

The Healing Power of Children

The children always challenge me to live in the present. They want me to be with them here and now, and they find it hard to understand that I might have other things to do or to think about. After all my experiences with psychotherapy, I suddenly have discovered the great healing power of children. Every time Pablito, Johnny, and Maria run up to welcome me, pick up my suitcase, and bring me to my “roof-room,” I marvel at their ability to be fully present to me. Their uninhibited expression of affection and their willingness to receive it pull me directly into the moment and invite me to celebrate life where it is found. Whereas in the past coming home meant time to study, to write letters, and to prepare for classes, it now first of all means time to play...

I now realize that only when I can enter with the children into their joy will I be able to enter also with them into their poverty and pain. God obviously wants me to walk into the world of suffering with a little child on each hand.

The Rewards of Compassion

One of the most memorable times of my own life was the time I spent living with the Osco Moreno family in Pamplona Alta near Lima, Peru.... I went to Peru with a deep desire to help the poor. I returned home with a deep gratitude for what I had received. Later, while teaching at Harvard Divinity School, I often felt a real homesickness for “my family.” I missed the children hanging onto my arms and legs, laughing loudly and sharing their cookies and drinks with me. I missed the spontaneity, the intimacy, and the generosity with which the poor of Pamplona Alta surrounded me. They literally showered me with gifts of love. No doubt, they were happy and even proud to have this tall “Gringo Padre” with them, but whatever I gave them, it was nothing compared to what I received.

The rewards of compassion are not things to wait for. They are hidden in compassion itself.

The Challenge of the Gospel

Perhaps the challenge of the gospel lies precisely in the invitation to accept a gift for which we can give nothing in return. For the gift is the life breath of God, the Spirit who is poured out on us through Jesus Christ. This life breath frees us from fear and gives us new room to live. The person who prayerfully goes about his life is constantly ready to receive the breath of God, and to let his life be renewed and expanded. One who never prays, on the contrary, is like the child with asthma; because he is short of breath, the whole world shrivels up before him. He creeps in a corner gasping for air, and is virtually in agony. But the person who prays opens himself to God and can freely breathe again. He stands upright, stretches out his hands and comes out of his corner, free to boldly stride through the world because he can move about without fear.

A person who prays is one who can once more breathe freely, who has the freedom to move where he wishes with no fears to haunt him.

The Prayer of Little Faith

The prayer of little faith is where you hold fast to the concrete of the present situation in order to win a certain security. The prayer of little faith is filled with wishes which beg for immediate fulfillment. This prayer of wish fulfillment has a Santa Claus naiveté which wants to satisfy specific desires....

With the prayer of little faith, it is the concreteness of the wishes which eliminates the possibility for hope. In this prayer, you want to be certain about what is uncertain and you start thinking in terms of one bird in the hand is better than two or ten birds still in the bush. With this prayer, the petition is aimed at getting what you ask for, any way you can, instead of being directed toward the person who might or might not be able to make that wish come true. The person of little faith prays like a child who wants a present from Santa Claus, but who becomes frightened and runs away as soon as he gets his hands on the package. He would rather have nothing more to do with the old bearded gentleman. All the attention is on the gift and none on the one who gives it.

In Solitude We Can . . .

In solitude we can slowly unmask the illusion of our possessiveness and discover in the center of our own self that we are not what we can conquer, but what is given to us. In solitude we can listen to the voice of him who spoke to us before we could speak a word, who healed us before we could make any gesture to help, who set us free long before we could free others, and who loved us long before we could give love to anyone. It is in this solitude that we discover that being is more important than having, and that we are worth more than the result of our efforts. In solitude we discover that our life is not a possession to be defended, but a gift to be shared. It's there we recognize that the healing words we speak are not just our own, but are given to us; that the love we can express is part of a greater love; and that the new life we bring forth is not a property to cling to, but a gift to be received.

Converting the Silence

One of our main problems is that in this chatty society, silence has become a very fearful thing. For most people, silence creates itchiness and nervousness. Many experience silence not as full and rich, but as empty and hollow. For them silence is like a gaping abyss which can swallow them up. As soon as a minister says during a worship service, “Let us be silent for a few moments,” people tend to become restless and preoccupied with only one thought: “When will this be over?” Imposed silence often creates hostility and resentment. Many ministers who have experimented with silence in their services have soon found out that silence can be more demonic than divine and have quickly picked up the signals that were saying: “Please keep talking.” It is quite understandable that most forms of ministry avoid silence precisely so as to ward off the anxiety it provokes.

But isn't the purpose of all ministry to reveal that God is not a God of fear but a God of love? And couldn't this be accomplished by gently and carefully converting the empty silence into a full silence, the anxious silence into a peaceful silence, and the restless silence into a restful silence, so that in this converted silence a real encounter with the loving Father could take place?

Seeing into the Center

Contemplative life is a human response to the fundamental fact that the central things in life, although spiritually perceptible, remain invisible in large measure and can very easily be overlooked by the inattentive, busy, distracted person that each of us can so readily become. The contemplative looks not so much around things but through them into their center. Through their center he discovers the world of spiritual beauty that is more real, has more density, more mass, more energy, and greater intensity than physical matter. In effect, the beauty of physical matter is a reflection of its inner content. Contemplation is a response to a world that is built in this fashion. That is why the Greek fathers, who were great contemplatives, are known as the dioretic fathers. *Diorao* means to see into, to see through. In celebrating the feast of Corpus Christi, the body of Christ, we celebrate the presence of the risen Christ among us, at the center of our lives, at the center of our very being, at the heart of our community, at the heart of the creation.

When the Word Strikes the Heart

Most people who listen to a sermon keep their eyes directed toward the preacher, and rightly so, because he or she asks for attention to the word that is being spoken. But is it also possible for the word to be spoken in such a way that it slowly moves attention away from the pulpit to the heart of the listener and reveals there an inner silence in which it is safe to dwell.

The simple words “The Lord is my shepherd” can be spoken quietly and persistently in such a way that they become like a hedge around a garden in which God’s shepherding can be sensed. These words, which at first might seem to be no more than an interesting metaphor, can slowly descend from the mind into the heart. There they may offer the context in which an inner transformation, by the God who transcends all human words and concepts, can take place. Thus, the words “The Lord is my shepherd” lead to the silent pastures where we can dwell in the loving presence of him in whose Name the preacher speaks.

Photo by Neal McDonough © 1996 All Rights Reserved.

