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LIFEWORLD EXISTENTIALS: GUIDES TO REFLECTION ON A CHILD'S SPIRITUALITY

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Abstract

Spirituality is a natural human predisposition. It is something that we are born with, and which continually seeks expression through life (O'Murchu, 1997). Whilst they may not possess the language to express it, research indicates that very young children too possess a spiritual dimension to their lives. Here in Australia, there has been virtually no published research in the area of spirituality and young children. How do we know that Australian children are spiritual? How might we gain insight into their spirituality?

This paper presents an example of hermeneutic phenomenological writing as a way of gaining insight into one young child's spirituality. It uses Van Manen's (1990) notion of *lifeworld existentials* as a possible guide to reflection on the text – the life expression – of this young child. The four lifeworld existentials are *lived body (corporeality)*, *lived time (temporality)*, *lived space (spatiality)* and *lived human relation (relationality)*. In using these as a means by which to interpret the life expression of this child, some insight into his spirituality might be gleaned.

Such reflections on the text – the life expression – of this child indicate some serious implications for the significant adults in this child's life who may nurture spirituality, especially parents and educators.

It was a clear and bright sunny afternoon on the first day of spring. I had driven down to our newly purchased block of land with my three year-old son, Thomas. Upon arrival, we got out of the car and headed slowly towards the rear fence on the block. The block slopes somewhat steeply from the road to the rear fence, and so our walk – hand-in-hand – was slow and deliberate. A sense of tranquillity filled the air. Some ducks were meandering their way across the other vacant

allotments and the sound of water flowing over the rocks of the cascades beyond the rear fence could be heard.

Upon reaching the rear fence, Thomas let go of my hand to explore the surroundings, while I stepped onto the lower rung of the fence in the hope of a glance of the cascades on the other side. Thomas was intently examining some small stones and rocks on the ground. When, after a few minutes, I

had had enough, I suggested to Thomas that we might head back up to the road at the top of the block.

"In one five minutes," he replied, using a familial phrase that had become somewhat of a hallmark in our house.

I looked a little more closely at what Thomas was doing. "They're just rocks," I thought to myself. We have more than enough of them in the garden at home. What could possibly be holding his fascination with these small pebbles? So I stood back and watched. His small hand caressed the stone he now held. His fingers examined the smoothness and the contours of what appeared to me as an ordinary and quite uninteresting object. The expression on his face was one of curiosity. In fact, his expression reminded me of a scientist I once saw on television who would often ask in moments of astonishment, "Why is it so?"

And then, he smiled. A look of sheer delight came across his face, as if a shiver had just gone down his spine. He held the rock tightly and asked, "Can I take this home, Daddy?"

"What for? It's just a rock," I replied a little bewildered. I could not see anything remotely intriguing about the object of Thomas' fascination.

"Yes," replied Thomas, "It's a rock!"

He looked as if he had stumbled upon a treasure. He held the rock tightly and almost secretively in his hand.

This event from the human life world, quite ordinary, and perhaps even mundane at a first glance, revealed something of Thomas' spirituality. Immediately evident was his sense of wonder and awe, evoked by the discovery of a small rock. I would like to suggest that Thomas' spirituality goes a little deeper than this. I would like to use the four lifeworld existentials of *lived body*, *lived time*, *lived space* and *lived human relation* (Van Manen, 1990) as lenses through which to reflect, analyse and interpret the text – the *life expression* (Gadamer, 1960, 1989) of Thomas. Such a hermeneutic phenomenological reflection may provide insight into this young child's spiritual life.

In using hermeneutic phenomenology, I am particularly conscious of Gadamer's (1960, 1989) contention that what takes place between the interpreter and the author of a text is a "fusion of horizons" (p. 306). Understanding occurs when the horizon that is projected by the life expression (the text), combines with the researcher's own comprehension and interpretive insight. Such a fusion of horizons can be likened to a conversation,

where "something is expressed that is not only mine or my author's, but common" (p. 388). A hermeneutic phenomenological reflection results in the production of something new, created out of the encounter of the interpreter and the life expression, or text, being interpreted. The meaning of a text is co-determined by "both the hermeneutic situation of the interpreter and the horizon that the text projects" (Sharkey, 2001, p. 25).

Describing Spirituality

I will begin by very briefly outlining what I understand by "spirituality". The majority of recent research suggests that spirituality is more primal than institutional religion, and is concerned with an individual's connectedness and relationality with self, others, the world and with the Transcendent (Bosacki, 2001; Elton-Chalcraft, 2002; Fisher, 1997; Harris & Moran, 1998; Hay & Nye, 1998; O'Murchu, 1997; Tacey, 2000, 2003). Spirituality is also understood to be holistic. It is a "dynamic wholeness of self in which the self is at one with itself and with the whole of creation" (Zohar & Marshall, 2000, p. 124). It requires us to regard others as whole beings and to respond to them with our own sense of wholeness (Priestly, 2002).

Rather than a spirituality that conjures images of otherworldliness and esotericism, I understand spirituality to be experienced and expressed in this world, in the ordinariness of people's lives. Being spiritual is not about being escapist from this world. It is about engaging in this world. While to some, the term might suggest internal and personal experience, Tacey (2002) has maintained that the young do not perceive it as private or excluded from reality. Rather it is:

... the basis for a new or renewed sense of human responsibility and social justice. Spirituality is worldly and pragmatic: it is advocated as a cure for racism, as an essential ingredient of the new ecological awareness, as an antidote to domestic violence and civil unrest, as a remedy for religious sectarianism and holy wars (p. 177).

Spirituality then, is an inherent and fundamental quality of what it means to be human. As Groome (1998) has stated, "spirituality is ontological – it belongs to every humankind's 'being'. It is more accurate to call ourselves spiritual beings who have a human life than human beings who have a spiritual life" (p. 332). It is an innate feature of human life and existence. It is a natural human predisposition, something that we are born with and that seeks expression in human living (Bosacki, 2001; Hay & Nye, 1998; O'Murchu, 1997; Ranson, 2002; Zohar & Marshall, 2000).

To some, this may seem a very humanistic view of spirituality. I do not believe this to be the case. A vital notion in any discussion on spirituality is the notion of mystery. Mystery involves that which transcends human understanding. Although it pertains to the inexplicable, mystery captures and engages the human imagination. Mystery permeates the relationality of spirituality in terms of self, others, the world, and God. But this mystery is both sensed and experienced in the ordinariness of life. It is, to use Tacey's (2003) notion, experiencing the sacred in the ordinary. While spirituality cannot be confined to human language and concepts, an encounter with it may prompt within us the recognition that we are dealing with mystery. In other words, it is possible to recognise "the mystery of the sacred in what is" (Champagne, 2001, p. 82).

The Lifeworld Existentials

Van Manen (1990) has described four lifeworld existentials that permeate the lived experiences of all human beings, regardless of their social, cultural or historical contexts: lived body, lived time, lived space and lived human relation. These existentials can be differentiated, but not separated. They can be studied in their differentiated aspects, while acknowledging that each existential calls forth the other aspects.

Lived body (corporeality) refers to the phenomenological fact that human beings are always bodily in the world. We experience and encounter things in a sensory manner – through sight, touch, hearing, smell, and taste. Van Manen (1990) also notes that, for example, when a person is the object of someone else's gaze, her or his modality of being may be enhanced. A person in love with another may "incarnate his or her erotic mode of being in a subtle glow or radiant face" (p. 104).

Lived time (temporality) is the time that seems to speed up in enjoyment, and slow down in periods of boredom or anxiousness. It is the human being's temporal way of being in the world. The "temporal dimensions of past, present, and future constitute the horizon of a person's temporal landscape" (p. 104). As a person's identity emerges and grows, s/he not only lives towards a future that is taking shape, but also reinterprets the past in light of who s/he has now become. The past changes because a person lives towards a future he or she can see beginning to take shape. Through an individual's hopes and dreams for the future, a perspective on the life that lies ahead is gained.

Lived space (spatiality) refers to the landscape in which people move and in which they consider themselves at home. Home is where we can "be

what we are" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 102). It is helpful to inquire into the nature of the lived space that may render a particular experience or phenomenon its quality of meaning. For example, the reading of a book may entail the seeking of a space that is conducive to reading, such as a quiet corner, a comfortable chair, or perhaps even at a table in a secluded coffee shop. In this particular example, "reading has its own modality of lived space and may be understood by exploring the various qualities and aspects of lived space" (p. 103).

Lived human relation (relationality) refers to the lived relationships people maintain with others in the interpersonal space they share. When people encounter one another, they do so in a corporeal way. They are able to develop a conversational relation with the other. In the larger existential sense, human beings have always searched in their experience of the other for a sense of life's meaning and purpose. Tacey (2003) has maintained that the self only comes to know itself in relationship with the other. Without a personified "absolute other" (p. 156) the self lacks a sense of identity, definition and form. Therefore, in a religious sense, many have searched in their experience of, and relation to the Transcendent for a sense of identity and life's meaning and purpose. Some would name the Transcendent, the ultimate ground of being, as God.

Lived Body

I will begin by reflecting on this text – the life expression – by using the lifeworld existential of *lived body*. Thomas encountered the small rock in a corporeal way, particularly through his senses of sight and touch. He perceived visually an object that caught his attention in some way, perhaps because of its unusual shape, or colour. He then experienced its texture and surface through touch. Through these senses, his curiosity was aroused, and his sense of wonder became evident. Perhaps he wondered how the texture of this rock could be so smooth, or so rough. Perhaps he wondered why he hadn't seen a rock like this in our garden at home. Perhaps he wondered how such a rock might have found its way to this place. His bodily encounter with the object of his interest aroused his curiosity, fascination and wonder. His wondering was leading him perhaps to a sense of the more cosmic dimensions of thought, such as the rock's connectedness with the earth, with the universe, and even the sacredness of this rock, although at this young age, Thomas would naturally have been incapable of articulating his thoughts in this way.

Hay and Nye (1998) have referred to this as mystery-sensing. Mystery-sensing involves the wonder and awe, the fascination and questioning

that is characteristic of children as they interact with the mystery of the universe. While not able to articulate his wonderings in the language of adults, Thomas was certainly engaged in mystery sensing. His intense examination of the rock - exploring its contours, its texture and its form - point to his engagement in this category of spiritual sensitivity.

In this experience of lived body can also be seen something of Thomas Merton's concept of intuitive, or ontological awareness (Del Prete, 2002). Merton maintained that an intuitive way of knowing is a natural predisposition of humankind, although it is one that is neglected in Western society. To intuit being is the ability to perceive with one's whole self in a direct, experiential and concrete way. In intuitive knowing, one enters the domain of holistic experience. This stands in contrast to the scholastic or Aristotelian philosophy of the West that has presumed a capacity for distance, that is, to separate one's self from that which is being considered or studied. The seeds of intuitive, or ontological knowing, can be seen in Thomas' experience with the rock. His bodily and tactile encounter with rock was an experience that engaged his whole self in a direct, experiential and concrete way. It was an experience that bridged the divide - the dualism - between the self and the object. For a short period of time, he and the rock became one as his bodily encounter led him perhaps to intuit the rock's connectedness with himself, the earth, the universe and even with the Transcendent (God). In this act of being, Merton might have said, Thomas had perhaps experienced something of the presence of God, for God had been present to Thomas in the very act of his own being.

Lived body, as a reflection on this experience from the human lifeworld, suggests that wonder, as a characteristic of spirituality can be encountered sensually in the ordinary experiences of touch, sight, taste, smell and hearing. Spirituality then, can be experienced bodily in the ordinariness of everyday life. The tactile experiences of this young child lead, or point to, wonderings about the larger notions of connectedness and sacredness. Spirituality, for Thomas at least, is encountered, expressed and is grounded in the ordinariness of everyday life experience. Rather than pertaining solely to the realm of otherworldliness, spirituality is experienced and expressed by engaging in this world.

It is perhaps, to use Tacey's (2003) notion, an example of the sacred being encountered in the ordinary. This is hardly surprising. In the Christian context, Jesus as presented in the Gospels continually used the ordinary - the mundane - to point towards the sacred, to the mystery of God.

For example, the birds of the air and the lilies of the fields that are looked after by God; the mustard seed, so tiny and insignificant, yet drawn upon to exemplify the Reign of God; a grain of wheat that, unless it falls upon the ground and dies, remains but a single grain of wheat with no life.

Lived Time

The lifeworld existential of *lived time* also provides a reflective insight into Thomas' spiritual dimension. In examining the small rock, Thomas was attending to the here-and-now of the experience in which he was engaged. Donaldson (1992) has referred to this immediacy of awareness as the *point mode*. As one of the most basic operations of the mind, point mode has prominence in children even after they have developed the capability of focusing on the past and future of experience. In their research, Hay and Nye (1998) have termed this *awareness-sensing*. It is an alertness to what might be experienced in moments of concentration or stillness. Both of these were present in Thomas' experience. In this concentration and stillness, in being so completely absorbed in the experience, Thomas was aware only of what he was doing. He had not noticed the time that had passed while engaged in his experience. This was evidenced when, in response to my request to leave, Thomas replied, "in one five minutes". Although Thomas was too young to fully comprehend the length of a passage of time, such as five minutes, his comment "in one five minutes" may point to the fact that time had somehow sped up in his enjoyment and fascination of this new experience. In other words, he experienced this passing of time subjectively, rather than objectively. In this subjective experience of time, Thomas experienced a sense of unity, oneness, or wholeness with this rock as an element of creation. He responded to the corporeal encounter with the rock in a temporal way with the whole of his being. In this way Thomas both experienced and expressed something of the holistic nature of his spirituality as a connectedness with nature that was literally timeless.

American scholar Trudelle Thomas (2001) has referred to the notion of here-and-now time as an immediate temporal horizon. A temporal horizon constitutes how far ahead in time a person thinks and plans. In stark contrast to adults, very young children have little or no concept of what it is to think or plan an hour ahead, a week ahead, or even a month ahead. The temporal horizon of adults, however, might typically include thinking weeks and even years ahead. For example a classroom teacher might plan her or his curriculum a week or so in advance, but with the five year school development plan in mind! The temporal horizon of a young child, however, is immediate. Yet it is

in this immediacy – this here-and-now – where a sense of the spiritual is attained. Young children, like Thomas, are continually engaged in the here-and-now, despite the efforts of their parents and other adults who continually encourage them to “hurry up ... we’re going to be late!” It would seem that as a child matures, and eventually becomes an adult, engagement in the immediate temporal horizon gives way to *line mode* (Donaldson, 1992), that is, the ability to focus on the past and future. For many adults, the ability to engage in the here-and-now of experience is repressed, or even replaced by a temporal horizon that focuses on the future. Could it be that adults, with their future oriented temporal horizons, might often be blind to the spiritual because they do not, and perhaps cannot engage in the here-and-now? What experiences, insights and epiphanies are we as adults oblivious to because we do not slow down and stop to notice the simple things – the dew on the grass, the movement of a tiny bug, the smoothness of a stone? Perhaps it is Thomas, who in this instance, teaches me to develop my awareness-sensing, my long since lost ability to stop and notice the most fascinating gifts this world has to offer. Perhaps children have much to teach us about adjusting our temporal horizons every now and then, so as to afford us the opportunity of wondering and of asking the ultimate questions of our humanness. Children have much to teach us about spirituality. Do we listen?

Lived time as a guide to reflection on this text of life then alludes to Thomas’ temporal way of being in the world, as a young child oriented to an open and beckoning future. It is possible to glimpse a sense of this lived time in his desire to become someone himself – to create personal meaning in life. In this seemingly ordinary life expression, Thomas makes sense of and creates meaning from an experience in the lifeworld. The sense of oneness and unity he experienced in attending to his here-and-now experience, and the meaning-making attached to it, will impact upon his future development, albeit in a small way. His encounter with the rock will form a part of his collective experience that he will draw on in his future meaning-making endeavours.

Lived Space

The lifeworld existential of *lived space* also sheds light upon this child’s spirituality. The space in which Thomas’ encounter with the rock took place was an open space. Although it was an area of subdivided land, no building works had commenced on any of the subdivisions, and there were at that time, no fences between the lots, except for the fence that separated the allotments from the running cascade. Also, this area of land was surrounded by bush land. Native eucalypts, the

occasional sound of singing birds, a small group of meandering ducks, and the gentle flow of the cascade comprised the land and sound-scape. Further, it was a clear and bright sunny afternoon on the first day of spring when this experience took place.

What does all of this mean? The space in which something of Thomas’ spirituality was expressed was not a space filled with the hustle and bustle of modern life (although I had attempted to introduce this Westernised mode of living into this serene landscape by suggesting that time stops for no one, and that it was time to leave). It was not a space filled with the noise of traffic or the smell or exhaust fumes. It was not a space filled with the endless chatter of commuters negotiating their own space on an already crowded pavement as they hurried to or from work. It was not a space filled with the invasive sight and sound of television commercials, or the trappings of cyber space. It might be possible to identify elements of a person’s spirituality in such settings, but this particular space was not those described above. It was a place of tranquillity. It was (almost) a natural setting. It was a place of serenity, since the covenants sought to retain the natural setting of the bush that surrounded it. More than this, it was also a place of promise of what was to come (the development of new homes).

This environment was to be our home. It was to become more than simply a place to live, but a home – a space in which to be welcomed, loved, accepted and in which to feel ‘at home’. It was (hopefully) to become a space in which Thomas would experience the support and openness of his family. It was to become a space that would provide a safe haven from which to explore the world. In this new environment, Thomas will experience new favourite play places, hiding places, secret places where he might collect his thoughts and wonderings. In this place, he will experience spaces for sharing, such as the kitchen and family room, and even forbidden places, such as under the house! This space – the family home – was to provide a dependable environment from which Thomas could explore his contingent world. As such, this space would be (and already is) a place in which his spiritual life will be nurtured and nourished.

Lived Relation to the Other

Finally, the father-child relationship in this particular instance was experienced as a special *lived relation to the other*. This relation was highly personal and charged with interpersonal significance. It is in this lived relation that Thomas experiences a fundamental sense of support and security that will ultimately allow him to become a

mature and independent person. It is with this lifeworld existential in mind that I would like to refer to the notions of *contingency* and *dependability* (Melchert & Proffitt, 1998).

In presenting these two notions, Melchert and Proffitt (1998) have maintained that the natural order of the created world is contingent because its creator (God in the Christian tradition) is dependable. Therefore, it is the balance of these two concepts – contingency and dependability – that make a sense of wonder possible. For Thomas, the whole world is contingent. Each new discovery he makes, although frequently viewed by adults as mundane and ordinary, is potentially a source of wonder and delight. His bodily senses of sight and touch had aroused his curiosity in the object of his attention – the rock – and as a result, his sense of wonder. But more than this, Thomas' fascination with this rock produced in me a long since repressed sense of wonder. His excitement and enthusiasm in this little rock caused it to become for both of us a source of wonder.

Contingency by itself is insufficient. Dependability is needed to balance contingency. Thomas' capacity to live in a contingent world, to experience this contingent moment, had developed as the result of his experience of the dependable care-taking of his mother and myself. Through the experience of dependable adult care-taking (lived relation to the other), Thomas has acquired a sense of basic trust, and he experiences his world as trustworthy. This notion of dependability is not fixed to a firmly rule-governed state. It is flexible rather than rigid. It is the notion of a trustworthy presence that will remain steadfast.

Upon further reflection, it could be said that in this relational sense, both Thomas and I offered each other a gift that was to be located at the very foundation of wondering. As a source of dependability in Thomas' life, I offered him the freedom to live in and explore a contingent world. In turn, Thomas' wondering at the seemingly most ordinary of things – a rock in this instance – awakened me to the awareness that I too live in a contingent world in which everything (including an inanimate object such as a rock) is a gift! These gifts, offered reciprocally, enhanced something of both of our spiritual lives. Neither gift is superior, but both are necessary. While I have the potential to nourish and nurture Thomas' spirituality, he in turn potentially nourishes and fosters my own spirituality.

Conclusion

There is much that can be gleaned by using the lifeworld existentials to reflect on this simple event, and so provide an insight into this child's

spirituality. What has been reflected upon here is by no means exhaustive. But there are some clear challenges emerging for us as adults. By not adjusting our own temporal horizons, at least occasionally, to include here-and-now time, it is possible that we are stifling our own openness to the spiritual moments that may be encountered in our day to day living. A reflection on this human life expression using the existential of lived time particularly serves as a reminder for us as adults, and particularly as educators, that as children's temporal horizons begin to broaden, we need to plan and provide opportunities for them to engage in the here-and-now of experience. It is in this here-and-now time that children's wonderings and connections with the larger existential issues and questions – Who am I? What is my purpose? Where is God? What happens when I die? – are pondered and nourished.

A reflection upon this text using the lifeworld existential of lived space suggests that if children's spirituality is to be nurtured, the environment in which such a nurturing is to take place must be carefully considered. Educators are well placed to both expose children to such environments, as well as to create them in the classroom and school settings. Many school communities have set aside and developed areas of the playground into nature gardens and quiet areas. In classrooms, an ambience can be created by quiet reflective music, or perhaps by the lighting of a candle. Even the placement of furniture can create a space that might be conducive to nurturing spirituality. As educators, we are skilled at creating environments conducive for learning. Do we create such environments for nurturing the spirit?

Important also, is the relationship of children to the significant others in their lives, be they parents, care-givers or educators. Spirituality is nurtured when children are provided with a dependable environment and presence from which to explore and experience their contingent world. Significant adults in a child's life can provide such a dependable presence for children, who in turn, may remind the adults themselves that they too live in a contingent world that abounds with wonder. That they too, potentially at least, can attune to the spiritual dimension of their own lives.

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