelation of awe, wonder, beauty, perfection, or unity is described throughout the wisdom traditions in peak (e.g., Maslow, 1971) and religious (e.g., James, 1936) experiences.

Moments of ecstasy are most frequently reported as occurring in, or being "triggered" by nature (Laski, 1968). There is some resonance with the natural world that is particularly powerful in evoking moments of wonder. Louv (2005) suggests that the current generation of children may be on the verge of a kind of nature-deficit disorder as the result of over-scheduling, the seduction of electronic stimulation, and the loss of uncontrolled natural areas to explore and freely play in. This generation of children may be losing touch with the power of free encounters with nature. If early experience in nature are as formative for others as they were for Berry and Ramakrishna, the loss of or the opportunity for awe in nature may have significant consequences on psycho-spiritual development.

### MULTIDIMENSIONAL AND MORALITY

The wisdom traditions all claim the world as multidimensional. In fact, *spiritual* generally implies or refers to that which extends beyond or beneath the surface of the material world. For some, seeing into the multidimensional universe powerfully shaped their spiritual development.

In his autobiography, Jacques Lusseyran, a teenage leader of the French Resistance in World War II and a survivor of Buchenwald, describes looking at his grandparents' garden in a small town in the French countryside. Their ride to the train that would take them back to Paris after their Easter holiday had just arrived. Jacques was in the garden sobbing. "I was crying because I was looking at the garden for the last time," he wrote. "I had just learned the bad news. I couldn't say how, but there was absolutely no doubt. . . . When my mother . . . finally found me and asked what the trouble was, I could only say: 'I am never going to see the garden again'" (Lusseyran, 1963, pp. 12-13). Three weeks later, as

a boy of seven, he was permanently blinded in an accident at school. But it was through his blinding that he learned to see in a new way—he learned to see *light*. One day several months after the accident, he said:

I realized that I was looking in the wrong way. . . . I was looking too far off, and too much on the surface of things. . . . I began to look more closely, not at things but at a world closer to myself, looking from an inner place to one further within. . . . I was aware of a radiance emanating from a place I knew nothing about. . . . But radiance was there, or, to put it more precisely, light. . . . I felt indescribable relief, and happiness so great it almost made me laugh. . . . I found light and joy at the same moment. . . . For every waking hour and even in my dreams I lived in a stream of light. . . . I could feel light rising, spreading, resting on objects, giving them form. . . . I saw the whole world in light existing through it and because of it. . . . Light was my whole reason for living. . . . Light threw its color on things and on people. My mother and father, the people I met or ran into in the street, all had their characteristic color which I had never seen before I went blind (pp. 16-21).

“There were times when the light faded. . . . It happened every time I was afraid. . . . Fear . . . made me blind.” “Anger and impatience had the same effects, so did jealousy and growing anxious to win at all costs—they threw everything into confusion” (pp. 19-20).

Jacques explained, “I could no longer afford to be jealous or unfriendly, because, as soon as I was, a bandage came down over my eyes. . . . Armed with such a tool, why should I need a moral code? I had only to look at the bright signal which taught me how to live” (pp. 20-21).

Jacques discovered intensities of hearing and feeling as well. For example, he related, “My hands discovered that objects were not rigidly bound within a mold . . . objects branched out in all directions I had to move my hands from branch to branch [on an apple tree] to feel the currents moving between them” (pp. 16-18).

Not only was this a richly expanded perceptual facility, but also provided, as he said, a direct feedback loop, a spiritual and moral barometer, as to what seemed aligned morally or spiritually and what did not. Is this available to each of us?

Robert Johnson is a contemporary Jungian analyst and author whose books *He* (1989), *She* (1989), *We* (1985) have used myth to address issues of identity and relationship. As a child Johnson had profound moments of seeing into another world; like Lusseyran, this was initially tied to an injury. He writes: “It all began with the crash of a car against a brick wall and the small knee of an eleven-year-old boy caught in between” (Johnson, 1998, p. 1). Johnson’s leg was pinned against the wall of a building he was entering to buy a soft drink. The major artery was severed and he was rushed into emergency surgery. It appeared that he would survive. However, after surgery, he was lying in his hospital bed slowly bleeding to death. The sutured artery had broken loose, but no one realized it. He reported:

I set my feet against the downward spiral and determined not to die, resisting it with all my willpower. But at a specific moment I crossed a divide . . . and suddenly I was in a glorious world.

It was pure light, gold, radiant, luminous, ecstatically happy, perfectly beautiful, purely tranquil, joy beyond bound. I wasn't the least bit interested in anything on the earthly side of the divide; I could only revel at what was before me. . . . It was all that any mystic ever promised of heaven, and I knew then that I was in possession of the greatest treasure known to humankind (p. 2).

But Robert's return from the "golden world" was very difficult. He struggled to find beauty, meaning, and purpose on this side that could compare with what he had seen on the other. He tried to make sense of this opening and to reconcile the golden world that he glimpsed with the gray world that he found often in his daily life. He described himself trying to balance a lifetime between heaven and earth.

A glimpse of the divine can be disorienting and demanding. As it was for Johnson, it can be difficult to find new footing—a center point where we can balance the worlds successfully. For example, in Atwater's (1999) research on children's near-death experiences, one-third of children seriously abused alcohol within five to ten years after their experience. Over half dealt with bouts of severe depression. Twenty-one percent actually attempted suicide. Confusion, guilt, shame, lack of understanding, and family members who felt threatened contributed to the difficulty in balancing the worlds.

Peering beneath the surface of matter provided a catalyst for their spiritual life. Lusseyran described an immediate sense of morality based on his perception of "light." Johnson's "golden world" provided an infusion of possibility and perfection that he struggled to lean toward in his life.

## BETWEEN YOU AND ME

Philosopher and theologian Martin Buber developed a relational notion of spirituality. He understood that "spirit is not in the I, it is between the I and Thou" (Buber, 1970, p. 89). Rather than "reaching up" we might say that his spirituality emphasized "reaching out." He came to understand that spirit comes in "the between," as we deeply meet one another—he said, "All real living is meeting" (p. 11).

At four years of age Buber's mother disappeared completely from the child's life and he was sent to the home of his grandparents. These grandparents told the small boy nothing about his parents' divorce, probably out of a feeling of pride and shame. When he was four, a babysitter finally explained the situation to him. Eighty years later Buber could still recall the moment:

We both leaned on the railing. I cannot remember that I spoke of my mother to my older comrade. But I hear still how the big girl said to me: "No, she will never come back." I know that I remained silent, but also that I cherished

no doubt of the truth of the spoken words. It remained fixed in me; from year to year it cleaved ever more to my heart, but after more than ten years I had begun to perceive it as something that concerned not only me, but all men. Later I once made up the word “Vergegnung”—“mismmeeting,” or “misencounter”—to designate the failure of a real meeting between men (Buber, 1967, p. 11).

Yet Buber’s conclusion to this story is not about “mismmeeting” at all. Rather, he learned from that hour on the balcony about genuine meeting. The heart of what Buber called the “eternal Thou” comes through existential trust—the readiness to go out again and meet the world with your whole being. Later in his childhood Martin developed a relational notion of spirituality between the “it” and “I” from another transformative experience at 11 years old while staying with his grandparents. One particular day he was grooming his favorite pony when he suddenly began to realize how much the horse enjoyed the attention. Stopping to savor this insight, it struck him that for him, the horse was no longer an object, an “it.” Furthermore, Martin realized that the horse had also grown accustomed to him and genuinely enjoyed Martin’s company.

It was not a casual delight but a great, certainly friendly, but also deeply stirring happening. If I am to explain it now, beginning from the still very fresh memory of my hand, I must say that what I experienced in touch with the animal was the Other, the immense otherness of the Other, which, however, did not remain strange like the otherness of the ox and the ram, but rather let me draw near and touch it. When I stroke the mighty mane, something marvelously smooth-combed, at other times just as astonishingly wild, and felt the life beneath my hand, it was as though the element of vitality itself bordered on my skin, something that was not I, was certainly not akin to me, palpably the other, not just another, really the Other itself; and yet it let me approach, confided itself to me, placed itself elementally in the relation of Thou and Thou with me. The horse, even when I had not begun by pouring oats for him into the manger, very gently raised his massive head, ears flicking, then snorted quietly, as a conspirator; and I was approved. But once—I do not know what came over the child, at any rate it was childlike enough—it struck me about the stroking, what fun it gave me, and suddenly I became conscious of my hand. The game went on as before, but something had changed, it was no longer the same thing (p. 10).

Out of this intuition sprang Buber’s lifelong fascination with God’s love of humanity as an “I-Thou” relationship and for the human opportunity to deeply meet one another which became the foundation for his life’s work.

Blinded and deafened by illness at 15 months, Helen Keller struggled for six years in a dark world where neither her own existence nor the world around her made any sense as she grew more alienated and detached. Her salvation came not only in the form of her teacher Annie Sullivan, but from a deep connection to the natural world and the world of language. Her opening took place at the age of

seven when she brought together with the help of her teacher the word “w-a-t-e-r” with its essence:

We walked down the path to the well-house, attracted by the fragrance of the honeysuckle with which it was covered. Someone was drawing water and my teacher placed my hand under spout. As the cool stream gushed over one hand she spelled into the other the word water, first slowly, then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten—a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that “w-a-t-e-r” meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free (Keller, 1961, p. 34).

This story describes more than a connection with the physical world and of a cognitive developmental leap; it seems to build a bridge to the soul. Although the appetite for learning the names of everything around her made Helen an ideal student, her questions about and experiences of love and spirit catalyzed her development, worldview, and identity further still. For example, at the age of 12 Helen, while reading a history book, said she was transported to the city of Athens. This significant out-of-body experience provided Helen with a glimpse into the world of spirit. From this she understood that her soul was independent of time and space.

The bright amazing realization seemed to catch my mind and set it ablaze. Space was nothing to spirit. I perceived the realness of my soul and its sheer independence of all conditions of place and body. It was clear to me that it was because I was a spirit that I had so vividly seen and felt a place thousands of miles away. In that new consciousness shown the presence of God, himself a spirit everywhere at once; the Creator dwelling in all the Universe simultaneously (Keller, 2000, p. 11).

These experiences would guide Helen to ask even more questions about the world of spirit and God; questions that tried to reconcile the presence she felt within herself and the image of God she had read about in the Bible. Human suffering, within the domain of spirituality would lead Helen Keller toward a life of service and education about people like herself; whose physical bodies she understood were nothing more than shells of a perfect and eternal soul. Her work as a poet, philosopher, and teacher helped change the way the world perceived the physically disabled, and also the way some saw their own relationship to the divine.

### WONDERING AND MEANING

The “big questions” such as “What am I here for?” “What is life about?” “Who am I?” are what philosophy and religion have attempted to address. Entertaining these “ultimate concerns,” as Theologian Paul Tillich (1957) called them, affects the way we live in the world. The spiritual quest can be focused and

explored through pondering, puzzling, and playing with such questions and may be thought of as a search for truth and meaning.

As a teenager, the 20th-century Indian sage Ramana Maharshi had insights into his own spiritual identity. The center of his own quest and the heart of his subsequent spiritual teaching was a very direct question: “Who am I?” Ramana invited his students to perpetually consider this same question. He found that relentless and honest pursuit of this question leads to a deep realization of the masks that we wear and the illusion of our separateness from one another. If we go far enough into this question, he said, it allows us to see the limitlessness of our deepest self—the divinity that is our true nature (Maharshi, 1982).

Victor Frankl, a physician and Nazi concentration camp survivor, is known for his focus on meaning and psychotherapy which he developed into Logotherapy. His work, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, has sold millions of copies. In his autobiography Frankl implies that his life-long focus on meaning had its roots as a four-year-old.

One evening just before falling asleep, I was startled by the unexpected thought that one day I, too, would have to die. What troubled me then—as it has throughout my life—was not the fear of dying, but the questions of whether the transitory nature of life might destroy its meaning (Frankl, 1997, p. 29).

In time Frankl concluded that death makes life more not less meaningful and that meaning cannot be destroyed, “nothing from the past is irretrievably lost. Everything is irrevocably stored” (p. 29).

One might call it pondering, or perhaps self-contemplation in the best tradition of Socrates when, during the years of my youth I had breakfast . . . and would think for some minutes about the meaning of life. Particularly about the meaning of the coming day, and specifically about its meaning for me (p. 32).

The Jesuit sage Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1979) said, “I was certainly no more than six or seven when I began to feel myself drawn to Matter—or more exactly by something that ‘shone’ in the heart of matter” (p. 17). He claimed that this childhood insight and the steady questioning that emerged from it was the cornerstone of his spiritual pursuit throughout his life. He recalls that his early attraction to minerals and metals, and later stone, was due to their seeming unassailable durability, and hardness, an approach or touch of eternity he implied. He even called them his “idols,” and it seems that from this early worship, his scientific (he was an accomplished paleontologist) and spiritual work (as a controversial Jesuit) evolved.

What used to grieve me when I was a child? This insecurity of things. And what I used to love? My genie of iron! With a plow hitch I believed myself at seven years, rich with a treasure incorruptible, everlasting. And then

it turned out that what I possessed was just a bit of iron that rusted. At this discovery I threw myself on the lawn and shed the bitterest tears of my existence! (p. 3).

A personal fascination with the natural world and a quest toward a permanent reality created in Teilhard the principles that would influence the way he saw the world, as spiritual matter, eternal and ever changing. His fusion of science and religion was the way that he came to terms with his own impermanence and the world whose light and spirit had embraced him. He sums up his integration of the natural and the spiritual world in his conclusion to the essay “The Cosmic Life” (1968): “There is a communion with God, and a communion with the earth, and a communion with God through the earth” (p. 14).

Questioning, wondering, and doubting serve as the motor driving a search for meaning. If you have been in the midst of a three-year-old recently you notice the “Why? Why? Why?” which demonstrates the search for comprehension and meaning that is so much our birthright. And perhaps surprisingly, even young children, as did Ramana, Frankl, Teilhard de Chardin, express the capacity for thoughtful consideration of the big questions (metaphysics), inquiring about proof and the source of knowledge (epistemology), reasoning through problems (logic), questioning values (ethics), and reflecting on their own identity in the world. Children’s openness, vulnerability, and tolerance for mystery enable them to entertain perplexing and paradoxical questions (Hart, 2003; Matthews, 1980). It is not so much the answers that are the spiritual heart of this but instead the engaged pursuit of the questions in search for meaning and truth through the mystery of life.

## CONCLUSIONS

There may be some temptation to categorize these influential individuals as spiritually precocious, however, recent research suggests that such early formative capacities and experiences are not the province of a rare few individuals but perhaps the vast majority of us (Hart, 2003). In fact, accounts from contemporary children are often indistinguishable from those of these influential figures.

Young people’s experiences such as empathic interconnection or *interbeing* (Hanh, 1995) may help shape a moral orientation emphasizing interdependence or care (e.g., Buber). Entertaining big questions about meaning, identity, and suffering may help shape character by focusing on such “ultimate concerns” (Tillich, 1957) as truth, justice, life, and death (e.g., Ramana). Experiences of accessing wisdom and insight may activate a lifelong capacity for listening for that still small voice, contemplation, and discernment (e.g., Black Elk, Roosevelt). Moments of wonder may provide a sense of perspective, hope, and possibility (e.g., Berry, Ramakrishna). Multidimensional perception may expand understanding of oneself and the world (e.g., Lusseyran, Johnson). These are

unfolding capacities that children appear to possess, although until quite recently this has generally been left out of our understanding of childhood development. Reconsidering these early developmental touchstones may provide fresh questions and clues about the inner world of the young people we care for today.

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