

Embodied Spirituality
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Perhaps no more appropriate site could have been found for a consideration of embodied spirituality than the site of this conference. For centuries before the historical record, the peoples of Norwich, of East Anglia--of all of England--were Celtic people among whom the spiritual world was closely linked with the physical world on every level. Profound connections among humans, deities, animals, and vegetation are represented by many surviving artifacts as well as by oral lore.

Until the first century C.E., the only unifying element among the diverse British tribes--the Trinovantes, the Coritani, the Iceni, the Silures, the Catuvellauni, the Brigantes, and others--was their commonly held spiritual beliefs and practices. Every grove and stream was inhabited--indeed, animated--by its own deity. Water, in all its manifestations--sea, rivers, lakes, streams, springs, wells, marshlands--was a potent source of life and healing. Trees, and particularly the oak, were of primary significance to the Celts. Sacred arbors were places of worship and sacrifice. Surviving images of trees, with their roots burrowing underground and branches spreading to the sky, suggest the joining of the lower and upper worlds.

Animals, both wild and domestic, were held in particular reverence. The boar was associated with feasting and festivity; the bull with aggression, strength and fertility; the ram also with aggression and fertility; the dog with hunting and healing (the dog was also depicted as having a presence in the Otherworld). Connection between animal and plant life was represented by the stag with its antlers shed in the spring and fall, symbolic of the growth-death-growth cycle of nature. The horse was a particularly powerful symbol of speed, beauty and sexual prowess, taking god-like qualities as represented by the enormous horse carved into a hillside in Oxfordshire, still evident.

The human head was a particular symbol of spiritual potency. In battle, the Celts were head-hunters, severing the heads of the enemy not just as a sign of victory but also to capture for themselves the sacred and protective powers thought to reside within the heads of the vanquished.

Gods were depicted with over-large human heads, or, often, with triple heads, facing in three directions.

In ancient tales that are still told, boundaries between human beings and animals are

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blurred by the many stories of shape-shifters, humans who take on the form of beasts, or beasts who become human for a while—the selkie legends are examples. The distinction between humans and vegetation is likewise rendered vague through the images of the Green Man, a man with vegetation sprouting from his head, his ears, and, in some instances, from his nose and mouth. The Green Man survived to become a decorative motif in Christian churches throughout Britain and Europe.

Celtic iconography depicts divinities possessing both human and bestial characteristics, such as the Lord of the Stags: a man with spreading antlers, the antlers also associated with the growth-death-growth cycle of vegetation.

The earth itself provided access to the spiritual realm, through “thin places,” physical sites of transport from the Presentworld to the Otherworld and back.

Less savory aspects of Celtic spirituality to contemporary sensibilities were human and animal sacrifice. Still surviving is evidence of enormous human-form wooden cages in which a human sacrifice was imprisoned, the cage then set on fire as a sacrifice to the gods. Bodily-spiritual connections were also evident in rites that involved casting the entrails of a sacrificed animal or human upon a stone altar to be “read” as an omen or portent by the presiding Druid priest or priestess.

The Celtic priestly caste were the Druid priests and priestesses who traveled among the tribes from their chief sanctuary on the Isle of Anglesey off northern Wales, as priests, counselors, philosophers, storytellers, diviners, shapeshifters and workers of supernatural wonders. Their influence among the Celtic people in Britain was so powerful on every level that theirs was one of the only two religions which the Roman invaders felt it necessary to war against in the lands they conquered, the other being Judaism in Palestine. Only the destruction of the Jewish temple and desecration of the Jewish altar begin to compare to the ferocity of the Romans’ determination to rid Britain of the influence of the Druid priests and priestesses, threats to the deity and the authority of the Roman emperor. This war against the Druids took place in approximately 60 C.E.

To provide a brief historical context for that war of some relevance to us here in Norwich: in the first half-century of the Common Era, the Romans, having conquered Gaul, began an invasion of England. They had subdued many of the southern tribes and established military bases at locations at Colchester, London, and St. Albans by 60 C.E. One of the tribes which had not been conquered was the powerful Iceni tribe, whose land was--here, in East Anglia. According to archaeological study, the royal dun was very near Norwich itself.

The Iceni were ruled by their tall, red-headed queen Boudica (whose name was subsequently mis-copied and is widely mis-pronounced Boadicea). Alarmed by the Roman incursions on British land and outraged by personal offensives against herself and her two daughters, Boudica raised a mighty army from the Iceni and neighboring tribes to resist the

Roman invasion. She was very nearly successful in driving the Romans out of Britain, her early success doubtless assisted by the fact that it was just at this time that the Roman military leader had removed the majority of Roman forces from southern England to northern Wales to launch an attack on the Druids and their sanctuaries.

Boudica easily routed and burned the Roman outposts at Colchester, London and St. Albans, which had been left all but undefended. News of the revolt came as the Roman legions were “mopping up” their slaughter of the Druids and destruction of the sacred arbors at Anglesey. The Roman army quickly returned to the south, engaged Boudica’s army in battle at a site now unknown, and defeated it. They then set out totally to subjugate the Britons and to eradicate all lingering Druidic influence.

The Druidic tradition was an oral one. The Druids left no written records, relying on an oral tradition to keep their influence strong and their lore alive. Much of what we know about the British Celts comes from artifacts recovered in England and artifacts and records in Ireland, which was never conquered by Rome. Norwich and its countryside provided the birthplace of the most tenacious efforts to resist Rome and to hold onto the ancient Celtic beliefs and practices.

I do not intend this paper to focus on the history of spiritual practices in Norwich, but if we can fast forward a millennium to consider what was happening in medieval Norwich 1300 years after Boudica’s revolt, that will provide a segue to a broader discussion of embodied spirituality from a more universal perspective.

The Roman conquerors were themselves polytheistic of course; it was not until the 4th century that persecution of Christians in Rome ceased and Christianity was granted official sanction by the Roman Emperor Constantine. The Romans withdrew from Britain in the 5th century, leaving it open to incursions by various invaders--Picts, Angles, Saxons, Vikings--and, in the 11th century, the Normans. During those years Christianity trickled into the British Isles, but it was not until the Norman Invasion that Christianity made its way into the mainstream of British spiritual life.

Of the dominant worldwide spiritual and religious traditions, Christianity holds the highest “theology of the body.” Christianity’s roots lie in the soil of Judaism, which itself places high value on the human being, created in the image of God and animated by the very breath or spirit—the *ruah*—of God. But this new religion, Christianity, begun as a sort of renewal movement in Judaism, placed its central belief in God’s actually becoming human. A young Palestinian girl, engaged but not yet married, was chosen by God to bear God’s own Son, to be named Jesus. God became human flesh—incarnate. Thus the dividing line between humanity and the divine being was erased. Not only had God looked at creation and seen it as good, not only had God created humankind in God’s own image, God had taken up residence in humankind, identified with humankind totally. Jesus was the “second Adam,” come to redeem Adam and Eve’s fall from grace.

Both Hebrew and Christian scriptures bear witness to a sense of spirit enlivening the very earth and of a connection between the natural world and humankind. As Isaiah the prophet exclaims, “[Y]ou shall go out in joy, and be led forth in peace; / the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, / and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands” (Is. 55:12). In the Christian Testament, Jesus says that if his followers failed to shout their praises, “even the very stones would cry out” in testimony to him (Lk. 19:40). And, as the Apostle Paul was to write, the whole of creation had been “waiting with eager longing” for the revealing of the children of God, for human beings to come into the fulness of their kinship with God (Rom. 8:22).

Thus it would seem that the old Celtic beliefs in the communion of deity, humanity, animal and vegetable life would resonate with these aspects of Christianity, and Christianity with them. And for some it was so. The Green Man at least survived, and the Celtic holy woman Bridgit—later St. Bridgit—is said to have had a vision foretelling the coming of Christ. But there developed two major influences within Christianity that were to militate against these early-held aspects of Christian belief. As Christianity was the state religion of most of the Western European world for centuries, their impact on Western thought and culture—and spirituality--have been wide-reaching and pervasive.

First was the influence of Greek thought with its notion of spirit and matter as binary opposites, elevating the spiritual as that which is pure, capable of attaining the ideal realm, intrinsically of a higher plane than the material world, reducing the body to that which is unspiritual, base and corrupt. The second influence was that of St. Augustine, a dominant Christian leader and theologian of the 4th and 5th centuries who brought to Christianity his notion of original sin: a belief that humankind, because of the sin of Adam, is from birth sinful and depraved, fallen from grace, in essence denying the *imago dei* in humankind. This doctrine of Original Sin has affected Christian belief ever since.

It was not a far leap to a view of humankind as deserving of God’s disfavor and contempt, to see God as distancing godself from sinful, contaminated human flesh, and thus a need to “mortify the flesh” in order to regain God’s favor. (This is, of course, to simplify somewhat a complex theological issue in order to abstract from it those aspects that pertain to the question at hand.)

Julian of Norwich

But our fast-forwarding was to take us to 14th century Norwich, where shall pause again before we depart to the wider world. On Tuesday a group of us visited the cell and centre for the study of Julian of Norwich, a 14th century mystic. For those of you who are not familiar with Julian, she was an anchoress, a woman whose calling was to a life of essential solitude and prayer, “anchored” in one location, yet available to people who would come to her window to seek her comfort or counsel. Julian was remarkable in many ways, not least of which is the fact

that her book *The Revelations of Divine Love* is the first book by a woman published in England. It disappeared for centuries after she completed it, but was rediscovered in the 19th century and finally republished in the early 20th century. It has been widely read and quoted ever since. What I would like to touch upon, if briefly, is Julian of Norwich's very deeply embodied apprehension of the spiritual.

Julian's sense of embodied spirituality is revealed in several of the 16 "showings" or revelations which she received, and which over subsequent years she reflected on in her writings. The first showing occurred when Julian was "thirty-and-one-half years old," and endured an illness that it seemed was to end in death. A priest arrived and held before her a cross (apparently a crucifix), telling her to look upon it and draw comfort from it. As she looked at the cross, it began to glow with light. She writes, "Suddenly I saw the red blood trickle down from under the crown of thorns, hot and fresh and flooding out as it did at the time of his Passion when the crown of thorns was pressed into his blessed head—he who was both God and man and suffered for me" (quoted in Upjohn, p. 33).

The pain left her and when she had recovered, she remembered that years before she had wanted to experience Christ's crucifixion as if she had actually stood at the foot of the cross with his mother and his friends. The showing seemed an answer to that desire. What Julian experienced, however, was not the emotional anguish of Jesus' mother and friends in seeing a loved one suffer and die. It was not the witnesses' profound sense of grief, not the suffering that one would have experienced at the foot of the cross, but the very physicality of Christ's own pain: the red blood trickling, the fleshly pain of the thorns pressed into his head. A difference. A very physical, embodied difference.

Julian's later reflections on this showing did not take the form of abstract theologizing on the meaning of the Cross or of the atonement. It was not, as the Church widely taught, a reminder of the utter depravity of humankind, an innate sinfulness that nailed the Savior to the Cross in the first place. Julian's reflections on this "showing"—experienced in very physical, bodily terms--aroused in her something quite different, as she later records: a profound sense of God's love for the Creation and of God's choosing to identify God's very nature with human nature. As she writes, "And I saw no difference between God's substance and our substance, but, as it were, all God. And yet my understanding took it that our substance is contained within God—that is to say, that God is God, and our substance is created by God" (quoted in Upjohn, p. 35).

From this showing derived a second, consequent, insight: "For I knew by the daily teachings of holy Church, and by my own feelings, that the blame for our sins hangs heavy upon us, from the first man until the time we come up to heaven. This, then, was my wonder—that I saw our Lord putting no more blame upon us than if we were as clean and holy as the angels in heaven.

Julian writes that she was "greatly troubled" by these seeming contradictions and cried

out to God for understanding (Upjohn, p. 36). The answer came in a parable, her second showing. She was shown a lord and his servant. The lord lovingly sends the servant on a mission, and the servant, eager to do the lord's will, sets off. He falls into a "boggy dell" and is greatly hurt. He cannot get up or help himself, but the "most mischief" that Julian saw was that the servant can not even lift his head to look to his lord, who only seeks to comfort him. The spiritual understanding that came was severalfold. First, Julian saw that the servant was at once Christ and Adam, signifying all humankind. This view is markedly different from Church teachings that view Christ as the "second Adam," coming to redeem humankind from Adam's sin. That is, God did not wait until the first century C.E. to take on human form, but had been one with Adam, one with humankind, from the beginning of Creation.

Julian's insight into this showing resonate with her reflections on the first, an identifying of God's nature with human nature, and human nature with God's nature, the spiritual and the material as one. She also saw a clear difference between humankind's perception of sin and God's view. She saw that sin is not "a shame to humankind" but can provide a way to see truth more clearly, but that human beings allow their sense of their shortcomings, or sin, to cut them off from God who seeks only to give them comfort. Her reflections suggest to her that such preoccupations with sinfulness do not come from God but from one's own self-absorption and pride; God does not reveal godself to Julian as angry or disapproving but as pure love and compassion.

Julian did not address directly, as a woman might today, the fact that these revelations about the nature of God and God's relationship with humankind rather flew in the face of the Church's teachings, notably the widely accepted doctrine of Original Sin and a great divide between God who is pure spirit and humankind, bound in sinful flesh. She simply acknowledged the authority of the church--and went on to describe what had been shown her.

A third aspect of Julian's sense of embodied spirituality is revealed in the metaphors she uses for spiritual realities: mother's love, a child learning to walk, a friend's service, a hazelnut, raindrops falling from the eaves, the scales of a herring (Obbard, 2000).

Lest we think Julian can relate only to those who believe in a divine being, or who see spirituality as rooted in the divine, let us ask ourselves whether there are not universal principles to be observed here.

If a child has been shaped in a culture--religious or secular--that conceives spiritual and material reality in terms of binary opposites, how permeable is the child to physically perceived manifestations of spirit--or to recognizing such experiences as spiritual in nature? If one is taught to embrace only what has been passed down from others as authoritative, or is otherwise prone to attribute authority only to some person or some system outside oneself, how would direct revelation be received? What is the likelihood of a fresh, original, deeply personal and deeply felt experience of Spirit? On the other hand, if one's need is to reject totally and out-of-hand what has been handed down as authoritative, is one not at risk of being equally closed, equally

rejecting, potentially equally as limited?

Julian had wished early in her life to know something: what Mary and Jesus' friends experienced at the foot of the cross. On some level she was open to revelation. When it came she initially didn't see it as a response to her openness or earlier-expressed desire but simply as it presented itself. Only on later reflection did she see a connection. It was an answer, but one that was, in essence, quite different from what she had asked for and different from what her tradition might have taught her was all she, a sinful human being, might seek, i.e. an identifying with the human beings at the foot of the cross. What was shown her was the very physical, embodied suffering of Christ himself.

Her showings implanted in her profound understandings that had an authority greater than that of her "inherited truth." They did not qualify it or shade it; they essentially over-rode it. Her experience provided her with an embodied knowing that was sufficiently authentic to be trusted above her received tradition, on these matters at least.

How is this not true on every level of our experience of spiritual reality? Of what we know of children's spirituality? Of the spiritual world's immanence, its "standing at the door and knocking" at the door of our receiving?

What defenses do we call into play to tame the untamable for ourselves, for our children? How might we be a means of making available to children a sense of a free, comforting and loving Spirit permeating the universe, down to each tiny grain of sand?

There was a wind blowing through the 12th, 13th and 14th centuries in England and Europe, calling forth similar embodied responses from other Christian mystics: Hildegard of Bingen, Meister Eckhart, Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila. Indeed, the term "embodied mysticism" has been called a redundant one; mystical experience, a direct experience of the Transcendent, has a physical, bodily impact. It tends not to be an abstract, cerebral affair, though it enlightens the mind and often leads to profound theological insight.

Hildegard, Meister Eckhart, Catherine and Teresa are worth reading in their own right, but we shall leave medieval mystics to extend our consideration further afield.

Embodied Spirituality Today

How do we understand "embodied spirituality" today? It is a term that has come into usage in the West rather than in the East, to counteract the dis-embodied spirituality that has come to prevail in the West, a sense that spirit is separate from the body, the spirit imprisoned for a time in base, sin-prone, thankfully mortal flesh. Perhaps it is not a useful term, would not have come into use, in the East, where the body has long been understood to be a part of the spiritual life. But to a great extent Western traditions have ignored the bodily energies in the spiritual life. The body has not been understood as a potential source of spiritual insight or understanding, but

something to be constrained, regulated, disciplined, its impulses or expressions suppressed or repressed if one is to lead a truly “spiritual” life. It is to challenge that view that the term “embodied spirituality” has become something of a buzzword in contemporary western spiritual circles.

The term “embodied spirituality” is generally understood to reflect a view that all dimensions of the human being—body, soul and spirit—are potentially sites for the transcendent, for understanding the Mystery that lies beyond and beneath and within the world we live in. The body is not to be denied or ignored, nor is it merely a conduit or for spiritual experience, but is itself a site of spiritual knowing, of experiencing the immanent Mystery.

And perhaps it would be good here to pause to outline what the terms “body,” “soul,” and “spirit” signify, at least for the purpose of this paper. People often conflate the terms “soul” and “spirit,” but in Jewish and Christian traditions, they are separate aspects of the human being. What, then, are the distinctions? According to my received Christian tradition, “body” refers to the visible, material, tangible, mortal aspect of our beings. The soul is the seat of the mind, the will, and the emotions. And the spirit is that aspect of ourselves that seeks and is capable of connection with realities that lie beyond our selves, that seek union and relatedness.

And so how are we to understand soul and spirit and their connection with each other and with the body? A useful, if not particularly scientific, understanding was given to me years ago by a Christian lay teacher, John Flandreau. John said that we may think of the soul as a bubble located somewhere within the body, and the spirit as another bubble, resting on the soul. They are two separate entities, but there is a shared membrane between them. (Can you see the picture?) What the human spirit finds union with outside itself will infuse the spirit, permeate the membrane between spirit and soul, and so affect the mind, the will, the emotions. The mind, the will, and the emotions, in turn, direct the body and its actions and affect the body’s general disposition and well-being. This image is not to be taken literally, but rather metaphorically, as a way to think about the relationships.

Robert Fuller (2007) has brought together multidisciplinary insights into that aspect of the soul that we identify as the emotions and their role in connecting bodily sources of thought and feeling with the spiritual life. As Fuller claims, understanding the “the role of discrete emotions in directing perception and cognition” gives us a way to “map the kinds of leverage that the body exerts on humanity’s spiritual impulses” (p. 27).

According to research in the fields of biology and psychology, there are several clearly identifiable basic “discrete” emotions. Some of these discrete emotions are fear and anger, the two most often noted, as well as joy, sadness and interest.

Fear and anger are generally recognized as universal emotions, genetically encoded and deeply wired into the human brain, lying beneath cultural influence, learning or volitional control. That is, I cannot decide whether I experience fear or anger. Others emotions, including

joy, sadness, and interest are considered to be less ancient and more likely to be blended with other emotions; wonder, for example, can be considered a blending of joy and interest. These emotions are also more likely to be shaped by cultural influences.

The somatic manifestations of fear and anger are almost identical: heart rate and blood pressure increase, blood flow is directed away from the viscera toward the muscles of action, energy is mobilized and sustained. The two emotions, Morton Kelsey and others have surmised, are often related on psychological levels as well.

As Fuller points out, emotions vary widely in their temporal effect. Fear and anger are most often linked to short-term reactions; and while many emotions seem to appear first as a response to a clear stimulus, they are often “the experiential template” from which longer-lasting moods, dispositions, personality traits and temperaments gradually develop. The emotions affect our spiritual lives in their role as the primary motivational system in goal-setting, information-gathering and directing attention to environmental objects that seem relevant to one’s vital interests.

All the emotions are substrates of physical responses to external stimuli, Fuller asserts. Lying beneath perception, cognition and motivation, they act on the body in visceral ways, stimulating adrenalin, affecting heart rate, and mobilizing our organ systems, muscle groups, and various metabolic processes, readying us for action. Our emotions produce species-typical gestures or expressions: raised hair, “chill bumps,” increased heart rate, enlarged or constricted pupils in the eyes, tightening or loosening of the mouth, the rushing of blood to the limbs for action.

Some researchers (notably Frederickson 1998) categorize emotions as positive or negative. “Negative emotions are those “triggered when new experiences fall short of expectations, frustrating the organism’s sense of well being.” Positive emotions (joy, sadness, and interest) “are those emotions triggered when new experiences exceed expectations, thereby broadening an individual’s thought-action repertoire and elevating an individual’s level of pleasure or enthusiasm” (p. 30).

The emotions of fear and anger are the most heavily researched of the emotions, in part because they are easier to differentiate according to their facial, autonomic, and behavior components (Frederickson, cited in Fuller)—and possibly also because they are likely to manifest themselves, if sustained for any length of time, in pathology or anti-social behavior. And yet, in terms research into children’s spirituality, it is the “positive” emotions that are most attended to: joy and interest, blending to produce the emotion of wonder.

Fuller cautions that in our daily lives most of our “feeling states” are too complex and multi-layered to be attributed to just one discrete emotion; our feelings, our moods, our temperaments are a mix of biological and cultural factors. It is clear that the emotions, whether discrete or blended, are linked to the body. What is the relation between the emotions and the

spirit of the child, beyond those Fuller points to in humankind as a whole (goal-setting, information-gathering, attention-directing)? What is the effect on the spirit, when a child encounters repeated experiences of having his or her expectations dashed, hopes disappointed, of repeatedly having one's sense of well-being threatened? There are networks of social agencies that deal with the effects of such experiences on psychological well-being; connections between negative emotions and a child's physical well being are also investigated and treated by medical science. To my knowledge little research has been done on the effects of repeated negative emotional experiences on children's spirituality, although their effects can be intuited, or inferred, particularly as children mature into adolescent or adult years.

What research into children's spirituality has tended to focus on are those "positive" emotions, those experiences in which children's expectations are exceeded, when they experience a heightened sense of joy, of wonder, of well-being. Ironically, those aspects of children's spirituality that researchers in our field have studied closely have been largely ignored in adult studies, particularly the emotion of wonder, and particularly among studies of emotions that are linked to biological or evolutionary well-being. Yet, as psychologist Jonathan Haidt (2003, cited in Fuller, 2007), points out, the emotion of wonder can be viewed from a biological or evolutionary stance. According to Haidt, wonder promotes social cohesion in very different ways from an emotion such as fear which narrows attention and restricts cue utilization. Wonder "enlarges the field of peripheral vision' and opens our attention to a wider field of stimuli than we would ordinarily attend to" (Fuller, p. 39). Particularly do experiences of beauty or perfection "open our hearts and minds" to others in our social groups, fostering increased openness rather than immediate utilitarian action. "Wonder responds to unexpected features of our environment" by arousing an interest in causality, agency, or intentionality that lie beyond the observed phenomena, stimulating higher-order thinking. It causes "a sense of mystery and produces both trust and a sense of belonging" (pp. 40-41). It arouses increased rapport with the physical environment and a desire to connect with the surrounding world. It enables human beings to move beyond self-interest to include the perceptions and interests of others, to an ethical sensibility.

The Body in Eastern Spiritual Traditions

Eastern spiritual traditions do not tend to hold the polarized view of body and spirit that has permeated Western Christianity. In Zen Buddhism, for instance, spiritual practice begins with the body. First learned is posture conducive to mindfulness, or meditation: keeping the back straight, sitting in lotus or half-lotus position; placing the hands lightly on the thighs, the eyes slightly open, resting on one point. Second is attending to the breath, the inhaling, the exhaling, which contributes to a stilling of the mind. The posture of the body, a focus on the breath, a stilling of the mind, prepare one for spiritual enlightenment, a state of transcendence, of oneness.

In my received tradition, Christianity, one begins with considering the spirit then moves "downward" to the soul and thence to the body. In Zen Buddhism, spiritual practice begins with considerations of the body, which affects the disposition of the soul, the stilling of the mind. The

soul then affects the disposition of the spirit and its capacity for enlightenment, for transcendence.

In other traditions, a sense of transcendence or ecstasy is achieved through other uses of the body, such as repetitious chanting or movement. In the Sufi tradition, the body becomes a means of spiritual knowing through dance—though only after one has mastered the demands of the body and the ego. After a long period of ascetic living and of disciplining of the ego (the white conical hat of the Sufi represents the gravestone of the ego) an aspiring Sufi dancer learns how, by anchoring one foot to a certain spot, the body may twirl in particular ways and postures to achieve a transcendent state. The body itself is transported to a state of bliss.

Children's Embodied Spirituality

To turn now to children's embodied spirituality. It is often said that children are little theologians, in their seemingly instinctive wondering about God.. Children are little theologians, yes; and it can be said that children are the embodiment of embodied spirituality. A few vignettes.

Christy, six, is spending the night with his great-uncle Jim, who lives on a small lake. Spending the night with Jim is a special treat for Christy, whose parents, though loving, are strict disciplinarians, easily becoming exasperated by Christy's rather wispy, carefree way of being in the world. But at Jim's there are no such strictures. A swim in the lake, supper, then hunting for frogs with a flashlight—a torch—before a bedtime story. In the morning on goes the bathing suit, perhaps still a bit damp from the night before. Jim is up and ready, and so an early morning dip, then watermelon for breakfast—eaten without formal plate or fork and knife, from the hands, the juices dripping from one's chin into the earth. Christy waits on grassy bank while Jim goes into the kitchen. The mist lifts off the lake, a fish jumps, a mother mallard paddles by with her ducklings in tow. Christy's body warms. Jim approaches, two large watermelon slides in hand. Christy is singing. "Sunshine! Oh, sunshine! Sunshine! Oh, sunshine!" Jim has the wisdom to stand and wait until Christy has finished his song. Then he sits and passes Christy his watermelon.

Eight-year-old Miranda was at the seashore with her father. She waded out into the shallow water and stood there, the water coming up to her waist. She began to move back and forth with the waves. Ten or fifteen minutes passed. Mark managed to sit and simply watch, not interrupting. Mark found his body swaying with Miranda's. Still he did not interrupt, despite his fears that she might be having some kind of seizure, or whether she had enough sun screen on. After a long while Miranda turned and came out of the water, absolutely glowing and peaceful, Mark later said. She sat down next to her father. After a few minutes, he gently asked what she had been doing. "I was the water," she said softly. "The water?" he repeated.

"Yeah, it was amazing. I was the water. I love it and it loves me. I don't know how else to say it." They sat quietly until a few minutes later she hopped up to dig in the sand. "Somehow I felt completely overwhelmed, like I had witnessed grace," Mark said later. (Hart, p. 47).

Eleven-year-old Billy Eliot, in the film of the same name, defies familial and social mores to pursue his love of dance. We see Billy dance his anger, his joy, his hope, his frustration, his fear. His primal, discrete emotions find expression in dance; it is in dance that he finds expression and transcendence. He wins an audition for the Royal Ballet School, and is about to be turned away when a member of the review panel asks a question: What does it feel like when you're dancing? Billy begins a stumbling reply. "Sort of feels good. It's sort of stiff and that, but once I get going, then I, like, forget everything...and sort of disappear. I sort of disappear. Like a feel a change in me whole body. Like there's a fire in me body. I'm just there...flying...like a bird. Electricity.....Yeah, electricity." That is enough for the reviewers: his body-spirit connection is expressed through dance. In the final scene, we see the adult Billy, the featured dancer, lifting off into a vaulting leap in a performance of Swan Lake.

One more. Sixteen-year-old Hannah is riding her horse, Dolly, across a vast wide open pasture, some three miles from home. The grasses have grown high, almost up to Dolly's belly. They reach the far end of the pasture and are turning to ride toward home when she feels, rather than sees, a storm rolling in. The wind picks up and the air fills with the damp expectancy of rain.

She looks up and sees the storm cloud, moving in fast. It's going to be a big storm, one of those lightning-flashing, sheets-of-rain one after the other storms. She urges Dolly into a canter. The wind increases. Her body moves with Dolly's rolling canter, the grasses waving beneath her. Suddenly she feels lifted, as if Dolly's hoofs are not touching the earth, one with her horse, one with the undulating grasses, one with the sky. That is all, until Dolly slows her canter to a trot to stop at the gate.

Such "peak experiences," such moments of embodied knowing, are not unusual in childhood. As they mystics demonstrate, and as Robert Fuller points out in his discussion of the role of discrete emotions in the spiritual life, some ways of bodily knowing are not socially constructed and provide reason to call into check, or to qualify at least, the constructivist cognitive paradigm, at least in this level of experience. The discrete emotions provide an unmediated, visceral effect upon the body, a direct way of knowing, as do such direct spiritual experiences as those that came to Julian of Norwich.

But as Tobin Hart, Craig Schlarb and Daniel Scott's research has shown, such peak experiences can be socially deconstructed. Christy and Miranda had the good fortune to be in the company of a wise adult who allowed and respected the moment. Billy Eliot won the support of his dance teacher and finally his family to pursue his love for dance. Hannah had learned that it was better not to speak of such an experience; she "forgot" it, until it came back to her years later in the context of hearing others describe such experiences. So that while bodily knowing, mystical experiences, and the emotions themselves may not be socially constructed, a child learns from the social environment how to deal with such phenomena, how to manage one's anger, how to disguise one's fear, how to suppress one's joy, how to hide one's sadness, how to ignore or

“forget” moments of wonder. The ways one learns to treat one’s direct, bodily spiritual experiences, to value or devalue them, to express or repress them, become, over time, personality traits, dispositions, shaping the general temperament and shaping the course of the spiritual life..

Adults who have direct experience of such transcendence are described as mystics, and are often placed on a higher plane than the rest of humankind. But I suspect that many of us here have had such experiences, known or intuited them.

Concluding Thoughts

This conference has given us insights into many manifestations of children’s embodied spirituality, a frame for understanding them, means of supporting them, and the wisdom, perhaps, to realize that we do not need altogether to understand them ourselves in order to respect and honor them.

So here we are in Norwich, ancient site of embodied spirituality, an international community of scholars rediscovering in the 21st century spirit-body connections as they may inform our work with children. Many questions remain unaddressed; many discoveries are yet to be made; many ambiguities and contradictions remain to be teased out. We have such work ahead of us if we choose it. And perhaps we shall see the day when the term “embodied spirituality” is recognized as a redundancy even in the West.

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