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**THE SPIRITUAL POTENTIAL OF CHILDHOOD:
AWAKENING TO THE FULLNESS OF LIFE**

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Introduction

Thank you for inviting me to your 12th International Conference on Children's Spirituality. Many years ago I spoke at one of the Roehampton conferences on 'Spirituality, Education and the Whole Child', later superseded by the International Conference on Children's Spirituality' (first held in Chichester in 2000). Ever since then I have followed with much interest this important field of studies which unfortunately still remains too little known. Books dealing with spirituality in general exist in abundance whereas studies dealing explicitly with children's spirituality are less numerous; frequently they are not even listed in general surveys and handbooks on spirituality.¹

Recently I reviewed the excellent, very informative and concise study *The Spiritual Dimension of Childhood* by Kate Adams, Brendan Hyde and Richard Woolley, published in 2008,² following the 7th International Conference on Children's Spirituality, held at the University

¹ For example, the large handbook by Kees Waaijman, *Spirituality. Forms, Foundations, Methods*. Leuven: Peeters, 2002, does not even carry a single reference to childhood or children's spirituality. The same applies to the well-known work *The Study of Spirituality* (eds Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, Edward Yarnold, London: SPCK, 1986, and the excellent academic overview *Minding the Spirit. The Study of Christian Spirituality* (eds Elizabeth A. Dreyer & Mark S. Burrows) Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins, University Press, 2005. Many other publications could be listed.

² Kate Adams, Brendan Hyde and Richard Woolley, *The Spiritual Dimension of Childhood*. London and Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2008.

of Winchester (2006). This book documents well the pioneering work that is being undertaken on children's spirituality. A strong case is made to listen to children's voices, which children of all ages have more opportunities to express today than ever before in history. But they also have to learn to find and speak their own, personal voice without imitating that of others.

Like others before them, the authors of this volume argue that spirituality is 'a natural human disposition'; this is briefly discussed in relation to evolutionary perspectives, mystical and wisdom traditions from West and East as well as transpersonal psychology. The study draws on wide-ranging research in anthropology, psychology, religion, neuroscience, theories of education and religious education, all of which throw some light on children's spiritual experiences. This interdisciplinary approach reveals a rich tapestry of the spiritual dimension of childhood, intimately related to the growth and development of the child's self, identity, consciousness and relationships rather than to any specific religious beliefs and practices.

Given the great variety of connections and expressions of spirituality, in childhood as well as in adults, I want to argue, though, that it may be more appropriate to speak of '*spiritual dimensions*' in the plural rather than in the singular, just as 'spirituality' should not be spoken of in the singular because of the great historical and cultural diversity of different spiritual experiences, teachings and exemplars.

To study children's spirituality at the beginning of the 21st century provides a prime opportunity for exploring the personal, social and global interconnections in the understanding and practice of spirituality. Countless definitions of spirituality have been suggested, while it is also said that spirituality escapes definition altogether. I work with an open-ended definition whereby *spiritualities* quite simply *connote*

those ideas, practices and commitments that nurture, sustain and shape the fabric of human lives, whether that of individuals or communities.

This open-ended definition can also be applied to childhood where the fabric of human life emerges, is nurtured into further growth and shaped towards its adult expression.

I have not undertaken any direct empirical research on children's spirituality, but I have published a book on *The Search for Spirituality. Our global quest for meaning and fulfilment*³ which discusses spirituality across the spectrum of human life from birth to death. This includes a section on spirituality and childhood as well as on spirituality and embodiment⁴ – themes that are directly relevant to this conference with its focus on spirituality and physicality, children's wellbeing and environmental wellbeing. At the level of personal experience I have been much involved with the upbringing of our four daughters and now also with that of our six grandchildren, apart from doing some RE teaching for 9-12 year olds many years ago.

Based on my own experience and research, I will first reflect on the spiritual potential of childhood, its awakening and development, followed secondly by a discussion of what I mean by the fullness of life in a time of almost cataclysmic change, and how this is related to trust in life and the zest for life, or what might be described as wellbeing in its largest sense. These ideas will be explored within a wider, more general context than one exclusively concerned with spirituality in either early childhood or young adolescence but, in my understanding at least, they have profound repercussions on the development of the spiritual potential of children and young people. They may widen your discussion and perhaps inspire some future research.

³ Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2009. I have drawn on my work in this book in several parts of this paper.

⁴ See especially chp 5 'Spirituality within Life's Dance'.

The spiritual potential of childhood, its awakening and development

The twentieth century has been described as the ‘century of the child’. An immense amount of research on the history and sociology of childhood, on children’s health and psychology, their education, growth and development has been undertaken. The needs and rights of children have been recognised in ways unknown before.⁵ Yet at least since the late twentieth century, and even more during the twenty-first century with its worldwide web, a growing critical awareness has arisen that childhood is increasingly under threat, so that some talk of the ‘erosion’ and even the ‘disappearance’ of childhood.⁶

Children are immensely vulnerable and need help and protection. Unicef speaks of ‘The fight for childhood’, of ‘childhood for sale’ and children’s ‘casualties of war’. Worldwide 18 million children are displaced by conflict and other emergencies and need urgent help⁷. Among them are 1 million children who are starving within large global areas affected by famine. Another example is the soul-stirring talk which the singer Michael Jackson gave in 2001 at Oxford to promote his ‘Heal the Kids’ programme. He described himself ‘less as an icon of pop...and more as an icon of...a generation that no longer knows what it means to be children:

All of us are products of our childhood. But I am the product of a lack of childhood, an absence of that precious and wondrous age when we frolic playfully without a care in the world...

...while performing and making music undoubtedly remain as some of my greatest joys, when I was young I wanted more than anything else to be a typical little boy. I wanted to build tree

⁵ See Hugh Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society Since 1500*. Pearson, Longman, 2005 [1995]; Dominic Wyse, ed. *Childhood Studies. An Introduction*. Blackwell Publishers, 2004; Sheila Greene & Diane Hogan, eds., *Researching Children’s Experience. Methods and Approaches*. Sage Publications, 2005.

⁶ See the early study of Neil Postman, *The Disappearance of Childhood*. 1982

⁷ See the Unicef Bulletin CHILDMatters, summer 2011.

houses, have water balloon fights, and play hide and seek with my friends. But fate had it otherwise and all I could do was envy the laughter and play time that seemed to be going on all around me... It is not just Hollywood child stars that have suffered from non-existent childhood. Today it's a universal calamity, a global catastrophe. Childhood has become the great casualty of modern-day-living...

And it's not just the kids who are suffering. It's the parents as well. For the more we cultivate little-adults in kids-bodies, the more removed we ourselves become from our own child-like qualities, and there is so much about being a child that is worth retaining in adult life.⁸

Given this problematic, greatly endangered situation of childhood within a large global context, it seems particularly important and poignant to investigate the *spiritual potential of childhood*, so that we can reflect on what can be practically done to develop this potential for the wellbeing of all children.

Human spiritual development belongs to all stages of life, whether childhood, adolescence, middle age, or the final stages of growing older. Ordinary day-to-day lived spirituality encompasses birth and growth, one's home and neighbours, family and friends, one's work and leisure, one's joys and pains, one's dreams and disappointments. All these experiences provide material for spiritual elucidation and transformation.

However, in the classical texts on spirituality the child remains mostly hidden. The physical process of childbearing and giving birth is generally not a religiously specifically valued activity. More than birth it is the activity of mothering that is drawn on as a religious symbol. While childbirth may be a spiritually significant experience for the mother, the spiritual potential and development of the child has traditionally not attracted much attention. Yet many religions know of special rites of initiation for the newborn, or for young adolescents on their path to

⁸ See Michael Jackson's speech given in Oxford on March 21, 2003 at ALL MICHAEL JACKSON.com

adulthood. In mythical stories we find the figure of the primordial child linked to the origin of life itself. We also know the divine child, but in comparison to all the male and female deities worshipped throughout history, this figure remains a relatively unimportant one. The best known examples are probably the infant Jesus in Christianity and the God Krishna as a child in Hinduism.

When the Oxford scholar Sir Alister Hardy (1896-1985) invited people in the 1960s to provide accounts of significant religious experiences in their lives, about 15 % out of over 4000 respondents described unforgettable, vivid experiences in their childhood that had been of lasting importance for the rest of their lives. These experiences related to a sense of presence, to something other than the self, to a sense of unity, of love, of a caring personal deity. These accounts were eventually published as *The Original Vision. A Study of the Religious Experiences of Childhood*.⁹

Another well-known example in this field is David Hay and Rebecca Nye's fine study *The Spirit of the Child* (1998).¹⁰ It maintains that spirituality is natural to children, that there is in fact a biological basis for spiritual awareness, since it is essentially part of human evolution and not an element implanted through culture and education. Thus there exists a pre-linguistic experiential foundation of spiritual sensibility in human beings.

This reference to children's 'spiritual sensibility' or what I call 'potential' seems to me more appropriate than speaking simply about 'children's spirituality' or the 'spiritual dimension' of childhood. The word 'dimension' in particular sounds too linear and too static – like a one-dimensional, stable ingredient – whereas our language has to capture

⁹ Edward Robinson, *The Original Vision. A Study of the Religious Experiences of Childhood*. Oxford: Religious Experience Research Unit, Manchester College, Oxford University, 1977.

¹⁰ London: HarperCollins, 1998.

the dynamic, developmental aspect of the spiritual, its immense promise, its mysteriously indefinable, even ultimately inexplicable quality, its ability to grow and expand, to embrace and suffuse all human life and experiences. It is this dynamic quality of the spiritual as well as its hidden nature embedded in a larger context, and spirituality's capacity to grow, expand and flourish which is captured more adequately by the word 'potential'.

This potential or capacity for spirituality is present in every human being, but it needs to be activated and realized. Its awakening and development during childhood is of great importance, but this first requires that parents and teachers will recognise this hidden potential. That means it has to be taught in some way, and this invites new approaches to spiritual education. We teach our children to learn to walk and talk, - to acquire all the immensely subtle and complex aspects of human culture, and master a wide variety of skills. But often our children are unfortunately not encouraged to develop spiritual awareness, except if they are given the right kind of religious and spiritual education. At present this does not happen in large parts of secular society, nor does it necessarily always occur in a traditional religious environment. The spiritual potential of each human being has to be awakened, trained and practised, just as training is needed to develop the potential to excel in sports, make music, sing, or dance. But even then not all people make good singers or dancers. Similarly, not everybody is spiritually equally gifted.

Educators must take note of the spiritual world in which children live, their experiences, hopes, dreams, as well as pains and fears. This requires intuition and empathy, a focused listening to children's own stories and voices, their real and imagined make-believe worlds. Contemporary children's experience includes a complex global world,

ranging from their personal and social worlds to being part of an intricate global network that includes international children's rights, children's relation to political and economic questions, to the market and consumerism, to health and disease issues, even to violence and conflict resolution.

There can be no doubt that education towards greater spiritual awareness is needed for all people in order to discover their spiritual potential within themselves. Very few become accomplished in the spiritual life without learning about it from others, or being introduced to it in some way or another. The active *awakening* of our spiritual potential into a spiritually active approach to life is still very underdeveloped in contemporary society. We need to give far more attention to the education of the human spirit, both in children and adults. Our individual development from birth to death may be likened to a progressive unfolding of the potential we carry within ourselves, much of which we never fully actualise, so that our spiritual awakening and progress remain incomplete and, more often than not, completely underdeveloped and woefully inadequate for being fully alive.

We could spend much time discussing what it means to be fully alive and fully human, and how spirituality can transform the personal and social lives of children and adults. I only want to say that the nurturing of spiritual potential means the development of *a spiritual awareness or consciousness* which I understand as a different, deeper way of "*seeing*", an all-embracing vision, a commitment to a depth dimension of human life – what used to be called a "transcendent dimension" – by seeing experiences in a larger context, having a greater vision – by relating more widely, and responding more effectively, by taking "response-ability" towards ourselves and others, the environment,

nature, the earth, the human community, and Ultimate Reality, however named – often called the Spirit.

In order to develop a more comprehensive and complex vision of the spiritual potential of childhood, we need to reflect on the meaning of birth and embodiment. As soon as we speak of children, we think of birth, the foundational human experience of coming into life. But human birth is more than a biological life-event; it displays a natural sacrality and points to a hidden spiritual dimension, recognised and reflected in the countless celebrations and religious observances that surround a child's birth into life. Many religions also know of a symbolic 'second birth', often considered the 'real' birth brought about by initiation, baptism, or later conversion in adult life. The philosopher Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) has captured the miracle of being born in the newly coined word, 'natality'. This points to the new beginning, opportunities, chances and hopes that arise with the arrival of each human being. Each birth is a new, exuberant affirmation, a sign of hope and renewal for humanity.

The small, newborn child embodies the mystery of beginnings, the freshness and wonder of life not yet touched by the narrow ambitions, confusions, and uncertainties of adulthood, not yet burdened with the responsibilities of a self-reflexive consciousness nor a sense of guilt. A child has a simple, even naïve view of life, a playful attitude and sense of enjoyment which many adults have lost. A child becomes slowly and gradually more aware every day of its growth. There are so many signs of a child's energy to learn, discover, explore and grow – a primordial vitality and immersion in the present that never seems to be part of adult life in the same way again, but lingers in memory as a primordial experience that can haunt grown ups as a yearning for unity and oneness long lost, but never forgotten.

The child's awareness is a deeply embodied one, linked to its own body, that of its mother, of significant others, of its home, and its surrounding world. The joys and pains of being human are so deeply connected with our physical existence and bodiliness that we need to reflect explicitly on the matter-body-flesh reality we are. Religious thinkers have often ignored this aspect of human nature in preference to abstract, disembodied thinking that separates mind, soul, and spirit from the physical aspects of the body, especially from human sexuality. So many religious and philosophical teachings seem to imply a radical separation of the body from our sense of the self. So many ascetic practices reflect a profound dis-ease with our physical embodiment. Yet spiritual energy flows through our body and limbs. It affects our whole being in the world, since spiritual life is fundamentally relational, and that includes an intrinsic relationship between body and spirit. We are above all *embodied selves*. Some prefer to speak simply of a *bodied self* (rather than an 'embodied' one), an expression that tries to counter the mistaken view that our mind and psyche exist within a separate corporeal container. We live as an integral unity patterned by body and selfhood which can be distinguished, but not disentangled and separated.

The human body is ambiguous as an experience and sign: it is both lived and imagined. It serves as a symbol in religious and social life, for the human body is used as a metaphor for the larger social and cosmic body. We live, think, and experience *through* our bodies, and religious beliefs are *embodied* through religious practices. The body can assume very different meanings in different religious and cultural contexts, yet our embodiedness expresses simultaneously our individual particularity, and our common human condition.

The twentieth century experienced a strong return to the body, a full recognition of its existence, an affirmation of its needs and desires, its

central role in all experiences of human intimacy, friendship, and love. It is through our body that we first develop a sense of a separate self, and a sense of the world. It is through our body that we are located in space and time. We also understand much better today how infinitely diverse the human body is in its individual expressions, and how culturally variable the meanings given to the body are. The body is thus of central significance for human identity, self-understanding, and self-transcendence, but also for the experience of human vulnerability, frailty, and finitude. The dignity of the human body is enhanced when we connect it with the body of the Earth, the whole world body, especially when this world is seen as ‘God’s body’, as the creation of a divine spirit and power, and when the whole of nature and the Earth is experienced as being marked by and suffused with the numinous presence of the Divine.

From a past neglect of the body, contemporary society has now become obsessed with the body, with our flesh and bones, our sheer physicality, its form, image, and representation. Nowhere is this more evident than in the current emphasis on global sports which involve the relentless training and top performance of numerous bodies. There is also the tyrannical imposition of socially prescribed, physical norms of beauty, the obsession with one’s body image, with regiments of diet and physical health, and the excessive bodily display in wide areas of public life. But does this mean we are liberated from an earlier disdain and rejection of the physical? That we love and appreciate the body? That we have achieved a harmonious balance between body, mind, and spirit?

A healthy, balanced spirituality must be related to the diverse forms of human embodiment. Only a spiritually aware attitude can give human bodiliness its true meaning and respect, including all the dimensions of our sexuality. It is not even entirely satisfactory to speak of ‘embodiment’, since this word can give the impression as if our spirit

were encased within flesh and blood, muscles and nerves, and everything else that is part of the physio-chemistry and biology of our body. The human body is an *ensouled body*, an entirely living thing, vibrating with energy and spirit. Following the philosopher Edmund Husserl, the German mystic Edith Stein (1891-1942) speaks of the ‘*lived body*’ (called *Leib* in German) to distinguish it from the merely material ‘body’ (*Körper* in German). It is this lived, ensouled body that is of great significance for understanding and practicing a holistic spirituality.

This body still remains a profound miracle and mystery that we do not yet fully comprehend in spite of all our advanced scientific knowledge, the X-rays and MRI scans that can now be taken of it. In the contemporary secular world, it is perhaps only in certain forms of psychosomatic and holistic medicine, and in some movements of psychotherapy and psychology, that the mysterious link between our body, mind, and spirit is more fully acknowledged and taken into account.

To draw out children’s spiritual potential into conscious spiritual awareness requires sensitive teaching from earliest childhood onwards, through informal and formal education by parents, teachers and friends. We need to develop *spiritual literacy* in a far more intensive way than is the case at present. I mean by this a literacy that goes far beyond learning to read and write, and beyond the acquisition of professional training and skills. It also extends beyond *emotional* and *ethical literacy* to a much deeper dimension of insight and wisdom that grows from both the heart and the head; it helps us to engage in deep-felt compassion and love, not only for other fellow human beings but for all life. The authors of *The Spiritual Dimension of Childhood*¹¹ discuss whether it makes sense to speak of ‘*spiritual intelligence*’ and they argue strongly for the

¹¹ See note 2 above.

usefulness of this concept. This discussion might have been extended by considering how the idea of ‘spiritual intelligence’ relates to that of ‘spiritual literacy’ which I consider less intellectual and more comprehensive in its application. The overall approach of *The Spiritual Dimension of Childhood* seems perhaps still too intellectual and cognitive even when spirituality is described as ‘relational consciousness’ (14).

Spiritual literacy does not just evolve by itself, but needs to be fostered and nurtured, it needs to be seeded to grow and flourish. For this, spiritual education is needed at all levels, not only for children and young people, but everywhere, in homes, schools, and colleges. It is important to develop ‘relational consciousness’ in children and adults, but this has to be extended to include also the deeper ‘seeing’ and ‘feeling’ of the heart. Spiritual literacy needs to become an integral part of life-long learning in order to initiate the global spiritual awakening the world needs so much today, so that the human species can evolve to a greater fullness of life. Let me explain what is meant by this.

Awakening to the fullness of life

What does it mean to be truly human, to be fully alive? Experiencing the fullness of life is sometimes described as a ‘sense of plenitude’,¹² a sense of being fully awake and aware, of savouring, enjoying and appreciating a rich spectrum of life’s experiences within oneself, in others and in one’s environment. Children, with their exuberance, enthusiasm, curiosity and playfulness seem to have this sense almost more than so many disenchanted and overworked adults.

Growing into the fullness of life must be understood in the largest possible context, which is that of evolutionary becoming. This now requires a strong ecological awareness and is rooted in a new ecological

¹² Teilhard de Chardin uses this expression.

Earth consciousness. The sense of a fullness of life is related to a primal trust in life, a zest for life, an openness to the future and the search for spiritual energy resources. I will briefly say something on each of these.

The Canadian ecofeminist theologian Heather Eaton speaks of the ‘revolution of evolution’, that is to say that when we take evolution seriously, this radically changes the reference point for all our thinking:

We are not the central reference point – even for our own self-understanding. Awareness of Earth processes allows us to see our radical dependency on other organisms for basic survival, in addition to our kinship with, rather than difference from, other animals. Evolution bends the mind, expands the horizon, and reverses the reference points. Earth is not our context, it is our source. (12)

She emphasizes the ‘layers of connection and continuity between human and the natural world...there is more similarity than difference. In fact, these words are inadequate because humans are a dimension of Earth; a differentiated, unique aspect of Earth’s biosphere...we are more a part of than separate from “nature”.’ (13)

She suggests that ‘we ground religious awareness first in the Earth processes, second within the processes of human symbolic consciousness and only third within specific religious traditions.’ (16).¹³

The new ecological awareness is the awareness of being humans embedded within and emerging from a living cosmos and sacred earth or ecological community’.¹⁴

Our new, so recent knowledge of evolutionary becoming – and all this implies: the immensities of time and space, the unimaginable complexities of living forms, including the history of the human species – provides a transformative, even revolutionary perspective on the understanding of our spiritual potential and dimensions. It teaches a new,

¹³ See Sigurd Bergman and Heather Eaton, eds, *Ecological Awareness. Exploring Religion, Ethics and Aesthetics*. Studies in Religion and the environment, vol. 3. Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2011. The quotations are from the Introduction (3) and Heather Eaton’s essay ‘An Ecological Imaginary. Evolution and Religion in an Ecological Era’, 5, 13, 16.

¹⁴ Bergman and Eaton, op. cit., 3.

dynamic way of looking at the world and ourselves, where the future is still open and we don't know where we are going. We are at decisive junction in the history of the human species, at the crossing of a new threshold where matter and spirit, body and soul are being realigned and reconnected.

The governing hyper-rational, techno-mechanistic economic worldview needs to be countered with a more powerful and alluring vision: one where there is rapport with the natural world, and feelings of intimate immensities. We need to honour, perhaps even privilege the intuitive, emotional, and passionate aspects of human knowing. In this vein, it is evident that humanity needs a spiritual awakening. (Eaton 17)

Such a perspective has profound implications for the understanding of children and the nurturing of their spiritual potential. A balanced, life-oriented spirituality will not only connect to their own body, but also to the larger body of the Earth, and the body of society – two immense communities of life within which all of us are rooted and which continuously shape the trajectories of our lives. Spiritual education and literacy can be explored in relation to many different insights and experiences, especially in relation to our new Earth consciousness and the awareness for building a new Earth community – a theme I cannot pursue further here.¹⁵ But I just want to mention that several contemporary scientists are in the forefront of questioning the rather narrow materialistic understanding of evolutionary processes by searching for ‘laws of self-organization and complexity’¹⁶ in the development of life. There is a real paradigm shift occurring in the understanding of evolution from physico-chemical perspectives to those of the complexity of

¹⁵ I have developed this in my article “Earthing spiritual literacy: How to link spiritual development and education to new Earth consciousness?” *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 31/3 (Dec. 2010) 245-260.

¹⁶ This is the subtitle of Stuart Kauffman’s book *At Home in the Universe. The Search for Laws of Self-Organization and Complexity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995. See also his book, *Reinventing the sacred: A New View of Science, Reason, and Religion*. Basic Books, 2008.

biological systems and organisms which may result as much from self-organization and far-from-equilibrium dynamics as from Darwinian natural selection. The eminent theoretical biologist Stuart Kauffman argues that there are no ‘entailing laws’ in evolution since we live in a universe of radical emergence where we will not know or cannot ever know for certain where evolution will take us. He judges this situation as leading to a new worldview which he describes as ‘the re-enchantment of humanity’. According to him, we live in a world of enablement, creativity and often unprestatable opportunities that we partially create and co-create, with and without intent, but that we cannot know ahead, since the becoming of life cannot be predicted. We need to develop new cultural forms and live ‘the well discovered life’ that will serve our deeper humanity. He writes in an unpublished conference paper:

We know the goods and ills of our fully lived Enlightenment dreams....we ARE disenchanted...we have lost our spirituality...we need an enlarged vision of ourselves and what we can become.¹⁷

Similarly, the American theologian John F. Haught who writes extensively on the relationship between science and faith, speaks about the great ‘cosmic drama still in the making’. To understand it, we must abandon mere analysis. As Haught says,

After taking the analytical scientific journey into the remote cosmic past, we must turn around, leaving the reductionists behind, and start following the cosmic itinerary as it moves in the direction of an ever more surprising future...Faith orients our consciousness to hope for a not yet visible future. (p.69 mss)¹⁸

The quotations from Haught and Kauffman both underline the openness of the future, which invites and engages human beings to take

¹⁷ Quoted from Stuart Kauffman, ‘The Reenchantment of Humanity: The Implications of “No Entailing Laws”’; unpublished paper and notes from a lecture given at the Conference on ‘Spirituality, Emergent Creativity, and Reconciliation’, St Paul’s University, Ottawa, May 23-26, 2012.

¹⁸ See John F. Haught, *Science and Faith. A New Introduction*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2012.

on responsibility in creating this future. Haught also underlines the capacity of life to *strive*: ‘To be alive means to be able to strive and possibly *achieve* something’ (70), to reach towards goals. He considers this capacity as one of the defining factors which draws all living beings together, a factor not taken into account by reductionists who reduce life to physical and chemical processes. This capacity to strive is something we as educators can animate, draw out and nurture in young people, but in some ways it is also true to say that we are all members of an awakening species, living on an awakening earth.

In the end, spiritual life is a life that cultivates wisdom, compassion, and love for the sake of other people’s lives and one’s own. It has been said that western society has now taken such an affirmative ‘turn to life’, from honouring different ways of life to affirming one’s individual lifestyle, that life itself has assumed the religious meaning formerly assigned to God. Thus we are observing the cult of a ‘new religion of life’, much critiqued and strongly resisted by conservative and hierarchical religious institutions. Yet such a polarization between God and life is as artificial and unhelpful as that between religion and spirituality. In theistic understanding God is always a God of life, a living God who bestows life and sustains it, cares for the whole of life - the life of the earth, the life of nature, and all human life, past, present, and future. Christians affirm this belief every time they recite the Nicene Creed with states: ‘I believe in the Holy Spirit, the giver of life.

Life in the widest sense is what humans experience and live for. But what is a? All life needs tending, nurturing, caring for, and human life especially requires truly human life physical, mental, moral and spiritual care for body, mind, spirit, and soul. That means human life needs spirituality like the body needs breath and blood to flourish.

The ascetic, exclusive elite spiritualities of the past have often been life-denying and life-harming, but the contemporary spirit of the secular world can be equally or even more destructive of life, since it seems so bereft of spirit. The spiritual dimension of wrestling with and for life is well articulated in an expression used by Christian Hispanic women in the US who speak of spirituality as *struggle for life*, and also as ‘a cry for life’. Understanding spirituality in this way points to the power of transformation which spirituality can and must exercise within human life. It can act as a force of survival, but also a power for change. This expression also hints at the truth that spirituality often develops through experiences of suffering and pain. It arises out of struggling with the material and psychological conditions of one’s existence, but also with one’s innermost self, and with the greater power of the Spirit. Yet the spiritual search is more than the struggle to survive; it means also the tremendous effort to live a fuller, more abundant, more meaningful human life.

The call for the transformative work of the spirit in contemporary culture - what Satish Kumar describes as ‘*the spiritual imperative*’ - requires a creative, dynamic response. We need to feed people’s zest for life, a zest for the full growth and development of life, for the further unfolding of life’s possibilities, its exploration of new ways. Only a transformative, life-affirming, action-oriented spirituality can respond to the hopes and agonies of our suffering world. Only a spirituality that is fully alive can celebrate the flourishing of all life, of the entire Earth community, and of human-earth relations. This calls for an end of human exploitation of the non-human and of nature and, in Thomas Berry’s words, for the renewal of the earth as a biospiritual planet.

Children are born with a fundamental, underlying trust in life, a trust which is characterized in German as *Ur-Vertrauen* – an elemental,

primary, foundational trust that underlies all life and growth, a basic fundamental faith in the goodness of life and in the world as our home. It is important to build on this primary trust, expand and consolidate it rather than disillusion, disenchant and destroy it. ‘Trust life’, Teilhard de Chardin used to say, ‘it is never mistaken’. This primary trust, this sense of being carried, affirmed and supported is so different from the ‘*Ur-Angst*’ or existential anxiety that modern philosophers speak about. From a religious point of view this trust is like being cared for and protected by God’s presence and loving care.

We need to love life, live it to the full, and contribute to its growth. This is impossible without a zest for life. We cannot advance the world and the life’s flourishing without it. But how can this be done? And where do we find the necessary resources for this ‘feeding and development’ of the zest for life in our personal lives and in the global community today?

Teilhard de Chardin described the zest for life as “nothing less than the *energy of universal evolution*” but, at the human level, the feeding and development of this energy “is to some degree *our responsibility*”, he said, a task that cannot be accomplished without giving spiritual values their due place. Teilhard de Chardin referred to the creating of global society as the task of ‘building the earth’, but this may be too external and positivistic a description. Given the biological, organic texture of life as well as the current interest in the new field of emergence in science, it may be more appropriate to speak of ‘growing’ rather than ‘building the future’. The verb *growing* better expresses the emergent, dynamic nature of creating and working for the future of humanity - a process which is not entirely within human control, but contains elements of novelty, chance, and uncertainty.

The reference to ‘growing’ links up with the vision of the American theologian, educator, and civil rights leader Howard Thurman (1900-1981) who encourages people in his *Meditations of the Heart* to look to ‘the growing edge’:

‘All around us worlds are dying and new worlds are being born’. The growing edge ‘is the extra breath from the exhausted lung, the one more thing to try when all else has failed, the upward reach of life when weariness closes in upon all endeavor. This is the basis of hope in moments of despair, the incentive to carry on when times are out of joint...The birth of a child – life’s most dramatic answer to death – this is the growing edge incarnate. Look well to the growing edge!’¹⁹

This ‘growing edge’ seems a more appropriate metaphor for moving life, society, and the world forward than the more instrumental ‘cutting edge’ that people usually speak of. It is a more organic, potentially richer way of thinking that relates more creatively to our contemporary ecological sensibilities. Teilhard de Chardin pointed to a new threshold in the development of human consciousness and organization, to the further social, cultural, and spiritual development of the human species. He did not simply understand this as a search for living longer, and living on into the future, as merely biological continuity and survival, but as the task to create a higher form of life, a more unified humanity. This is the birth and growth of what he perceived as the emergent ‘noosphere’, which involves a deep spiritual transformation of the human community. Thus the expanding vision of a global cultural evolution includes the expectation of a further spiritual evolution of humanity. This is not an automatic development but an enormous task that concerns all people on earth, whether secular or religious. Young people in particular have to become aware of the

¹⁹ Howard Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1981, p. 134.

responsibility involved in this global human transformation. Teilhard de Chardin had a special interest in studying the activation of human energy which cannot be done without drawing on the spiritual energy resources present in the great philosophical and spiritual traditions of humanity. He was interested in the conscious organisation of human energy at a personal and collective, global level. Above all, he praises the power of love as ‘a higher form of human energy’.²⁰ I consider this a key idea, especially for education and the spiritual awakening of young people. It also reminds me of the saying: ‘Where attention goes, energy flows.’

I speak of such key ideas that can inspire and generate change by using the word ‘*pneumatophores*’.²¹ This is a term drawn from the taxonomy of the plant kingdom which carries a profound ecological meaning. Botanists use it to refer to the air roots of plants growing in swampy waters. Such roots, sticking out into the air, are carriers of *pneuma*, of air or spirit, if this word is translated literally. When I first used it in a lecture, one of the listeners pronounced this word simply as “new metaphor”. This is a very clever reading, since this word is meant to be used metaphorically in my reflections, in the sense that I understand it as referring to those transformative, empowering ideas and inspirations that can serve as bearers of spirit and channels for new life of individuals and communities today.

Within the secularity of modern society we need many such *pneumatophores*: ideas that are vibrant bearers of spirit, ideas that can literally ‘inspire’ and guide us to generate new life. Such ideas may be drawn from traditional religions, secular society, the sciences or the arts;

²⁰ See the essays in the two volumes by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Human Energy*, London: Collins, 1969, and *Activation of Energy*, London: Collins, 1970. See also Ursula King, ‘Love – A Higher Form of Human Energy in the Work Teilhard de Chardin and Sorokin’, *Zygon. Journal of Religion and Science* 39/4 (2004), pp. 77-102.

²¹ See Ursula King, ‘Pneumatophores for Nurturing a Different Kind of Love’ in *Through Us, With Us, In Us. Relational Theologies in the Twenty-First Century* (eds. Lisa Isherwood and Elaine Bellchambers). London: SCM Press, 2010: 52-70.

they may arise from the sacred or the secular, from national, transnational or global contexts – it does not matter where they come from as long as they lead us to a heightened awareness and sensibility, a sense of global responsibility, and a new kind of spiritual literacy that can help people to live a life of dignity on the planet without destroying the life-support system of the earth or killing each other.

I will give some examples for pneumatophores – ideas that can spiritually inspire and empower all of us, but especially young people. There is first the idea of the “*flourishing*” of people and planet – of the whole human species on planet Earth – provides an inspiring vision. The original associations of this word can be traced back to flowers, gardens, and growth. It is a very ecological concept that can be related to the whole web of life.

Flourishing means to thrive and prosper - is a very desirable process that is intimately connected with what others call “*the zest for life*”. It is a dynamism and drive, a continuing source of energy which nurtures people’s attitudes, motivation and activity. It means we are fully alive and enjoy life with all its ups and downs, its sources of satisfaction as well as its experiences of suffering. This very positive concept of flourishing is immensely attractive as it implies that we can go from strength to strength, even when the going may get difficult at times.

In order to flourish as a person and as communities, good relations with others have to be nurtured, the right external conditions must pertain. People cannot flourish at times of war, strife, and dissent. Humans cannot live a healthy, satisfactory life if they don’t eat the right food, breathe clean air, drink clean water, and have the right education. So much poverty and starvation around the world is linked to these basic human necessities, so directly dependent on our most immediate environment. Human flourishing is not possible without other forms of

flourishing, especially environmental and biological, but it also extends to economic, political, social and spiritual flourishing.

Another viable pneumatophore is the idea of wellbeing in its most comprehensive sense embracing the health of body and mind. The Israeli American medical sociologist Aaron Antonovsky (1923-1994) who was particularly interested in the relationship between stress, health and wellbeing, developed a theory called *salutogenesis* (concerned with the origin of health rather than patterns of illness)²². This pioneering theory which is currently used in different health promotion initiatives is concerned with investigating specific personal dispositions that make individuals more resilient to the stresses encountered in daily life. The theory is based on the claim that a person can better cope and remain healthy by developing a ‘sense of coherence’ about life and its challenges. This makes people realize they are leading a meaningful life which gives them inner personal reassurance, trust, and confidence to identify resources within themselves that can help them to improve their health. Looking at children and adolescents, one can investigate how they construct meaning and meaningfulness, and how one can identify resources that promote greater inner and outer wellbeing and help them to create a meaningful pattern for their life at a time of much change and great uncertainty where the future is open-ended and has to be actively constructed. Ultimately this is both a practical and a spiritual task.

Yet another example of a creative, inspiring pneumatophore is found in Anne Hillman’s book *Awakening the Energies of Love. Discovering Fire for a Second Time*.²³ Drawing on insights from mystics of all cultures, she traces the process of awakening – whether as gradual

²² This theory of salutogenesis is described in A.. Antonovsky’s books *Health, Stress and Coping* (1979) and *Unraveling the Mystery of Health* (1987). It is linked to the use of an Orientation to Life Questionnaire and the creation of a coherence scale.

²³ Anne Hillman, *Awakening the Energies of Love. Discovering Fire for the Second Time*. Putney, Vermont: Bramble Books, 2008.

transformation or sudden mystical epiphany - to the ever present powers of love that run like a current of fire through all of life. Full of passionate wisdom and a great love of life, her book invites everyone to the great adventure of harnessing the energies of love for the transformation of the world and ourselves.

Hillman's pioneering work emphasises very much the need for a new awakening now. She traces this process in an evolutionary framework by following the rise of consciousness within the development of humanity, and within each person. We each carry two beginnings in ourselves, that of a child, and as a child of the human race. Reflecting on the evolution of our mind and the foundations of our soul, we discover a profound capacity for relatedness and for a qualitatively different love that can embrace differences. We need to discover our fundamental relatedness to everything that exists, not only to other persons, but to the whole natural world. Awakening the energies of love and learning to live with fire inside, "we learn to live in relationship – all relationship – in wholly new ways: to live as the greater community of life."²⁴ At this evolutionary juncture of the human species we are all called to awaken to a new kind of love, a love that is not a feeling, but a great power. Awakening to this radically different love may be gradual or come in a flash:

The awakening impulse – this Love moving through the entire human species like an evolutionary wave – is a *huge energy*...At issue at every turn, is your whole bodymind's ability to adjust to its increase. Learning to tolerate and to accommodate the energy without becoming exhausted becomes paramount. You may find that there seem to be a series of learning curves: an influx of energy, then a period of discovering how to adapt, followed by a plateau; then, a new influx of energy. It hardly seems to be the benign bliss promised by the new-age spiritualities!²⁵

²⁴ Ibid., p. 236

²⁵ Ibid., p. 240 f.

Animated and motivated by that tremendous evolutionary energy wave we begin to see and hear things differently, learn to access life in a new way. Our sense of identity begins to change and we learn to live in a conscious communion with life, to live as relationship, and to be motivated in all things by love. Hillman's journey into 'awakening the energies of love' was originally inspired by the saying of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin: "Someday, after mastering the winds, the waves, the tides, and gravity, we shall harness for God the energies of love, and then, for a second time in the history of the world, humanity will have discovered fire."²⁶

Conclusion

If children and young people learn to develop their spiritual potential, they will discover fullness – plenitude – throughout their life. Becoming spiritually more fully alive, they learn to see more deeply. This will empower them to deal creatively with an open future, nurture a zest and love for life and experience themselves as a deeply connected, integral part of the great community of life. It will awaken them to the deep mystery of our wondrous world and discover the lineaments of spirit interwoven throughout the web of life while learning to draw on the energies of love and compassion, and to work for peace, justice and a world of greater human dignity and respect.

To awaken spiritually, children and young people need examples and guidance to motivate them to strive, to set them on fire, so that their spiritual awareness and imagination become awakened and ignited. Much

²⁶ Quoted at the beginning of her book, p. 7, this passage is a slightly reworked translation of the final passage of an essay on "The Evolution of Chastity" written by Teilhard in February 1934. See Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Toward the Future*. London: Collins, 1975, p. 86f.

of this can be done through teaching about science and spirit in a new way, by discovering our epic story of cosmic, earth and human transformation.²⁷ Or by teaching about the rich spiritual heritage that humanity now has access to, or by exploring the diversity and treasures of different faiths. Or it can be done on an interpersonal level, through significant encounters with teachers, friends or family members.

Then there are the intergenerational links between the young and the old which can provide inspiring food for thought and action. On a recent visit to my local public library I came upon a large book called *The Grandparent Guide*.²⁸ Written by an American doctor, its first part deals with ‘Understanding Yourself as a Grandparent’ and to my surprise it contained a chapter on ‘Spiritual Guide’ which begins:

One of your most important roles as a grandparent involves cultivating your grandchild’s spiritual development. This is the role of spiritual guide, a powerful position that can have a profound impact on the moral path your grandchild will take.²⁹

This chapter speaks of the spiritual aspects of the grandparent-grandchild relationship, the opportunities for illumination and transformation, the ‘tending’ of the children’s spirit ‘in today’s de-spirited times’ through using spiritual language with words such as ‘kindness, compassion, understanding, and selflessness’ to evoke spiritual thoughts and open the grandchild’s mind to another plane of existence, and most of all, to give a grandchild one’s blessing.³⁰

In reflecting on the spiritual potential of childhood – here understood in a large sense as ranging from early childhood to full

²⁷ Highly to be recommended is the 56 minutes’ film *Journey of the Universe. The Epic Story of Cosmic, Earth, and Human Transformation* (2011) produced by Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, and accompanied by a book with teaching materials.

²⁸ Arthur Kornhaber, M.D., *The Grandparent Guide. The Definitive Guide to Coping with the Challenges of Modern Grandparenting*. Contemporary Books (a division of McGraw Hill Companies), Chicago 2002

²⁹ Ibid., p. 43-52.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 45-49.

maturity and adulthood - I have discussed what awakening means and how it involves a zest for life and a love of life, and how these draw on spiritual energy resources. In addition, I tried to outline briefly certain elements of what some people now call an ‘evolutionary spirituality’. This will help children and young people to develop a spiritual sensibility and awareness at a time of great change, in a culture dominated and profoundly transformed by modern science. In this context it is most important to make children aware of the exciting change of thinking about the meeting of science and spirit, a change of paradigm which can be spiritually so enlightening and inspiring.³¹ As Rupert Sheldrake writes at the end of his book *The Science Delusion. Freeing the Spirit of Enquiry*: ‘The realisation that the sciences do not know the fundamental answer leads to humility rather than arrogance and openness rather than dogmatism. Much remains to be discovered, including wisdom.’³² Such ideas are seeds of the spirit – they provide us with excellent inspiration and motivation for developing the full potential inherent in the body, mind and spirit of human beings.

³¹ See Dave Pruett, *Reason and Wonder. A Copernican Revolution in Science and Spirit*. Santa Barbara, Denver, Oxford, 2012.

³² Rupert Sheldrake, *The Science Delusion. Freeing the Spirit of Enquiry*. Coronet, 2012.

