

Paper for the Fifth International Conference on Children's Spirituality

Journeys from the Theatre of Learning – Developing spirituality in secular young people through religion neutral exercises and activities.

Abstract: *At the third International conference on children's spirituality Sue Phillips described how she uses multi sensory experiential techniques to make Religious Education make sense to young people. The five techniques of the Theatre of Learning, now being used by hundreds of schools in Britain, is making young people aware of their own spirituality and creating a bridge between that and the spirituality of the believers in whatever religious tradition they are studying. This she calls hitting the spiritual target.*

For Sue this is still a problem because Religious Education in school is focussed on learning about other peoples' beliefs and offers little or nothing to the spirituality of the child who will always remain outside the traditions - and that is most of them.

In this paper Sue argues that religious education both inside and outside the religious traditions will be much more successful if it uses religion neutral exercises, language and concepts to make both beliefs and practices make sense to young people and uses them to develop and nurture the universal spirituality common to all humans alongside the study of the six major traditions.

Over the years that Sue has been developing this work she has found that children are hungry for a way to pray, to repent, to feel forgiven, to mourn, to celebrate rites of passage and festivals – without God. Giving them the tools to do these things in a religion neutral way without the necessity for belief in God, an after life or a specific tradition will provide happy, healthy fulfilled adults in touch with their inner selves.

This is not a barrier to faith or membership of a tradition but a way of inviting young people to approach spirituality instead of excluding them with incomprehensible beliefs and practices that do not speak to their generation.

Sue argues her case with examples from pupils writing and practical exercises in which delegates may take part.

At the First International Conference on Children's Spirituality I described with photographs and demonstrated with my pupils, what was then, probably, a unique way of learning about religion which I came to call the "Theatre of Learning".

In my specially adapted classroom children learn in circles, without desks or textbooks, in a multi sensory environment with music, scent, food and artefacts. They sit in and around large sets designed to represent the places of worship of whatever religious tradition they are studying.

I developed these techniques gradually over a number of years in response to pupils'

disaffection with RE, and in particular, with a dry, content laden syllabus, which they decreed, quite rightly, was nothing to do with them, or anything that they knew.

My intention at the beginning of this journey was primarily to motivate children with an exciting and interesting lesson so that they were better behaved and secondly to find a better way to help them learn so that they would get better exam results

Both of those things happened; the transformation was dramatic, instantaneous and permanent – *however the most dominant, unlooked for and surprising development was that of the children's spirituality*

After that first workshop in July 2000, a lovely lady from Canada approached me with a pen and pad in hand "Now, what have you written?" she said pen poised to write it down. I was completely taken aback "Well, nothing I replied".

I shall always be profoundly grateful to that lady, whoever she was, because the writing made me reflect. It forced me to think about what was happening in my classroom and *why*.

Four years, and thousands of written words later, the ability of these techniques of the Theatre of Learning to develop the spirituality of children has emerged as the most dominant feature of my thinking and my work in the classroom.

In my first paper I argued that spirituality is universal, innate, an essential part of every human being. I likened it to a candle which everyone has, but which for many children is unlit. Our task, I suggested, is to light it and see that it *stays* lit.

As I drove home through the darkness after that conference I became convinced that the real task of Religious Education should be to light that flame and equip children with the ability to seek, find and create spirituality in their lives *beyond* the classroom.

The exercises and activities that I developed were designed to help children empathise with religious traditions that seemed alien to them. For example, writing down the name of a special person, wish or dream and placing it in a tiny box, held while quiet music played, to the forehead where they *thought* about it, heart where they *felt* it and finally held in the hands where they thought about what they could *do* about it, was designed to help my secular pupils with no ritual or tradition in their lives to understand the Orthodox use of tefillin.

The act of writing, enclosing it in a box, the body language, every part of the exercise was designed to enable children to remember, relate to and understand empathetically the ritual of Jewish prayer. It promotes academic achievement enabling them to assess the value of such rituals and answer examination questions such as "it's a waste of time to dress up for prayer" Discuss; much more effectively. It develops toleration and understanding - it is difficult to make fun of someone when you have done something similar, but the most significant aspect for me is how powerfully these many exercises

and activities affected the children emotionally, so I asked myself these questions on my journey home

- What if we were to do this, not as a by product of an academic cerebral path, but we were to make the development of spirituality central in our planning with the study of the traditions illustrating that spirituality ?
- What would be the effect of encouraging children to use these exercises regularly in their lives for reflection and healing ?
- What would be the effect of showing secular children how to create for themselves rites of passage where the elements of ritual and liturgy and tradition they chose would enable them to feel and experience the awesome nature of the new stage of their lives they have entered ?
- Since these are, of necessity, in a secular and multi cultural classroom religion neutral activities, and not directed toward a divine being, what is the nature of the awareness they receive during these activities?
- Is this the way to give back to our young people in a meaningful form that connectedness which is what religion means?

What do I mean by spirituality?

My definition is very simple. Forgive me.

For many delegates the task is to dive into the diversity to explore and revel in the complexity of the notion of spirituality. As a school teacher mine is the opposite - to reduce it - a sentence is good, a phrase is better, a single word would be perfect.

So for me and the children I teach, spirituality is simply, " the inside bits"

How do I draw conclusions about my work and how do I test them ? By the process used in therapy and counselling work.. When a reflection is offered to the client the counsellor waits to see what happens - does it strike a chord ? is there resonance ?, realisation?, increased self awareness?, change?, peace of mind?

The writing from the children which I will share with you today is my evidence

Religion neutral exercises

I developed what I called **religion neutral exercises** and demonstrated with my pupils, the first one I ever devised, at the first conference, a religion neutral activity designed to help pupils understand the meaning and purpose of Christian prayer. In this exercise, I wanted children to understand that prayer is a conversation with God, that believers feel they get an answer. I wanted to create an experience that paralleled prayer without actually asking them to pray. What we did is not a prayer because it is not directed toward a divine being.

A religion neutral exercise on prayer

I asked pupils to consider in silence, for a minute, to quiet music, something they needed in their lives to help them understand petition and supplication.

I asked them to think about a relationship that needed healing, to help them understand forgiveness. Something to feel grateful for, to help them understand the effect of worship, worthship, giving value to something in a meaningful and profound way.

After that, I asked each child to pick up a necklace of beads from beneath their chair and to think of five people who were significant in their lives, for good or otherwise. As we held each bead in turn for a minute, we thought about each person. This was to help them understand the effect of using aids like the rosary, or an icon, or image during worship .

I began the exercise by reading from a poem which I hoped would speak to them and the way they felt sometimes, In the debrief we used this experience to help them understand how Christians are inspired by the Bible and other devotional literature.

I did this to make RE make sense, to help the pupils to remember and understand. I did it ultimately to help them pass an exam. I did not expect the powerful and significant experiences that their subsequent writing clearly showed were taking place, experiences that in some cases led to a life changing development in significant relationships.

I asked the pupils to write about the lesson describing what we did and how it helps us to understand aspects of Christian prayer especially the Lord's prayer, supplication, adoration, petition. I told them that they did not need to refer to what they had thought about in the experiential part of the lesson.. I did not expect the writing I received .The full text of some of the work I received can be read in my teacher resource file "Making RE Make Sense" Here are some extracts.

" This was the best lesson I ever had in life. Although I felt very tearful I realised many things about every relationship I have tried to have .I shut people out if I feel close to them because I don't want them to hurt me.

I've spent today putting back together the relationship I have with my mother, she has helped me with many worries I had about my real Dad. I now feel ready to see my step

Dad as a friend rather than an enemy I am ready to learn how to trust again and I am going to put past pain behind me and move on.” Sophie

*“I thought about my Auntie who is very ill and is going to die of lung cancer very soon. When I was sitting in RE I realised how much she meant to me so when I got home ma and mum rang Sunderland and I told her how much I really care.” Sarah
(Sarah’s aunt died three days later)*

“I think that by setting aside a period of time regularly just to simply think about all aspects of life both good and bad you can become more aware of things you might not have noticed otherwise. We all tend to think of the bad things but rarely consider the good points By forcing yourself to look and find the positive aspects of our lives, things often don’t seem too bad compared with before” Roxanne

I thought this lesson was very worthwhile because it actually made me realise what I have to do, Thanks , Miss “

Using the religion exercise on prayer outside the classroom

If these exercises had such an impact used once, what would happen if children used them regularly outside the classroom?

Three pupils volunteered to help me find out and to write about their thoughts. All three reported the positive effects but finding the time to write their thoughts down as well as consider sharing them publicly was not attractive to busy sixteen year olds so most of the evidence of its effectiveness remains anecdotal

Emma wrote extensively for a while. Relationships dominated her periods of quiet reflection as she realised how difficult she had been with her mother for the past two years. Realising how much her mother meant to her, she spoke to her and healed the rift.

Next, she thought about her neighbour.

“She is a grumpy old lady who moans about today’s kids all the time. Soon she is going to die from cancer. I thought about how lonely she must be , and how scared. I felt really guilty because me and my brothers and sister used to laugh at her. My Mum goes every Sunday with magazines and fruit. I think I will give her some cake or something to take over from me. Maybe it will make up for it a tiny bit.”

She thinks of her Nana and decides to send her a funny E mail. She thinks of something to buy to make her friend smile the next day and decides how to sort out her relationship with a teacher who is always cross with her, realising that she had created a bad impression in the first lesson.

Accidentally overhearing girls saying hurtful things about her in the changing rooms at

school devastates her

“Something like this hasn’t happened to me since I was 12... One girl said “How on earth did she get a boyfriend?” I thought they would stop when they saw me but they didn’t. All lesson they just laughed at me . When I got home I tried to forget it but I couldn’t ,so I did my praying differently. I thought about what had happened. I did it for longer than usual and it calmed me down a bit. I found myself thinking that what they thought doesn’t matter. My boyfriend is better than any of them put together, so if he likes me what does it matter ?”

Finally, she writes

This has turned into a sort of diary for me writing and praying really help, I prayed as a kid but then I lost interest when I got older but now its unbelievable how much it helps”

Like many people in their last year of school Emma stopped working hard. She was getting into trouble with some teachers. Part way through there was a marked difference in her attitude in school which remained for the rest of the year until she left. When I commented on the change one day in class she told me about the realisation that she had had about her mother and her behaviour in general. It was only when she gave me her “prayer diary” at the end that I saw that the periods of structured reflection appeared to have played a part.

Participatory symbols

Now I would like to talk about one other important technique which has a profound effect on children’s spirituality and by that I mean one which changes the way they see themselves and others. ***Participatory symbols***

Participatory symbols is a term I took from Paul Tillich’s book “Religious Language”. In it he suggests that there are certain *actions* which humans need to *do* in order to feel changed, to experience something that they would not know in the same way if they simply *talked* about it. I was intrigued by this notion because it helped me to understand what was happening, almost by accident, as a process of natural evolution, as I strove to make religion relevant to my pupils.

Once I realised what was happening I was able to repeat it over and over again.

The first participatory symbol I devised was part of our re enactment of Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement, This was the other activity we demonstrated at the first conference. The whole notion of a day of atonement is quite alien to modern secular youngsters. All I really intended to do when I devised a re enactment where we donned white sheets ritually to solemn music and the class listened in silence while I read the confession that the rabbi reads in the Synagogue, was to help them *remember* what happened, simply in order to pass an exam.

As I planned the activity with no notion of religion neutrality or participatory symbols, or any great thought at all, I decided that the pupils needed something to *do* symbolically with these regrets. I wanted to help them grasp the notion of something leaving a person, to help them understand the idea of repentance - and indeed this seemingly bizarre performance, having an effect on a person who chose to take part.

I set out a basket of stones beside a bowl of water, taking the idea from the stones Jewish people leave by graves as a sign of mourning and Taslich, walking beside flowing water at Rosh Hashanah, representing the washing away of sin.

I put all the ingredients together into a ceremony, a ritual, which I hoped would convey something of the solemnity and seriousness of the occasion to young people who might never have attended a ceremony or ritual, or if they had, were unmoved, or even bored by it .

I had no idea how powerfully it would affect them , how many of the children then, and ever after, would *really* repent and feel cleansed or who would need at the end to talk about it with someone else, perhaps to sort out a relationship and seek real forgiveness or closure.

Together, the repeated use of religion neutral activities and participatory symbols in my lessons has led to me to believe that there is a universal spirituality that our children are hungry for.

I would like to give you an opportunity to take part in one of these now. This was one I devised to help children understand the meaning of Rosh Hashanah , Jewish new Year during the month of Ellul that preceded New Year Jewish people think about the things they want to put right in their lives and will put right relationships that need mending. This prepares them for the Day of atonement in the Synagogue on Yom Kippur where they will confess privately to themselves, which I have already mentioned.

As New Year approaches Jewish families will think about what they want to change about themselves their family and their community

Paul Tillich suggests that turning things into actions affects us in a way that words alone do not, and so I turned it into a participatory symbol. I invited the children, as I have with you, to write down three things that they would like to change about themselves, their family and their community.

The children placed these in a box which I sealed in front of them so that they were assured that their writing would remain entirely confidential. We opened them together, reading in silence after our re enactment of Yom Kippur.

I never know what change this participatory symbol brings about because it is confidential and I will never know how it will affect you but I do know how it affected me

when a few days after the first conference I sat in my first teachers course and wrote

“I need to find the confidence to tell more people about this way of working. I need to make sure that I take care of my family and my pupils while I do it”.

Four years on, many articles, presentations and five teachers resource files later, I still have the faded paper pinned to my office wall. It both encourages and warns me. The very doing of this work is a spiritual issue in itself, presenting spiritual challenges.

I am going to invite you now to write about these things and address them to yourselves. I will post them to you when we return to school in September so think about where you would like them posted to – home or work.

The effect of Participatory symbols

I asked the sixth form, my, eighteen year olds, who have just finished studying A level with all its academic rigour, what RE had given them as persons. This is what Kyrsty wrote, remembering a lesson that took place when she was sixteen. In this lesson she had been invited to use a participatory symbol within a re enactment of Orthodox Christian worship.

“I’ll never forget a year eleven lesson when we were doing an Orthodox Christianity lesson and you invited all of us to light a candle for someone. It was the first time I’d been able to do that and it meant and still means a lot to me – I didn’t stop crying that day! The thing about the Theatre of Learning is that it gives people who don’t usually have the chance to do anything spiritually based, the opportunity to do it – without it being connected to any religion or anything that they might normally think is nonsense. It takes the rituals out of context and gives new meaning to things, but still keeps them connected to the religion so that it can be learnt for the exam as well as being beneficial”.

“This general idea has stuck with me and so I can do symbolic things to get rid of or let out emotion not just by lighting candles but through other things like holding a pebble, then throwing it once I have thought about things that are getting me down. I want to say thank you ... for the Theatre of Learning because it has been so helpful and done so much for me in the years I have been studying RE, Love Kyrsty”

Over the seven years that I have been working on these techniques I have come to believe that the childrens’ need for prayer, ritual and celebration is as strong as ever – what they reject is the opaque symbolism of the established traditions that have no meaning or power for them.

If we do not start with spirituality but become immersed in truth claims – does God exist, is there an afterlife or the correct understanding of the expression of a tradition such as the differences of belief about laying tefillin among Orthodox and progressive

Jews we make religion about *other* people.

When we do that we shut the door to spirituality in the faces of our children, so of course they are turned off because

“Religion is about nothing we know or anything to do with us.”
(the comment from a sixteen year old which started me on this journey)

What we also do is present religion as something *cerebral* rather than something that is *experienced*. Now, of course that is not wrong, I am not suggesting that we *reduce* or remove the academic rigour of religious studies for a moment but that we *add* something that will enrich it make it *more* accessible and to a much wider group of children.

I had discovered in class after class that the children I taught had a real need to reflect, to forgive and to feel forgiven, to take part in rituals, to mourn, to welcome new babies, to seal important events .

They need to feel part of a community and a family and to express this ritually and symbolically. They need to experience the comfort and healing and sense of connection that religion provides - but they did not need to believe in God or an afterlife in order to experience these needs and feel comforted strengthened and healed by the religion neutral exercises and participatory symbols.

- If a child does not wish to lay tefillin can we offer them a religion neutral alternative , one that will hit a similar spiritual target?. The enormity of what a believing Jew is doing when laying tefillin cannot be underestimated but if a child cannot enter into that experience because it makes no sense, it has no meaning, or because it does not believe in God, does that mean that the alternative is nothing ?
- If a child does not pray in its life outside school because it does not believe in God and gains nothing from the experience of prayer in school assemblies is the alternative also, nothing ?

Ritual and liturgy are very powerful they enable believers to feel changed

- When our children ask to marry in church and bring their babies to be baptised what do we do ? There are some churches that welcome them but many do not . We bang the door in their faces, for that is how it feels to the adults and the children who tell me about it. It is a painful rejection "the church wouldn't let me be christened .My mum and Dad weren't allowed to be married in church"
- We do this because we do not understand what they are asking for. They are asking for blessing , for connection, for tradition, for an experience which will help them feel changed and experience the awesomeness of what has taken place in

their lives which is what ritual and liturgy do but instead in our refusal we say to them

- “ Those things are inside a building where you go to worship and the key to the door of that building is *belief* and your seat is only guaranteed if you come regularly.”
- We are cutting our young people off from community, tradition, rites of passage, processes of grieving and expressing joy in establishing a family and being able to experience the awesome responsibility of becoming an adult, a partner and a parent, a member of a community conscious of having a place and a role in it.

When God the counsellor is no longer available what else is there to help them to reflect on their relationships, the need to forgive and feel forgiven, to mourn, celebrate and mark significant moments?

Recovering spirituality means recovering Dharma

Dharma is a Hindu concept one with many nuances of meaning .It conveys a sense of a person's role in life and the community. It is about being in harmony. It is about being in tune with the laws of nature and the universe and also with the structure of one's community and the wider society of which one is a part . From that sense emerges an individual's path, or duty which is at once both a role, a state of being and a relationship. Dharma – connectedness .We need to give that back to our children.

We speak often of the effect of the absence of spirituality on our society. We talk of its sickness, of the emptiness that leads young people to over eat, abuse drugs and alcohol and attempt suicide .We need to help them discover their Dharma which like the kingdom of heaven is within them *but we need to do it without allying it to belief in God.*

We are concerned by the state of the mental health of our young people in the developed world and of our global community. We are anxious about how to channel community and nurturing values into them.

Religion neutral exercises are a way to awaken and nurture the spirituality, the Dharma. Once awakened it will enable them to understand and empathise with the spirituality of other people so that they will in time become whole persons who can connect with themselves and their community and become good citizens.

Those being nurtured within a tradition may come, through this doorway, to make it their own, or at least be able to sit at a table of celebration with their family and their religious community in sympathy, rather than alienation or exclusion.

“After lessons like these, I feel I can go into a celebration in any family anywhere in

the world and understand what it means to them, even if I do not understand what they are doing “

Renata aged 16

My experiences in the classroom have led me to believe that we should be establishing a spiritual curriculum for our children which allows them to develop their own tradition of regular reflection and ritual, to provide spiritual nurture enabling them to mark their journey through life in a way that is meaningful to them.

It was a religion neutral exercise using a participatory symbol that Kirsty was referring to. It helped her to begin dealing with the accidental drowning of her baby brother. She was born as a consequence of his death and thus he exerted a powerful influence on her life which she believes she must live to the full and with great responsibility for his sake.

I think that religion neutral exercises and participatory symbols are a powerful way to develop spirituality in anyone and that these should be central to any programme of religious studies or nurture into a tradition.

If we allow ourselves to make academic achievement the *sole* measure of successful religious education we permit the subject to fulfil only *part* of its potential to educate our young and prepare them for adult life.

Developing spirituality promotes academic achievement

This is also the way to the highest academic achievement for it is only through the empathetic understanding of what it means to have a religious world view that a young person in school can attempt to evaluate it never mind be motivated to do so in the first place.

It is also a way to include everyone, whatever their religious background. I battled for so long with “I don’t believe in God why do I have to do this rubbish! I cannot remember the last time I heard any one say that..

“I am an atheist but these lessons help me see where they (believers) are coming from ?”
16 year old pupil

It is also a way to include everyone whatever their ability to read and write. Religion is something you experience and share through discussion and action in the world. Every child can participate equally in this

“We should learn RE in mixed ability classes”

said Leanne a highly able pupil with CAT scores at 130 plus. She was reacting to a

suggestion that the able pupils would do better in a separate class

"We have so much to learn from each other. I have learned to get on with and understand people so different from myself, people I would never talk to otherwise and they talk to me outside class ,now. We have all learned to respect each other through the sharing in special circles .We have different perspectives on life and we need to know that. I have learned so much from listening to everyone "

For Kirsty and the other eighteen year olds I have taught for the past ten years, RE provides an intellectual satisfaction far beyond the acquisition of knowledge They tell me every year that it is the most demanding of their studies.

"In our other lessons you just learn things, a bone is a bone and a heart is a heart and this is how it works, but then we come to RE and wow! nothing is what you think it is!"
Ciaran

"Its confused me, but in a good way, nothing fits into the box"
Rachel

All the way through their evaluations they talk about how their academic studies have also affected them personally.

The Synoptic paper on "Life, Death and Beyond" was full of the most intellectually demanding quantum physics and philosophy as we wrestled with the mind/body problem, looking for a science of the soul, unpacking what the nature of matter and consciousness might be. Each student contributed from their other A level studies, as we looked at modern brain research and they linked their studies with poetry, literature and film. The atmosphere was electric, the excitement palpable as they fell over themselves to contribute, to wonder, to question. "My brain is going to explode !" said Stacey as the bell went for the next class. It spilled over into their conversations with their peers in clubs and pubs. It was a holistic process feeding souls as well as minds.

" It has made me confront death head on" said Rachel

"given me comfort in times of grief." Said Gemma

Kyrsty talked about how the lessons had affected her work in an old persons home

"I see a fair few people pass away. It's no less difficult now that it has been before but now I can see that they are going to be in no pain when they go. And also that the great faith they have can help them through. I suppose in this respect -RE makes me think outside the box the box being life to see in the end that life is only a short part of a persons being, no matter what happens afterward"

Rachel describes how RE has affected her thinking about God

*“RE has definitely expanded my imagination and made me realise the immense difficulties that language creates – the boundaries of it. RE and religion I have come to believe is purely and simply a **language struggle**”*

*“Before RE at School my only experience of religion was Christianity and Sunday school which as a very young child I saw as a chore. I can see the significance of religions – what they mean to others , I see their **spirituality (underlined twice)** I no longer think a set of beliefs is sufficient to meet my needs - I prefer the concept of an **idea (underlined twice)** “*

Kyrsty says

It has given me a better sense of my own religion. If I were to define it I would say that I am a Christian, a modified one – I believe in God, but an immanent, Atman like, one, “The force” is a good way to put it. – Studying RE has given me a chance to access different people’s beliefs and put a name to what I believe or think!”

For me this has underlined the importance of separating belief in the children’s minds from spiritual practice through using religion neutral exercises and language

What do I mean by this ?

God gets in the way in RE because the luggage that the children bring about what and who God is. The anthropomorphic personification of the very young has to evolve as the children encounter a modern scientific world view and explore philosophy . It is there they stumble and fall.

Their academic study of the world and the way it works, taught in isolation from spirituality, teaches them that religion is nonsense. At best they will be tolerant of others at worst condemn them.

Yet Quantum physics and religion stand side by side asking similar questions and getting similar answers as we realise the impact of the fact that the world looks like more like a great thought than a great machine. Unless someone is there in the science or RE department *making the connections* then the children may not. They see discord rather than harmony.

It is spirituality that led Niels Bohr a nobel prize winning physicist to make that connection and design himself a coat of arms with the yin yang symbol at its centre.

It was spirituality that led Fritjof Capra ,another physicist to write his ground breaking book “The Tao of physics”, in which he demonstrated the connection between the

Eastern traditions and quantum physics, making these important insights accessible to us all.

It is in the quantum world that it all comes together, religion, science, mysticism, philosophy and questions about the verification of religious experience. This young people can relate to.

Modern science has revealed to us a material world made up entirely of atoms, ultimately *all things are one*, the atoms are made up of electrons and the electrons are made up of energy - ultimately all that we are and anything is, is energy endlessly transforming it self into one form or another, *nothing is created or destroyed, it only changes* - including the universe itself.

Therefore as the Hindu scriptures tell us *Reality is indeed an illusion*.
"All we are" says Gautama "is the result of what we have thought."

When the children have *experienced* this through learning to listen to the inner voice, through religion neutral exercises, participatory symbols, meditation and reflection they are open to religious experience, to using their spiritual intelligence to enable themselves to thrive and to explore ways of describing what they are thinking .It is here that intellect and experience go hand in hand, each enhancing the other.

Gemma's view of God developed during her sixth form course. In a debate about the existence of God at the end of the first year of the course she declared herself to be an atheist .This is what she said at the end.

"I do not believe there is an old guy sitting on a cloud .I do not believe God created the universe I believe that the universe did start with the big bang , however the energy that started the big bang is still here with us. Whether it is this energy that people believe is God , I don't know. I think the universe has its own energy, and I do believe that this energy is inexplicably linked to us and our paths through this world and any others"

Rachel's study of the quantum world, the verification of religious experience and miracles led her to comment

"I want to believe that everything is connected physically/spiritually and that such things as telepathy are possible – that the world is so complex and that the things we do not understand we will one day ."

Developing Spiritual intelligence ?

One of the most exciting things that I have read recently is Brendan Hydes'paper on the plausibility of spiritual intelligence in the "International journal of children's Spirituality" April 2004 edition. In it he argues that in order to be one of the

intelligences spirituality has to be essential for our survival. He picks out connectedness as the essential element in religion and argues that this is central to our survival because it is this that gives meaning and purpose to our existence and enables us to connect with ourselves and our community.

What he is suggesting makes so much sense of what I am encountering in my classroom. It makes sense of the connection the children find to spiritual awareness and their sense of well being and ability to cope with relationships.

He reminds us that spirituality, because of its great age, is primary and its expression in the traditions, which are comparatively modern, is secondary. If we were to make spirituality primary in religious education and teaching about the specific traditions secondary, we would enable the contact with the traditions to become meaningful, to make sense, as well as accomplishing a great deal for the health and well being of our children.

My sixth form group and I read the paper on spiritual intelligence together. They were fascinated . It made sense to them as a valid interpretation of their own experience, helping them understand why RE had made the impact on their own lives that it had.

Listening to the inner voice .

But all this raises a very serious question - what is it that is happening when a child takes part in these exercises and is moved. Pupils are hungry for spirituality - to have the candle lit – can one light it for oneself – with out God ?

I suspect that the inner voice and inner dialogue that the children discover in the religion neutral exercises, might be what the mystics would recognise if we sat them down to talk with the children

I want to say that everyone in my class room is aware of and responding to God – is it just that I want to say that to make what I am doing acceptable ? why might an atheist be upset ? – is it because when I mention the word God the luggage ridden notion imposed on them by the traditions is what they reject and put aside?

Does it matter – if we understand each other?

What might happen if after reflection and thought from the children over a period of time we said not “Do you believe this? But ”What have you encountered ?” they certainly encounter something.

I suspect what they encounter when they show me this awareness in their lives is what I call God . I recognise it and I call it God and I say “Look at these words that people throughout history have used to describe their experiences, they seem to have a connection”. - but would the young person *want* to call it God ?

Here are some sixteen year olds writing anonymously about what the word God means to them. They did this writing after lessons on religious experience, the concept of the numinous and taking part in religion neutral exercises on prayer and the Eucharist

“God is not a person he’s more like a feeling like the air helping us to survive”

“I think God is all the kindness inside us and all the light around us”

“I don’t think God is a real person and not necessarily a spirit. I think that there is something inside everyone that can be thought of as a God if you are religious. I am not religious nor do I go to Church, but I do find that if I need to think or get something off my chest there is something inside me I can talk to in my head “

I think God is a woman. She is a spirit, a guide but she doesn’t happen to do anything. She is part of your subconscious mind

I think God is a voice in your head because when you believe in something like if you think you have an illness you start to imagine or believe in it.

“I don’t really see God as a human but I guess he is and we are made in the image of him, I see God as a presence of love hope and strength. Once you find God you realise he is everything”.

It seems to me that children don’t necessarily find *belief* something they need. It also seems from my classes that spiritual development is possible *without* belief in a transcendent being or an afterlife. They are hungry to have the candle lit. Is giving them an awareness of their inner voice and teaching them to listen to it, the way to light it for them ?

- Is this what we mean by revelation ?
- Is this what we mean by the holy spirit
- Does it matter as long as we understand each other ?

It does leave us with the troubling notion of authority. We can’t have people having an awareness that they just made up but whatever awareness or relationship with God a person has have, there is a risk. The Klu Klux Klan believe they are doing God’s will, so do the suicide bombers. You can’t escape it, community gives believers courage and confidence, like them, but it doesn’t make it right.

- What is happening when the children go through these reflective exercises?
- What is happening to the sixth form who rate RE the most interesting of all their studies even though they do not believe in God?
- They are nourished by the notion of immanence .The numinous is a concept that

makes sense to them.

- They respond to mysticism, relating the words of the mystics sometimes to their own unnamed experiences.
- The concept of the Atman, the universal life force in every living thing .The Kingdom of heaven is within you. The kingdom of God is to come and now is . In the beginning was the word .All these things resonate with them.
- As did the whole of John's gospel, full of symbolism and metaphor, to which they could respond and interpret for themselves as a cry to recognise that we are essentially spiritual beings and that the recognition of that leads to fulfilment and satisfaction.
- Are there such things as miracles did the resurrection happen? Rachel's response is illuminating *"I want to believe that everything is connected physically and spiritually and that such things as telepathy are possible – that the world is so complex and that the things we do not understand we will one day ."*

This is what makes me think that it is ultimately about the language not the concept, after all the idea of God is quite modern in the history of religion

So, is the inner voice the secular spirituality that we need to help our young people discover the God within? Is the discovery of the inner voice, the way to the sense of the numinous and the other .Is this what is meant by "the kingdom of heaven is within you" ?

Is it just a language game as Rachel concluded or a matter of

Does it matter as long as we understand each other ?

So, in the end I have decided that I can live with lighting the inner flame and believing that this is the flame on the altar and the flame that comes through the screen of the iconostasis, that is given to the baptised baby, that stands before the Ark , that is Havan, that glows in the smile of the Buddha image because

" Those who know do not speak . Those who speak do not know."

TheTao

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