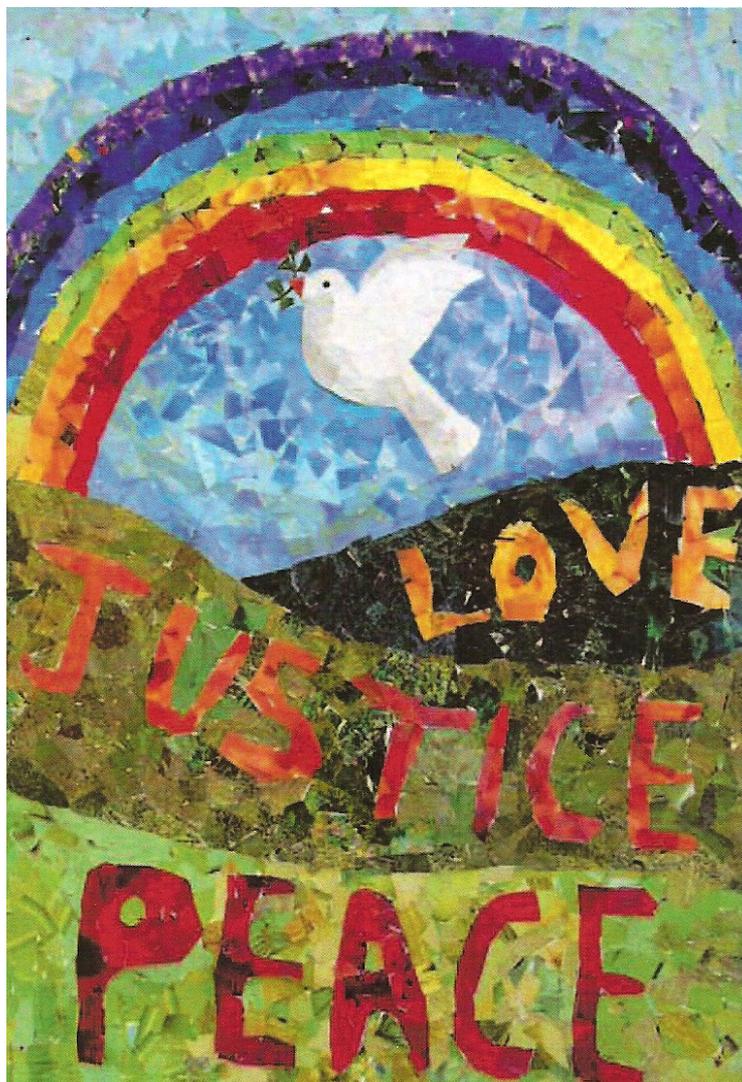


The future of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain

Spiritual equality in the experience of Quaker children

Margaret Crompton

with thanks to all the Friends who have contributed to this exploration



'Quaker Testimonies' Annie McColl & Children of Keighley Meeting

Friends Quarterly Essay Competition, November 2009

'I have learnt that my light is within'
(Fire and ice 2009 p5).

1. *Spiritual equality: 1.1 Spiritual equality; 1.2 Innocence and Light*

1.1 *Spiritual equality*

The future of the Religious Society of Friends depends on children. There can be no topic with wider relevance or more in need of a prophetic voice. Such a voice spoke in 2003 when Helen Bayes concluded from research into the attitudes of 17th and 18th Century Friends towards children that:

children are still not generally seen as spiritually equal, even among Quakers, because spiritual wisdom is seen as the product of 'years of seeking and experience' rather than as the divine seed of truth planted in us all. Thus we fail to live our faith to its full egalitarian conclusion. Can we begin to imagine how things might have developed for 18th Century Quakers if they had continued to trust their children's stubbornness and adventurousness rather than fearfully restrain them? (Bayes 2003 pp29-30).

The prophetic voice had spoken, too, in 1994 when Sue Collins (then Quaker Home Service Children's Secretary) identified a gap in Quaker ministry and issued a challenge:

In very many Meetings children and young people have become a minority group and their feeling of isolation, persecution and low worth is as real to them as it is to any other disadvantaged group.

Our testimony to equality is apparent in the work that is done in our name to counteract social injustice from slavery to homelessness, from prison reform to HIV/AIDS. Women in the Religious Society of Friends are in a 'more equal' position than in many other churches yet somehow the opportunity to put equality into practice under our own Meeting House roofs by addressing the needs of our children has been ignored. Our belief in equality does not quite extend to include those under 18. Our belief in the inner light seems only to 'switch on' with adulthood.

Can we see that of God in everyone? Is the inner light present in the earringed punk and the hyperactive toddler as well as the grey-haired lady? If we really hold to the spirit of Quakerism then we can only say yes (Collins 1994 p18).

In 2009, while Friends seek clarity about responses to the testimony about peace, or celebrate about celebration of single sex unions, there is little interest in recognising, respecting, and understanding the implications of children's spiritual equality.

Quakers sometimes seem indifferent to matters concerning children because none (either matters or children) are directly connected with their own Meetings. This ignores some essential considerations:

- ◇ Without children, the Religious Society of Friends will not survive;
- ◇ Meetings should be prepared to welcome children at any time, even if Children's Meeting cannot be arranged every week;
- ◇ Friends are involved with children in every aspect of life – family, neighbourhood community, professional responsibility, Meeting for Worship;

- ◇ Living according to Quaker testimonies implies concern for present and future children, throughout the world.

This essay explores spiritual equality in the contexts of children's spiritual experience, and Quaker faith and practice. Its purpose is to establish a basis for study, discussion and publications regarding a foundational Quaker model of spiritual equality. Focus is on inwardness rather than activity, based on the conviction that Friends need to be aware of and understand:

- ◇ Implications of spiritual equality;
- ◇ Their own attitudes towards children, within Quaker Meetings, families, wider communities, and professional encounters;
- ◇ Diverse perceptions of, approaches to and attitudes towards children's spiritual experience.

As in any other area of faith and practice, Friends learn about and respect one another's experience. Diversity may deliver strength and richness but can easily dissipate into discrepancies, activity without foundation, or sentimental tolerance.

The testimony about peace, for example, may deteriorate into superficial condemnation of war, instead of stimulating creation and maintenance of peace as an active manifestation of spiritual equality. Quakers have developed many ways of realising this testimony through study and training, activity and silence, essentially as expressions of faith and worship. This testimony can be honoured in different ways and from various perspectives through fundamental strength of tested belief and tradition.

The intention of the present analysis is not that Friends should all adhere to the same models of spiritual experience, equality and childhood, but as encouragement to consider, learn, formulate and practise. To take the matter seriously.

Taking children seriously

Being comfortable with silence helps me to still my mind in professional encounters, to focus on the other person, to listen deeply, to respond appropriately, to wait and not to rush into speech if no one else is talking. It also enables response if a child speaks directly about 'that of God' in whatever form or language. 'I like you,' said one girl, 'because you take me seriously' (Crompton 2007b p90).

Headings

1. *Spiritual equality: (1.1 Spiritual equality, 1.2 Innocence and Light)*
2. *Faith and practice: (2.1 Representing children, 2.2 Advices and queries, 2.3 Respecting children, 2.4 Elders and overseers, 2.5 Meeting children)*
3. *Images of childhood: (3.1 Images of sainthood, 3.2 Fearful children)*
4. *Approaches to children's spiritual experience: (4.1 Progress or regression, 4.2 Ages and stages, 4.3 Original visions, 4.4 Religion)*
5. *The holistic vision: (5.1 Holism)*
6. *Meeting God*

References

Vignettes

Taking children seriously
Cara and the Space Ark
Lucy and the hand of Jesus
Bible stories and rough play
Tom and the periscope
Patience and the Indians
Will and the Prophet
Dan and the devil
Alethea and war
Greta and the children's Friend
Coral and the fear of life
Sue and the children's crusade
Ram and Ganesha
Hobbits and Roman gods
Playing peace

Most vignettes use pseudonyms. Wherever possible permission for inclusion has been obtained

Interspersed quotations from *Fire and ice* convey reflections by young people (12-15) on the Quaker Pilgrimage, 2009.

Link: Quaker respect for spiritual equality and belief in innate Light is a foundational principle. *Cara and the Space Ark* illustrates how three people gathered, each one contributing and learning, through the ancient image and medium of light, the rainbow.

1.2 Innocence and Light

The spiritual equality to which Helen Bayes and Sue Collins refer is the 'stable core' of the Quaker way. As Patricia Williams summarises: 'The foundational Quaker doctrine is that all people have a measure of the divine Light within them. This doctrine springs from the Quaker experience of personal transformation combined with humility and attention to others. Humility says, if I possess the Light, then so must everyone.' Thus, 'everyone deserves equal respect,' which leads to the testimonies, including equality (Williams 2007 p61).

She elaborates: 'The great theological principle of the early Quakers is the universality of the Light. Sex does not exclude. Poverty or wealth, sickness or health, Behaviour... Beliefs do not exclude. Everyone, without exception, possesses the divine Light within' (Williams p138). On this principle, Helen Bayes bases her regretful conclusion that 'children are not generally seen as spiritually equal' and her challenge to 21st Century Quakers to learn from 17th Century fore-Friends and trust the children (Bayes p30). Poverty, wealth, sickness, health, gender, race, religion, educationnone of these excludes. Yet, it appears that age, or rather youth, can *now* 'exclude.'

Quakers rejected the doctrine of original sin, described by Robert Barclay as 'an unscriptural barbarism' (Barclay 1676). Children were regarded as innocent from birth until consciously committing a wrong act. As the Light was within every person from birth, children 'had a direct relationship with God that must not be constrained' and 'were expected to take responsibility for their own faithfulness' (Bayes pp5, 6). William Smith explained young children's duties to God:

...you must mind the Light with which Christ enlightens you, which Light is in your Consciences, and with its light it will let you see when you think any bad thought or speak any bad words, or when you do anything amiss...and if you love the Light, the Light will guide you, and lead you in the way of Peace (Smith 1663 pp92-3; in Bayes p6).

Friends recognised that children needed love, nurture and guidance in order to live as George Fox taught, waiting 'in humility and trust until God's truth was inwardly received' so that 'Life lived in this way would be transformed into a life so innocent that the urge to sin had already died.....The adult-child relationship became an eternal triangle with God giving wisdom and guidance to the child as well as each parent' (Bayes pp4-5,7). Innocence, the predisposition to live according to the guidance of Conscience and to do no harm, is innate but is also challenged by 'the urge to sin,' in particular 'worldliness.' Nurturing innocence requires the care of other Friends, within both the family and the Meeting.

Cara and the Space Ark

Cara, Helen (her mother) and Mary were sharing Children's Meeting. Mary prepared the room with paper, modelling clay, an enormous box of coloured pencils and a brightly illustrated book, *Noah and the Space Ark* (Cecil and Clark 1997). The room looked welcoming.

During the first 15 minutes, which they shared with other Friends in the large Meeting Room, Mary was led to narrate the Genesis story of Noah and referred to the rainbow she had seen that morning. She concluded: 'Now Cara, Helen and I are going to talk about rainbows.'

They enjoyed reading the book and talking about the story and pictures. Then Cara made a plasticine rainbow, creating her own sequence of colours and remembering a song about rainbows.

At the beginning of their Meeting, Cara and Helen had asked about Greg, a Friend who was ill. Cara was concerned that he might die and thought of a relation who had suffered from the same illness. She made a glowing picture of a rainbow to send to Greg.

When they returned to the large room, Cara placed her plasticine rainbow on the central table, and took the picture round the circle for Friends to sign – she chose a different coloured pencil for each Friend.

Mary felt that the whole Meeting had been integrated, even though Friends had spent some time physically apart.

Link: Some contemporary Quaker attitudes are indicated in such Friends House publications as *Quaker Faith and Practice*. Several of the few extracts concerning children in the Book of Discipline demonstrate failure in respect but *Lucy and the hand of Jesus* captures a moment of ministry. Although Elders and Overseers are charged with responsibility for nurturing children's spiritual well-being; ambiguous advice raises questions about intention and respect. *Bible stories and rough play* illustrates how young children take responsibility for themselves and others, while adults can cause distress, even harm, by insensitivity. Questions about why children spend time in Meeting Houses lead to *Tom and the periscope*, identifying differing perceptions and responses.

2. Faith and practice: 2.1 Representing children; 2.2 Advices and queries; 2.3 Respecting children; 2.4 Elders and overseers; 2.5 Meeting children

2.1 Representing children

Although numerous activities and initiatives are available (often through Quaker Life), it is not always clear how these relate to sustained study or a foundational Quaker model. Moreover, Friends House publications rarely refer *to* children, and hardly ever include material *by* them, while some suggest that focus regarding children and young people is activity based. Yet Quakers are widely associated with children professionally, particularly in education, health and social care and welfare. At least two are professors of religious studies, and several research, teach about and write on related subjects (for example, Collins, Copley, Crompton, Nesbitt, Stone).

- ◇ *A Framework for Action* (2009) makes no mention of children.
- ◇ The Quaker Week edition of *the Friend* includes only one contribution from children, *Quaker Testimonies*, a vivid collage created by Keighley Meeting (McColl p8). Otherwise, this important edition refers to children only in an article on school based social justice (Hopkins) and a photograph of Naomi Blake's sculpture honouring Bertha Bracey (in Friends House) (p10).
- ◇ Only two *Swarthmore Lectures* relate directly to children (Reader 1979; Rutter 1983).
- ◇ Britain Yearly Meeting has published no relevant substantial texts.



However, the cover of *Quaker News* Summer 2009 shows a young child leaning against, and holding hands with, an adult who sits peacefully, as if in Meeting for Worship. Another photograph shows Jewish Israeli and Palestinian Moslem children playing together (Taylor p11). The brightly illustrated lead article 'Fire and ice,' comprises reflections from young people (12 –15) on the Quaker Pilgrimage to Swarthmoor Hall, some of which are quoted in the present essay, linking 17th Century with 21st Century faith and practice.

'We held a short meeting for worship, which was a beautiful moment. Then we legged it down the hill ...it was great to feel the wind in your face, dodging down rocky paths, slipping and sliding down the slopes'
(Fire and ice p5)

2.2 Advices and queries

In the later 20th and early 21st centuries, new editions of the *Book of Discipline* have given some attention to the care and nurture of children and young people. In the most recent edition of *Quaker Faith and Practice* (1995/2009), Advice 19 exhorts Friends to:

Rejoice in the presence of children and young people in your meeting and recognise the gifts they bring....Seek for them as for yourself a full development of God's gifts and the abundant life Jesus tells us can be ours. How do you share your deepest beliefs with them, while leaving them free to develop as the spirit of God

may lead them? Do you invite them to share their insights with you? Are you ready both to learn from them and to accept your responsibilities towards them?

The language indicates that children and young people are *them*, while *you* are adult Friends. *You* are reading *Quaker Faith and Practice* which was compiled for *you*, the reader. It was apparently compiled *by* adults, too, for there are no contributions by children.

Although adults are exhorted to learn from them and to beware of imposing beliefs, there is little recognition of confidence and respect for children as full members of the Meeting in silent presence and spoken ministry. The enquiry about allowing 'freedom to develop as the spirit of God may lead them' may echo William Smith's explanation to young children of their duties to God (1660) [1.2]. Although the Advice recognises children's direct relationship with God, does it express the belief that the Light is inherent from birth, not 'the product of education and maturity?' (Bayes p6)?

Lucy and the hand of Jesus

When Lucy and Joe came into the large Meeting Room for the last 15 minutes, they were excited after their time with Dick and Anthea but settled quietly next to Dick. Lucy became fascinated by the picture of *The Presence In The Midst* above the bench.

The 'Presence' is the transparent, shining figure of Jesus floating a little above the floor of Jordans Meeting House, surrounded by silent grey-clad Quakers. His hands are raised in blessing. The depiction suggests the presence of the Spirit of Jesus within every individual Friend and, thus, of the gathered Meeting.

Lucy, who usually finds it difficult to sit still, copied the position of Jesus' hands and seemed thoughtful. Her involvement with the picture silently ministered to the Meeting drawing attention to a message which, for Friends who were over-familiar with the image, had become invisible.



(Penrose 1916)

2.3 Respecting children

In the 1960 edition of *Christian Faith and Practice in the Experience of the Society of Friends*, three entries are indexed under 'Children and the meeting.' An extract from W. Russell Brain's 1944 Swarthmore Lecture asks, 'What is the effect of the group upon the children?' and continues:

Some children may be able to share in meeting for worship at a fairly early age, but others require to be ministered to, and does it not often happen that the hungry look up and are not fed? Even our young people are apt to feel that we do not sufficiently give them a reason for the faith that is in us.

Friends are exhorted to develop ‘diversity of method and a more experimental spirit....to meet the spiritual needs of the young’ (Brain 1944, pp55-6; in *CFP* 1960 pg 334).

The 1995/2009 edition of *Quaker Faith and Practice* offers three entries indexed as ‘Children: spiritual experience.’ It is unclear how these differ from other extracts headed, for example, ‘Children in meeting,’ since all experience is spiritual (*QFP* 2:74 – 2:76). Several extracts demonstrate failure to respect children’s spiritual equality.

- ◇ George Gorman notes: ‘Children have an uncanny knack of knowing the difference between living ministry, as opposed to words that are injected into the meeting for their good’ (Gorman 1973 p141; in *QFP* 2:74).

‘Uncanny’ implies unnatural, mysterious, even sinister, whereas distinguishing between ‘living ministry’ and moral homily is an innocent, natural skill. The comment suggests just the superior, weightily adult attitude which the writer was deploring.

- ◇ Ann Hosking expressed surprise when a Meeting comprising about 24 children (some very young) not only ‘went on for over a quarter of an hour and was very deep’ but continued in silence after the elders (themselves children) shook hands. Five minutes later, she began a conversation but ‘no one responded to my cheerful comments. I was the one who had lost touch. When the children did speak, it was slowly, thoughtfully, with long spaces between.’ At this point, ‘I realised that children do minister.’ After 40 minutes, the Meeting ended only when someone entered the room.

Why did that person fail to show the courtesy of waiting to be certain that the silent meeting had ended? (Hosking 1983-5 pp226-7; in *QFP* 2.76).

I found the epilogues very powerful, especially after the fire. The ministry of others of my age was fabulous’
(Fire and ice p5).

2.4 Elders and overseers

Advice to elders and overseers in this 2009 edition also suggests questions about respect for spiritual equality. Elders are exhorted:

together with overseers, to care for the children and young people associated with our meetings; to listen to what they have to say and to enable them to take as full as part as possible in our life and worship; to ensure there are regular opportunities for their spiritual nurture (*QFP* 12.12i).

Overseers are required:

together with elders, to exercise care over the children and young people associated with the meeting, whether in membership or not, and to see that suitable activities are arranged; to encourage them, where appropriate, to take part in gatherings arranged for young people at local or national level, consulting with parents when appropriate (*QFP* 12.13f).

The language is ambivalent, unclear, laden with value judgements and implies failure even to consider spiritual equality. Thorough consideration of Section 12 suggests a number of questions:

- ◇ Advice that children should be ‘enabled’ to take only ‘*as full a part as possible* in our life and worship’ suggests hidden constraints, or that they aren’t regarded as full contributors, only guests at Meeting, visitors to ‘*our* life and worship;’
- ◇ Does ‘suitable’ suggest that overseers might arrange ‘unsuitable’ activities?
- ◇ Doesn’t really listening include attending to the communication of silence – as with the children in Anne Hosking’s Meeting [2.3]?
- ◇ How are these Friends ‘to care for...’ or ‘to exercise care...’?
- ◇ Spiritual nurture can’t be confined to ‘regular opportunities,’ for it should be constant, continuous, integral to all interactions: ‘Let your lives speak;’
- ◇ Why do elders need to be instructed ‘to listen to what they have to say?’ shouldn’t any Friend discerned as qualified to fulfil the responsibilities of eldership listen to what *everyone* has to say?
- ◇ Why is it relevant whether children are ‘in membership or not’?

Such questions give Friends much to think about. Yet in 1994, Quaker Home Service had published *Opening Minds: Some thoughts on work with children and young people in the Religious Society of Friends*, in which Sue Collins commented on the volume of *Church Government* soon to be superseded by *Quaker Faith and Practice* 1995, ‘in the section on eldership and oversight children are given separate mention; nevertheless the responsibility for *all* the community is laid on the elders and overseers’ (Collins 1994 p18).

Bible stories and rough play

When Anna couldn’t go to church, her grandmother, Meta suggested holding Sunday School in the bedroom, which Anna had beautifully tidied. Meta asked what usually happened at Sunday School; Anna explained, ‘Bible stories and rough play.’ Meta wasn’t sure that she was up to rough play (especially in a small room) but thought she could manage Bible stories.

Meta asked Anna to take charge of their Sunday school, as it was her room. Anna carefully selected equipment, which she set out on the floor. Then she asked Meta to read the next Bible story in the book they’d been looking at earlier. As this was the Annunciation, it led to an interesting discussion about God and fathers. When Anna declared that God was her father, Meta asked, ‘What about Carl?’ Anna explained briskly that Carl was her father on Earth, God was her father in heaven, and pointed to the ceiling. This disposed of Bible stories for the morning.

Anna then engaged Meta in dressing paper dolls, reminding her that they had done this before. Meta became anxious that this was play, not ‘Sunday School,’ forgetting both that Anna was in charge and that what mattered was communication, not ‘virtuous activity.’ In fact, this play led to thoughtful discussion about friendship, behaviour and presents which satisfied even Meta’s need for pedagogy.

Meta learned another, harder lesson. When Anna’s brother came into the room, Meta at once suggested an activity in which he could join. Anna, who had been concentrated and calm for over an hour, became distressed and rushed away.

To her shame, only later did Meta realise that she had betrayed the little girl. Anna had had fulfilled every responsibility for the Sunday School, including preparing equipment, organising activities, engaging in discussion, welcoming and looking after Meta. Yet Meta had destroyed the atmosphere and Anna’s commitment by failing to pay proper respect and attention.

2.5 Meeting children

Friends are not always clear about why children come to the Meeting House on Sunday mornings. When adults are not sure of their own motives for Meeting, children are likely to be confused and disengaged.

The elders of the Meeting described by Anne Hosking [2.3] were children – but the meeting was specifically *for* children. If children are to retain interest, it is both practical and wise for them to be integrated within the Meeting community, and fully involved in both age-related and all-age Meetings, including planning and leading.

How do children perceive the reasons for attendance at Meeting, and whether these differ from the intentions and expectations of adult Friends? Is the purpose of attending ‘Children’s Meeting:’

- ◇ Being kept safe, quiet, occupied
- ◇ Being with adult Quakers
- ◇ Bible stories
- ◇ Creative activity
- ◇ Discovering silence
- ◇ Exploring Quaker history, identity, testimonies, traditions, ‘the Quaker way’
- ◇ Green Party training
- ◇ Learning about Christianity
- ◇ Learning about religions
- ◇ Meeting for worship
- ◇ Peace Movement practice
- ◇ Spiritual formation
- ◇ Sunday school
- ◇ Or???????

There are often discrepancies between adults’ intentions and the effects of practice. What, for example, are the implications if children end their Meeting 15 minutes early and are taken from their own room, where they may have been deeply involved, to join the adults, and to be still and silent? They may then be asked to share (‘report on’) what they have been doing. However, children are not encouraged to interview adults on how their time has been spent. Are they consulted about whether they gain from joining the adults, or would prefer to invite adults to join them, including engaging in whatever the children have been doing (which may include being silent and still)?

Pastoral Care of Children and Young People (Committee on Eldership and Oversight 2001) asks useful questions.

A Quaker Life booklet, *Building our Children’s Meeting for Worship*, offers ideas about structure and content (Penny 2009), but refers to ‘spiritual growth and development,’ although this concept is dubious [4.1, 4.2 below].

Essentially, there is one Meeting for Worship, in however many rooms this takes place. The gathered Meeting is neither divided by walls nor distinguished by such attributes as age.

Tom and the periscope

Lucy (7), Jo (6) and Tom (4) were playing with assorted kits and figures. Joan was uneasy because she thought activity should be more focused. However she gradually realised that the children were becoming cooperative and thoughtful, deeply engaged in creating a world. When Tom found a straw which Joan dismissed as ‘useless,’ he said that it was ‘useful for a submarine.’ Lucy left the hospital she was building and made a boat for Tom’s straw periscope.

Lucy asked when they could play. Puzzled, Joan said she thought they were already playing. Later, she realised that ‘play’ meant running around and making a noise – from which the children courteously refrained.

Realising that it was nearly time to join the adults, Joan tried to prepare the children. Lucy firmly stated that she hated the silence. Tom said that he wasn’t good at silence; he was good at talking. As Joan disliked the disruption to both children and adults by interrupting both Meetings after 45 minutes, she was ambivalent but said that their parents would want the children to join them. She negotiated five minutes during which time the reluctant children sat remarkably quietly with her, counting the seconds.

Link: Individual perceptions and responses are central. However, attitudes towards, and understanding of, children change constantly and radically, influenced by such elements as: legal requirements and provisions, religious traditions, educational and psychological theories, media images. All exert powerful impact on, and influence expectations of, children’s behaviour and adults’ responsibilities.

Two contrasting images of childhood illustrate diversity of perception and influence. *Images of sainthood* evokes Quaker children of two centuries. *Patience and the Indians* and *Willa and the prophet* illustrate discrepancy between children’s responses and adults’ assumptions.

The early 21st Century might by later commentators be characterised as the ‘Age of Fearful Children,’ for children are both feared and encouraged to fear. Policies relating to children are beset with anomalies and assumptions about which Friends are not always conscious or clear. *Dan and the devil* and *Alethea and war* are reminders that spiritual experience can be fearful.

3. *Images of childhood: 3.1 Images of sainthood; 3.2 Fearful children*

3.1 *Images of sainthood*

Language about, and understanding of, childhood changes constantly. A great deal can be learnt about attitudes toward children from literature. Most 17th Century books intended for children were didactic. James Janeway's stories about 'saintly children who died in a rapture of prayer' exhorted readers: 'If you love your parents, if you love your souls, if you would escape hellfire, and if you would go to Heaven when you die, do you go and do as these good children' (Janeway 1671; in Townsend 1974 p20).

In 1917, L.V. Hodgkin's *A Book of Quaker Saints* 'for children of all ages' distinguished between stories suitable for 'older' and 'younger' readers, explaining that accounts of:

the persecutions of the Early Friends are too harrowing for younger children. Even a very much softened and milder version was met with the repeated request: 'Do, please, skip this part and make it come happy quickly.' I have preferred, therefore, to write for older boys and girls who will wish for a true account of suffering bravely borne; though without undue insistence on the physical side. For to tell the stories of those lives without the terrible, glorious account of the cruel beatings, imprisonments, and even martyrdoms in which they ended here, is not truly to tell them at all. The tragic darkness in the picture is necessary to enhance its high lights.

My youngest critic observes that 'it does not matter so much what happens to grown-up people, because I can always skip that bit; but if anything bad is going to happen to children, you had better leave it out of your book altogether.' I have therefore obediently omitted the actual sufferings of children as far as possible, except in one or two stories where they are an essential part of the narrative (Hodgkin 1917 p7).

Nonetheless, 'The children of Reading Meeting,' deemed 'suitable for younger children,' includes descriptions of assault:

The constables seized the boys, turned them out into the road, and there punched and beat them with their own staffs and the Justice's loaded stick until they were black in the face. The girls were driven in a frightened bunch down the lane. Only Hester sat on in her place, still and unmoved, sheltering the Twins in her bosom and holding her hands over their eyes. Up to her came the angry Justice in a fine rage, until it seemed as if the perfumed wig must almost touch her smooth plaits of hair. Then, at last, Hester moved, but not in time to prevent the Justice seizing her by the shoulder and flinging her down the road after the others. Her frightened charges, torn from her arms, still clung to her skirts, while the full-grown men strode along after them, threatening to duck them all in the pond if they made the slightest resistance, and did not at once disperse to their homes (Hodgkin pp224-5).

The violence is shocking to an adult, let alone a child. This paragraph compacts physical, emotional and spiritual assault, including the almost sexual image of the disgusting wig in proximity to virginal plaits, and the appalling image of 'full-grown men' terrorising babies. As the author understates, 'It certainly was neither a comfortable thing nor a pleasant thing to be a Quaker child in those stormy days.' However peaceful the eventual outcome, 'the tragic darkness' surely remained with not only the 17th Century children of Reading but also the 20th Century readers.

The author's message is ambiguous. She intends, it seems, to teach Quaker children about their traditions and forebears, at once exposing her readers to, and protecting them from, the truth. 'Exposure' suggests that the experiences of which she writes are far in the past; Quaker children need no longer expect to be assaulted and tested in such ways. Yet she was writing in 1917 when Quaker children met emotional and spiritual challenges as their parents might be endangered for witnessing to their faith. They would have been aware of wartime horror, of violence, injury, loss, death. They would also have known the Christian stories of torture and assassination. 'Protection' suggests that the author does not consider her contemporary children to be brave enough to encounter the narrated experiences of their 17th Century co-religionists.

Yet no narrator, whether writer, parent or teacher, can predict the impact of a story.

Patience and the Indians

Patience recalled her reaction to 'Fierce feathers,' Viola Hodgkin's account of the visit by American Indians to a Meeting House in Saratoga in 1775. The unexpected guests watched as Friends continued in worship, and were then invited to take refreshment in a Friend's home, before leaving peacefully in friendship (Hodgkin 1917 pp 347-55).

'When I was about 13, the children acted it as a presentation to the Meeting and it really became part of my thinking about "how you behaved in Meeting." At that time I took it along with everything else I took, and if I did feel any negative response, I hid that from myself, as I did a lot of other things.'

Many years after later, on a retreat, Patience discovered how angry she had been and remained, 'a suppressed anger with the unmistakable feel of "old hurt".' She realised that 'one form of spiritual abuse is to impose on children...by custom and teaching what some exceptional individuals have been able to rise to by grace. At the time I was not consciously deeply distressed. I just accepted it.'

The intended message had been about peace, steadfastness and God's protection. The 20th Century child heard about threat and un-protecting parents who could risk their children's safety for the sake of principle.



(Penrose 1918)

Will and the Prophet

Will remembered how the story of the infant Samuel being called by God caused him to feel sad and lacking that he was not similarly and divinely called (1 Samuel 3:1-10).

*‘I learnt about the history that everyone assumes you already know
- and that other people affect you on so many levels’
(Fire and ice p5).*

3.3 *Fearful children*

Since 1933, the *doli incapax* provision in English and Scottish law has deemed children under a certain age to be incapable of distinguishing between right and wrong. This age has for years been 10, despite efforts to raise it. Until recently, children between 10 and 14 were protected from prosecution, unless they were aware that what they were doing was seriously wrong. However, this concession has been discontinued by the British Government (Broadbridge 2009). Thus 10 year olds can be found guilty of criminal offences. 17th Century Friends might have recognised this in the teaching that children should attend to the Light, to determine when they did ‘anything amiss,’ together with the assumption of innate innocence.

In *Declining Childhood* (2199) by X. Rowntree (a future social historian) the early 21st Century may be described as the decade of *Fearful Children*:

.....Far from being *doli incapax*, even young children were regarded as ‘fearful’ in the sense of arousing fear. Image and expectations were confused - idolising and indifferent, placatory and punitive, sentimental and censorious.

Provided that they had enough physical strength, they were capable of killing. Older children carried and used knives and guns, took drugs and stole. Even little girls wore sexually provocative garments and cosmetics. Both boys and girls were abusive and violent, verbally and physically, with no respect for or courtesy to anyone but their own gangs. They were frightening, described as monsters, evil, alien, different from ‘normal’ people.

Children could destroy innocent adults by alleging that they had made inappropriate contact, whether sexual or physical. This could lead to punishment from which, however blameless, the adults might never be released.

And yet, other adults could abuse, assault, enslave and oppress children without let, hindrance or retribution.

Police checks were intended to protect children from convicted offenders but the effect was often to deter adults from seeking any contact, for example, helping with clubs and activities, including those associated with religious organisations.

Unplanned contact became potentially dangerous and raised anxiety. Although surrounded with protection, children were regarded as vulnerable and at risk.

Society simultaneously desired and hated children, vacillating between bribery and punishment. Some were smothered under mountains of material possessions (but never seemed satisfied) while others starved (and could never be satisfied). ‘Wealthy’ children were provided with electronic carers/teachers which enabled contact with anyone, anywhere on Earth – and inhibited communication with anyone, anywhere. Indeed, whether or not they had sufficient physical food, almost all children were starved spiritually..... (Rowntree 2199).

Far from assault by paedophiles, the greatest risk may be the loss of relaxed contact between people, whatever their ages, and of freedom to experience abundance of life, to take risks. The greatest loss is of communication, spontaneity and trust. It is crucial that Quakers should discern as a major and urgent concern the prevention of this fantasy historian’s assessment from becoming fact

Dan and the devil

When a Quaker Meeting was unable to gain access to its usual room in a residential establishment for boys who had committed serious offences, Friends sat in the garden with a staff member and a resident, Dan. He asked whether the Quakers believed in God and then said, seriously and convincingly, that he believed in the devil.

Some young people who have committed offences express the sense that they are controlled by 'evil' and have no power to stop themselves.

The 11 year old boys who killed James Bulger in 1993 were described as 'evil, brutal and cunning.'

Alethea and war

On their usual Saturday walk around the village, Alethea and her parents passed a playing field on which activities to commemorate the beginning of the Second World War were in progress. Alethea asked what war was. Her parents explained. Later, she refused to pass the field again, even though the activities were over.

Link: In order to develop a foundation Quaker model of spiritual equality, it is essential for Friends who are in any way concerned with children to be aware of the wider context of approaches and attitudes. *Greta and the children's Friend* evokes anxiety caused by misunderstood messages. 'Ages and stages' approaches can pose problems. *Coral and the fear of life* illustrates dangers of relating experience to expectations of chronological age, and of failing to attend to children. Other approaches focus on experience and vision. *Sue and the children's crusade* depicts discrepancy between a child's perception and adults' intentions, and the enduring strength of an original vision. Although 'spiritual' does not always imply belief in a deity, spiritual experience is often inseparable from religious belief. Brief references to the work of Quaker scholar Eleanor Nesbitt, and a Methodist minister, lead to an evocation of Hindu children, *Ram and Ganesha*..

4. *Approaches to children's spiritual experience: 4.1 Progress or regression?, 4.2 Ages and stages, 4.3 Original visions, 4.4 Religion*

4.1 *Progress or regression?*

Since the 1980s, this field has expanded from occasional specialist texts to a major focus of study and publication, representing wide diversity of focus, theoretical base and theological conviction. Observations, interpretations and formulations are diverse, represented by many different concepts. In his 1944 *Swarthmore Lecture*, W. Russell Brain referred to 'spiritual needs.' Other writers focus on spiritual - *development*, - *foundation*, - *vitality*, - *well-being*. 'Spiritual equality' has received little attention. All such formulations are beset with ambiguities.

As 17th Century Friends communicated about the Spirit through such images as Light and Seed, so 21st Century Quakers express beliefs through a diversity of image and metaphor. However, few may be aware of either the range of contemporary formulations, or those to which their own approaches relate.

Models represented in texts and teaching are sometimes contradictory. For example, a Quaker Life leaflet advising Friends involved with children's Meetings recommends three texts by non-Quakers, of which two are described as 'excellent.' However, this endorsement is not supported by any review, analysis, description or explanation of how they relate to Quaker faith and practice. Moreover, two of these texts can be subjected to criticism, to which no reference is made in the leaflet, and one of these is long out of print. The other, 'Spiritual development,' has been made freely available to Friends, although the concept of 'development' is dubious, the original text is quite old, and the author is not a Quaker (Quaker Life 2008; Hay with Nye 1998/2006; Bradford 1995; Lee 2007).

The first consideration is for individual Friends to identify their responses to the 17th Century belief in innate Light, echoed by Wordsworth's image:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home:
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!

He reflects on chronological and spiritual change;

Shades of the prison-house begin to close
Upon the growing Boy (Wordsworth 1807).

Jungian psychoanalyst James Hillman described the child's soul as: 'A being close to angels, it arrives knowing everything essential...its collective unconscious is replete with primordial awareness' (Hillman 1988 pxiii).

In contrast, Paul, the Christian proselytiser, suggests a spiritual journey in the opposite direction: 'When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man, I gave up childish ways' (1 Corinthians 13:11-12).

These apparently antithetical models underlie many approaches to children's spiritual experience. Karen Armstrong (a former Roman Catholic nun) offers a possible resolution of this dilemma. Through study of the history of religion, together with her own experience, she considered that:

human beings are spiritual animals....[who] started to worship gods as soon as they became recognisably human; they created religions at the same time as they created works of art. This was not simply because they wanted to propitiate powerful forces but these early faiths expressed the wonder and mystery that seems always to have been an essential component of the human experience of this beautiful yet terrifying world (Armstrong 1999 p3).

Recalling her own early beliefs, she explained:

My ideas about God were formed in childhood and did not keep abreast of my growing knowledge in other disciplines. I had revised simplistic childhood views of Father Christmas; I had come to a more mature understanding of the complexities of the human predicament than had been possible in the kindergarten. Yet my early, confused ideas about God had not been modified or developed. People without my peculiarly religious background may also find that their notion of God was formed in infancy. Since those days, we have put away childish things and have discarded the God of our first years (Armstrong p3).

This analysis combines the image of innate Light, of that of God in everyone from the beginning of life, with the need for guidance and nurture of the whole person.

Greta and the children's Friend

Greta loved Sunday school. She felt safe, and protected by Jesus, as a hymn assured her :
 'There's a Friend for little children
 Above the bright blue sky...'*
 But as she grew older, she began to fear that Jesus would cease to be her Friend when
 she was no longer a little child (*Midlane 1859).

4.2 Ages and stages

'Pauline' progression is elaborated in developmental, ages and stages models. James Fowler (USA) presented 'Faith Development Theory,' adapted from Piagetian cognitive development and Freudian psychoanalyst Erik Erikson's 'Eight ages of man' (Fowler, 1981; Erikson, 1950/65). Of Fowler's 'Stages of Faith,' only three relate to childhood, and the last is regarded as attainable only by such exceptional people as Gandhi and Martin Luther King. Although this model has sometimes been seen as relevant to religious education, it is usually criticised as of limited practical relevance.

A simpler, four stage model had been introduced in 1980 by John Westerhoff III (a North American Episcopalian pastor). Sue Collins found that he approached 'the development of faith in a way which [was] easy to understand and to relate to our own experience.' Noting that 'Our early learning in all fields is by formation or experience,' she summarised his first stage, *experienced faith*. 'A baby learns to talk by listening and by experimenting with sounds which are interpreted and reflected by its parents. A young child learns what faith *is* by being with faithful adults. Experienced faith does not end with childhood.' The second stage, *affiliative faith*, is associated with children between five

and 11: ‘when an individual feels part of the whole and wishes to express that belonging by sharing in all the activities that the faith community engages in.’ The third stage with immediate relevance to children is questioning, which ‘coincides with the rebelliousness and self-searching’ of adolescence (Collins 1994 pp30, 31).

The Steiner-Waldorf approach to moral education regards the *Infant phase* (0-7) as concerned with the body and primary physical development. Major emphasis is placed on the example and guidance of teachers, when much learning is through instinctive imitation. The *Childhood phase* (7-14) defines learning as taking place within a feeling mode and concerned with the soul, emphasising the contribution of the example and guidance of class teachers.

Such models may alert Friends to the importance of attending to every aspect of children’s lives when considering spiritual well-being. However, the concept of *development* in this context is dubious because, as Rebecca Nye notes, this would imply ‘that early forms of the phenomenon will be inferior, impoverished and less valuable, it seems an inappropriate model to capture the richness demonstrated by children’s spirituality in its own right,’ and ‘it is impossible to establish a consensus about the nature of mature spirituality’ (Nye 1996 2:12-14).

Knowledge and understanding of cognitive development can be useful in communicating with children, and enabling and encouraging expression of ideas and experience. Thus engagement with, for example Bible stories and concepts of such beings as angels and deities, may conform with age related interpretations of myth, legend, fairy story and concepts of such beings as fairies and Father Christmas. While cognitive and physical milestones can be identified and anticipated, and children’s conceptualisation, language and motor skills interpreted and assessed, ‘spiritual development’ is not measurable.

Coral and the fear of life

21 year old Coral wrote: ‘The years from 8 to 11 I remember as pretty agonising. I was afraid of death and of life for that matter, and subject to severe panic attacks which nobody seemed to notice. I couldn’t explain them at that age of course, but looking back I don’t really think they were caused by any mental instability but simply by my having reached a religious crisis at a ridiculously early age and being quite unable to cope with it’
(in Robinson 1977 p111; quoted in Crompton 1998 pp61-2).

4.3 Original visions

Rebecca Nye was co-author with David Hay of *The Spirit of the Child*, based on a study of children in two primary schools and concluding that, ‘the primary task of education is the nurture of the spirit of the child’ (Hay with Nye 1998 p175). The authors (a Roman Catholic biologist and lecturer in Education, and an Anglican psychologist) began from the Wordsworthian premise that, ‘The adult world into which our children are inducted is more often than not destructive to their spirituality...Children emerge from infancy with a simplicity that is richly open to experience, only to close off their awareness as they become street-wise’ (pp 21-22). The essential task was, ‘not to detect the presence of spirituality, but to understand how it becomes suppressed or repressed during the process of growing up’ (Hay 1995 p1271).

While their approach echoes 17th Century Friends, it derives largely from philosopher and psychologist William James (USA) whose *The Varieties of Religious Experience* remains influential 100 years after publication in 1902. Two years earlier, he had sent a postcard

to thank J. Henry Bartlett of Philadelphia for *Quaker Strongholds* by Caroline Stephen (1891):

It is the strong book of a strong mind and soul – ... I have been much interested in some of its chapters. I already have browsed in the earlier Quaker literature, and Fox's movement has always seemed to me the purest and freest-of-falsities of any of the successful religious movements of which I have any knowledge. It was in fact a movement for veracity and away from lies almost altogether. Thanks again! (James 1900).

One consequence of James' ideas was the establishment of the Alistair Hardy Research Centre in Oxford by a professor of Zoology who held that the survival of 'religious experience' through the process of natural selection demonstrated its value to the individual. David Hay, sometime Director of the Centre, interpreted 'religious experience' as 'spiritual awareness' (Hay with Nye pp9ff). His predecessor, Edward Robinson, compiled two books of narratives about memories of spiritual experience in childhood of which over 5,000 had been collected during the 1970s. One title, *The Original Vision*, is a quotation from poet Edwin Muir:

...a child has also a picture of human existence peculiar to himself, which he probably never remembers after he has lost it: the original vision of the world. I think of this picture or vision as that of a state in which the earth, the houses on the earth, and the life of every human being are related to the sky overarching them; as if the sky fitted the earth and the earth the sky (Muir 1964 p33; quoted in Hay with Nye 1998 p45).

The sequel, *Living the Questions*, explores ideas about growth (Robinson 1977, 1978).

The best known pioneer in studying children's spiritual experience is Robert Coles (a North American child psychoanalyst) whose *The Spiritual Life of Children* (1990/1992) includes both verbal accounts and pictures from children of numerous nationalities and religious backgrounds.

Sue and the children's crusade

When I was 7 or 8 years old we went along to an event to be held at a chapel just along our road. I think it was probably some sort of children's crusade, but it was advertised to the local children as somewhere fun to go in the holidays. Within a few minutes of arriving we were standing in a semi-circle, being taught what I would now describe as a happy clappy hymn by the enthusiastic leaders. My reaction to this event – a mixture of the music, the place, the people – was to be violently sick. Of course the leaders thought I was ill and rushed me out of the room to clean me up – but as soon as they had done so I fled because I knew I was not ill but reacting to something I found totally alien.

The 'religious' experience must have been so different from what I had grown used to that I literally could not stomach it....Although in my teens I was for a while drawn to the glamour and theatricality of a high church with its 'bells and smells,' this was only a phase so that when I first experienced Quaker Meeting I was drawn to the simplicity which I had loved as a child (Collins 2009).

4.4 Religion

Spiritual experience is for many people associated with religious belief. A paper on 'Religious nurture and young people's spirituality' by Eleanor Nesbitt (Swarthmore Lecturer and Professor of Religions and Education) includes references to interviews with Alice (*aka* Morning Star). At 14 Alice 'was concerned with the relationship between being Quaker and Christian.' She 'voiced her pacifism which she found at odds with peers' and teachers' assumptions during the Gulf War,' and 'was moving from a God to a Goddess framework' (Nesbitt 2001 p137).

Much may be learned from faith traditions. Interviews at 12 and 21 with Mina (a Sai Baba Hindu) conveyed 'her delight in life, her strong social concerns and her intellectual engagement with religious teaching.' Mina described her enjoyment of Bal Vikas classes where she learnt about ' "Religions, God and other Spiritual things, we sing songs have games learn new prayers in different languages. It's real good fun".' At 21 she was changing from her parental religion to distinguishing between 'spiritual' and 'religious.' ' "I myself don't practise a religion – but I believe in spirituality: I believe in God...I don't necessarily believe in individual religions".' The author concludes that 'Ethnographically based reflection on spirituality must... be grounded in an understanding of "faiths," and of the experience of those individuals who are variously associated with them, as fluid, internally complex and changing' (Nesbitt 2001 pp133, 134, 140).

When compiling social work training materials, I learnt from adherents of seven faith traditions how the concept of children's spiritual experience was inseparable from religious beliefs and observances (Crompton 1996).

Texts linking spiritual well-being with children's care/welfare, sometimes reflect the religious foundation of the caring organisation. In 1963, for example, the National Children's Homes (NCH) Convocation Lecture *The Religious Needs of Children in Care* identified 'children's deepest personal needs' as 'Security, significance, standards, and a society in which all these things can happen to him,' which were, 'ultimately most fully satisfied in the Christian religion.' This was not the controversial statement it might now seem to be and was, in any case, written for a Methodist foundation [now Action for Children]. Even if the children cared for by NCH were not all Christian, the speaker could be confident that there would be no objection to 'Christian values.' He concluded with the hope that: 'all who commit themselves unreservedly to the needs of children in care shall know how to be in true conversation or encounter with each other. Beyond words or beneath words, they must be able to discover how deep is the experience which unites them' (Hamilton 1963 pp 15, 68).

Ram and Ganesha

When a Quaker group attending a course on *Interfaith Pilgrims* (Nesbitt) visited a Hindu temple, the priest, spoke about a boy who asked, 'Have you seen Vishnu?' (a deity). He had answered, 'Yes, for I have seen you.'

The priest's son, Ram, visited the shrine of his favourite deity, Ganesha, every day after school to tell him about the events of the day.

Link: Fundamental to, and enduring in, Quaker belief is the integrity of spirit and body – indivisible, as described in the concept of holism. *Hobbits and Roman gods* evokes one Quaker's memories of 'natural childhood spirituality.'

5 *The holistic vision*

In 1995, the Reverend John Bradford (then Chaplain Missioner for The Children's Society) wrote *Caring for the Whole Child: a holistic approach to spirituality*. Although this Anglican-based model is rather complex, it was a pioneering endeavour to apply holism to children's spiritual experience (Bradford 1995).

Holism is based on a Greek word implying *entire, all, total*, illustrated by Aristotle's assertion that 'the whole is other than the sum of its parts.' Separately, flour, yeast and water are discrete entities; combined, they form bread which at once partakes of the nature of all three ingredients and is different from any one of them.

Sylvia, attending Meeting for the first time, ministered about the shadow of a tree she had been watching. She saw how the shadow combined sunlight and tree and floor and became something other than the sum of its parts. Added to that sum were her eyes (physical observation), intellect (analysis), spirit (transformation) and voice (communication). Through her mediation the shadow became an epiphany.

Karen Armstrong described:

...the holistic pagan vision...when the divine was not essentially distinct from either nature or humanity, it could be experienced without a great fanfare. The world was full of gods, who could be perceived unexpectedly at any time, around any corner or in the person of a passing stranger (Armstrong 1999 p23).

A related interpretation of holism underlies my work in developing attention to children's spiritual well-being in everyday practice in care and welfare services. Work with Barnardo's, Northern Ireland included an innovative conference and a substantial publication comprising original writing by Barnardo's staff (Crompton 2001, 2007a, Crompton and Jackson 2004).

My application of the holistic approach recognises *spirit* as integral and essential, an everpresent presence in everyday life. Spirit is contained *within* the body, not constrained *by* it. 'Spiritual experience' is inseparable from cognitive, emotional and physical; experience in any one area of life affects the whole. This can be imaged in three integrated areas:

Intra-personal - inner experience (which may include belief in a deity);
Inter-personal - relationships based on attention to and care for other people,
Supra-personal - involvement with community, concern about eg. peace-making, poverty, environment.

Many experiences and attributes are integral to all three areas, for example:

awareness	faith	respect
awe	hope	seeking meaning
belief in a deity	imagination	transcendence
compassion	inspiration	trust
courage	joy	truth
creativity	love	vision
delight	mystery	wisdom
discovery	numinous	wonder
endurance	quest	worship

Spiritual experience is not always delightful and may include, for example:

abuse	fear	oppression
despair	isolation	pain
doubt	loss	terror

However, preoccupation with words and definitions can detract from recognising the essentially indefinable nature of 'spirit' – associated with the invisible (*breath*) and intangible (*inspire*). Such concentration can inhibit communication, just as concentration on activities can prevent true meeting - the meeting of spirit with spirit, of whole person with whole person.

In the 21st Century, study of children's spiritual experience has become an extensive academic occupation. For example, the Children and WorldViews Project publishes the *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* and organises international conferences, while in 2006, Sage, the long established publisher of respected academic texts, produced a 543 page tome, *The Handbook of Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence* (Roehlkepartain et al 2006).

Yet the message from all those pages might be summarised by a modest writer who in 1946 introduced *The Spirit of the Child*, a study of her own two children, thus:

This book has arisen out of a quest for spiritual truth and an effort to reach fundamental values and to understand the life beneath the form...The basis of spiritual life...is the awareness of forces and relationships transcending the material and the holding of value according to this awareness... there is no hard and fast line between physical, mental and spiritual. That which is spiritual is manifested through that which is physical (Thorburn 1946 pp7-8).

She concluded:

We study the spiritual life of small children only to find that we should study his whole life in its completeness, and that he eludes our grasp because he *is* spirit, 'God is a spirit, and they who worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth,' in that which is manifesting itself and in that which is manifest (Thorburn p168).

The tongues of flame at Pentecost, the celebration of the Spirit, can be seen as symbolising the spark which ignites communication, connection and creation. Since God *is* spirit, why does it seem necessary to define 'spirit/ual'? And if the implications of 'physical,' 'cognitive' and 'emotional' are clear, why is 'spirit' so perplexing?

The holistic approach assumes, in line with 17th Century Quakers, that the capacity for spiritual experience is inherent from birth (perhaps before). The divine is universally both immanent and encompassing. Divinity and humanity are one. That is the meaning of incarnation.

Hobbits and Roman gods

I can make no clear distinction between childhood spirituality and childhood psychological health: both require a child to be free to explore, imagine and create, while knowing they are loved and secure. I wonder if a natural childhood spirituality isn't essentially rather elemental and pagan. Dark and light, heat and cold, the familiar and the strange, security and danger, food, touch, coming home. The Roman gods of hearth and home, with minor deities for every grove and well, are naturally understood by children, I think. Tolkein obviously captured this simple childhood spiritual sense; and I think Susan Cooper's *The Dark is Rising* series also does it well. As a child I could easily relate to this kind of Manichean good vs. evil theology and I rather liked Dennis Wheatley (of all people).

Later, like lots of sixth-form historians, I was engrossed by Keith Thomas' *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, and there was something nostalgic about its appeal: a nostalgia, I now suppose, for the semi-imaginary spiritual life of childhood as opposed to the religion of school chapel and, worse, the evangelical 'Christian fellowship' (John Parkin 2009).

'It has made me aware that you live like a Quaker not just talk about it'
(Fire and ice p5).

Link: The holistic approach links the 17th Century image of Light with 21st Century consciousness. The essay concludes with ideas for developing a foundational Quaker model of spiritual equality, including study of, attention to, and increased respect for children's spiritual experience, illustrated by *Playing peace* and a final quotation from **Fire and ice**.

6 Meeting God

Karen Armstrong refers to pre-Christian religious faith as holistic. Adam and Eve meet God walking in the garden in the cool of the day (Genesis 3:8). Gradually, the divine becomes increasingly separated from humanity, until the deity can communicate only through incarnation (Armstrong 1999 p23).

17th Century Quakers re-integrated spirit and flesh, envisioned through such metaphors as Light. Many 21st Century Quakers adopt an holistic approach. Vision and epiphany are omnipresent. Answering that of God in everyone implies spiritual equality, irrespective of age

This essay is offered as a contribution to the development of study, discussion and publications regarding a foundational Quaker model of spiritual equality, based on the conviction that Friends need to be aware of and understand:

- ◇ Implications of spiritual equality;
- ◇ Their own attitudes towards children, within the Quaker Meeting, the family, and the wider community;
- ◇ Diverse perceptions of, approaches to and attitudes towards children's spiritual experience.

Future developments might include:

Publications

- ◇ Booklet series on children's spiritual experience and Quaker faith and practice (edited by Friend/s experienced in and knowledgeable about this field);
- ◇ *Friends Quarterly* edition dedicated to children's spiritual experience (possibly guest edited);
- ◇ *Quaker Faith and Practice*: contributions by children, including art work; consultation with children about content;
- ◇ Quaker Life to be aware of and well grounded in contemporary scholarship and publications (Quaker and other) about children and spiritual experience;
- ◇ Substantial publication on children's spiritual experience; (for example, edited collection of commissioned papers);
- ◇ *Swarthmore Lecture* focusing on spiritual equality and children;
- ◇ *The Friend* and other centrally produced communications to consider involving children, both as contributors and subjects.

Study

- ◇ Research into and analysis of images and expectations of, and attitudes towards children (including legal, social, spiritual), leading to development of Concern, (consideration in Meetings, presentation to Meeting for Sufferings).
- ◇ Travelling Woodbrooke course on spiritual well-being in the context of care/welfare/education/health;
- ◇ Woodbrooke course based on topics introduced in this essay.

The most effective way to learn about children's spiritual experience is to pay attention – listening to words and silence, respecting what is expressed and being aware that much may *not* be expressed. Nurturing children's spiritual well-being and vitality is a matter not of teaching or doing or a special Sunday morning hour but of everyminute everyday communication.

For the Religious Society of Friends in Britain to survive, it is essential to:

Trust and respect children
 Recognise and encourage their ability to initiate, understand and lead
 Learn from their ministry
 Attend to their wisdom.

Theirs is the prophetic voice.

Playing peace

Before they reluctantly spent five minutes in the adult Meeting, Lucy, Jo, Tom and Joan had expressed in music the world they had been creating. At the piano, Lucy and Jo improvised one at each end of the keyboard while Tom responded with movement.

The Hospital, for example, stimulated quiet repeated notes on the piano while Lucy spontaneously sang sad words. Joan asked if none of the people got well: Lucy replied that that was another song, which she then sang. Joan negotiated that, after the five minutes with the adults, they could create one more song, *The Farm*.

When the adults came into the room for shared lunch, the children returned to the piano and this time Lucy's songs had more words. This was the rehearsal and, after they had eaten and run around, the children wanted to perform their music for the adults. Not all the adults appreciated what had been, and was, happening, but some stayed to listen. Now Lucy's singing was clearer, more confident, with more words and extended melodies. Joan decided that they all deserved to be let off the rein and encouraged them to play *The City* as loudly as possible.

Then, thinking that a Quaker Meeting should end more peacefully, she asked the children to 'play the Meeting.' Lucy and Jo played sweetly, with Joan improvising a gentle melody on the central black notes. Lucy asked her not to do that since, she said, they couldn't do the same. But a moment later, she too was playing a peaceful swaying tune. Then she sang. Her mother and Joan looked at each other, deeply moved, as she created a song about the Meeting, about God and Jesus – a perfect ministry.

What else is spiritual equality?

'I learnt that, essentially, we all have part of God within us and that it's important to keep in touch with that part of you and that no matter what life throws at me, as long as I stay in touch with my inner life I will be alright'

(Fire and ice p5)

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