

Working from a shamanic perspective within pre-school education

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I recently got a rather unusual and specialised part time job - maybe a dream job - teaching and writing a music and movement programme tending to the emotional and spiritual welfare of children in a large inner city centre; children of 0-4 years old - little green shoots. I have felt for a long time that culturally we sell our children short despite our best interests. We live in a post-industrial modern world that wants our children to appreciate and connect to the natural world around them but then requires disengagement with that in order to grow up and be an adult.

We are taught to walk gently on the earth on the one hand, but then the governments legislate for policies that are a detriment to the earth and her inhabitants. We want our children to breathe clean air and eat good food yet live in societies that actively pollute the air and contaminate the food. We want them to be kind and respectful to animals yet give meat and milk that comes from the untold suffering of inhumanely industrially farmed livestock. How to make sense of that? And how to instil in our children, whatever their background, upbringing and familial cultural values, a sense of safety, agency and empowerment instead of blind entitlement or a sense of being too insignificant to have a voice?

Adopting a shamanic way of relating to the world and teaching that to our children can help make sense of these opposing realities. More importantly a shamanistic way of relating to the world helps

foster a sense of spirituality that is not imprinted with any dominant religious belief. By spirituality I mean a belief in the interconnectedness of all living things, a sense that there is something greater of which we are all a part - regardless of and including the diverse cultural shaping of this.

Yet how can a shamanic world view co-exist with a target-based linear education system? How can this kind of thinking be encouraged and taught in schools that don't even recognise the importance of, for example, music within the curriculum for basic wellbeing?



While there are many ways of working with shamanic perspectives, for me, a music and movement programme that integrated a Chinese 5 element Taoist perspective ticked all the boxes. Whilst many of the practices are too sophisticated for young children, the basic tenets of connecting to the earth and the sky (using singing for example), centring oneself in the body through basic chi kung movements, learning the directions and using the healing sounds and colours to express, release and change feelings are invaluable tools that both come from scientific well-esteemed cultural forms and have their roots in shamanic practices. More pertinently 5 element Chinese Taoism is a tradition (and a science) that spiritualises the body through the act of imagination; a cosmology that links the interiority of the body to the Earth, the Planets, the Stars (particularly the Big Dipper and the North Star) deities, animals, colours and sounds. It is this training and harnessing of the imagination that is one of the gifts 5 element Taoism has to offer to children. It is crucial to give children tools for using their imagination for health and wellbeing that that they won't have to discard later on in life as something that was invented for children and that has no value in the adult world.

Pre-school learning is amazing and imaginative and gentle. It encourages children to relate and connect to animals in an anthropomorphic way, to think magically: toys can fly through the air; pieces of plastic can make noises when you press them; the world is full of wonder and possibilities and tooth fairies, Father Christmases and the unexplainable technology of mobile phones and computers. However as they get older magical thinking almost becomes a marker of childhood; something to be discarded during the transition to adulthood, the potentials of the imagination left to flourish in the guardianship of horror films, dystopian sci-fi and New Age individual wealth creation programmes. In Western culture it is rare to find magical practices that bridge the world of child to adult. Practical shamanistic teachings can provide both the continuity and help navigate the disjunction, the split in thinking that is required when children realise that the practical constraints of adult life necessitate hypocrisy. School lessons in the importance of recycling and landfill and the travesty of supermarket plastic bags, organic fruit and veg and happy animals become translated at home into readymade processed food, kitchen bins overflowing with landfill waste, and the painful knowledge that all this is destroying the planet. Add to this the realisation that a western upbringing has its privileges and post-colonial legacies can lead children and young adults to feel shame, helplessness, anxiety and rage – feelings that are hard to contain and make sense of.

In my experience the disillusionment that accompanies those feelings can lead to distrust, fear and even a complete disavowal of the kind of connective thinking that encourages each person to develop some kind of spiritual connection with themselves and the world about them. Starhawk terms this connection "Immanence". This estrangement from connective thinking can have tremendous impact on a soul level.

The kind of self-confidence and agency that our younger generations will need to navigate the world and her contradictions can be nurtured at an early age by practitioners of shamanic knowledge who can encourage and teach children to relate to the natural world around them through their bodies, and to start to learn awareness that their bodies, and their feelings inside their bodies, are important and necessary. Structures that contain simple and basic tools for the validation of children's feelings as things that are normal and healthy are invaluable and compatible with pre-school education. We learn very early on, some of us earlier than others, that contradictions in the world of adults can be confusing and upsetting and often require a disengagement from feelings that seem too difficult to process and to keep connected is too painful. Yet connection to both feelings and to the natural world is vital for the healthy emotional, mental, physical and spiritual growth of children (and adults) and when the knowledge of the natural world is no longer experienced but taught in classrooms it is more

than ever crucial to teach children how to connect and feel instead of the process of rational eye learning through images and words.

Bodily, emotional and immediate, using the healing sounds is a core therapeutic aim of my classes. Each element is said to represent both a positive and negative emotion, both of which are natural and normal. The negative emotions can be released from the body using a vocable sound. Traditionally this is connected to an organ in the body, and the sound is said to release excess heat from the organ in question. The sound for the East for example is shhhh and relates to the emotion of anger and the liver. I am limited by both the age of the children and time constraints in terms of exploring the emotions so I simply invite them to make the sounds after playing the emotion.

For myself, when I discovered the Taoist Inner Smile meditation practices and the healing sounds nine years ago I felt something switch back on that had been present as a young child but that I had learnt to close and shut down. I remember learning to stop the smile feeling in my heart because I felt too bad, or because it felt too inappropriate in the face of others suffering. Yet over the years the resonance of the specialised knowledge of other cultures through quests for integration and healing have plugged me back in, gently bringing alive the specialised knowledge that I somehow have in me - an instinctive knowing of the immanence and connectedness of all - the singing wisdom of the land and her peoples that I had as a child.

I believe that connectivity to the earth around us, to nature and to our own feelings are fundamental evolutionary imperatives for the health of the individual and the collective. I also believe children are instinctively and unconsciously connected to the earth, nature and to their feelings. To be able to help them validate that connection; honouring it through using music, movement and sound, lays the foundation of self-confidence and trust in that connection. By encouraging children to connect or relate to nature/ the natural world and their feelings I believe we are laying the seeds to help our children grow into conscious global citizens.



References

*Taoism was originally a collection of folk religions and sub marginal local cults with strong shamanistic roots, that found written form around 400bc (Robinet 97).

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