

CHILDHOOD SPIRITUALITY

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ABSTRACT: Hundreds of examples of childhood spiritual experiences have been collected by researchers in England and the United States. Oddly enough, they have been missed by the mainstream of transpersonal psychology. Three kinds of childhood experiences contradict the theoretical positions of Wilber and Washburn in regard to early stages of development: (1) when on the basis of their own experience children realize that the adults around them are spiritually ignorant, (2) when children become aware of their identity beyond the physical self and beyond one lifetime, and (3) when they know or discover methods of achieving on their own a state of nonordinary consciousness.

Childhood spirituality has been terra incognita in transpersonal psychology, a curious state of affairs in a field devoted to vigorously investigating all manifestations of the transpersonal universe. One exception is Armstrong's (1984) paper on empirical evidence for spiritual experiences in childhood and another is Murdock's (1978) paper on meditation with young gifted children.

Armstrong included three compelling examples from Robinson's (1977/1983) study of childhood religious experience. Both Robinson and Armstrong argued that genuine spiritual experiences are accessible to children and that the quality and depth of such experiences challenge developmental theories that put absolute limits on children's conceptual and experiential capacities. Despite this, Wilber (2000) asserted that people who say that children are more in touch with spiritual realities have "difficulty producing credible and coherent examples." The fact of the matter is that such examples do exist and, what's more, in significant numbers, but owing to unpredictabilities in the dissemination of knowledge the studies of childhood spiritual experience have been overlooked. That childhood spirituality is a viable area of research is evident by the launching of the *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* in 1995 and the collection of papers in Best's (1996) *Education, Spirituality, and the Whole Child*.

LODES OF CHILDHOOD SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES

In 1969, Sir Alister Hardy, a British evolutionary biologist, founded at Oxford the Religious Experience Research Unit (now a Center at the University of Wales in Lampeter, Wales) to collect reports of religious experience "in *all* its forms" but specifically asking for accounts of experiences from those who "felt that their lives had in any way been affected by some power beyond themselves" (Hardy, 1979, p. 18). By 1977, over 4000 reports had been received. The Center has published a number of studies, and Edward Robinson led the research on children's and adolescents' transcendental experiences (Robinson, 1977/1983; Robinson & Jackson, 1987). Robinson also presented detailed in-depth interviews with 13 of the respondents to

get a picture of the impact of early spiritual experience on a person's life (Robinson, 1978).

In the United States, Edward Hoffman, working with young children, noticed their higher sensitivities for compassion, creativity, and aesthetics. Following up on Maslow's idea that children can undergo peak experiences, he embarked on a quest for "the highest reaches of childhood experience" (Hoffman, 1992, 1998). Tobin Hart (personal communication, January 18, 2001) has gathered over 150 cases of children describing their spiritual experiences.

The reports collected by Edward Robinson (1977/1983) and Edward Hoffman (1992) bring a wealth of evidence of profound transcendental experiences in children. When asked about a spiritual experience that had a lasting significance in their lives, many adults describe an event from childhood. Robinson (1977/1983) reviewed about 600 such reports and followed up 362 with a questionnaire. He found that spiritual experiences can occur before age 5 (10%), most occur between ages of 5 and 15 (70%), and fewer occur after age 15 (19%). When Hoffman (1992) asked directly for childhood experiences, he received about 250 detailed descriptions. In the 134 excerpts included in his book, 23% of these experiences occurred when the subject was 3 or 4 years old, and the remainder happened between the ages of 5 and 15. Thus, asking specifically for childhood experiences brought their number up.

These reports show that children are capable of having genuine spiritual experiences of divine presence, oneness and interrelatedness, energy pulsating in living and non-living objects, self as not physical, a sense of continuity between life and death, and much more. The experiences occurred spontaneously—in nature or at home, in church or in the car—and they had enduring significance for the person's whole life. The families of some of these children were religious; others were not. Childhood spiritual experiences often initiate spiritual search later in life and endow a person with strength to endure life's reverses and tragic losses.

While the great majority of transcendental experiences are reported to be joyous, reassuring, and blissful, nevertheless a certain number of such experiences are unsettling, sometimes even frightening, although they are usually later resolved. This is more likely to happen when a gifted child pursues difficult existential questions such as the meaning of death and nothingness, and for which he or she cannot find authoritative assistance. Eventually the fears dissolve and give place to a feeling of deep peace. In some cases it may take a long time before the resolution comes. Until such time, the experience can be very trying, especially to a child. Accounts of such experiences are a topic in themselves.

In Maxwell and Tschudin's (1990) study of modern religious and other transcendental experiences, 18 occurred before the age of 14, some as early as the nursery. Nye (1998) has interviewed 38 children, 6 and 10 years old, in regard to their spiritual awareness. In studies of gifted children, Feldman (1986), Lovecky (1998), Morelock (1995), and Piechowski (1998) have presented examples of spiritual expe-

periences obtained directly from children. Thus the currently available pool of published accounts of childhood spiritual experiences numbers more than 700.

The content of these accounts has by no means been exhausted for what it can tell us about childhood spirituality and transpersonal reality. The questions posed by Robinson (1977/1983) are still with us: "What has been the nature of this process that was set going by that early event, or of the faculty that has enabled it to continue?" (p. 13). For a start, it seems to me that it calls into play a person's openness and receptiveness to the flow of energy from the larger spiritual reality in which this reality is suspended and that the faculty involved is either a special endowment in the person when still a child or a normal endowment present in all children but only activated in some (Piechowski, 2000). This is not an original thought but simply a recognition of the possibility that in children, as well as in adults, the energy of spiritual awakening can flow from the higher self to the conscious self (Grof & Grof, 1989).

ARE SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES AUTHENTIC IF THEY ARE REMEMBERED FROM CHILDHOOD?

Intensive examination of the 362 reports of childhood spiritual experiences led Robinson (1977/1983, p. 16) to conclude that these experiences correspond to a property of childhood that is not something that is later outgrown but that is an essential element of the whole person. Thus, (a) "The original vision" is not a fantasy but a form of knowledge, what William James called the *noetic quality*; (b) this vision can be properly understood only when studied over time; (c) many of these experiences are self-authenticating—they need no sanction or confirmation from another source, but are valid by the inherent authority of the experience; (d) they bring to the person an awareness of his or her true self; (e) the vision can only be understood in purposive terms, such as *destiny*. The last conclusion corresponds elegantly to what Lovecky called *entelechy* (Lovecky, 1990). The respondents used phrases like "the diamond moment of reality," "the most real living experience . . . like contacting a live wire when you were groping for a match." For 13% of the respondents, their childhood experience was more powerful than later adult experiences; for 17%, childhood and adult experiences were about equal; and for the large majority (70%) their adult experiences grew in strength over the childhood ones (Robinson, 1977/1983).

The fact that the experiences are reported decades later, in some cases at the age of 80, raises the question whether they are remembered accurately or have been edited and distorted from the original event. Robinson argued that the experience bypassed language because it was inexpressible, and also because children do not yet have the language to describe it. Here are three examples of the indelible strength of such experiences. The respondents are well-educated, gifted individuals. The first respondent (a 57-year-old man), who had his first experience at the age of 5 or 6, says that a child receives impressions but does not analyze them, thereby avoiding modification of how the experience is recorded in memory.

Because a spiritual experience is so different from any other experience it cannot be distorted in memory, though it may be incapable of description. I remember vividly what I felt but I may not be able to convey that memory to others. It was something "out of this world": it was a deep and abiding awareness, not intellectual, not emotional, but a deep perception of reality, of beauty, of truth and holiness. A child does not ask for "meanings," it merely accepts experiences and rejoices in them. It lives for the moment. . . . A spiritual experience is sufficient in itself. It produces a reaction that "nothing could be more perfect than this." It is the ultimate in happiness, trust and fulfillment—but a child does not of course think this; it merely accepts with gratitude. (Robinson, 1978, p.128, M57)

The second respondent (an 81-year-old woman) had her first experience at the age of 5. She makes the point that interpreting an unusual, intense experience is beyond a child's capacities:

I suddenly realized I was seeing *through* what the senses normally present into a beyond—most beautiful. There was the most glorious colour everywhere. . . . Its vividness has remained with me all my life. . . . I have never attempted to interpret that experience; I can't. I am just describing it as it happened. I do remember saying the twenty-third Psalm; I do remember saying to myself, this must be what Heaven is like; and I do remember the wonderful colour of it all; it seemed to be stereoscopic as if it went on *through*—like that. That's all. How could I interpret it? (Robinson, 1978, pp. 155, 159, F81)

The third respondent (a 49-year-old man), who had his first experience at the age of 6, says that one cannot well translate images (ideographs) into words; consequently, an experience is imprinted whole.

Language tries to reproduce ideographs of a sort in the mind of the hearer; it fails because of the hearer's modifications en route to consciousness. In an experience like this, though, the ideographs are planted definitively and directly before personal modifications can get at them and mutilate them. (Robinson, 1978, p. 98, M49)

What he is referring to are three-dimensional scenes which are extended in space. This type of lifelike imagery, or "picture thinking," has been described as characteristic of dyslexics (Davis, 1994), of gifted individuals who had a near-death experience (Atwater, 1999), and of visual-spatial learners who are not dyslexic (Silverman, 2001). This man described a later experience of reading "by a kind of series of mental pictures, something I had not experienced before. It was as if I were watching a documentary on television, and the reading was the voice of the commentator" (Robinson, 1978, p. 97).

There is evidence that children's memories are in fact very good. A study of a significant childhood event (e.g., the birth of a sibling) showed that 3- and 4-year-olds recall the event a year later quite accurately and no less well than 8-year-olds (Sheingold & Tenney, 1982). More recent research demonstrated that children have a good recall of personally experienced events even as early as the end of the first year (Bauer, 1997; Fivush, 1997; Schneider & Pressley, 1997). One of Waldron's (1998, p. 117) subjects saw again at the age of 21 the same "celestial vibration of light" that he recognized as the one he had seen as an infant. Robinson (1977/1983)

has several examples of spiritual memories prior to 18 months of age or even within the first year of life.

RECURRENT THEMES IN CHILDHOOD SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES

Themes that recur in the descriptions of childhood experiences have been illustrated by Robinson (1977/1983), Murdock (1978), Hoffman (1992; 1998) and Piechowski (2000). They include

- ecstasy, timelessness, oneness with nature
- pulsating energy and life force
- God, Eternal Presence, God in everything
- identity: a sense of self beyond physical reality and beyond one lifetime
- entelechy
- techniques of achieving heightened consciousness

This list can be extended to include dreams, near-death experiences, healing, and more. My concern here is to adduce a few examples which show the authentic power and depth of such experiences and which demonstrate that these experiences are equal to those reported by adult experiencers, such as those described by Hardy (1979), Maxwell and Tschudin (1990), or Waldron (1998). Murdock (1978) also reported meditation experiences in gifted 5 year olds that were comparable to those of adults.

In the following example, the child spontaneously practiced focusing on the rhythm of her breathing, a basic technique of meditation. At the age of 71, a professor of anthropology, she remembered the event, which took place at the seaside when she was 4.

I found myself standing at the beach, alone. The sea touched the sky. Breathing with the waves, I entered their rhythm. Suddenly there was a channeling of energy: the sun, the wind, the sea were going right through me.

A door opened, and I became the sun, the wind, and the sea. There was no "I" anymore. "I" had merged with everything else. All sensory perceptions had become one. Sound, smell, taste, touch, shape—all melted into a brilliant light. The pulsating energy went right through me, and I was part of this energy.

My parents found me transfixed on the beach and thought that I had suffered a heat stroke. So they kept me in bed, in the dark, for a couple of days. This gave me time to return to ordinary life. . . . I've always been able to recall the light that enveloped and penetrated me. In this way, the episode . . . became a spiritual "measuring rod" as to whether a later vision was genuine or just a fiction of my imagination. (Hoffman, 1992, pp. 38–39)

Her experience combines ecstasy, timelessness, pulsating energy, interconnection of everything, and a consciousness of an omnipresent nonphysical self in one all-embracing light. In most cases, such early experiences instill in the recipient a feeling of certainty of its truth. Thus they stand apart from anything that is only imagined. This woman's remark, that her experience became for her a spiritual "measuring rod," makes this point emphatically. Her vision at the age of 4 gave her a means of judging later in life whether an experience was genuinely spiritual or not.

With no mention of a divine presence, such experiences are called nontheistic (White, 1996). In a theistic experience, God is known as a distinct Presence, or is present in everything, or everything is present in God. For example:

One spring day, when I was about 7, I was outside playing happily in the late afternoon. I looked toward the sun. Clouds were slowly floating across it, and the rays beaming out from behind them were glorious. I became utterly entranced with the whole vision.

I had the intense feeling that God was somehow speaking to me through this scene. At that instant, I just knew that *God was in everything* and that *everything was a part of God*. I felt awed by the whole experience, but never told anyone about it. (Hoffman, 1992, pp. 49–50)

Realization of one's identity beyond the physical is another frequent theme. Related to it is the subtheme of the continuity of the self beyond death. For example:

When he was five or six years old [Michael] was patrolling the path in an English graveyard with his grandfather while his grandmother and I were tending their daughter's grave. He saw a black marble tomb with gold letters on it, quite different from all the rest, and he said: "Granddad, what's under that?" His grandfather said brusquely: "Oh, so-and-so [naming the person] is under that."

Michael: "Oh no he's not."

Grandfather: "Oh yes he is. He's dead and buried."

Michael: "It's only his body that gets buried."

Grandfather: "Well, isn't *he* his body?"

Michael: "He'll have an airbody now."

Grandfather: "What's an airbody like?"

Michael: "Well, while I'm alive you can hear me coming down this path . . . fump, fump [stamping, then very quietly] but when I'm dead you won't hear me coming. I'll have an airbody."

"I had never heard the word 'airbody,'" his mother said. "Michael must have coined it himself." (Young, 1977, p. 103)

A highly significant theme is *entelechy*, the concept of a vital force directing a person's life, a strong will toward self-determination and toward fulfilling one's destiny (Lovecky, 1990, 1993). Gifted children often display such intrinsically directed striving. Experiences of being given a plan or mission in life or of being guided are captured by this concept. Lovecky (1998) met a gifted 5-year-old girl, Crissy, who was instrumental in another child being healed. Crissy had always shown unusual spiritual sensitivity and awareness of others. Her mother said that Crissy was calling out in church "Hallelujah" and "God is good" when she was only a few months old. Just before she turned 5, she felt a strong urge to pray for her cousin, then only 7 weeks old. She prayed for 3 days. Only then was it discovered that the baby had a birth defect. Crissy told everyone that the baby would be healed if they prayed, and she herself continued to pray. Two weeks later, the baby was healed. "Crissy sees herself as a gift from God. Her stated goal is to be a doctor for Jesus."

In the reports of adults remembering their childhood experiences, there are some of a distinctly entelechial character, such as receiving a plan for one's life. An awareness of divine guidance can be regarded as a manifestation of entelechy. For exam-

ple, one woman related (at the age of 72) that the blueprint for her life, which had been given to her as a child, had been carried out:

Like petals of a rose opening in beautiful order, my life has opened up bit by bit from that first clear and wonderful experience of God calling me by name when I was six and revealing his plan for my life. What followed was built on that first experience. (Robinson, 1977/1983, pp. 51-52)

CHILDREN'S TECHNIQUES FOR ENTERING NONORDINARY CONSCIOUSNESS

In the reports one finds also instances of techniques children use to enter a heightened state of consciousness. In contrast to experiences unexpectedly overtaking a child's consciousness, some describe practiced ways of entering a joyful state of deep peace, even bliss. Devotion expressed in intense prayer, pouring out the heart in longing for God, is the way of many great mystics. Some childhood accounts contain descriptions of intense though wordless prayer, achieving a state of calmness by focusing on breathing or a visual pattern in a tapestry or window, silent gazing in church, repeating a phrase, or concentrating on infinity.

How young children contrive to hit upon these techniques is, to say the least, intriguing. One would think they would be rare and unusual, but Nye (Hay & Nye, 1998) found that children 6 and 10 years old could, at those ages, identify their strategies for reaching spiritual awareness. Some of their techniques were: mental and physical withdrawal, becoming absorbed and focused, seeking communication through prayer, and pursuing a chain of questions about one's own origin, the world's origin, life's origin, and so on. For instance, Andrew, age 6, who at first declared himself an atheist, later said "I believe in God's love." His image for God's unending love was the infinite circumference of a circle, and a square for the devil's inferior, finite "love" (Hay & Nye, 1998, p. 116). Although Andrew's idea is more in the nature of awareness rather than spiritual experience, it is nevertheless an excellent example of an advanced level of thinking about spiritual matters in a child. Nye said:

In response to the ineffable nature of spiritual experience, evoking imagery and drawing analogies have been time-honoured strategies in most spiritual traditions. These strategies were also employed by the children, and have specially interesting implications for our understanding of their spirituality.

It is likely that most of the children in our sample had not yet reached the Piagetian stage of thinking called "formal operations" in which abstract ideas and principles can be operated on in the mind. Rather, these children would have "thought" best in terms of concrete examples or literal images. For this reason it is perhaps not surprising that using imagery was a potent strategy for their spirituality. However, they did not seem "locked in" by their tendency to create literal imagery; rather it served as a resource that fed other strategies. Nor was all this imagery "concrete." In some cases it was creatively combined with more abstract ideas. Six-year old Andrew's concrete images of heaven and hell as a never-ending circle and a finite "edged" square respectively, are illustrative of how image-making can give rise to a "concrete and abstract" combining strategy. His literal imagery was combined with a more abstract level of reasoning concerning the nature of love, and his subsequent insights about human relations and his sense of God. (Hay & Nye, 1998, pp. 131-132)

One respondent recalled how, at 3 years of age, he discovered a way to have an authentically religious experience. Note again the authority of truth felt in the experience in contrast to the inauthenticity of adult pronouncements:

Very often when I was about three I used to look out the window of either the bathroom or the ironing room and experience a euphoric unification with the space in front of me and all around.

I became so absorbed in these experiences that I would lose all sense of time. . . . At some point [some years later] I discovered that if I sat very still in my bed with my legs crossed and then fixed my eyes on a spot in the design of the Oriental rug, I entered a euphoric state. I had been taught prayers, but never experienced the same intensity of feeling with them.

In simple terms, these meditative experiences led me to feel as a child that the grown-ups around me were out of touch with something and were deceiving themselves—and me—with unfounded opinions. As a result I often felt the need to retreat to a private reality among the woods and in nature. (Hoffman, 1992, p. 96)

Others reported feeling refreshed and calm with the inflow of energy as a result of focusing on a pattern or repeating a phrase—one at the age of 4 repeated over and over, “I am me! I am me!” and felt deep peace and a “strong sense of God at those moments” (Hoffman, 1992, p. 125).

One person discovered a technique of “tumbling back” when she was about 8 or 9. She is one of a unique group who as children appear to have experienced that which existed before the universe came into being—the primordial Void or blissful Nothingness and Silence. The concept of nothingness or emptiness is most prominent in Zen Buddhism and stands for that which is most real and self-identical with being (Nishitani, 1983).

I grew up in an affluent and nonreligious family. During time alone in my room, I would often “tumble back” into another reality—focusing on what was here before the universe or anything else existed. I would tumble further and further into this secure void, relishing the feeling of quiet detachment, almost floating.

I never told anyone of these episodes. Somehow I knew that my inner tumbling was not an ordinary thought process but a special experience that occurred only when I was alone for a while. I was certainly not scientifically motivated during these inner journeys. I never actually *thought* about space, time, or the universe’s creation. That is, my “tumbling back” experiences were much stronger and involved richer sensations than mere thinking.

These experiences just happened naturally. There was no particular trigger like art, music, or exposure to nature. More than thirty years later I recall these episodes with great fondness, awe, and reverence. They left me with a feeling of connectedness with whatever is beyond our own reality, and the knowledge that I could change my ordinary state of consciousness. (Hoffman, 1992, pp.152–153)

This child was aware that her experience was special, and for it to take place she had to be alone. Her way of concentrating by *zooming back to before* anything came into existence is in some ways similar to the next example, an encounter with the ground of being, a name for that in which everything exists (Tillich, 1952). A clinical psy-

chologist had, as a little boy, the experience of his self as nameless, formless, and infinite.

One day when I was three or four, I was playing alone in bushes around our house on a summer afternoon. My parents had several visitors, and they started arriving. . . . I was watching it all from the bushes. . . . Soon everyone had arrived, but I remained motionless in the bushes, enjoying the quietness and coziness of the spot.

I first noticed that I could think about anything I wanted, and no one knew what it was. As I conjured up memories to think about, I realized that I could go back only a short distance in time before I found myself beyond all memories and facing a total blankness.

As I faced the blankness in my mind's eye, I gradually became aware that my identity transcended all these memories: that "*I had no form or name, no history*, and filled this blankness or emptiness as an immensity extending to infinity. This awesome feeling lasted for several minutes, and then I became aware of myself as a little boy peering out of the bushes.

I experienced a tremendous jolt—and a sense of regret mixed with anger and sadness—about having suddenly left my previous state of euphoric awareness. This memory has returned to me with increasing clarity as a result of my meditative practice. It still inspires me, how my usual childhood frame of mind was completely erased, and how I was able to merge with a much greater awareness. (Hoffman, 1992, 123–124)

Most children at that age are not yet able to reflect on their own thinking (Flavell, 1963), yet this boy realized that his thoughts were his own. At this moment, the boy not only understood that he was an individual but that he also had a personal history. He had the remarkable ability to slide back in memory beyond his point of origin and experience the great Void, the ground of all existence. A similar report is in Peterson (1976).

These two examples demonstrate a technique of stepwise regression that parallels the Zen practice of the Great Doubt, as quoted by Nishitani from the *Sermons* of Takusui (Nishitani, 1983):

The method to be practiced is as follows: you are to doubt regarding the subject in you that hears all sounds. All sounds are heard at a given moment because there is certainly subject in you that hears. Although you may hear the sounds with your ears, the holes in your ears are not the subject that hears. . . . You must doubt deeply, again and again, asking yourself what the subject of hearing could be. Pay no attention to the various illusory thoughts and ideas that may occur to you. Only doubt more and more deeply, gathering together in yourself all the strength that is in you, without aiming at anything or expecting anything in advance . . . become like a child within your own breast. . . . But however you go on doubting, you will find it impossible to locate the subject that hears. You must explore still further just there, where there is nothing to be found. Doubt deeply in a state of single-mindedness, looking neither ahead nor behind, neither right nor left, becoming completely like a dead man, unaware even of the presence of your own person. When this method is practiced more and more deeply, you will arrive at a state of being completely self-oblivious and empty. . . . When you are no longer aware of your being completely like a dead man, and are no more conscious of the procedure of the great doubt but become yourself, through and through . . . there will come a moment, all of a sudden, at which you emerge into transcendence called the Great Enlightenment, as if you have awoken from a great dream. (pp. 20-21)

Nishitani comments (p. 21): "The Great Doubt . . . is like the bean whose seed and shell break apart as it ripens: the shell is the tiny ego, and the seed the infinity of the Great Doubt that encompasses the whole world. It is the moment at which self is at the same time the nothingness of self, the moment that is the 'locus' of nothingness where conversion beyond the Great Doubt takes place."

How is one to understand that a method so obviously difficult and mentally strenuous came naturally to a child? A skill of this kind is beyond the cognitive capacities of almost any adult, let alone those of a young child. However, it is less of a stretch when the child in question is highly gifted, as these two must have been. Highly gifted children ask existential questions because they try very early to understand the nature of death and the origins of life, the universe, and God (Gross, 1993; Harrison, 2000; Hollingworth, 1942; Lovecky, 1997, 1998; Silverman, 1994). The most parsimonious, and rather obvious, explanation of such abilities in young children is that they have brought them from a previous existence. One must also entertain the possibility that extraordinary abilities and talents are developed in part between lives (Greaves, 1991). A facility for doing something difficult and on a superior adult level is the hallmark of a prodigy (Feldman, 1986). The children who knew the technique of working their consciousness backward to the ultimate emptiness or ground of being are nothing short of being spiritual prodigies.

THE PLACE OF CHILDHOOD SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES IN DEVELOPMENT

Accounts of spiritual experiences in young children challenge the concepts of children's early cognitive and emotional development as limited to prepersonal, concrete, and magical thinking, and their incapacity to understand the finality of death. It is rather the theoretical edifices of adult mainstream thinking that appear to be limited (Armstrong, 1984; Hay & Nye, 1998; Robinson, 1977/1983). One of the repeated realizations in the study of children's development is how much we keep underestimating their capacities. The discovery that children are capable of having genuine spiritual experiences and that these are neither extremely rare nor exceptional instances is a case in point.

The shortcomings of young children's conceptual capacities, codified by Piaget and Kohlberg, have long been demonstrated to be the product of (a) requiring a verbal response from a child and (b) children trying to figure out what kind of answer the adult wants. When tasks measuring conceptual capability were put into the children's own hands and were within their own experience, logical operations turned out to be within their capacities (Amend, 1975; Cole & Cole, 1996). Results are similar when children are probed in a religious context. Exposed to adult religious pronouncements, children tend to reflect the ideas handed to them, but on their own they do not produce anthropomorphic concepts of God. Petrovich (1989) found that when the context did not focus on religion, young children used the word *God* free of anthropomorphic projection.

The evidence of childhood spiritual experiences challenges the views of Wilber

(2000) that childhood spiritual experiences are, at best, momentary peak experiences representing lower levels of spiritual development, and of Washburn (1994, 1995) that childhood is cut off from the transpersonal ground of being by "primal repression."

At least three kinds of childhood spiritual experiences contradict these theoretical positions:

- the many instances in which, informed by their profound revelatory experience, children realized that they knew more than the adults around them, and were aware that the adults were ignorant of spiritual realities;
- the instances of children discovering or already knowing methods of entering deep states of nonordinary consciousness;
- the examples of children's strong sense of identity beyond the physical self and beyond one lifetime.

Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, in 13% of the cases studied by Robinson (1977/1983), the childhood experience was the strongest of the subsequent experiences in the person's spiritual development.

Wilber and Washburn rely on the received knowledge of developmental theories, in all of which the early stages of development are characterized by "prepersonal" limitations and inadequacies of locomotion, thought, and emotion. Washburn and Wilber developed their schemes without the benefit of the extensive case material revealing numerous instances of spiritual experiences in childhood. Wilber (2000) argued that because young children are incapable of taking the perspective of another, they cannot have mystical experiences. Research does not support this view. First, Borke (1975) showed that young children only *appeared* incapable of shifting their perspective to another because the situation with which they were presented was outside their experience. In familiar situations, they can make the shift. Second, highly gifted children are not only capable of sophisticated insight into the perspective of other persons but are able to act on it (Howard, 1994; Silverman, 1994).

Theories give only a generalized picture of development. The weakness of any general theoretical scheme is its inability to account for individual differences. When one moves from children's experience and behavior to theory, much is lost in the abstract picture. Developmental psychology has established that children are capable from the start of engaging those who care for them, of being responsive to their caregivers and developing very early a smile (the so-called social smile) that actively bids for the caregiver's attention. Advances in child development research also brought back the view that children's sense of right and wrong is innate (Damon, 1988; Kagan, 1981, 1984). This contradicts the view of the young child as instinctual, amoral, and undifferentiated.

The test of a theory is lived experience, not the other way round. Any theoretical model ought first to be walked through case material to make sure the abstracted general picture does not veer too far from what it aims to capture. There is considerable evidence—some of which is reported in this paper—that children have gen-

uine and authentic spiritual experiences comparable to experiences considered transpersonal in adults. Children's spiritual experiences cannot be reduced to the status of lower-level spirituality just because they were had by children.

How is one to accommodate, within the primitive rubrics of preoperational thought, or pre-egoic state, the many well-documented (including physical evidence) cases of children who remember previous lives (Stevenson, 1987; 1997) and who, at the very young age of 3 or 4, are able to give names and details of their previous personality, family, and social status? If the "psychophore" postulated by Stevenson carries memories from one life to the next, why wouldn't it also be capable of hosting various grades of transpersonal consciousness?

At any rate, the scope and quality of the kinds of childhood experience discussed here does not permit them to be categorized as representing just the lower levels of spiritual development, as Wilber (2000) asserted. These experiences go counter to the notion of primal repression on which Washburn relies in order to account for the apparent loss of connection with spiritual reality. Surprisingly, Wilber, too, has recourse to "the *repression barrier* erected by the ego to prevent lower prerational impulses from coming up" to argue that the "defenses against the id can defend against God" (Wilber, 2000, p. 141, emphasis in original). The continued use of the highly speculative and fictitious concept of id is unfortunate. Primal repression is supposed to be the young child's defense against pressures from the id. Such instinctual pressures have to be biological. This requires the id to be something real. However, in a biological organism there is no room for some reservoir of unbridled energy "seething with excitations." Biological organisms are internally highly regulated, and when the control breaks down there is cancer or death, neither of which can represent the id.¹

The concept of the id assumes that from birth a child is driven by self-gratification and has to be tamed in order to function in social concert with others. However, humans are social from birth—we are designed for emotional attachment and for reciprocal interaction with others (Bowlby, 1969). This, too, makes the id a fiction.

Armstrong (1984) proposed a solution that circumvents the prepersonal conception of childhood. He adjusted Wilber's diagram of developmental stages by introducing a line from the transpersonal level achieved in a previous life to the early childhood of the present one. In other words, a person who reached the transpersonal level is likely to have access to that level in childhood via distinct experiences. The cases of children practicing methods of concentration to enter a deep state of consciousness, their awareness that they have a better grasp of spiritual reality than adults, show forcibly that childhood spirituality can be much more than juvenile peak experiences.

CONCLUSION

The recollections of childhood spiritual experiences show that a larger reality opens up to some children spontaneously, and that they can find their own way to enter a

state of transpersonal consciousness. Through these experiences, a different sense of their being emerges for children, sometimes as vast as the whole universe, a glimpse of a larger benevolent and joyous reality in which human beings and all of life are connected on a deep level.

I have had the opportunity to talk on this topic and present examples of childhood spiritual experiences to groups of parents of gifted children and to professional audiences at national meetings here and abroad. The response has always been positive because of recognition of the participants' own, or their children's, experience. This is another indicator that such experiences are not rare. There is also relief and gratitude that someone is breaking the taboo on talking about spiritual experiences, a taboo that is still quite strong (Hay & Nye, 1998). And then experiences are offered. A 14-year-old boy in New Zealand sent me this report, which starts as a memory of a dream but then places it in the midst of a day in preschool:

One example of this is a dream I had when I was four years old, in which I talked with Buddha. That may not strike you as odd at all, except that I have never heard of Buddha before. I was in the car with my father when I first mentioned to him that a bald, fat man with holes in his ears and large breasts had spoken to me. I described this man in great detail, along with the conversation we had that was mostly about things in which I was interested.

When we arrived at home Dad asked Mum if I had mentioned this conversation to her to which Mum replied that I had. Dad wondered if she had been as concerned as he that this had taken place. Mum said she just thought there must have been a visitor to the preschool who had spoken to all the children. . . . They asked me if this was the case and I said "No, he only spoke to me, the others couldn't see him." I also told them that I didn't know the name of the man. Dad looked strangely at Mum and suggested, somewhat hesitatingly, that this person sounded very much like the Buddha, despite the fact that I had neither heard nor seen a picture of him. Mum showed me a picture then and I confirmed that it was just like the man I had been talking with.

The content of childhood experiences has the same character as the accounts of adults' transcendental experiences which reveal that behind our ordinary reality is a larger unseen reality. This is the larger spiritual universe that William James (1902/1936) deduced from his study of varieties of religious experience. He concluded that for people who have had such experiences, the goal of life is to achieve a harmonious relation, even union, with this larger spiritual universe. Perhaps some channels we ignore are open early in life, only to close later. Like the opening in the bones in the top of the head of the newborn that later closes, so, perhaps, the experiential channels of higher energy can also close but reopen later through spiritual discipline or other methods. And it is the case that for a number of people, as a result of spiritual practice, the memory of their childhood experiences returns. Nevertheless, in some people the early channels do not close and the contact with spiritual dimensions continues undiminished through the person's life. These experiences continue to exert their influence. A significant spiritual experience in childhood is often the foundation for the unfolding of a person's spiritual development.

NOTE

1 It is illegitimate for Washburn to use the term "id" to mean both Freud's concept of id and Jung's concept of collective unconscious, because the first was clearly meant to be biological, while the other was meant to be nonphysical.

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