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Christian Perspectives ? the spiritual child

Our five year old granddaughter is full of questions about God. She has had a limited experience of church ? she's more often at swimming lessons or friends' birthday parties on Sunday mornings. She is in love with language and her newfound ability to express herself in written words. When she spent a few days with us recently, she sat at her little table and wrote a full page of poetry which read like a Psalm. It was a song of praise about God's love for creation and every person; God's goodness; and, her own love for God.

Where does this come from? I'm reading a book right now by Lisa Miller, Ph.D., professor of clinical psychology at Columbia University, entitled The Spiritual Child. This is her definition of spirituality: ?Spirituality is an inner sense of relationship to a higher power that is loving and guiding. The word we give to this higher power might be God, nature, spirit, the universe, the creator, or other words that represent a divine presence. But the important point is that spirituality encompasses our relationship and dialogue with this higher presence.? Her field of research has produced evidence that a natural spirituality is present at birth enabling children ?to feel part of something larger, and experience an interactive two-way relationship with a guiding, and ultimately loving, universe.? This natural spirituality exists independent of religion or culture and is as fundamental to our makeup as our emotion, temperament and the physical senses.

Why is it important to recognize this capacity? Miller offers evidence that the benefits of our natural spirituality are both ?significant and measurable.? Our spirituality, from birth and as it develops across a lifetime, gives us resiliency in the face of all the stresses and adversity that are part of every life. e.g. ?Evidence-based research and imaging technology show the effects on brain structure and function in people for whom spirituality is central in life versus those for whom spirituality is not a strong presence. Reduction in levels of cortisol (which tend to rise when we are stressed) and brain structures that correlate with lower risk of depression? are a couple of the observations. Our spirituality connects us with the supportive presence of a loving higher Power; helps us to experience connection or ?oneness? with others and the natural world; and, guides our capacity for meaning-making and ethical decision making ? just a few of the factors that are life enhancing and protective.

What supports spiritual development? Miller identifies several ?opportunities for spiritual parenting?:

1. Just as we teach our children to ?use their words? to express emotion, we can model the use of a spiritual vocabulary so that children learn a language to communicate their innate spiritual experiences. (e.g. heart knowing, inner compass, feeling of oneness, connection with/conversation with God/Spirit, etc.)
2. We can share our own spiritual experiences. (e.g. Grandma's death was so sad and we miss her but often I still feel her close to me. When we hold her in our love and our thoughts, she's still with us. When good things happen I like to thank God. When I'm worried or confused, I ask God for help/courage/wisdom.)
3. Provide space for children to express their own ideas and spiritual experiences. (Meet your child where (s)he is with love and acceptance.)
4. Build a spiritual practice together. (praying, meditating, gratitude practice, special family rituals, participating in a spiritual community)
5. Embrace relationships with animals and all of nature. (?Children can learn that all living things are our teachers.?)
6. Care and repair: tend the ?field of love.? (?Embracing family as sacred gives your child a spiritual place to live every day.? This includes our extended human family and spiritual communities?our church families.)
7. Strive for an inspired life. Our spiritual life generates kindness ? a compassionate approach to all our interactions everyday. Our world is transformed by every act of kindness.

Jesus said, ?Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. (Mark 10:14)

Jesus said, ?I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children.?

Like Jesus, we can honour the spirituality of children and the, perhaps neglected, spiritual child within each one of us.

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