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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18820/23099089/actat.Supp33.14>

ISSN: 1015-8758 (Print)

ISSN: 2309-9089 (Online)

Acta Theologica 2022

Supp 33:190-206

Date received:

05 January 2022

Date accepted:

16 March 2022

Date published:

20 June 2022

The foundational influence of early spiritual experiences on adulthood

ABSTRACT

This article presents research on spiritual experience in childhood and aims to illustrate the foundational effects of such experience on adult lives, using the qualitative data of several testimonies. The latter highlight that researchers in spirituality need to pay more attention to what is happening at a spiritual level in childhood and to the hermeneutical lens it provides for interpreting the lives of adults, including themselves, who once were children. They will also illustrate the role religious socialisation plays in spiritual experiences in childhood. The stories are explained in terms of the spirituality framework of the foundational desire for authenticity in the subjectivity of the child interacting with the child's lived historical situation and how this interaction continues to play out in the life of the adult. They are evidence of the self-implicating character of research in spirituality as the researcher was also once a child. The researcher regards authentic subjectivity as a form of mystagogical method, a method about which Kees Waaijman has written eloquently.



Published by the UFS

<http://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/at>

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1. INTRODUCTION

Kees Waaijman has made a tremendous contribution to the field of spirituality studies, which explains this *Festschrift* in his honour. His famous book of nearly 1,000 pages, *Spirituality: Forms, foundations, and methods* (2002), is one very significant example of his impact. Although its subject index, according to Kees, “contains the most important subjects of lived

spirituality and of the study of spirituality” (Waaïjman 2002: 957), it does not include the subject of spirituality and childhood. The book does give several pages to the “spirituality of the child” (Waaïjman 2002:55-59) in the context of the relationship of the latter to spiritual education. My focus, in this instance, is not on the spirituality of the child, or on its relationship to spiritual education, but on evidence that a person’s spiritual experience in childhood can have transformative effects at a foundational level on his/her life. Such moments of spiritual awakening early on in a life testify to the validity of Kees’ strong emphasis on mystagogy being at the heart of the study of spirituality. Naming the effects involved as transformative supports his position that “transformation is a key word in the context of systematic discourse on spirituality” (Waaïjman 2016:43). The evidence of such experience also provides the reflexive researcher in spirituality with an additional hermeneutical and self-implicating lens, given the child s/he once was. Research on spiritual experience in childhood is a relatively recent phenomenon, as it used to be thought that children were too immature to have sound spiritual experience. We get an insight into why people used to think that way in Dr. Kate Adams’ paper for the British Educational Research Association in 2009. Dr. Adams is a former primary school teacher, who is an academic specialising in children’s spirituality in Britain. In her paper, she mentioned that,

given that serious discussion of spiritual experiences is not common in daily discourse, children often feel a fear of ridicule or dismissal, and for that reason retreat into silence (Lamb 2009:36).

According to Dr. Rebecca Nye (2009), a leading authority on children’s spirituality, spiritual experience in very ordinary, everyday aspects of children’s lives is “probably a reality for every child – regardless of their religious or other factors in their upbringing”.¹

If we accept that people are subjects of spiritual experience from childhood, then it will call for a new understanding of what being a child means and how to perceive and relate to children. It will also call for a new understanding of who we all are in light of our understanding of the child we once were and adds to the importance of first-person methodology in the field of spirituality studies.

In this article, a number of stories illustrate the foundational effects of spiritual experience and religious socialisation in childhood on adult lives. By spiritual experiences I mean experiences of where something excessive breaks through unexpectedly from a deeper layer of reality and often in the ordinary of life, with the resulting effect that the gifted experiences

1 See, also Nye (2017:7).

play a foundational role in the agency and narrative of the person's life journey (Hammarskjöld 1964:169).² Such experiences make us more aware of the mystery of wonder and goodness at the heart of reality, which can be named in different ways, and which is not always apparent to us, and which can even be eclipsed at times by negative life experiences or the state of the world.

The stories focus on positive spiritual experiences in childhood and are told in terms of the theoretical framework of the foundational and methodological praxis of authenticity in the child interacting with the child's lived historical situation. I regard this framework as a form of mystagogical method, a method about which Kees has written eloquently. What I mean by the praxis of authenticity will become more evident in how I interpret the stories. The evidence of the stories also confirms what Wulf wrote in 1969, and to which Kees draws attention in an article on theoretical approaches in spirituality:

The spirituality of present-day Christians is formed to a high degree from the bottom up by the experiences which they incur in their contacts with the modern world, their fellow human beings, and themselves (Wulf 1969:352).

My position, in this instance, is that formative lived experiences of that kind are already taking place in childhood. The children in the stories have a Christian background,³ but similar stories can be told, I would say, of children from other traditions. The stories provide qualitative data for research in the field of spirituality. The first story is about a spiritual experience from my own childhood. I will indicate its foundational role in the development of my life and work.

2. MY STORY

When my brother, sister and I were small children, my father would come and say goodnight to us when he came home from work in the evenings. On one of those evenings, when I was aged 5 years, he asked us, who were very close in age, whether we had said our night prayers, and I, the eldest, answered that I had a toothache. My father replied that I did not have to say my prayers then, as God would understand how I was feeling. Utterly unexpectedly, his words impacted on me immediately in a way that led to a deep, warm, peaceful experience. I experienced myself in my embodied

2 Dag Hammarskjöld, the late and inspiring Secretary-General of the United Nations, once said that at some moment he decided to say "yes" to Someone or Something, and that that made all the difference for his life from then on. See also Waaijman (2002:928).

3 See also Keating (2018).

consciousness being reassured, being cared for; I experienced that my pain mattered, that I mattered – to God. I experienced and understood that God was a kind God, and that this profound realisation was being gifted to me from beyond myself.

Reflecting on what happened that evening in later life has enabled me to identify that this experience of spiritual consolation regarding what I believe to be the reality of God as a God of kindness, compassion, care, and understanding was so powerfully transformative in my subjectivity that it became a foundational criterion for me of how to be an authentic human being. Whatever was in line with that experience could be trusted, and whatever contradicted that experience had to be rejected or opposed.

The experience also testified to a spiritual dimension in the human person that makes spiritual experience possible. My experience was spiritual at a human level, first, because it connected me with ultimate depth meaning and value in life, but given my socialisation into a particular religious tradition, I interpreted it as being related to the God of that tradition.

My decision to go to Chile in the early 1980s to tackle the brutal military dictatorship of General Pinochet, who claimed to be a loyal Catholic, was influenced by my desire to mediate the kind God of my childhood into the Chile situation for the sake of its transformation.⁴

Similarly, I have specialised in liberation and feminist theologies because I view them as authentic Christian theologies that articulate the transformative beauty, truth, goodness, and love of a kind God into situations of lived oppression. For example, when I read a story like that of Jesus and Mary Magdalene, I do so with a hermeneutics of the imagination, which means using the imagination as a principle of interpretation. I interpret what I read with an imagination influenced by my spiritual experience in childhood and the added input of my later sociological studies. Such a re-reading of that story leads me to say that, if we accept Mary Magdalene, in keeping with her human spirit, desired to live a life of authenticity then we have grounds for holding the following. She was a sensitive and intelligent woman in a society and history that did not value her sufficiently as a woman, because it was possessed by the demonic spirit of kyriarchy (lording it over people from the Greek *kyrios* meaning “lord”) and androcentrism (taking the male as normative for the human). She was suffering from socially induced depression when Jesus as a person of religious authority met her. His valuing of her as the woman

4 See O’Sullivan (2018).

she was led to a breakthrough experience at embodied depth where she met the same kind of God that my father enabled me to meet all those years ago when I was a child in pain needing to know that God was kind, caring and understanding, especially to those whose voice society might think needs not be heard.

3. SARAH'S STORY

3.1 Sarah aged four

My second story concerns my niece, Sarah. Early in 1991, as I was on my way out the door of her home to catch a train to Dublin, Sarah, who was four years old at the time, said to me: "Michael, you're a boss." "A boss, Sarah", I said, somewhat taken aback. She said: "Yes, you're a priest, and all priests are bosses!" – I am a Jesuit priest.

I found myself wondering about what she meant on the journey to Dublin. Employing a hermeneutics of the imagination, it occurred to me that Sarah's experience of being at Mass was an experience she lived in the company of her parents, who were the two most important people to her in this world. But when the priest came out to say Mass, these immensely important people in Sarah's life, and all the adults, and Sarah, and all the people, stood up, paid attention, and waited to be spoken to by the priest. The priest did nearly all the talking during Mass. Everyone was meant to pay attention when he spoke and to answer him when he uttered words such as "The Lord be with you". All the people stood up again at the end of Mass when he left the altar.

We know from experience that we seek to make sense of our world. Early signs of this desire are already evident in the constant curiosity of the child. There is a dynamism at work in our interiority from early life that has us that way. I call this dynamism the dynamism for authenticity, the dynamism to know reality as it really is and to be in an appropriate relationship with it. This dynamism is a dynamism of self-transcendence in that it prompts, pressures, pushes, or, alternatively, attracts, us to be the kind of person that keeps going until we have satisfied our seeking and acted accordingly. Self-attention discloses that this self-transcending dynamism works in us through essentially four operations of knowing and choosing, namely experiencing, understanding, judging, and deciding.⁵ I

5 Lonergan (1990:6) gives the following list as operations: "seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, tasting, inquiring, imagining, understanding, conceiving, formulating, reflecting, marshalling and weighing the evidence, judging, deliberating, evaluating, deciding, speaking, writing". The operations of experiencing, understanding, judging, and deciding are arrived at by denoting the

have written about this position elsewhere, but it would take too long to elaborate on it in this article (O'Sullivan 2019:271-278).

Suffice it to say that, as Sarah interacted with her world under the impact of the dynamism for authenticity in her operations of experiencing, understanding, judging, and deciding, she would have been moved to be attentive to the data of her experience such as the way her parents and everyone in church stood up when the priest came out on the altar, the way he did nearly all the talking, and the way others present like her parents spoke only in response to words he uttered first. Her remark to me also shows that she must have puzzled over such experienced data and, therefore, engaged her experience with the operation in us of understanding. The operation of understanding moves us beyond what is involved in attending to data, in order to raise relevant questions that enable us to understand the data. As a result of such questioning and interpretation, Sarah eventually concluded at a further level of self-transcendence, where judgments are made, that priests fitted her learned social construct and learned linguistic term of a "boss".

The desire, at whatever stage we are in life, to live from our reflexive and relational subjectivity with the quality of authenticity is a desire to be objective. Objectivity is not a matter of ceasing to be subjective, but of living the kind of subjectivity that correlates with the real order of things. This quality of desiring, characteristic of authentic subjectivity, can exist in us and be adhered to, without our being explicitly aware of it or being able to name it in those terms. Obviously, this is how it is for us as children.

The quality of self-presence consistent with authentic subjectivity moves us to experience, understand, judge, and decide according to the standards of beauty, intelligibility, truth, goodness, and love, which have been differentiated in compact human experience over time. The existential state of authentic subjectivity or authentic receptive, relational, reflective, and reflexive self-presence is, therefore, a very open form of subjectivity, requiring ascetical rigour. As such, it is a spiritual practice, because, through it, we seek to learn about and live life at the level of ultimate meaning and value. Beauty, truth, goodness, and love are ultimate dimensions of reality. Authentic subjectivity as spiritual practice moves the person to know and live life from foundational depth and in a horizon of ultimate dimensions of reality. In that sense, it can be said that children living in authentic subjectivity live in a spiritual self-presence.

various operations on the four levels of experience, understanding, judgement, and decision by the principal occurrence on each level.

In processing and responding to her world through her subjective activities of experiencing, understanding, judging, and deciding, and doing so, in so far as she did, in a manner characterised by the desire for authenticity and the objective meaning and value correlative with it, Sarah was engaged in the practice of spiritual self-presence under the conditions of childhood.

3.2 Sarah aged eight

Four years after that experience with Sarah and my effort to fathom it on the train at the level of authenticity in my subjectivity, at the level that is, of my desire to understand Sarah's experience at the level of what could explain it satisfactorily, I was preparing to give a talk at the first conference in Ireland on the ordination of women (1995). I decided that I would speak with Sarah as part of my preparation. She was eight years old then. I asked her whether she remembered what she said to me about priests four years earlier. She was vague about it, but her mother, Carmel, my sister, said that it is very interesting that I should ask her about that subject, and explained why.

At Mass a week earlier, Carmel said, the priest had asked the adults to fill in a suggestions sheet about how to improve the parish. At the Mass, Sarah said that she also wanted to fill in the page. My sister was not in favour at first, because she was carrying out the request of the priest, and he had not asked for the views of children. But Sarah repeated that she also had things to say. At eight years old, what did she write? Women should be priests!

Clearly, in the four years since her earlier words to me on the subject, Sarah had continued to process her religious world through her subjectivity and the impact on it of her desire for authenticity, which, as I mentioned earlier, need not have been explicit in order to exist. She had become aware that only men were priests, and this reality clashed with her identity as a girl-child. As a result, she now held, it seems to me, that the exclusion of females from ordained priesthood did not meet the standard of authenticity for life in this world. Her empowering self-transcending capacity for authenticity in her life had moved her on from what she considered to be a judgement of fact that priests are bosses four years earlier to a judgement of value that women should be priests. It also moved her to engage in further self-transcendence by going beyond her judgement of value to a decision to give it effect by insisting that she also had a view to offer, and writing it on the suggestions sheet about how to improve the parish.

I said to her at that time that I would be speaking about women priests at a conference in Dublin the following week and would like to hear more from her about her views on the subject. This is what she said (O’Sullivan 1995:49-53). I offer it as further evidence to illustrate the empowering spirit of authenticity present already in a child in relation to religious matters. This indicates an experience in her at some depth of having connected with the mysterious ground of beauty, intelligibility, truth, goodness, and love. It illustrates how her empowering spirit of authenticity, under the conditions of childhood, was interacting with and influencing how she constructed her world as a reality of meaning and value.

Me: The Pope (John Paul II at the time) is not in favour of women priests (he had just brought out a document saying that we should not even think about it!).

Sarah: He is probably just jealous, jealous that women would become more pow/popular, if they became priests. Women should be able to (become priests); why should only men get their own way?

Sarah: Women only get to say a little at Mass, and things. We don’t hear about women. Don’t hear their views. They are less pow/popular. St Mary (the mother of Jesus) and St. Brigid are not celebrated like St. Patrick is (we were holding this conversation on St. Patrick’s Day).

Sarah: Men priests leave out the women part. They only want to talk about Jesus and God because they are men. They talk about Jesus’ friends: the twelve apostles, and Mary and Martha and Lazarus, and Bartimaeus, and Zacchaeus – but never about Mary’s (the mother of Jesus) friends.

Sarah: Priests don’t talk about holy women – just Jesus and God. Women priests would talk about women. If Jesus had a girlfriend, they would talk about that. It’s not fair that boys should get their own way and girls not.

Sarah: We don’t say the Hail Mary and girl prayers during Mass – we say the Our Father.

Sarah: In the first bit of the Bible, about the tree, and a girl and a boy, she goes and eats things off the tree. She doesn’t trust God. Why does the girl have to be the more evil? And why was a man brought down first (‘he came down from heaven’ in the Creed)?

Sarah: The Apostles were all men. That’s unfair. People will think men are holier. It is fairer to have six women and six men.

This conversation with Sarah shows that, already as an eight-year-old girl, she felt compelled to disagree with the then Pope, John Paul II, and with a long-standing religious tradition regarding women that he upheld. This reminds me of the words of Jesus, "unless you become like little children, you cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven"! Sarah not only felt compelled to disagree with him, and the form of Catholic tradition he was espousing; she positively distrusted both:

he is probably jealous ... why should only men get their own way?

... it is unfair that the apostles were all men ... why is the woman

blamed for sin ... and why should Jesus come as a man?

Her opposition to the strength of such external authority stemmed, in my view, from the strength she felt from being rooted in the foundational dynamism for authenticity in her subjectivity, which could exist without her being able to articulate it that way as a child aged eight years. Her presence to herself and her world as an eight-year-old at this foundational level meant that she could not ignore what she was detecting, discovering, and deciding there without involving herself in a self-contradiction at the core level of herself as spiritual.

Sarah's position on priesthood in the Catholic Church as a child was developed, obviously, without input from theology. If she were to study theology now as a 35-year-old adult, would her judgement in childhood about priesthood, derived from her efforts to be faithful to the dynamism for authenticity in her subjectivity at that time, continue to be foundational by enabling her to develop a more sympathetic and well-grounded theology that could contradict Vatican arguments? Or would the greater exposure to such ecclesial arguments of authority, through the study of theology, persuade her that her earlier judgement was the fruit of childhood immaturity and thus overpower, so to speak, where she had come to on the foundation and in the horizon of her spirit of authenticity in childhood? I believe the former would be the case and I am drawn to this view by reflection on my own experience of an analogous kind in childhood articulated earlier, which included references to how it influenced my way of doing theology subsequently.

4. JANET'S STORY

The third story I want to consider regarding the interaction of empowering authenticity, external authority, childhood, and spiritual experience is that of Janet Ruffing. Janet works at Yale University in the USA and is

a past-president of the international Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality. She says that, as a five-year-old, she remembers being

left behind in the pew when everybody went to communion. My mother taught me that I didn't have to receive the bread, that Jesus was just as present in me as he was in everyone else and all I had to do was snuggle up to her when she came back. That opened the mystical doors for me as a very young child knowing that I could be with God any time I wanted to. In church, out of church, through other people, in sacred space, in nature. So that's how I got started (Gardenshire & Nuttman 2011:6).

She says that she experienced

a powerful sense of presence enveloping us all right there in the pew. And I'm sure that part of my own call to be a Sister of Mercy was to bring other people to God that way. What I knew was this love from God. That was very real for me, and it was always there, whether things were going well or different. So I would say that was really a sense that God was such a loving person. That was so clear to me, that when I was teaching religious education to first graders, when I was a sophomore in high school, my highly developed theory of religious education was that these children needed to know that religious education was a happy place to be, a loving place to be, and that God could have fun with them ... So, for me, the most important thing was that they could feel a warm and loving presence with them associated with religious education and with church (Gardenshire & Nuttman 2011:6).

Noteworthy in her testimony is that spiritual experience in childhood, not knowledge of doctrines, was foundational in her life. Noteworthy, too, and similar to my experience with my father, is the way in which her mother, as a primary source of loving authority in her life, facilitated her foundational spiritual experience at that time and its influence on her subsequent development.

Janet's journey of authenticity, under the impact of her experience in childhood of God as a reality who loved everyone, breaks through again very powerfully when she was 15 years old. At that time in her life, Janet experienced discrimination against the Mexican American community:

I knew every child was a child of God. I knew these Mexican-American children were children of God just like I was, and that there wasn't any difference among us. I knew that at the age of 15 (Gardenshire & Nuttman 2011:7).

She felt the discrimination deeply because it contradicted, I would say, her foundational religious experience at five that God was in everyone and everywhere. In her doctoral study years later, she decided to address this issue of spirituality and social justice. According to her, her doctoral studies gave her the tools of social analysis and philosophical and theological understanding to bring together the worlds of spirituality and social justice. That was in the early 1980s. Her view now all these years later is:

If people are actually in touch with the living God, they are going to be enhanced in their humanity. They are being delivered from all the ways unjust systems have enslaved them ... the more we are touched by the mystery of God, the more we are enabled and inspired to be compassionate. And that's coming from the way God is with us (Gardenshire & Nuttman 2011:9).

Janet's view all these years after her foundational experience in childhood, as well as my reflection on my own experience and that of Sarah illustrate that our world of religious meaning and value is formed not simply by reflection on received religious tradition, but through spiritual self-presence-in-the-world, which needs to be cultivated as early as possible in life. This point is in line with Kees' point referred to earlier about the need to link the spirituality of education with the spirituality of the child.

5. MARY'S STORY

A fourth story is that of Mary Frohlich who, like Janet, is a past president of the international Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality. Her presidential address in 2009 was about spirituality and ecology. During her address, she revealed the relationship between what she chose to focus on in her address all those years later and a key spiritual experience in childhood:

I begin with a personal story. Fifty years ago, I was a small child in a good secular humanist family living in the Black Hills of South Dakota. One lovely Fall Saturday we went picnicking deep in the Hills, at a remote lake that very few people knew how to find. Iron Creek Lake was a small, serene, gorgeous little lake surrounded by deep pine forests that seemed to breathe with an earthy and mysterious fragrance. I remember wading out into the cold water of the lake chest-high, and suddenly being overwhelmed by the awareness of holiness. I didn't have the word "holiness" in those days; in fact, I didn't have any words for what I felt and knew in

that moment. Even today, there is more I can't tell you about that experience, than what I can tell you. But I remember this much as clear as day: the physicalness of the place, and that my soul trembled with awe and love.

So, fifty years later I stand here, still stammering, but trying to be faithful to that moment of being blessed by the Earth. Perhaps we could even say that in some sense I was anointed in that moment, for *this* moment, when I speak out for love of the Earth. But even if that is so, I do not take it to mean that I am special. We are all members of the family of the Earth, no more and no less. I suspect that many – maybe even *all* children are thus anointed. What happens in such experiences is as if a great, clear space is opened up in the soul where God breathes forth goodness for the family of earth-creatures. It is crucial that we name and claim those experiences, which are core moments of transconceptual awareness and ecocentric conversion. They are moments of grace that come upon us unbidden, yet change the contours of our souls (Frohlich 2009:32-33).

For Frohlich, living in terms of authentic subjectivity, after her spiritual experience as a young child, meant having to be faithful in the ongoing journey of her life to that breakthrough spiritual awakening at the depth of her soul. In the years since that address, she has dedicated herself increasingly to working for the need to exit the Anthropocene era and to enter, what Albrecht (2015) has called, the Symbiocene era.

6. STEPHANIE'S STORY

A fifth story is provided by Stephanie Paulsell, a professor at Harvard Divinity and also a past president of the international Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality. She recounts a key experience from her own childhood which has turned out to be foundational in her life. She describes it as follows:

One morning in Oak City Christian Church, North Carolina, my dad is preaching my favorite of his sermons: 'Lost in the Mystery of God:' Like many books I've read and loved, I don't remember the words of the sermon, but I do remember how it made me feel. It made me feel like the world was opening up all around me, on every side. It made me want to kneel with all the devoted, everywhere. It made me want to lose myself in the mystery of God (Paulsell 2008:84).

Many years later, she chose her favourite of her father's sermons, "Lost in the Mystery of God", as the title for her presidential address. Her address attended to the place of childhood spiritual experience in a scholar's

study of spirituality. Her presentation implied the need for research on the relationship between a scholar's research commitments and his/her spiritual experience in childhood. As she put it herself:

The child hidden in the work of a scholar of religion might be one who found the religious instruction he was offered so enervating and absurd that he couldn't wait until he was old enough to refuse it. Or a child whose observation of religious practices in the lives of those around her, or in her own life, wrote a question into her heart so deeply that it could not be ignored. 'The hallways of religious studies departments are thick with ghosts,' Robert Orsi writes. The ghosts whom Orsi calls 'our invisible conversation partners, as real as the saints and spirits and ancestors of the religious worlds we study' include, as he reminds us, the adults in whose company our religious ideas, questions and desires took shape. But they also include the children we ourselves once were (Orsi 2005:14).

7. POPE FRANCIS' STORY

The present Pope was once a child. He is noted for, what I call, his spiritual self-presence of God's goodness, by which I mean his presence to himself, others, and the planet through his experience of God as a good God. We see this quality of presence radiated very often in his eyes and smile when he is reaching out to others. His predecessor, Benedict, greatly emphasised the need for truth, but I regard Francis as a Pope who gives priority to the need for goodness. This form of self-presence functions as a spiritual dynamic, by attracting others to the God of his experience. Among the ways in which he has communicated this spiritual dynamic are his washing the feet of a young Muslim woman in an Italian gaol on Holy Thursday in 2013; the very good relations he has with people of other religious traditions (for example, for the first time ever, a Patriarch of Constantinople attended the inauguration of a Bishop of Rome), and his declaration in May 2013 that God's salvation is available to all people of good will, including self-acknowledged atheists.

A clue to the Pope's largesse of heart is provided in his book with Rabbi Skorka, when he was archbishop of Buenos Aires. The then future Pope Francis remembers being four years of age – it was 1940 – and accompanying his grandmother, when two Salvation Army women passed by. He asked her if they were nuns. "No," she replied, "they are Protestants, but they are *good* (my italics)" (Pope Francis 2014). Although he grew up in, what was considered to be, a very Catholic country and would have been taught that all Protestants were going to hell, when he reflected back on

the incident as archbishop of Buenos Aires, he praised his grandmother's "wisdom of true religion". For Francis, true religion, in other words, is not true in practice, unless it is lived with the wisdom of goodness. This conviction began to develop in him as a child and further reminds us that, in every adult, there is the child we once were. This child abides in us in some way and processed and put his/her world together in the context of a call to fidelity to an innate desire to be a good and authentic person interacting with lived experience, especially lived experience with those in authority whom we loved and trusted for guidance about life. The Pope's story from his childhood, like the other stories I have treated, shows how positive spiritual experience in childhood can be foundational for a life.

8. MY MOTHER'S STORY

I began with a story about my father and me. My last story is about my mother and me. At the time of the story, she was navigating her life as a person aged 90 years, living in a nursing home with Alzheimer's and confined to a wheelchair. But sometimes when I visited her there, her first words to me were "You are manna from heaven", and her eyes would light up and she would give me a broad smile of joy.

Her words bring to mind the biblical story of the enslaved people who escaped from Egypt and set out on a journey to a land they believed God had in store for them. Readers will recall that their journey was long and arduous and that they began to get very disgruntled and to suffer from hunger and its effects. Then something extraordinary happened. They had an experience of what they called manna from heaven arriving to feed them.

My mother would have learned this story in childhood, and it obviously made a deep impression on her. Her greeting "You are manna from heaven" showed that she lived at that time waiting on God to give her sustenance to keep her going on the final stage of her journey to the promised home she believed God, at least some of the time, had waiting for her in eternity. Her greeting meant that, at such times, she may have been perceiving her caregivers as divine interventions and the nursing home as a divine milieu, to use the Jesuit Teilhard de Chardin's descriptor for the cosmos.

9. CONCLUSION

I have argued that adults are subjects of spiritual experience in childhood, which can be foundational for their lives. I also argued that, intrinsic to the subjectivity of a child, is a desire for authenticity, a desire to learn by discovery like Sarah, or by trust like Janet, how to detect, select, and commit to what corresponds to beauty, intelligibility, truth, goodness, and love in life, which for those in the Christian tradition will be connected with the God of their tradition. Obviously, being influenced by authority figures who relate with healthy experience of that tradition will assist the child in a direction that develops his/her innate spirit of authenticity, as was the case with Sarah, Janet, Stephanie, Mary, Pope Francis, my mother, presumably, and me.

In light of my argument, researchers in spirituality need to be aware that they and the adults they research and with whom they research were subjects of spiritual experience as children and that such experiences need to be adverted to in how research is done because of their possible transformative and enduring effects at a foundational level on the mystical life journeys of everyone involved in the research.

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Keywords

Trefwoorde

Childhood

Kindertyd

Spiritual experience

Spirituele ervaring

Authentic subjectivity

Egte subjektiwiteit

Researcher

Navorser