

Mary Ellen Durante, Ph.D.  
Director of Catechesis  
Saint Mary's Parish, Sacred Heart & Saint Ann's,  
Saints Mary & Martha, and Saint Alphonsus in the  
Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester New York  
[mdurante@dor.org](mailto:mdurante@dor.org)  
2015 REA Annual Meeting, Nov 6 - 8

## **ABSTRACT**

This paper considers how children are imaginative and full of wonder and how these qualities are foundational in developing their religious imaginations when teaching children how to pray. This paper explores how children can be taught that imagining the possibilities life holds can help them construct and reconstruct a sense of the meaningfulness of their lives and the world they live in. The author looks at how parents and religious educators can invite children to engage their imaginations and form a religious imaginations leading them to becoming more ontologically whole.

## **CHILDREN, PRAYER, IMAGINATION AND ONTOLOGICAL WHOLENESS**

This paper explores the interplay between children, prayer and the imagination by discussing the nurturing of the creative imagination, spiritual sensitivity, and the religious imagination. The paper concludes by considering how teaching children to pray and helping them develop an active spirituality can enable them to develop a greater sense of ontological wholeness, that is a greater sense of themselves as being made in the image and called to grow in the likeness of God.

The God of Christian prayer is an involved God, a social God. Involvement and society are among the essential marks of Christian prayer because this prayer is actually a participation in God. God is involved with humanity, and so prayer is an involvement in humanity. God is social and not isolated, and so prayer is a social, not an isolated, activity. The quest for union with God and the quest for the unity of mankind is one quest.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Leech, *True Prayer: An Invitation to Christian Spirituality* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1990), 8.

In questing for union with God people pray; and through prayer, they can encounter a living God.<sup>2</sup> Hence, prayer is the motion that is between God and humanity; it is a rhythm of meeting and reply.<sup>3</sup> In this meeting with God, Christians come to understand that nothing is private, especially prayer. (The word “private” is derived from the Latin *privatio* which means robbery.). True prayer finds its meaning within a social context. The social meaning of prayer is expressed in the symbol of the Trinity, which represents a relational God who is social and communal.<sup>4</sup> When God created humanity in God’s image, God intended for people to live in relationship with each other. As God is best realized as the Holy Trinity, three distinct persons in one, God is a God of relationship.<sup>5</sup> Through prayer, the human experience of knowing God and being in community establishes a cooperative relationship with God, where adults, youths and children of good will live and work harmoniously together as equals.<sup>6</sup>

### ***The Creative Imagination***

Imagination, Jerome Berryman suggests, is what happens when action becomes a creative process.<sup>7</sup> Berryman contends that imagination is the key to unending renewal of life: “Enter the existential game with imagination, wonder, and laughter if you want to become new without end.”<sup>8</sup> One might go further and say that imagination in action is life itself. Imagination provides necessary and vital energy; it provides life; it makes life possible. Berryman uses the amoeba adapting to life as an example of the imagination at work as well as of how the human body functions at its own cellular level “and in our own intrapsychic, interpsychic, and spiritual dimensions.”<sup>9</sup> Additionally, “the ambiguity of the imagination is at the root of our being.”<sup>10</sup> Berryman explains: “The fundamental ambiguity of the imagination is expressed most profoundly in its humble and yet grand use in the world of everyday.”<sup>11</sup> Consider how life can be a paradox in that the imagination is a creative process that can image ways of bringing together things that are normally separate from one another or even contradictory.<sup>12</sup> Berryman adds: “The Incarnation focuses the fullest expression of the ambiguity of the imagination. The story of one who was completely God and completely human made the intensity of this ambiguity available to us. Even as creatures of space and time we can enter deeply into the image and life of Christ.”<sup>13</sup> This paradox can be resolved by acknowledging that the creative life-giving image of God is embodied in and through life. God, having created Adam and Eve in God’s likeness, provided the foundation and destiny of humanity. In the words of the fourteenth

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>5</sup> John Westerhoff III, *Living the Faith Community: The Church That Makes a Difference* (Minneapolis, MN: Winston Press, 1985), 13.

<sup>6</sup> Leech, *True Prayer*, 24.

<sup>7</sup> Jerome W. Berryman, *Godly Play: A Way of Religious Education* (New York: Harper San Francisco Publishing Company, 1991) 133.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>11</sup> Berryman, *Godly Play*, 133.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 131.

century mystic Julian of Norwich: “Greatly ought we to rejoice that God dwells in our soul; and more greatly ought we to rejoice that our soul dwells in God.”<sup>14</sup>

Karl Rahner’s *Theology of Worship* considers the human body as the symbol of the soul, and each individual as an embodied spirit.<sup>15</sup> Rahner’s theology supports the indwelling of God in each person as “Spirit-in-the-World” who is capable of conscious acts of worship, and as finite creatures humans are able to embrace a relationship with the infinite Creator.<sup>16</sup> Maria Harris explores this relationship more fully: “Because we are made in the image of the Creator God, we, too, are fashioners. Our human vocation is to be in partnership with God to fashion even as we are being fashioned, attempting to realize our artistic capacities as this happens. For to the question, ‘Who is fashioning?’ the response is, ‘God and ourselves.’”<sup>17</sup> To be alive biologically, psychologically, socially, and spiritually offers the possibility of being co-creators with God; where endings are understood as beginnings and beginnings are understood as endings.<sup>18</sup>

### ***Imagination and Spiritual Sensitivity***

Research by Hay and Nye (1998) shows that children, through their imagination and sense of wonder, go beyond the superficial, the mundane, and the ordinary; bringing themselves into the realm of the transcendent or spiritual and enabling them to develop “spiritual sensitivity.”<sup>19</sup> Hay and Nye identified categories of spiritual sensitivity that they feel could provide the “media” for spirituality: “One such category of spiritual sensitivity identified was that of *mystery-sensing*. Mystery-sensing pertains to the wonder and awe, the fascination and questioning that is characteristic of young children as they interact with the mystery of the universe.”<sup>20</sup> Brendan Hyde states: “The notion of wonder (and awe) is one that has come to be associated with children’s spirituality.”<sup>21</sup> Hyde points out that through both wonder and imagination children encounter the mysterious, and the mysterious provides a door to perceptions of transcendence. In terms of religious education, experiences of the mysterious can enable children to be open to an encounter with the Transcendent God.<sup>22</sup>

For young children the world is full of wonder and the emergence of new life. They are experiencing revelations of new things all the time. Young children often express awe and wonder, as they are curious to understand everything that is around them.<sup>23</sup> Also, children can have an ability to enter into “deep currents of consciousness,”<sup>24</sup> which can open new ways to view the world. Brendan Hyde notes that children are open and eager to participate and to fit into their world, and that these currents of consciousness stir up feelings of awe, as well as initiate a

---

<sup>14</sup> “Julian of Norwich,” <http://www.goodnews.ie/wisdomlinejuly2010.shtml>. Accessed October 21, 2014.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Skelley, *The Liturgy of the World: Karl Rahner’s Theology of Worship* (Collegeville, MI: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 37.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>17</sup> Maria Harris, *Fashion Me a People: Curriculum in the Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), 16.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>19</sup> Brendan Hyde, “Children’s Spirituality and ‘The Good Shepherd Experience,’” *Religious Education* (2004), 99: 2, 141.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>23</sup> Kate Adams, Brendan Hyde and Richard Woolley, *The Spiritual Dimension of Childhood* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishing, 2008), 60, 61.

<sup>24</sup> Hyde, *Children and Spirituality*, 56.

connectedness with reality that includes others.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, children's conscious experience of wonder and awe is a connection with the forces of the natural world. This connection can provide insights that help them to define and develop their ongoing relationships with others.<sup>26</sup> Hyde points out that this sense of the "other," in a Christian context, can lead people to strive toward understanding their lives in relationship with the Ultimate Other who is God.<sup>27</sup>

### ***The Religious Imagination***

Harris points out that there is another language for disclosing the imagination, namely, through the use of "religious language." Religious language allows us to penetrate deeply into the profound, into broader and wider fields of perception and understanding that exist below the surface and beyond the superficial.<sup>28</sup> Harris notes: "If the function of language is to give form to our experience of the world, then the use of religious language to speak of imagination can help us understand the mysterious, the numinous, and the mystical elements residing at the heart of the world."<sup>29</sup> Here the religious imagination influences religious language and here is where the "holiness within teaching itself is more readily claimed and reclaimed, more readily released," because imagination and words matter.<sup>30</sup> When teaching children how to pray through the use of the religious imagination, the creative imagination is activated and the process of giving form to the subject matter or content of learning happens.<sup>31</sup> Harris writes: "New form comes into being because we take the risk of becoming artists, becoming creators, becoming teachers."<sup>32</sup> Artists, creators, and teachers similarly work toward giving form to their endeavors. This "form-giving" can then open doors through which the emergence of new life can flow.<sup>33</sup> The use of religious imagination in teaching children to pray can also foster revelations that can lead to the re-creation of the earth.<sup>34</sup>

It is through prayer that adults and children can engage the "religious imagination." It is here that the past, present, and future can intertwine, revealing the entrance into God's reign. In discussing the religious imagination encountered through teaching and learning prayer, Harris writes:

First, I propose that religion provides a way to speak about, qualify, distinguish, deepen, and direct imagination. When brought to bear upon teaching, the religious imagination enables us to see teaching through another lens. It enables us to pose the possibility that to dwell as a teacher with other human beings is to dwell in the area of *mystery*, not because subject matter is dense, but because we humans as the *Imago Dei* are ourselves mysteries, and interaction between us always takes place on holy ground, the only kind of ground there is.<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>28</sup> Harris, *Teaching and Religious Imagination*, 19.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 35, 36.

<sup>32</sup> Harris, *Teaching and Religious Imagination*, 36.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 36, 37.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 16.

In sharing Christian traditions of prayer with children, parents and teachers can offer ways to explore the *collective wisdom* of Christian prayer traditions as being vital for the formation of a *religious imagination*. They can strive to enable children to see God in all things, to have faith in the conviction that God “reaches out to us,” to have faith that humanity can and will respond in the ordinary events of everyday life.<sup>36</sup> Maria Harris writes, “Teaching is an act not only of the imagination, but of the *religious imagination*.”<sup>37</sup> In teaching children to pray, parents and teachers invite them to embrace the religious imagination of their religious community as central to developing and continually nurturing both a personal and communal relationship with God.

### ***Children and Imagination***

Engaging children through the use of their imagination is at the heart of teaching, as children are naturally imaginative.<sup>38</sup> In teaching children to pray educators can and should encourage them to employ their imaginations in order to artistically, creatively, and consciously communicate with God. Consequently, imaginative prayer can break new ground and allow original, diverse, and spontaneous forms of prayer to emerge, celebrating children’s personal relationship with God.

Showing how to use the imagination is a way of creating possibilities, and children have the capability to alter their destinies and their existence through the exercise of imagination.<sup>39</sup> “Imagination can change, reverse, and re-create present reality,” Harris notes. It is important to teach children that imagining possibilities and asking questions is natural for everyone to do. These activities can help them make meaning out of everyday situations. Children should also be taught that imagining the possibilities life holds is a natural way to be involved with constructing and reconstructing realities that are never complete, and that one can view reality from multiple perspectives.<sup>40</sup> Maxine Greene postulates: “Imagination will always come into play when becoming literate suggests an opening of spaces, an end to submergence, and a consciousness of the right to ask why.”<sup>41</sup> The imagination allows us to know a reality that is no longer too big for us to fit our minds into or too small that we might by omission simply dismiss as being not important. From a religious perspective, Harris acknowledges that there are aspects of the mysterious that can be known, yet not everything mysterious can be known.<sup>42</sup> With *religious imagination* we are called to *meet* the mysterious, to meet the “unknown” with “multiple perspectives” just as we are called to ask questions.

### ***The Spiritual Nature of Children and Ontological Wholeness***

---

<sup>36</sup> Thomas H. Groome, *Will There Be Faith: A New Vision for Educating and Growing Disciples* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2011), 242.

<sup>37</sup> Maria Harris, *Teaching and Religious Imagination: An Essay in the Theology of Teaching* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1987), 10.

<sup>38</sup> Harris, *Teaching and Religious Imagination*, 3.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>40</sup> Maxine Greene, *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Boss, 1995), 130, 131.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>42</sup> Harris, *Teaching and Religious Imagination*, 13.

Research suggests that human spirituality is universal and can be considered a natural expression of tendencies or characteristics that are inherently human.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, everyone is created in the image of God; therefore, everyone has the capacity to grow in God's likeness.<sup>44</sup> This natural spiritual predisposition or spiritual consciousness continually seeks "articulation" in human life from childhood onward.<sup>45</sup> Children's quests to discover, connect, and engage with others and their sense of their own humanity is propelled by this quality of spiritual consciousness, which arises from the depths of their being.<sup>46</sup>

Spirituality is often a controversial subject not only within the ordinary sectors of society but also within the scientific and academic worlds. Harvard theorist Howard Gardner explains: "Many of us do not recognize the spirit as we recognize the mind and the body, and many of us do not grant the same ontological status to the transcendent or the spiritual as we do to, say, the mathematical or the musical."<sup>47</sup> However, Gardner considers spirituality to be an ontological as well as a biological reality. Based on his research of this ontological reality, Hyde contends that the natural path of spiritual existence moves toward a transcendence of the ego in order for the self to achieve a higher consciousness. In a state of higher consciousness the *self* is free to be joined with the *other*, forming a relationship of Ultimate Unity.<sup>48</sup>

Ontological awareness is closely linked with becoming unified with the surrounding world and ultimately with God.<sup>49</sup> Hyde explains: "Ontological awareness is the ability to perceive with one's whole Self – one's whole being – in a direct, experiential, and concrete way. In such a way of knowing, a person enters the realm of holistic experience."<sup>50</sup> The mind, body, and soul of persons are involved in the experience in which they are engaged.<sup>51</sup> Hyde goes further to report that this kind of awareness has been observed among children as they were engaged in learning activities that invited them to work with tactile materials that seemed to "bridge" the division of Self and the object. Each child seemed to merge into a union with the event of creating as a single entity.<sup>52</sup> Hyde posits: "While they may not have been aware of the presence of others around them, those children were ontologically aware of themselves and their connectedness to the activity in which the divide between Self and object had been bridged."<sup>53</sup> This is an act of "being," an experience of wholeness and this "unity" of experience might be called "Ultimate Unity." Although the children may not be able to articulate their experiences, for a moment they may have become one with the Other, having transcended time and space.<sup>54</sup> Hyde continues: "In these holistic experiences of unity, it was possible that these children were being led to a sense of their unity with Other in the more cosmic dimensions – in creation, and possibly the Transcendent."<sup>55</sup> Karl Rahner points out that the goal of transcendence is "the

---

<sup>43</sup> Hyde, *Children and Spirituality*, 29.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 332.

<sup>45</sup> Hyde, *Children and Spirituality*, 29.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>47</sup> Howard Gardner, *Intelligence Reframed: Multiple Intelligences for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 53.

<sup>48</sup> Hyde, *Children and Spirituality*, 43.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>52</sup> Hyde, *Children and Spirituality*, 90.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

infinite, ultimate reality which remains at the root a mystery: that is to say, God.”<sup>56</sup> Correlatively, in the action of “being,” “these children had perhaps experienced something of the presence of God,” for here they encountered the indwelling of God in their own “being.”<sup>57</sup>

### ***Conclusion***

Prayer offers an experience of self-transcendence – of being one with God. Prayer involves self-giving and “being set free from isolation.”<sup>58</sup> Teaching children to pray offers them the opportunity to understand that through prayer they can enter into a special relationship with God and “be transformed” *in* God.<sup>59</sup> Consequently, children can develop a sense of ontological wholeness through prayer; by being shown how to freely reach out beyond the ordinary events of each day, by being shown creative manners of prayer, and by exploring how religious imagination interconnects their relationship with the Divine Spirit.

---

<sup>56</sup> Karl Lehmann and Albert Raffelt, eds. *Karl Rahner: The Practice of Faith: A Handbook of Contemporary Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1986), 57.

<sup>57</sup> Hyde, *Children and Spirituality*, 90.

<sup>58</sup> Leech, *True Prayer*, 6.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adams, Kate, Brendan Hyde and Richard Woolley. *The Spiritual Dimension of Childhood*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishing, 2008.
- Berryman, Jerome W. *Godly Play: A Way of Religious Education*, New York: Harper San Francisco Publishing Company, 1991.
- Gardner, Howard. *Intelligence Reframed: Multiple Intelligences for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. New York: Basic Books, 1999.
- Greene, Maxine. *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Boss, 1995.
- Groome, Thomas H. *Will There Be Faith: A New Vision for Educating and Growing Disciples*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2011.
- Harris, Maria. *Teaching and Religious Imagination: An Essay in the Theology of Teaching*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1987.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Fashion Me a People: Curriculum in the Church*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989.
- Hyde, Brendan. *Children and Spirituality: Searching for Meaning and Connectedness*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishing, 2008.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Children's Spirituality and 'The Good Shepherd Experience.'" *Religious Education*, (2004) 99: 2, 137-150.
- Leech, Kenneth. *True Prayer: An Invitation to Christian Spirituality*. San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1990.
- Lehmann, Karl and Albert Raffelt, eds. *Karl Rahner: The Practice of Faith: A Handbook of Contemporary Spirituality*. New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1986.
- Skelley, Michael. *The Liturgy of the World: Karl Rahner's Theology of Worship*. Collegeville, MI: The Liturgical Press, 1991.
- Westerhoff III, John. *Living the Faith Community: The Church That Makes a Difference*. Minneapolis, MN: Winston Press, 1985.
- "Julian of Norwich," <http://www.goodnews.ie/wisdomlinejuly2010.shtml>. Accessed October 21, 2014.