

“My dog died,” “higher,  
daddy, higher,” “I wish I’d a  
million hearts” ..... and  
other things our children say

An exploration of the spirituality of children and  
what it says about ourselves as adults



RE Congress, October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016



# Opening moment



Mary Black Wonder Child.



# The Beatitudes (Matthew 5)

He said:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn,  
for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek,  
for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,  
for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful,  
for they will be shown mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart,  
for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers,  
for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.



# How can those we teach, teach us?

- What distinguishes a child's spirituality from adult spirituality?
- What might the spirituality of children teach us about ourselves?
- What are the practical implications in our various contexts of understanding how children's spirituality differs adult spirituality? How right and how wrong are we getting it!?



My context

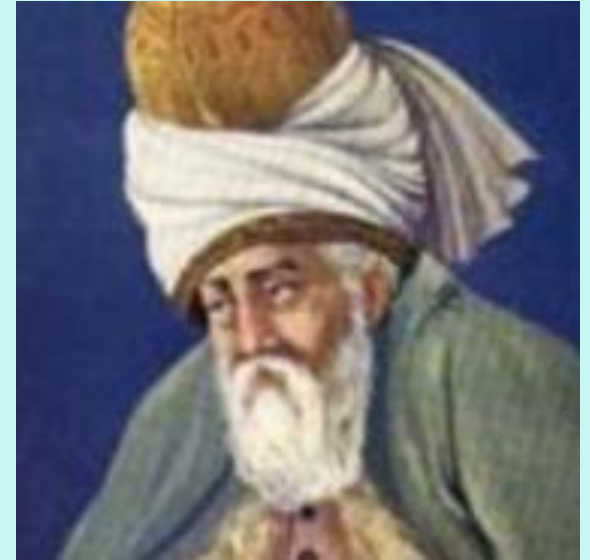


## Two Kinds of Intelligence

There is another kind of tablet, one  
already completed and preserved inside you.  
A spring overflowing its springbox.  
A freshness in the center of the chest.  
This other intelligence  
does not turn yellow or stagnate. It's fluid,  
and it doesn't move from outside to inside  
through conduits of plumbing-learning.

This second knowing is a fountainhead  
from within you, moving out.

Rumi

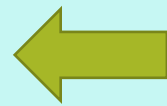


# Initial discussion:

- Are children innately spiritual? Is there a 'freshness' to this that we might attend to?



What in  
your view  
does  
'spiritual'  
mean?



Spiritual

Social

Intellectual

Emotional

Physical





# Two schools of thinking:



- Children, especially very small children and babies are not spiritual. Wilber describes children's modes of thinking and beings as merely concerned with their immediate physical reality
- Children have an innate capacity for wonder, wondering, wisdom, empathy .....but it's an emergent capacity.

(Roehlkepartain, Ebstyne King, Wagener, Benson)



# Growing interest in children's spirituality

- An awareness of spirituality within a holistic vision of the child
- Evident in curricula: Aistear (2009), Primary Curriculum (1999), Junior Cycle Framework (2015)
- “Toxic childhood syndrome” (Palmer)
- Concern for well being and resilience of children particularly in terms of ‘meaning making’ and ‘feeling connected’



# How important is it?

- Spirituality is the bedrock on which rests the welfare not only of the individual but also of society and indeed the health of our entire planetary environment (Nye and Nye)
- “Spiritual intelligence (SQ) is the intelligence with which we address and solve problems of meaning and value, the intelligence in which we can place our actions and our lives in a wider, richer, meaning-giving context, the intelligence with which we can assess that one course of action or one life path is more meaningful than another “(Zohar and Marshall)



# Some definitions of spirituality:

- The search for meaning in life events and a yearning for connectedness to the universe". (**Coles**, 1990)
- It is the heart of empathy and care, the pulse of compassion". (**Canda and Furman**,1999)
- Spirituality is finding what Thomas Merton called the 'hidden wholeness'.

(From NCCA, Wellbeing as a Key Skill within the new Junior Cycle Framework)





# What might spirituality look like in children?

Note:

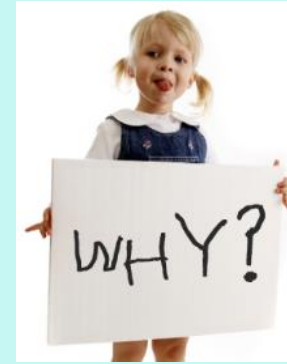
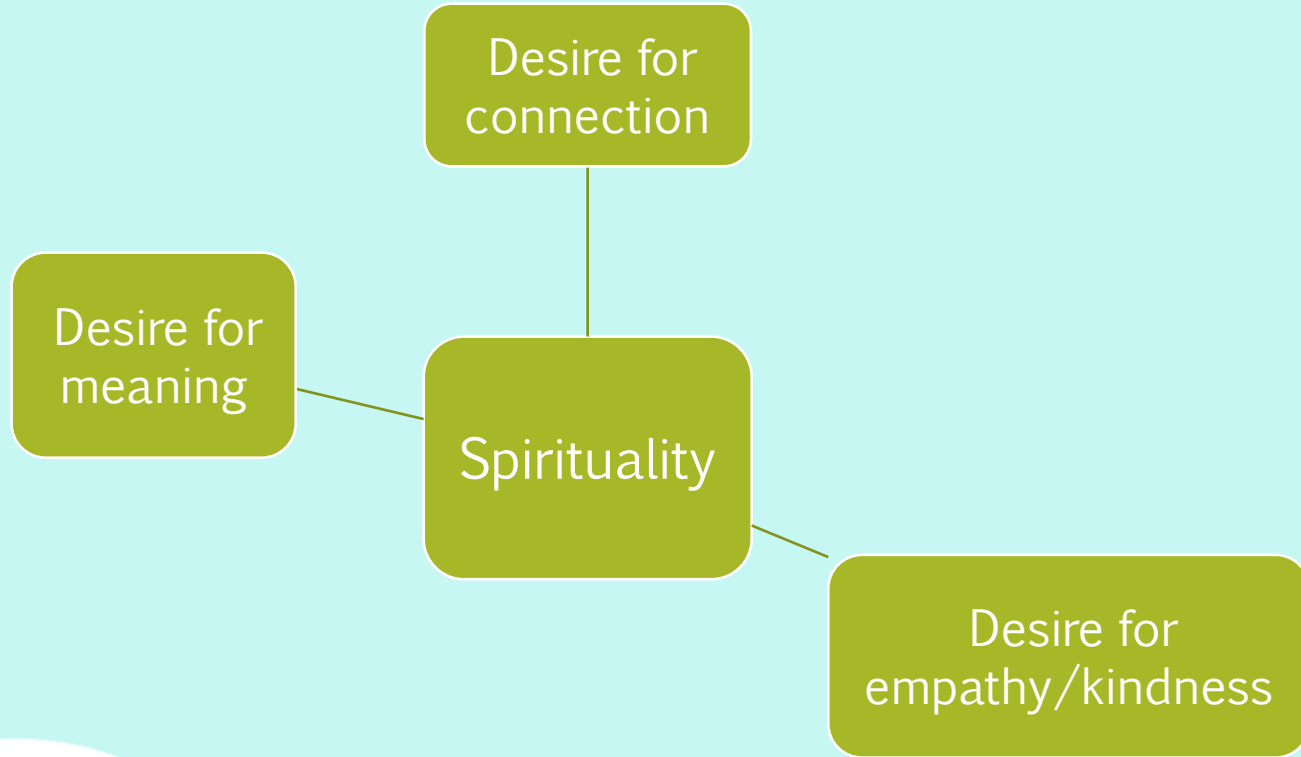
Children are all different! Different children will experience their spirituality in different ways, depending on their interests, their environment, their capacity, and so on. No two children are the same!

- **Listening for Wisdom:** a tuning in to the inner voice, a capacity for direct knowing, for going to the essential heart of an issue, an understanding of the centrality of love
- **Wonder;** including intuitive experience, experiences of oneness with the universe, an ability to *be-in -the-moment*
- **Wondering:** asking the big questions... why, why, and why again!
- **‘Between you and Me’:** a relational sense, often manifesting in compassion or empathy with others
- **Seeing the Invisible**

(de Souza, Durka, Engebretson, Jackson, McGrady)



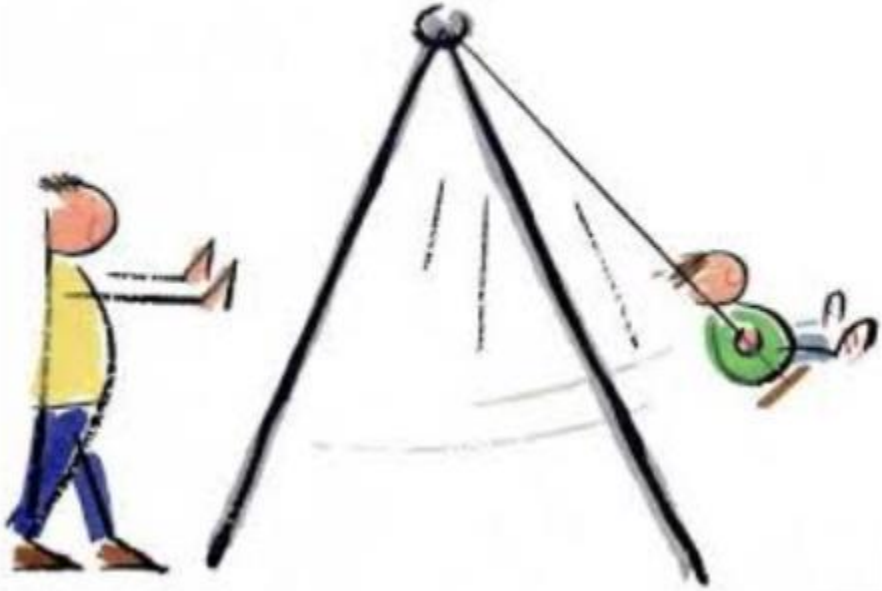
Spirituality is finding what Thomas Merton called the 'hidden wholeness'.



## Vignette 1:

David – raptured in wonder and awe

Source: Hyde, 2008. Children and Spirituality.



What does a child's ability to be in the moment teach you about your own spirituality?





A short moment to capture this.....



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rvpCmKUo1Aw>





# Discussion 2

- What does a child's ability to be in the moment teach you about your own spirituality?

(Implied, what exactly are we missing, when we miss this in our own lives?)



# The inquisitive child



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U1nOPBEGli8>



# Vignette 2:

## Jane- The Inquisitive Philosopher

Source: Hyde, 2008, Children and Spirituality.



How would you answer Jane's question?



## Discussion 3:

- How many questions do YOU ask a day?
- What kills the questions, in our homes, in our schools, in our Church?
- What can we do to encourage philosophical enquiry in the children we live with/work with/care for?



## Vignette 3:

### Tam - Showing Empathy

Source: Hyde, 2008, Children and Spirituality.



Have you ever been on the receiving end of their empathy? What have you learned from it?



# Clip on empathy



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SsWs6bf7tvI>





On the island of Lampedusa, Pope Francis spoke out against what he called a globalization of indifference. He says during his visit, “Who among us has wept for these things, and things like this?” Who has wept for the deaths of these our brothers and sisters? Who has wept for the young mothers carrying their babies? For these men who wanted something to support their families?” He tells us that we are a society that has forgotten the experience of weeping, of “suffering with”. Because of our relative wealth we have actually become indifferent on a global scale.



# Let's pause with 'empathy'.....

- How do different children experience and express empathy?
- What are the challenges for us here as adults?





# Some 'take aways'

Aistear, the Primary Curriculum and the new JC Framework all take about the spiritual development of children and young people. But they can be vague on detail in terms of what that would look like?

What 5 - 10 things do you think would be necessary in terms of, for example, a school policy or a parish policy on this?



# Taking care of a child's spirituality....

- For parents, caregivers, relatives etc., staying connected to them emotionally and showing how and why connection matters... even when it's difficult or feels impossible.
- Fostering wonder about themselves, the world, others
- Praising the good questions and the awkward questions too
- Praising, promoting and encouraging empathy towards themselves, others, the world
- Engaging in conversation; engaging with the questions in a calm manner
- Demonstrating, inviting and leading by example (especially in terms of being okay with stillness)
- Observing and learning from and with your child ('play' and 'pause') through free play in particular



# Spirituality and the child with special needs:

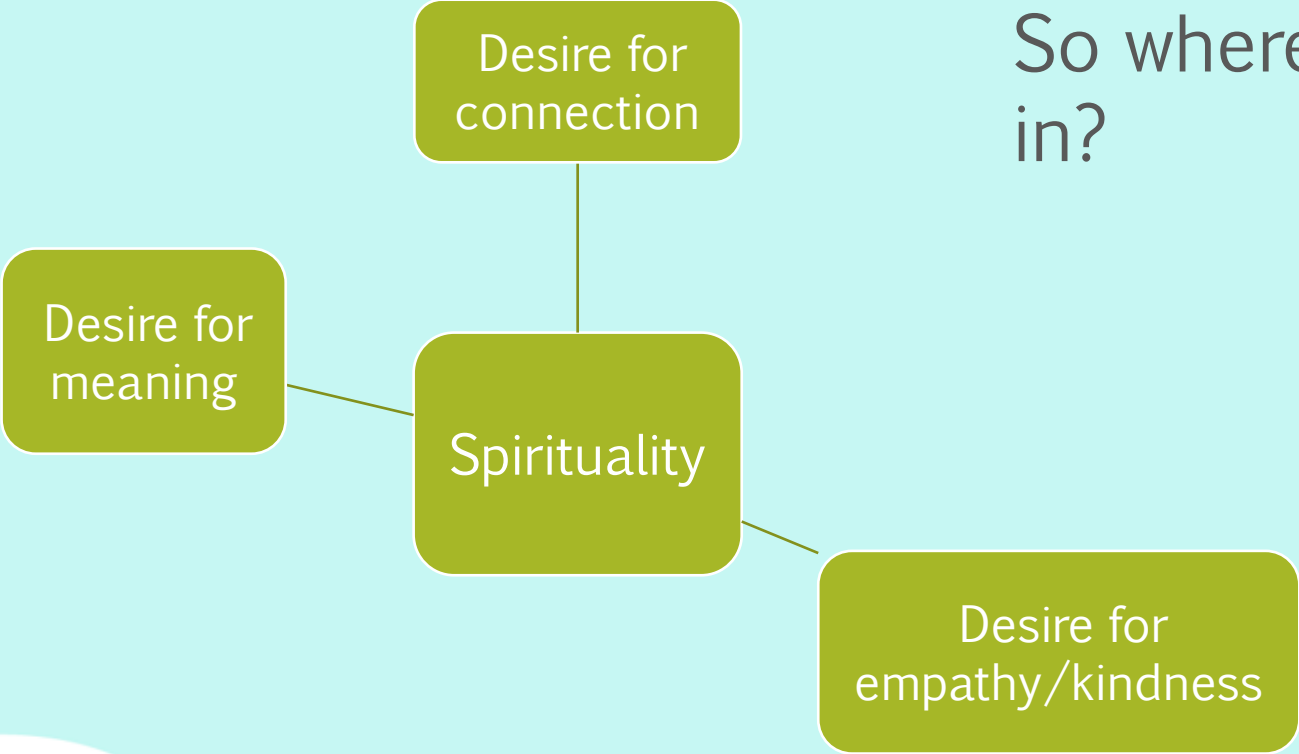
Some core principles:

- Every child is unique; a one size fits all approach doesn't work
- Every child is loved and invited into relationship with themselves, with others and with God. No one should be excluded from the richness that engagement with the spiritual can bring.
- Every child has an emergent capacity for the spiritual in their lives; that emergent capacity can only be discovered and uncovered through love
- The parent/guardian is, as with all children, best placed to know their child's capacity for the spiritual and how that capacity can be developed
- In this role, parents need support and help; spaces to share their experiences, to share their frustrations and joys, and to learn from one another

(Adapted from *Spiritually Able: A Parent's Guide to teaching the Faith to children with Special Needs* Rizzo and Rizzo, *How to Welcome, Include and catechize children with Autism and other Special Needs*, LR. Sutton, *Handbook for Adaptive Catechesis, serving those with special needs*, Chronister)



So where does Religion come in?



Some images to explore the differences....



# Some hints and tips for parents in terms encouraging a child's religious development



1. See above for the spiritual development of your child
2. Teach them only what you believe yourself – authenticity matters!
3. Be okay with not knowing every answer to every question and re-assure your child that it might be a case of learning together
4. Don't rush with answers that are too advanced. Let your child be your guide
5. Avoid anything that separates and divides the spiritual and religious from the rest of the child's development; be realistic in your expectations!
6. Encourage your child in all of his/her learning including his/her religious education.
7. Make connections to the spiritual and religious as you see fit in every day life and in their learning
8. Introduce prayer and ritual in to your home according to your own comfort levels
9. Trust your own instinct! Have fun! Go with the flow!
10. See the parish as a support for you in your bringing up your child in faith.



# My hopes for my children.....

“I have come so that they may have life and have it in abundance”. (John 10:10)





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Final comments.

Thank you!

