

What are we doing to our children?

Chris Walton draws attention to our most urgent task with help from **Margaret Swedish** and **Rebecca Mørch**

The Least of the Least by Chris Walton

Whoever does not receive the kingdom like a child, will not enter into it at all' (Mark 10.15).

We all will have puzzled about the meaning of this saying, but in all our puzzling we will have agreed about the general interpretation, that is to say that Jesus is saying that you have to be like a child before you can enter into the Kingdom. Our puzzling has been about the characteristics of a child Jesus was referring to. We come up with various ideas, like innocence, vulnerability; we differentiate between being 'childish' and 'childlike'. In doing this we hardly ever ask ourselves about the character of the Kingdom. The assumption most often is that we would wish to enter the Kingdom, so to do so we must become like a child in some way.

It is not easy to receive a reinterpretation of a passage so well known to us, and interpreted with such universal agreement but Ched Myers in his commentary of Mark (*Binding the Strong Man, A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*; Orbis, 1988) challenges us to just that.

The words of Jesus above come from the famous passage in Mark's gospel when the disciples prevent people bring children to Jesus so that he could bless them (Mark 10.13-16). But how many of us realise that just twenty verses before this (Mark 9.37) Jesus has said the following words:

'Whoever receives one such child (he had put a child in the middle of the group) in my name receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me?'

Before we look at these two statements closely together, it is helpful to understand their context.

In Mark 9.33-37 the words about the child are prompted by the fact that the disciples

'on the way' to Capernaum had 'discussed with one another who was the greatest'. Jesus takes the opportunity to once again teach them about what relationships are like in the new "way" (in the Kingdom). 'If anyone would be first, she/he must be last of all and servant of all' (v.35). Then come the words about receiving children. Jesus is clearly pronouncing that to follow him requires the acceptance of a social transformation. It is the transformation from an essentially violent social structure where it is assumed that status and worth is attached to those with power, influence and, often, domination, to the way of non-violence; reversing those assumptions about status and elevating the 'last' to the 'first'.

In Mark 10-13 the words about children are provoked by the disciples' rejection and dismissal of the children (the least of the least). Jesus continues to challenge the

disciples. The Kingdom means the turning upside-down of the social structure which includes their own inner community and their own families. He has already (9.36) put the child at the centre, 'in the midst', now he makes them face the fact that it is their behaviour towards the 'least' which will determine their participation in God's rule.

So now it is time to put the two statements together:

'Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me?' (Mark 9.37)

'Whoever does not receive the kingdom like a child, will not enter into it at all' (Mark 10.15).

This is no mere symbolic idea that if you become like a child in some idealised way you will enter into the Kingdom of God. It is the strong revolutionary statement that you will only enter the Kingdom if you receive children. Unless you offer children (the least of the least) status, your unconditional acceptance, your love then you have no hope of offering the same to others who are oppressed and marginalised by the present social structure. It follows that you are unable to enter the Kingdom where the "last" are "first" and the "first" are "last".

Margaret Swedish writes a weekly blog from America under the title: Spirituality and Ecological Hope. The one posted on July 31st 2008 caught our attention.



What are we doing to our children?

Fostering Ecological Hope
by Margaret Swedish



If we could see the crisis time from the perspective of the children, would that change things? If we project current trends into the next few decades, say to mid-century when there will be 2-3 billion more of us on an already over-stressed planet, you know, when our small children will be middle age, what will life conditions be like for them, and then for their children?

What are we doing to our children, to their hopes and dreams, their voices, as they try to speak to us of the future?

Well, we are feeding them fat/fast foods, we are making them obese, and we are putting them on prescriptions drugs by the millions and millions. We are jeopardizing their health because we have no time or patience to ensure healthy living, and we are numbing all their fears and anxieties so that these symptoms will not make us look at ourselves and the society we have created that is doing them so much emotional and spiritual harm.

Two news articles this week made me really depressed about our youth. The first, **Weight Drives the Young to Adult Pills**, was in the NY Times.

It's about how we are treating the problem of childhood obesity, fast becoming the number one health threat for the young, by putting them on statins. Adult drugs in children as young as 8.

Because we don't know how to give them a healthy cooked meal, we don't know how to say no to their fast food and soda pop cravings, and we don't know how to get them exercising, actually using their little bodies to do what comes naturally to them – play hard. We don't have time for it and

“My God, what in hell are we doing? What have we done? What kind of world have we made for our kids?”

we are ourselves victims – have let ourselves become victims – to the fast-paced, packaged foods, fast food, convenience foods, frenetic over-stressed, unhappy lifestyles that gave birth to this epidemic.

Within the next few years, the U.S. will be able to claim 25 percent of its population have type 2 diabetes.

This is a sign of a society in demise if ever I saw one.

Here is the other story printed in my local paper. It was regarding a debate going on in medical circles about **whether kids on drugs for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (the notorious ADHD) should be screened for heart problems.**

What? We've got millions of children who in this generation have somehow managed to get this diagnosis, and we have put them on drugs that compromise their heart health – higher blood pressure and heart rate?!

How did we manage to come up with all these kids with such problems – 4 million diagnosed with ADHD, more than half of whom take stimulant drugs like Ritalin that may negatively affect their hearts.

On these drugs for years. Statins, ADHD drugs, anti-depressants, anti-anxiety drugs – for years – children, teenagers, whose brains are still developing, whose hearts, lungs, muscles, bones, are still developing.

What a grand experiment! And yet, where is the society's confrontation with itself, the moment when collectively we say to ourselves, “My God, what in hell are we doing? What have we done? What kind of world have we made for our kids?”

Are we listening to these most precious canaries in the mine shaft – telling us that our world has gone toxic and we need to get out of the mine – fast!

LISTEN to our children! Listen to their stresses, their overweight, out-of-shape bodies, their plea for relief from anxiety and pain! These are not the personal failings of individuals and families, who then absorb such guilt and shame and embarrassment into themselves. This is a society-wide mental illness and is a reflection of a very, very unhealthy way of life.

We are biological beings as much as the birds, the animals, the forests. If these creatures tell us our Earth is in trouble, so do our own biological beings. If we want to relieve the stresses on the birds, the animals and the forests, and if we critique our society for polluting and overdeveloping and abusing our natural habitats – well, how about our children, our teenagers?

If we can reflect on what it would mean to love the ocean and the rivers, what would it mean, in this context, to love our children? They manifest that we have already made a mess of our biological home; they show as that we have already arrived at the point of crisis.

What will we do? Out of love, **out of love for them**, what will we do?

Thank you, Margaret...

My answer? Put the children 'in the midst' – it means put them **FIRST**.

Turn the page



Our most urgent task

by Chris Walton

'Magic Spots' is the name given to times of solitude in a special place. All Earth Education programmes include such times of silent alertness in the natural world. At the Ringsfield Centre we tread joyfully and lightly – these are sacred times and places.

Chris Walton is currently engaged in PhD research in which he is considering the relationship between Earth Education and spirituality, eco-literacy and childhood. Chris is willing to discuss issues at any time. You can contact him by e-mail GreenEditor@aol.com or at Ringsfield Hall, T: 01502 713020.

It is my belief that our most urgent task is to give children the opportunity to be 'in the midst' in God's natural world. To give them opportunities to have the space and the places to experience God's creation. Why do I insist on this? Let me tell you about the amazing consequences of doing just that. When it all seems so hopeless, when the issues, the problems seem so immense, suddenly we are awakened to a resurrection of hope when we listen to the children.

As I listened to the birds singing in my magic spot, I could see birds flying from one tree to another. I was wondering things such as, How do birds sing? However I could smell the air blowing through my hair. I could smell the natural smell of oxygen coming from the trees. Shalanda, 9 years old, descriptive writing of 'Your Magic Spot' (set by class teacher), 2007

In my magic spot I have noticed some really amazing things. I noticed a colourful ladybird and bugs. My favourite is hearing the wonderful trees going 'Wisha wisha wisha', it sounds as if they were really enjoying their selves. And the fresh air makes me think of a new world. Unnamed 10 year old, 'Magic Spots', 2005

'Breath is life; it is soul, the *anima mundi*. When we breathe we exchange ourselves with the world around us. On the in-breath, in the moment of inspiration, we not only take in the world, we are also nourished by it, in-spired by it. And then at the pause, so slight and so subtle, in that briefest of moments before the expiration, when we give back to the world what it has given to us, an alchemy occurs.'¹

Breathe on me, Breath of God
Fill me with life anew,
That I may love what thou dost love,
And do what thou wouldst do.
Edwin Hatch (1835-89)

At our Centre we find evidence that children are desperate for the opportunity to make the connections within themselves, with others and the earth which will open their lives to the spirit of God and to learn that if all things are connected then to improve our relationship with the earth is an urgent task. In my research I have discovered that some 40-50% of the children participating in these times of solitude for a mere three days are still seeking times of solitude at least once a week 3 months afterwards. In my ministry it has taken me years to persuade many adults to do the same!

My own theological understanding of incarnation, that spirit and flesh belong together not only in Christ but also in ordinary human beings, undergirds what I am suggesting. This immersion in the natural world with the companionship of those who are aware of the interconnection of all things will serve to make space in young lives for reverie. Gerard Bachelard suggests that reverie 'makes breathing easier'². My religious metaphors tell this story: the creator breathed his 'ruach' into humankind, because flesh and spirit belong together. I will let John Taylor take up the story:

'We might call ruach the power of [humankind's] personhood, the power of his separateness, the power by which he is recognised as himself. But it is also his power to recognise, and to be impinged upon by, the otherness of persons, things, realities which are not himself. For as Hegal says, 'the truth of personality is just this: to win it through immersion, through being immersed in the other'. My spirit, therefore, is never uniquely mine... It resides only in relatedness to some other. Spirit is that which lies between, making both separateness and conjunction real. It generates a certain quality of charged intensity which from time to time marks every person's relationship with the world around them and with whatever reality lies within and behind the world.'³

It is this 'charged intensity', this reverie which offers to children the space to discover that a flower, a tree or the idea that all things are connected, can command their attention. The ordinary becomes spectacular, the commonplace a moment of wonder. Giving expression to this together with others is heartwork; giving voice to the world. Paul van Buren describes the sort of 'disclosure' as a foundation for a life-journey which includes 'spirituality:

'Speech about God, or silence about God, for that matter... appears within the context of a sense of wonder, awe and joy before what is there for all to behold; the fact that we are alive, and that there is anything at all. The mystical, as Wittgenstein put it ... is not *how* the world is, but *that* it is. This sense of awe and wonder occurs when one is *struck* by the fact that I am, and that I am I, that a tree is itself, and that there is anything at all.'



Leaning against the rough bark of a gnarled oak tree I could hear the birds go twit. At the opposite end of the field there was an enormous spiky bush. The smell of the flower is beautiful. The flowers were as bright red as a red ruby which is really bright. The thing I thought was that I never knew it could be like this, it is amazing.

Sayo, 10 years old, descriptive writing of 'Your Magic Spot' (set by class teacher), 2007

Give children the opportunity, and through a different-to-the-classroom yet 'ordinary' encounter with the natural world children will begin to hear another language when trees and animals, the natural world communicate with them. It is a language that they had not known existed. Here is a seed for the growth of seeing that otherness does not mean separateness and discontinuity but rather togetherness and continuity.

In the magic spot I wrote in my diary about what I felt. I thought about lots of things, like what would be like to be another animal.

Unnamed, 'Magic Spots', 2005

Here is the beginning of reflecting that breathing in and out involves this child (and all of us) in the awesome interconnection of all things so that to articulate that experience thus: 'On a bit of moving air, on this fragile, slender, invisible thread depends the continuing act of creation'⁵ is not a quaint dream but the subversive act of reverie – our most urgent task.

Chris Walton

Magic Spots made my spirit fly free and see the plant in its natural [state] go free.
E. G., 'Magic Spots', 2005

My spot was in the long grass and was quite near the woods. I could hear wind in the trees rustle and I could see dew on the blade of grass. It was nice to be part of the world in my magic spot.
Jasmine, 'Magic Spots', 2005

This is reverie which is the beginning of an ecological literacy where 'The selfhood of a tree, the music, the girl, the mountain, confronts me in its absolute otherness, and also demands that I meet it in my own integrity... I am seeing "with new eyes". For now this other being meets me in its own authenticity, and I am face to face with the truth of it, not merely the truth *about* it.'¹⁶

'In industrial growth society we have for centuries minimized, suppressed, or entirely ignored the nature task in the first three stages of human development, infancy through early adolescence... Arrested personal growth serves industrial 'growth'. By suppressing the nature dimension of human development... industrial growth society engenders an immature citizenry unable to imagine a life beyond consumerism and soul-suppressing jobs... Too many of us lack intimacy with the natural world and with our souls, and consequently we are doing untold damage to both.'¹⁷

Our most urgent task is to put the children first. Then we may well indeed enter into this flowering planet and animated universe, the Kingdom of God.

The best part of Earthkeeping, I think, was the web of life because it was really fun and it was so tangled I thought we would never get out of it, and I suppose we won't.
Kate aged 9, Thank you Letters, 2002

Notes

- 1 Romanyshyn, R. D. (2002). *Ways of the Heart: Essays Toward an Imaginal Psychology*. Pittsburgh, Trivium Publications, p.65.
- 2 Bachelard, G. (1994). *The Poetics of Space*. Boston, Beacon Press, p.77
- 3 Taylor, J. V. (1972). *The GoBetween God*. Trowbridge, SCM Press, p.7.
- 4 van Buren, P. (1968). *Theological Explorations*. London, SCM Press, p.170.
- 5 Romanyshyn, R. D. (2002). *Ways of the Heart: Essays Toward an Imaginal Psychology*. Pittsburgh, Trivium Publications, p.65.
- 6 Taylor, J. V. (1972). *The GoBetween God*. Trowbridge, SCM Press, p.12.
- 7 Plotkin, B. (2008). *Nature and the Human Soul: Cultivating Wholeness and Community in a Fragmented World*. Novato, California, New World Library, p.6.

Who Will Save Us?

Rebecca Mørch's response to the challenge of this most urgent task was to write a book.

Rebecca is a mum and professional artist, who is inspired by the wonders of the natural world and passionate about protecting them. She decided to write *Who Will Save Us?* following her research of the Antarctic penguins for her artwork, and subsequent research into the effects of climate change.



The book is proving to reach those from 5 to 75+. It is being bought and successfully used by both primary and secondary schools. Some schools are basing their term/half-term curriculum on *Who Will Save Us?*. The 48 full-colour pages contain numerous illustrations and picture words, which enable younger readers and those with special educational needs to actively follow the story, focussing their attention, while provoking thoughts and questions.

Who Will Save Us? contains a heartfelt and engaging story about a small group of young penguins discovering their wonderful world, only to find it is changing at the hands of the humans. However, there is hope in store. Their teacher, Old Wise, explains that humans are clever and caring, and – when they all work together – they can make amazing things happen... The story is followed by a comprehensive and illustrated section on how we can all help, from energy saving to fair trade, and a listing of useful organisations. Therefore, the book covers the main aspects of climate change, from 'the greenhouse effect' to causes, effects and potential solutions, and offers a stepping-stone to further research and understanding of climate change.

In order to ensure the book was produced with a minimum impact on the environment and that it was distributed to create maximum positive action, Rebecca and her husband, John, decided to publish the book themselves. It has been printed in the UK, using Forest Stewardship Council (FSC – to create awareness of paper from responsibly managed forests) and 50% recycled paper, vegetable based inks and a biodegradable laminate on the cover.

In addition to the book, Rebecca and John set up 'The Who Will Save Us? Children's/Young People's Project'. This gives children and young people in schools and groups, like church youth groups, Guides and Scouts, the opportunity to have their own budget to help resolve climate change, and to help with other related issues. The budget is raised by the schools/groups buying the books at a reduced price, and selling them at the retail price of £5.99, making a profit of £2.50 per book. The children/young

people then 'work together' to decide how to spend their budget. The project is both educational and empowering. It encourages good citizenship and is already succeeding in helping to develop sustainability in schools and the community. Nationally,

primary and secondary schools are taking part in this project with some wonderful ideas and actions.

The couple are promoting and selling *Who Will Save Us?* via many charities including WWF-UK, Oxfam education, Friends of the Earth, Sustrans, Eden Project, Centre for Alternative Technology, the Science Museum and the National Marine Aquarium. Also, book sales are growing steadily via their website, independent retail outlets, catalogues and national wholesalers. Some libraries are now stocking *Who Will Save Us?*. In addition, the book has been requested as a competition prize by various organizations like the Forest Stewardship Council, The Wildlife Trusts, Girlguiding UK and Devon Libraries. There have been a number of positive articles and reviews, such as *The Ecologist* in their June edition and *Primary Science* in their March edition. Many events, conferences and book signings have been attended, including 'Hope Rising' at Exeter Cathedral, which Rebecca and John found incredibly powerful and inspirational. ■

Rebecca's belief is that every species has a right to live upon this planet, and her hope is that readers of *Who Will Save Us?* will enjoy the book, and will be inspired and empowered by it in some way.

Who Will Save Us? has acquired supporting statements, presented on the cover, from seven of the major charities involved with climate change issues. These are WWF-UK, Oxfam, Sustrans, Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, The Wildlife Trusts and I Count. The foreword has been written by Pen Hadow, the polar explorer who is embarking on 'The Arctic Survey' in 2009. Oxfam describes the books as "a beautifully composed and illustrated book that will inspire children and adults alike. A real example of how to explore what it means to be an active global citizen."

For further information on the book and project, and for purchases, please contact Rebecca or John at Rebecca Mørch Publishing Limited –
E: info@rebeccamor.ch.co.uk;
T: 01626 369514;
Visit: www.rebeccamor.ch.co.uk.