

Learning Spirituality from Children

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A Child Shall Lead Them

Youth and Children's Day! Most everyone has seen a promotion with this heading. Worship spaces, public venues and education institutions hold space for this type of event. Young people bring presentations like readings, educational projects, dance and musical performances. For congregations that host recurring Youth and Children's Day - monthly, annual or similar - there is a regular opportunity to build curriculum and be intentional about centering children in areas that this age group is not often considered. Opportunities like leadership, event design, peer education, and content preparation are explored through centering our young people. Most importantly, their own spiritual health is engaged, and prayerfully, expanded. The spiritual fortitude of Black children is crucial to their surviving, and their thriving. Our children need, and are worthy of, strength of surety, peace of mind, and solace of emotion. Wading through the waters of today's world already takes a toll on grown folks. Pursuing peace for our children - and the world we are hoping for with every tomorrow - is a journey that requires communal determination. This journey requires patience and grace. It requires willingness to fall, fail and try, try again. As the proverb reminds us, "if you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together."

Spirituality is one of the ways that we can go far, because it is best practiced when individuals working on being whole in ourselves come together to build community. Spirituality can be defined as a belief that there is something more than the physical, something greater than the single self. Concern for youth and children brings communities together. Across ideologies and locales, whatever the reason, when we worry about our babies, we act. We respond to physical threats, political and economic issues. The spiritual care of our children must have our attention as well. Whether we define children as young people who are not yet teens (ie zero to 12 years), or young people who are not eligible for voting or driving in the United States (ie under 18 or 16), there is a special opportunity in the practice of pursuing spiritual health together, across generations. That is because young people are natural spiritual teachers. This point is my purpose. Young people readily signal their happiness, hunger and thirst, fatigue and frustration. They also have signals for spiritual needs, and in learning about them, we will also learn from them. There are many avenues and stories to share under this theme, but I will organize my presentation like so

- Children and youth teach us partnership in protection. We can learn how to partner with them in all that is at stake for them, spiritually, historically, and presently, through scripture and Black movement.
- Children and youth teach us spiritual strength even in challenging circumstances, such as disability and incarceration. The children most at risk are often the ones who give us the richest recipe for spiritual practice.
- Children and youth also lead us beyond spirituality. They teach us to strengthen our faith.

Our main elements must also be defined consistently, even if not absolutely, for the purpose of this discussion. So, what ages are referred to with the use of the word children? I view ages 0 to 4 as babies or little ones in the subject of spirituality. I refer to 5 years up

to 10 or 11 as children. Youth are 12 years into late teens. “Young people” is a blanket reference to any of the groups described.

How will we define spirituality? Similar to words like “love”, it is difficult to determine a single definition for spirituality. Commonly, the word refers to matters of the non-material and non-physical. More broadly - perhaps universally - spirituality means “concerning the soul.”

Many of us know spiritual practice to be more connected to culture, family traditions or personal peace habits, all different from religious practice. Religions tend to have moral codes, and specific orders of worship which can encompass physical, dietary and social expectations to prove loyalty to a deity or a unique cause. Religion is one of many spiritual paths. Spirituality - matters which concern the soul - does not require religion.

I believe that every human has a soul. I do not expect that every human soul will call on the same name - or any name in particular - as their God. Additionally, I do not believe that religion is required for spiritual health. While I believe and teach Christianity as a sacred path to spiritual health, I do not believe or teach that the God I call the Trinity requires any particular religion in order to extend loving care, justice, and grace to any person.

While I am only equipped to discuss my own spiritual community in depth, I am grateful to know the beauty of diverse spiritual paths. The various paths and people I trust all make special considerations for the spiritual safety and solace of children. Christianity’s historical Black church traditions are the roots of this discussion. My spiritual lens is Black liberation theology, and my political lens is best characterized as queer Black feminisms. Together, these three describe the ethic by which my sense of spirituality and sacred things are defined. Going with God's future helps us make sense of how we live today.

In the prophet Isaiah’s vision of just governance, carnivorous animals are settled calmly with the herbivores which usual instincts would signal as prey. This indicates a future where a conquering leader is also establishing a rule of fearlessness and rest. Isaiah 11.6 says “The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, The leopard shall lie

down with the young goat, The calf and the young lion and the fatling together; And a little child shall lead them.” (Isaiah 11.6, New King James Version). The people whom the prophet addressed were asked to imagine more than the absence of danger. They were invited to believe that a young person could command their actions. As the scripture describes a little child in leadership of livestock perceived as tame and animals known to be wild, we might find within this framework an example of God’s vision for the human condition.

In Isaiah 11, the prophet’s vision continues with coupled illustrations of animals and children. Bears, lions, vipers and cobras and kids, oh my! Then verse nine gives us the plain statement version of what the illustrations imply: “They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain, For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord; As the waters cover the sea.” Destruction and harm have no place in the equation for God’s economy. The reason that harm and destruction will not happen is the planetary fullness of the knowledge of the Lord. When the whole world is full of the knowledge of the Lord, all of life is free of “hurt, harm and danger” as the elder saints used to say. In other words; under the fullness of the knowledge of God, the condition of humanity as evidenced by the example of children is innocence.

Evidence of innocence in the prophet’s vision comes simply from children existing. Perhaps the primary way that our young ones teach spiritual health is by being their sacred selves. By being, children teach us how to be. The congregation I serve is called Saint John’s United Church of Christ - The Beloved Community. We have youth and children’s Sunday once or twice each month. Our children recite verses from scripture, speeches and poems from Black artists and ancestors. We invite our young people, including young adults, to share original works like music, dance, spoken word and visual arts. We ask them to teach us, to lead us. The experience is heartwarming and adorable, an opportunity to pour out encouragement and pride on our young people, whom we call “God’s babies” and “church babies”. At worship services and events when they are not leading, many of our little children sit in the back area of the sanctuary, in an area with low seating, scripture-based activities, and comfortable carpet for

babies to crawl, though sometimes it is used for spontaneous dancing. We all learn when children are at the center and in the lead. For our very young ones, singing is an aerobic activity, there is no on-key or off-key. There is no key, there is only noise and motion. When faced with challenges like missing cues or forgetting lines, young people tend to be more adventurous. We applaud them for this. When they express frustration at failure, adults rush to reassure them. Whether we work at the front of the sanctuary or walk around during worship, we adults often observe and respond to our church babies more intently. From what I have studied and experienced, young people naturally lead us in how they need us to lead them.

Both: Partnership & Protection

If children can teach us about spirituality simply by being, we must learn how to hold physical safe space for them to simply be. The spiritual condition of our young people makes plain that so much is at stake for their material conditions. We need to protect and partner with each other across generations now more than ever. Isaiah's prophecy that "a little child shall lead them" puts a spiritual perspective on the commonly repeated colloquialism "I believe children are the future." If they are truly the future, how must we revere them? How are we to raise them? What does the Lord teach us about honoring them? What is at stake for our children in these unprecedented times?

In learning to support and interact with children, the perspective of our community elders and aging family members can be poignant, and just as prophetic.

Children and elders in many global south communities are similarly sacred, possessing a special proximity to the divine. Old souls have seen the roads we have yet to journey on. Young people are fresh from a pre-bodily existence where souls are sewn together in the womb of heaven, a kind of spiritual realm where some traditions believe God forms us before we move through the physical womb to breathe our first breath on earth. Any physical atmosphere of spiritual

health and safety has components of both well-worn wisdom and wide-eyed wonder.

There have been 413 school shootings since the Columbine massacre in 1999. The Washington Post estimates that 370,000 school children have been impacted by gun violence. The worries of harm, chaos and destruction seem like a constant. Many of the youth we know are sharing the sentiment of an increasingly popular play on the word unprecedented, asking when exactly will we live through precedent-ed times? It may seem strange indeed, at a time like this, to consider children and youth as our teachers in spirituality. If we follow the examples that God gives, then there is always time to appreciate the spiritual capacity of children, especially when it comes to social justice. Our youth and children do possess the qualities of innocence and peace that we are striving to center as the real powers of a world where justice and wholeness are both the baseline and pinnacle of livelihood. That young people might be an example of these traits is a reminder given in history, in scripture and in daily life.

In the 1960s, the leaders of the Civil Rights movement called upon children to train and engage in protest to demand an end to segregation, lynchings and anti-Blackness across the south especially. In Birmingham Alabama, in May of 1963, a thousand Black children gathered in churches instead of going to school, to state marches and non-violent protests. They marched downtown Birmingham, they were arrested and jailed. They suffered police brutality and outright violence from civilians. The protest event was called the Children's March and the few days of protests were known as The Children's Crusade. It would not have been possible without the resolve of the young people who participated. Some of the youth and children shared that many parents and guardian figures had forbidden their children from participating. Nadine Peterson Smith was 15 years old when she participated in the Children's March. She was arrested at the march and was jailed for 9 days. Reports from the other children jailed discuss unsanitary conditions, overcrowding, lack of food and water, and of course verbal and physical abuse. Still, Ms. Peterson Smith insists that "walking off the [school] campus was the beginning

of making a change, and I would do it all over again.” And many agreed with her. According to historians and journalists, the Children’s Crusade was a pivotal point in the mid-century era of liberation movements. Malcolm X disagreed with the actions of the adults in leadership who planned the event. He spoke about the reality that children were put in danger when they should have been protected. For some folks, it implied that the young people were used in order to make a statement. The history of human rights eras and protest movements involve children at many levels. Whether one takes the position of Brother Malcolm or Sister Nadine, we know that our young people are to be treated with a special respect which gives us pause as we map out actions for any great cause.

There is so much at stake for our youth and children. The reality of raising young people in this or any age can be harrowingly complex. The parents of Ruby Bridges had separated before Ruby entered 7th Grade. Ruby herself said the marriage crumbled under the harsh impact from that particular type of hatred brought by fame. Harriet Tubman was rented away for most of her childhood by the landowner who claimed ownership of her and her family, because he was deep in debt. She was separated from her family for long periods of time until the famous incident that caused her disability, at age 13. The Exonerated Five (often known as the Central Park Five) were all between 14 and 16 years old when they were convicted and imprisoned despite their innocence and alibis. Before being exonerated, the least time the different boys spent in prison was five years and thirteen years was the longest. Aiyana Stanley-Jones was seven years old, asleep in her bedroom, when a police officer shot and killed her during a raid. Diamond Reynolds and her four year old daughter were in the car with Diamond’s boyfriend Philando Castile when police fired into the vehicle multiple times. There is much at stake for our children; in matters of the soul, the body, and the community. Raising youth and children requires both partnership and protection. Caring about their physical needs is part of the way we provide covering for their souls. It is this care for the soul where that partnership happens. It is there, in the spirit, where their leadership is born. We need to listen to them to know their needs, and we must

carve out safe spaces for them to flourish without fear, so that their natural leadership can take shape. And when it does so, both leading and learning can become a communal practice.

Generations, Imagination, Liberation

At one time, the number of adolescents imprisoned in adult facilities across the United States was over ten thousand. Many of these young people were Black and brown. Many of them were disabled and/or neurodiverse. Christian service organizations, especially prison ministries, expanded their offerings and consulted with professional counselors and family lawyers with the intention of equipping young people with tools for spiritual survival. My very churchy family, like most Black families, has loved ones who have “done hard time” which means they have been incarcerated for many years. We volunteered with various prison ministries in the 80s and 90s. My parents are both preachers. My father is a pastor and professor, my mother is an educator and choir director. When I was a child, my sister and I would accompany them and the church choir to perform concerts in prisons. I remember the coaching session as we prepared our program. Formerly incarcerated people visited our choir rehearsal and told us about dress code, code of conduct, items we could share with “the inmates” and how to politely keep the required physical distance while still conversing without awkwardness. I remember the tall wild grass in the fields surrounding the prison for miles. The intimidating check-in process and the thick smell in the building all created discomfort despite the determination we had to get in and visit. Between songs and prayers, people shared testimonies and poems. We sang freedom songs. The counselors taught about deep breaths and picturing openness in our minds. The preaching addressed protecting and listening to the growing numbers of young people being imprisoned. Dad repeated his main point multiple times: “There is only one generation in God’s house.”

Before we departed, one of the staff in the prison asked if we would be willing to receive a thank you note from a 17 year old

inmate. He had been sentenced to a number of years at age 15. Having developed a rare palsy, a stress-based illness directly related to captivity, he was unable to write and barely able to speak. So we were granted permission to be in closer proximity to him. His thank you note was focused on three words, in response to the service elements. “Generation” he said, “for the teaching!” then “imagination for the breathing.” and “Liberation! Singing!” Liberation, generation, imagination. If you know anything about church folks and alliteration then you know we ate that up with a spoon. We repeated the words and expanded on the poem during the ride home. “Salvation! Determination!” and the like. But the more the child’s original phrase was repeated, considered and discussed, the more we began to realize, that will preach. And it did. And I have. I have preached and written and appreciated these words ever since I heard them. These words I heard as prose when I was 10 or 11 years old, came from a teenager who was known to have the mental capacity of a much younger child. Yet he was tried as an adult. He was criminalized, convicted and incarcerated. He was 17 years old, but his mind was closer to my age at the time, and his body was aging rapidly. I imagine him feeling proud to have expressed his thoughts so presently and meaningfully. Neither his story or identity are mine to tell, so I will give him a nickname for our purposes. I will call him Poet.

Against all odds, Poet was brought into a space where he was welcomed and encouraged, and in spite of his physical surroundings. When his body was connected to a promise of peace, he communicated the connections he experienced in his soul. Poet taught us a rubric for spiritual safe space. He has given us a recipe for spiritual practice.

Spirituality is intergenerational. Learning to receive spiritual leadership is an all ages act. Just as we hope to teach our children about matters of the body and soul, they need their elders to receive them when they respond. Spirituality is an act of imagination. Spiritual practice builds and maintains a vision of a world we might only dream about. Spiritual practice is preparation for - and assurance of - liberation. Spirituality is one of the practices that comes with us when we are all finally, fully free. We struggle towards an end of

struggle. We protest to raise awareness which will hopefully make protest obsolete. We negotiate and organize to reach resolution, so that we can turn negotiating tables into fellowship space. We practice spirituality now to keep us going until liberation is finally achieved. And spirituality will continue on when we reach our goals.

One of the ways we learn is from modeling. Each element Poet named is a lesson young people model for us, often reflecting attributes of the divine.

“Generations for the teaching.” Children model the intergenerationality of God. Called The Ancient of Days in scripture, God is all knowing and all wise, transcending time and therefore ageless. These attributes can result in an interpretation of God as old and male. Although there is a historical fascination with the infancy and boyhood of Jesus, children and youth, the young and yet learning, are not usually considered as a possible model for illustrating God. We need to learn from our little ones, because it can take generations of trying to succeed in replacing generational curses with generational blessings. We need our youth to be our leaders. While the older generation might have a sense of the challenges coming toward us, the younger generation often has a sharper vision of what is happening right now. One of the spiritual lessons young people model for us is that the generations are all interconnected, and interdependent. We are all made in God’s image. And the image of God is fully present at first breath.

“Imagination for the breathing.” Youth and children are proof that we are the creation of an imaginative God. They decide suddenly that they no longer enjoy a food they only recently exclaimed was their favorite. They also do this with toys, words, colors, clothes and people. Children outgrow everything but the image of God. Octavia Butler once wrote “God is change” which many believers consider a controversial statement. But the image of God is carried by beings who shift and grow, develop and progress, regress, break down, heal up, and change. Change is good for God’s image bearers. We call it

development. We who wear God's image literally experience change as one of the guarantees of life. We change physically, mentally, and spiritually. It takes divine imagination to trust people who are literally brand new to be image bearers. We can learn from God's trust in a person who knows nothing about anything. God entrusts babies to bear Their image. Babies know best how to cuddle, cry, eat and breathe, and oh how babies can bring out our common imagination! Naming them, recognizing their hunger cues, loving their laughter, learning the special formula for rocking them to sleep. Maybe in the midst of it, we can also learn ourselves; learn how to slow down, laugh and relax, take deep breaths and take care of ourselves. While we are learning how to best care for them, children model spiritual nurturing for us. They remind us that all humans have needs which must be met for our health. They teach us that having needs is human.

“Generation for the teaching, Imagination for the breathing, Liberation for the singing.” Young people teach us how the generations can learn from each other. Babies model the intersections of God's imagination and bearing God's image. Finally, our youth and children teach us that we are all born ready and fit for freedom. We need to be reminded and renewed in that reality. When we are fearless, we create freely. But even in the long journey towards a liberated reality, our young people create freedom songs that keep us encouraged along the way.

Psalm 8 says “O Lord, how majestic is your name! Through the praise of children and infants you have established a stronghold against your enemies, to silence the enemy and the revengeful” (Psalm 8:2, New International Version, New American Standard Version). We teach children to raise their voices not just in victory and success, but in preparation for it. We teach little athletes to cheer before they take the field. We encourage deep breathing, or chanting before young thespians go on stage. We teach young musicians to declare a creative partnership with their instrument before they play a note. In every situation, we encourage young people to loudly applaud for themselves and their peers. This is biblical - the soldiers of the Lord brought down entire empires with their voices. And for many

youth and children, lack of self-esteem is their first worst enemy. They need a deeper confidence than feigned happiness. Praise and worship offers a stronger surety than simply hoping for the best. The scripture illustrates the same. God's fortress of safety is built by songs of praise. "Out of the mouths of babes" says the old King James Version. This means we can be sure that there is no act of hope so small or insignificant that it cannot build up our faith. For even the cry of an infant is the stone of God's stronghold. The very sounds of our children lead us into safety. "Liberation!" Poet said, "for the singing."

Conclusion

There is only one generation in the household of God. Each of us was once a child, and the scriptures give many examples of the great importance of small things. A mustard seed moving mountains, the praise of infants becoming a safe stronghold. God invites us to address Them as a parent. Believers are referred to as "God's children" and there is no change to this language as we age. So then, we are all children in God's household. And we can learn from each other. Children and youth lead us in ways beyond spirituality. They teach us to strengthen our faith.

The more we receive young people as our siblings in Christ, the more we will regard the special leadership that helps us to care for them as they need and deserve. Children are tenacious. They teach us the spiritual strength of resilience in hardship. Youth are impulsive and opinionated. They teach us the spiritual flexibility of embracing change. When the youth class at my church studied prayer, they wrote prayers for self-control when offered alcohol and drugs. They wrote prayers for inner peace when they are crying so much they can't sleep. Prayers for protection from adults at home and at school who make them uncomfortable. Prayers for proof that God is really there, especially when life is really hard. Perhaps these youths felt they were simply sharing their burdens, as they were invited to. But for the people who care for them, these requests led us to strategize support as well as to join in the prayers. Their burdens are our business. A

shared spiritual practice like prayer and meditation can help ease burdens and amplify blessings. Shared spiritual practice amplifies the blessing of community, and the Holy Spirit promises to be present whenever we are gathered together. When we organize for the sake of our young people, we experience a strengthening of our faith.

In May 1995, Nelson Mandela launched the Children's Fund in South Africa. In the speech marking the event he said "There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children." The same is true of a spiritual community. God's vision for wholeness as told by the prophet Isaiah is an existence of innocence marked by the leadership and freedom of children. We spend so much time trying to teach children how to be more grown up. But God would have us spend more time becoming like children. Jesus modeled this throughout his earthly ministry. In Matthew 18.1-5, the gospel writer records a discussion between Jesus and his disciples. "At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. And he said: "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me." (Mat. 18.1-5, New International Version)

God promises a kingdom where we can live in fearless innocence like children, and then goes a step further in Jesus to say more than that, we must become like children in order to enter in. But the Lord also knows what we face, he knows all about our struggles. So God knows we need more than just this promise and a command. Jesus shows up to show us. God becomes a baby, an infant whose cries create the stronghold of Psalm 8. God becomes a child who grows up never forgetting the sacredness of childhood. Jesus was barely a teen when he taught and discussed the scriptures with theologians and scholars. He then called to children while he taught, he drew attention to their importance and rebuked people who did not hold them in high regard. Jesus proves to us that even God learns spirituality from

children. God learned by being, by modeling, by teaching, and by changing. And God tells us that he became a child for one important reason - to reclaim innocence for all of us.

Why are we called God's children? Because God has made us innocent. When God looks at all Their children, They do not see our worst days, failures, missteps or many mistakes. God sees the same children that will someday guide both the wolf and the lamb. Jesus spent his life showing us how to see each other the way God sees us. If we practice what Jesus taught us, then we have everything we need in order to maintain healthy spiritual practice. What we need is welcome. We need partnership for protection, we need a clear perception of what is at stake. We need willingness to listen and learn from each other. We need the generations, imagination, and liberation. We need each other. And those of us who have the most needs can teach us the most about welcome. Perhaps that is why God chose to first meet us in the tender frame of a child, so that we could picture the creator of the universe as one who "takes the lowly position of a child". For as Jesus said, "this is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me." Perhaps, when we learn spiritual solidarity from our young people, we are learning from God.

Footnotes

School Shootings:

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/interactive/school-shootings-database/>

Nadine Peterson Smith:

<https://alabamane.wscenter.com/2023/05/02/nadine-peterson-smith-shares-her-story-of-the-childrens-crusade-60-years-ago-in-birmingham-alabama/>

Nadine Peterson Smith recalls her participation in the Children's Crusade in Birmingham, Alabama 60 years ago, Alabama News Center, Vimeo Video