

The Spiritual as Critical and Political

Are we willing to link the spiritual and the political in our work with children and youth, viewing both as necessary aspects of life, vital for us and for them? To develop the spiritual as critical in their lives for their wellbeing (and ultimately ours) requires a spiritual way that includes a critical sensibility. A spiritual practice that does not encourage an attitude of critique and doubt in children and youth may be more dangerous than no spiritual concern at all. It is in encouraging them to be sensitive to and critical of their own contexts and the messages of culture with their own spiritual insights that the spiritual and political combine and become life giving.

The spiritual needs to be grounded in lived practice. My academic context is the professional field of child and youth care, known as social pedagogy in some parts of the world. It is a discipline rooted in practice and a valuable site for exploring the spiritual. Practice is something that is lived, that weaves together theory and research into action (praxis). It is in practice that experience comes to shape one's approach to the spiritual as it offers a place to live and work with children and youth.¹

What is “spiritual”?

In my view, the spiritual is neither an ethereal abstraction nor (only) mystical or mysterious experience — although it may include and be shaped by such experiences — rather, the spiritual is the lived expression of what we value, what matters to us, what we are devoted to, and what we care for. It is what we humans (with all of us in play: body, mind, spirit, souls) do in practice. How we live our lives is our actual spiritual life. To demonstrate this, I use an exercise that asks participants to make a list of:

- what they think about most
- where they spend most of their time

¹ I prefer to speak of the spiritual and avoid the term “spirituality” as its meanings are so varied, even slippery. In developmental theory, a significant piece of child and youth care training, physical, emotional, social, cognitive and spiritual development are studied. Physicality, emotionality, sociality do not appear in the normal discourse – perhaps spirituality should not either.

- what receives the largest share of their resources, especially financial resources, and
- what receives the largest portion of their energies and attention.

I suggest to them that their list outlines their spiritual lives as practiced. The reactions to this activity are complex. Many people conceive of the spiritual as abstract, private and hidden. It may be discomfoting to see it as lived through practice. It is not our claims and beliefs that are spiritual but rather our way of living that enacts the actual beliefs we have in life. Our practice may or may not embody what we claim we believe.

As well, it is important to acknowledge that in spiritual life, relationships matter, as in how we treat others, all others: the living, great and small as well as all things material: objects, nature, possessions. Because of the relational quality of the spiritual we need to recognize that our words express us individually (or personally) and collectively (or communally). Our ways of living and speaking show the shape, tone, attitude, leaning, and qualities of our character. The spiritual is seen in how we live. I think if we examine any religious tradition this claim will be echoed in one form or another.

A third critical aspect of the spiritual is that it is not individual. We share the spiritual. It is not possible to have a spiritual life or to develop spiritually in isolation. The spiritual may be personal but it is also communal. Communities have an ethos, values and prejudices that are being sustained, expressed and practiced by those who live in them. We live and work in communities that have a shared spiritual way. We inhabit and express personally the community that we live in. The places we inhabit speak through us (Serres, 1991). Our children are enculturated to their home environment from family, to neighbourhood, to town or city, to region and country. The languages we speak, the accents we use and the ideas of home that we espouse are shaped by a communal spirit. We become part of that common spiritual ground. This claim is also rooted in spiritual traditions.

We are shaped by context. We live in and through context (Derrida, 1988). We articulate what we care about and what we believe – both shaped by wherever home is and how it speaks through us.

Implications

First, the spiritual is always evident if we choose to notice it. It is continually being expressed in actions, words and deeds by each of us, and by our collective practices through communal

choices, politics, economy and public life. Our communal life expresses a spiritual leaning and that is an impetus for my concern that it be critical. Although the spiritual is simultaneously evident in all the personal and cultural practices we live, at the same time it is mysterious, and out of sight.

Second, the spiritual is a form of common ground, that is, it is like the air we breathe all around us, in every one of us, shared but unseen and frequently taken for granted. I note that many older languages have a single word that represents spirit and breath, and sometimes wind, for example: *Ruah* in Hebrew, *Pneuma* in Greek with the same idea lingering in English words (from Latin *spiritus*) like *respiration*, *inspiration*. The spiritual is an inescapable and necessary part of every day life. It is critical (vital for life) but too often uncritical as practiced, remaining obscure and ignored.

If one assumes, as I do, that the spiritual is always in play or being practiced whether acknowledged or not, the question that arises is not: is there anything spiritual going on, but rather, what is the quality of the spiritual that is going on right now (Warren, 1982)? The spiritual is persistently present but requires attention to be noticed. A critical sensibility is necessary to attune to what the nature of the spiritual is in any moment. Equally significant is the consideration of what are the implications for life together in the spiritual being practiced.

I wish to interrogate the spiritual as lived because the lived spiritual shapes the lives of the young. For me the following questions form the basis of a critical spiritual sensibility:

Is this way of being spiritual, life giving?

Is it destructive?

Is it compassionate?

Does it offer hope? Possibility?

Does it cheapen? Enhance?

Who does it serve?

What ends are we moving towards?

These last two questions are significant if we are to have and promote an understanding of the spiritual as addressing life as it is being lived and if we are to offer the possibility of addressing responsibility in communal and public life.

What is “political”?

I assume children are spiritual. Are children political? It depends on what we think the political is. If we understand the political to be electoral politics and the business of parties, fundraising, lobbying and so on then we will probably conclude that children are limited politically. A cultural challenge in contemporary societies is the myth that electoral politics are the political sphere or constitute the basis of democracy.

All of our relations have political implications. There are a number of phrases in popular culture that tell us this but we do not often pay attention to the complexity and difficulties inherent for children. We talk about family politics and office politics. Children live every day in families and work sites – schools are work sites for adults. Families and schools are riddled with politics. Children and youth learn how to read and respond to adult exchanges/relationships early in life. They are doing relational politics. We laugh at how they know who to ask for certain favours or who to approach for permission for a particular activity. This is nascent political sensibility.

Children in schools know how to read who is for and who against certain things, who is a source of potential “conflict”, who is approachable and who must be avoided. This sensitivity informs children in relationships with adults but is also an important concern in the schoolyard and other play spaces. It is necessary political awareness. Children have a basic understanding of power as practiced. A visit to the principal or head master’s office is not the same as a chat with a teacher, counsellor, or the school nurse. They know how authority works, and what hierarchies are. They also know how power is distributed in the playground, who to avoid, where to gather.

In a school where bullying had become a problem parents and school staff were developing elaborate plans to intervene but on consulting children learned that bullying usually occurred in one or two places at particular times and the children recommended that an adult presence in those spaces at those times would be all that was necessary (Alderson, 2000). It worked. The children had analyzed the situation astutely.

I do not see a divide between the personal and communal. I accept the feminist adage that the personal is political, that is, that what we do at the personal level, what is done to us at the personal level has implications, is informed by and shapes how we live together and thus shapes the collective political in our lives. The spiritual is also personal and therefore, political. The spiritual and political domains are never distinct in the practice of living. Our

communal, political, social life has spiritual qualities as much as we have in our personal lives. We are nested in and shaped by those qualities as well. This is, or should be, of great concern to those who work with children and youth because they are being formed by the socio-political-spiritual day by day. Public life is not neutral space and cannot be cut off from the spiritual.

I was alarmed a few years ago on hearing that a wealthy businessman in our region who manages a corporate conglomerate and makes public claims to his Christianity, when pressed by a reporter about how his distribution company can distribute pornographic magazines based on his beliefs, he answered: “I never let my religion interfere with my business. Business is business.” His lived spiritual is quite different from his espoused one. Although he claims a religion as his spiritual home, he makes it clear that he keeps his religion out of his work life. What then is his lived spiritual practice? What end does his work serve?

Does he have a sense of how things are connected? How can he ignore responsibility for actions that have consequences outside of his personal sphere? Personal and business choices have impact on other people’s lives. Business is not outside spiritual life. We are relational beings (Gergen, 2009) and our world, our ideas, our practices, personal and public, private and corporate are shaped in and by what goes on between us and around us. The spiritual is part of all of those relationships and the exchanges in them. A spiritual orientation that ignores the connections and implications of lived practice lacks a critical facet that can face how the political and spiritual are entangled.

Children and the political

I am interested in the political in children’s lives and how the political contexts of children’s lives have an impact on their spiritual lives. Because both the political and spiritual are personal and communal, both have roles in shaping the lives of children and youth. To not attend to a child/youth’s political sensibility and expression puts their spiritual formation and development at risk.

One of the successes of the Harry Potter series is its capacity to locate children in the complex politics of the world and to show them struggling with personal and communal forces all at once. The series presents children as grappling with life issues and does so

without a sentimentality that only sees them as innocents. Children appreciate that someone writes frankly about how complex and potentially dangerous life is and recognizes that they already live in contexts full of difficulty and danger. They long to be active agents, to have some opportunity to push back. The Potter stories echo a tradition of stories in which little ones are engaged politically and do shape social outcomes.

A religious example

Religious traditions do have stories in which the spiritual and political are linked in the lives of the young, recognizing that they have a role to play in cultural critique. The story from the Jewish tradition about a boy, Samuel who is acting as a temple servant to the ruling high priest, Eli demonstrates this awareness. Eli is old and blind. His sons are running the operation and exploiting ordinary people. Samuel's duties include sleeping in the sanctuary to make sure that a ritual oil lamp does not run out of oil by morning. Three times in one night a voice calls him. Three times he goes to Eli saying: "Here I am, you called me." The third time Eli advises him to answer: "Speak, Holy One your servant is listening."

Samuel does so and has a visionary experience in which he is told that Eli and his family will be destroyed because they have violated their office and responsibilities. In the morning, Samuel does not say anything until Eli warns him to tell what he was told on pain of receiving the same or worse outcome. Samuel passes on his condemnation and in due course, Eli and his family are deposed as leaders. Samuel grows in reputation and stature and takes over their role.

The spiritual and political are entwined in this story. When you read around this text for more context it is fairly obvious that a boy serving in that setting and watching Eli's sons force temple servants into prostitution and stealing food intended for worship purposes, among other violations, that he would have some sense of how bad it was. He would know the complaints and see or hear about the abuse of power. Children do see. They do know. It is astonishing that Eli has the wisdom to acknowledge Samuel's visionary experience and accept his political and spiritual condemnation without question. The boy's vision is problematic: it is not good news for the current political and religious leadership. It is very bad news: critical in every sense. Imagine what must it have been like to be a boy delivering condemnation to his mentor and employer.

Imagine today if we had, in schools and religious communities, leaders who would allow the critical insights of children to shape the future. In child and youth care we strive to practice youth engagement, offering the young ways to express concerns, to act in their own best interest, and be part of decision-making processes that shape their lives.

Children and “real” politics

It is important to recognize that many children in the world do not live in safe personal or communal environments. It may be that their families are marginalized as they live with inordinate stressors from poverty, violence, ill health, or horrid living conditions. They may be living, as so many children are, in conflict zones or disaster areas. Their will to survive attunes them to political life as a necessary part of staying alive. It is the same survival skill that is displayed in schoolyard awareness. They have to assess every day what is safe, where is safe and who is safe. They learn “to read the signs” – the personal is political for them every day.

Children and youth can be caught up in horrific circumstances. Think of children kidnapped and forced to become child soldiers or bush brides and what they are forced to do in order to survive. The complexity of demobilizing child soldiers or reintroducing bush brides into their home communities is a difficult moral, ethical, political and spiritual conundrum. How can we assess the moral responsibility of a man who was kidnapped at the age of ten and forced to kill and maim, who became an effective leader by the age of fifteen or sixteen and is now in his early twenties and wishes to stop after a decade of war? What criteria can be used to judge his life? His choices? How has context distorted his life? Or how can a young woman who has been a bush bride, forced to sexually service soldiers be returned to a community that sees her as unacceptable because of her actions when her choices were so limited and she survived?

Nigel Thomas’s (2009) volume explores the lives of children who participate in public life because of their circumstances and learn to negotiate and navigate in complex ways in order to communicate their needs. Children who are unattached refugees fleeing without family members, face difficulties in having their stories accepted as credible. If they tell the truth about their political involvements at a young age they are accused of being older and rejected. If they try to hide their political actions they can be rejected for misrepresentation.

If their families engage in political protest and they join in can we believe that they understand what they are doing if they are young? When does a child know what is an astute political choice?

Many children and youth who live in complex mixed cultural and political environments have to make dangerous and difficult choices in their own best interests as they see them. They cannot afford the luxury of naiveté – adults may fantasize them as naïve. Gretchen Wolff-Pritchard (1992) argued that children have real difficulties in their lives and in the context of religious education need to be offered stories and teachings that will equip them to meet real difficulty. This is true for all education. Children need to be equipped to meet the difficulties they are already living in. Children and youth do not need a sentimental, comfortable spiritual pabulum.

They live in a world that is eager to exploit them, to exclude their voices from public life and to hone them as passive victims so they will consume, not care and do as they are told. Their challenges are not later in life but part of their present existence. Their lives are at stake now – in many cases literally and in all cases spiritually. I recall a poster I saw on the wall at the Cuernavaca Center for Intercultural Dialogue on Development, in Mexico: “There is a link between the meaningless deaths on one continent and the meaningless lives on another”. I do not want my children or those I work with to live meaningless lives and have no idea of how their way of living has impact on other lives. They need to be aware that their choices are critical and they need to be equipped to be critical of offerings that numb them, blind them or make their connectedness and responsibilities disappear.

We must not pretend that the mechanisms of our culture do not have spiritual significance or that we do not need to be paying attention to what our children are being taught by culture and about who gains from that. Our children do notice and do make links between what we say and do and the incongruities – or if you prefer in religious language – hypocrisy – of not living what is claimed.

I am not advocating protecting children and insulating them from the world. I am advocating that we need to equip children with knowledge and skills to meet life and its dangers and difficulties. They may already see and know. They may already be in difficulty and danger and we need to nurture their skills, encourage their critiques and support them to give voice to what they see as troubling so they can hone their critique and protect

themselves to grow in body, mind and spirit.

One does not learn responsibility, compassion, or other worthy qualities by reading and reciting. One learns these things in practice, often in trial and error learning, through mistakes and risk taking. Spiritual and political skills, values, capacity and potential require acknowledgement, nurture and opportunity for expression, practice and development. We need political and spiritual sensibilities that are astute, critical and willing to risk. I believe we cannot have one without the other, because the spiritual is lived personally, as is the political.

How then can we nurture their critical sensibilities and attune their spiritual insights to personal, political and communal wellbeing? What wisdom must adults develop to provide a context in which spiritual and political development can go hand in hand so that an attuned, aware and critical spiritual practice can be nurtured? That is our work.

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