

Divine Naivete: The Gifts of Children

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This week, Carol and I snuck out of the office at 4 p.m. on Wednesday and went to see the new Harry Potter movie. I realized what a curmudgeon I am when I asked the man selling the tickets to the movie, somewhat concerned: "Is the theater just packed with little people?" "No," he said, reassuring me. And it's true it wasn't *packed* with little people, but after all, this was a Harry Potter movie, so the demographics were somewhat on the young side.

Once I adjusted to the fact that this wouldn't be a silent "film" experience, I started to enjoy the stage whispers of the kids in the audience, their observations, their questions of clarification, their exclamations of joy and horror. I laughed much harder when a little girl repeated Ron Weasley's line, "Why can't we be following butterflies into the forest?" than I did at the original, because you heard this 5-year-old voice laughing and repeating the line like it was the funniest thing ever said. And when there were scary points in the movie, the shrieks these kids let out were the embodiment of unchecked terror. Life was so ... alive for these little kids. Danger was blood-curdling, joy was unbounded and fresh.

Maybe because I am an only child, I've always loved other children, even my own age -- loved watching them, like an observer of some strange species. Maybe I was a bit like Florence King, who writes about her first day in kindergarten: "I wasn't used to children and they were getting on my nerves. Worse, it appears that I was a child, too. I hadn't known that before; I thought I was just short."

As I grow up, I find I still revel in the raw expression of children, delighting in hearing what is said by those who haven't quite learned what they shouldn't say. I think, for instance, of the granddaughter of a parishioner of mine. The parishioner was in her 80s and her granddaughter said to her with all sincerity and as if it were the greatest compliment: "Nana, if you wore gloves and a scarf around your neck and a lot of makeup, you would almost look young and pretty." Or the girl who told me indignantly, as if I were stupid or trying to get one over on folks, that my hair was not red, it was *orange!*

The other thing I love about children is their unself-consciousness. Annie Dillard in *An American Childhood* writes about remembering the *very moment* she became self-conscious, never to be able to forget or escape herself again. She describes it as a kind of rite of passage to adulthood, or like Eve biting the apple, a transformation that is about new knowledge and a kind of prison, too.

Children aren't yet imprisoned by too much self-consciousness, and there is a freedom in that that I love to watch, and envy terribly. When I taught Sunday school at All Souls Church, I used to love this one boy whose mother, who was an artist, gave him incredible freedom of expression, so he had this blithe air. She used to let him dress himself every morning, and I always looked forward to what he'd wear to our kindergarten class. One day, I still remember, he came in wearing hot pink tights, with a striped shirt that was too small for him so half his belly showed, a necklace of big plastic beads that he'd strung himself, and a fluorescent orange sweatband around his forehead. And you could tell he felt like he was at the top of his kindergarten game. Of course, the last laugh was on me when he handed over a matching necklace he'd made for me to wear and I had to wear it all Sunday so as not to hurt his feelings.

We have such free spirits close to home -- just stand in the lobby every Sunday and see who insisted on wearing a certain pair of tights or shoes that don't match. In fact, I still remember the first day of church last year when we met in New Providence. Neal Eisenstein came up with his daughter, Alexandra, who must have been only 4 at the time. She was wearing this sequin top and a blue tutu and tights and maybe even a tiara. Stupidly I asked, "So are you going to a costume party after church? Are you in a school play?" She shook her head and I looked up to see Neal shaking his head. "It's the only thing she would wear to church," he said with this beleaguered look on his face that said: "No one ever told me this was part of the deal."

I love that unself-consciousness and confidence in kids. I yearn to get some of that back.

I think we all see in children reminders of pieces of ourselves that may have faded or gotten dull from lack of use, but that we are not or should not ever be entirely willing to surrender. Of course, that is easier said than done. As we grow up, we learn to shed our so-called childish ways.

We learn, for instance, that those who see and name the truth are not always popular, especially because naming all the truths means inevitably naming some that are not so pretty. And yet I think we all long for a little more honesty. In a world in which so much is cast in euphemism, it's nice to have a spade called a spade. It's wonderful when someone says aloud that the emperor has no clothes. A child reminds us of the beauty of such honesty, and its power to free us up from pretending, and invites us to reclaim a piece of that for ourselves.

As we grow older, it is easy also to forget to see the world with fresh eyes. Having seen it all before (or thinking that we have), we can grow callous to its beauty and its horror. The laughter or wonder of children is like a window back to that place of passionate engagement with life. A child's delight in snow reminds us that snow is more than "something to shovel," that it is also something out of which angels can be made. A child's innocent question about why that man is sleeping on the street wakes us up to a question we once also asked ourselves, but have forgotten to ask for a while.

Just the other day, while I was stopped at a red light, I saw a mother and her small son crossing the street in Summit. The mother was intent on getting across quickly; her son had another plan. From the moment he stepped off the curb, he started to do this little dance -- his head turning this way and that, his little feet prancing on tippy-toes, his mother oblivious to what was going on behind her. I was in hysterics and so were the other drivers, and finally when she turned back and saw him, so was she. Then, when the little boy stepped up onto the curb, the dance stopped as abruptly as it started. Clearly, for this little boy, crossing the street was cause for celebration.

So children remind us of the power of honesty, of the joy in being alive to life, and finally, children (especially young children) have the natural ability to be totally present in any given moment. Free from anything like a list of "shoulds" or concern about how they look or might sound, they can just "be." It is, I think, what the Buddhists ask us to cultivate, in part, when they talk of cultivating the "beginner's mind." And children seem to live this kind of presence out naturally.

Just this weekend, all dressed up for a night out, I stepped into an elevator. At some point, I realized I was feeling a kind of tug at my pants and looked down to see this little girl. Clearly she had seen my silk pants and wondered what they felt like, reached out to touch them, and, liking what she felt, stood there rubbing the fabric between her fingers. We were all in an elevator riding down a few floors lost in thought, she was living deeply in that moment, which just happened to involve my pants -- until her mother saw and whisked the girl's hand away.

It isn't just Buddhism that exhorts us to imitate the beginner, the child. In Christianity also there is often the exhortation to be like a child. In fact, in one scene, the disciples try to keep the children from Jesus, as if the children will be a nuisance to Jesus, and Jesus rebukes the disciples and reminds them: "Unless you become as little children, you shall not enter the kingdom of God." I read his words as a reminder for us all to recapture some of the simple trust and openness we had as children.

In some ways, the Stone Soup story is about just such simple trust, and what that trust makes possible. In the story, the man who comes to town tells a story about a magic stone, and by the very act of believing in such a story, the villagers make the story true. The story is a metaphor for a lot of things, not the least of which is that sometimes believing in the impossible makes it possible.

In the preface to his book *For Common Things*, Jedediah Purdy, a young author, makes an argument against our model of adulthood. "Irony," Purdy writes, "has become our marker of worldliness and maturity. The ironic individual practices a style of speech and behavior that avoids all appearance of naivete -- of naïve devotion, belief, or hope."

Our irony or our cynicism as adults, this author believes and I agree, does not speak of our maturity or sophistication, but of our fear. It speaks of our fear of betrayal, of disappointment or humiliation. It speaks of a fear that caring and believing and hoping too much in the world will open us up to pain as it doubtless has in the past. Purdy wants

us to see that "permitting ourselves to neglect [our naïve hopes, beliefs and devotions] is both reckless and impoverishing. Not just to ourselves, of course, but to the world."

Children are the world's persistent plea for the same kind of renewal of hope and faith. It is, after all, the innocence and the laughter of children that recalls us so quickly to the beauty and the possibilities of this world. It is our being the object of a child's simple trust that brings us back again and again to a willingness to trust others once again. It is their delight in stories and their willingness to believe that invites us to delight, and to believe again, too.

In the stories of Judaism, there is a theme of children bearing divine gifts, particularly wisdom. Young Joseph is given the gift of interpreting dreams and later leads a nation. Young Solomon asks for and receives the open heart that imparts wisdom and becomes the wisest man of his time. Through these stories, Jews were reminded that from the mouths of children and through their example, the adults might see evidence of some of the great religious truths. It is a lesson we, too, would be wise to keep in mind.

With their example, may we reclaim for ourselves that beginner's mind and child's heart, stay open to the beauty and the wonder and the possibility of life. May we be willing to look foolish in service of the divine naivete, hoping, believing, laughing, making Stone Soup, dancing in crosswalks, being fully ourselves even if it means wearing tutus to church because it feels like a tutu kind of Sunday. If nothing else, life will be a delight, and the company we keep here will never be dull. And at best, our imitating children will keep hope, innocence and boldness alive. So may it be.

Amen.