

CHILDREN AND SPIRITUAL COMMUNITY

CHILDREN IN COMMUNITY

An Interweaving of Personal Observation and Experience with Children in Community:
Highlighting some Components of Community in General with Ideals and Concepts from
The Urantia Book

PITFALLS OF SPIRITUAL COMMUNITY

A Look at an Experiment with Spiritual Community: A Personal View of the Pitfalls
By Sara Blackstock

CHILDREN IN COMMUNITY

I would imagine that most parents who are students of *The Urantia Book* would like their children to grow into people who are committed to their relationship with God, seeking His will, doing good, seeking truth and beauty, and ministering to their brothers and sisters, but who would also be drawn into the worldwide community of students of the Fifth Epochal Revelation. Most of us know how this has changed our lives for the better in almost inexpressible ways, and we would want that for our children, if it would also be God's will for them.

Although some parents are sending their children to some well organized and established churches for their basic religious education and socialization, there are others who are trying to forge a new way for their children to experience community within the context of the Fifth Epochal Revelation; and then other parents are providing a rich experience in both paths.

A survey has been sent out to study groups of *The Urantia Book* around the country asking what they are doing for their children in their study group or communities. I think the results will tell us that there are some groups who have discovered ways to richly include their children in their spiritual community. However, from the little I know about what is going on, I have gotten the idea, that as yet, most parents who are students of *The Urantia Book* are not offering (or finding) rich spiritual experiences for their children outside of their home, and even in the home, the spiritual education often seems rather tentative and experimental, with some trepidation of turning the kids off, especially as they get older.

My steps are all gone for my son, now 20 and recently out of the home, who was brought up almost since birth in the Family of God community. At this point, after going down into the shelter at 13 and preparing for nuclear war based on messages, he is not particularly interested in spiritual community of any kind, although I am sure he does have a personal relationship with God.

So I don't have any personal, parental answers to the question: "How Do We Bring Up Our Children in Community So They Feel a Commitment to and an Integral Part of that Community? And is this desirable?" But I will attempt to offer some observations and experiences of over 25 years of working with children in groups — in community — and share some things that seem to help children to establish a

sense of community, and to correlate these with what *The Urantia Book* says about spiritual community.

My experience has been primarily with school age children (kindergarten—6th grade) as a teacher over the last 20 years. I now "manage" a staff of 12 teachers who work with over 250 children of these ages. Observation and experimentation are the techniques which we have used over the years, plus making a lot of mistakes with kids. The ideals and ideas of *The Urantia Book* put these past and present experiences into a meaningful framework.

I am director of a school age day care center which is on the school grounds of a public elementary school in Walnut Creek, California. We have successfully established (and are still evolving) a community involving at least 750 people, including parents, grandparents, kids and staff. I also worked for 15 years with the children of the parents who were co-workers and volunteers in the Family of God Foundation. These children were 2,3,4,5 years old and we kind of ended up hanging out together while their parents worked and because I was a teacher. I felt a desire, not only to entertain them, keep them safe and happy, but to try to establish some sense of experience of being a group and acknowledging God, for this is what the adults were doing. Eventually we discovered the importance of RITUAL, which, as you know from *The Urantia Book*, is a basic glue of groups, especially early developing groups. So allow me to begin from there.

FACTORS WHICH ARE PART OF COMMUNITY FOR CHILDREN IN GENERAL WHICH MIGHT TRANSFER TO SPIRITUAL COMMUNITY FOR CHILDREN

RITUALS

FIRE

The first thing which I found held these young children spellbound as we sat together in the front lawn was FIRE. "Fire was mixed up with magic in the minds of primitive fear-ridden mortals." "Some tribes worshiped fire as a deity itself; others revered it as the family symbol of the purifying and purging spirit of their venerated deities. Vestal virgins were charged with the duty of watching sacred fires, and in the twentieth century candles still burn as a part of the ritual of many religious services." (p.947C) So here we are fitting right in with magic and "primitive minds," and even fear. We lit a candle and very, very carefully passed it around as each child who wanted to said, "Thank you, God" (for something in his/her life). This was the beginning of a ceremony which was just repeated last year at the Jesus' birthday celebration with several teenagers and a little one held in its father's lap. This little "Thank you, God" ceremony has evolved of course and I will share with you some of the other things which seem to have enough meaning to the kids to have continued to be incorporated year after year. But, you have to have fire, whether it is a candle on the table at dinner, a candle passed around by the children, or carried by the children to an altar or special place.

TEMPLE BUILDING

The other thing which evolved was the building of a "temple." Children and building forts in special places is well known. And it had to happen here in the religious sense. Most of the time of our "ceremonies" were spent in building the temple and getting ready for our "Thank you, God" ceremony. The building of the temple was done with great care, experimenting, talking, and some arguing. All we needed to build a temple were some fairly big pieces of material, pretty if possible, some big pins (we used diaper pins, for those were available) and clothespins. (I think at one time we even "undiapered" a toddler in order to get a necessary pin.) The kids helped pin and tie the material to bushes and trees; we put some material and other little "totems" on the floor, our candle in the middle and sat in a circle.

FOOD

Snacks quickly became incorporated into the ceremony. We tried to have special things—little, tasty, pretty goodies which we could eat after we said, "Thank you, God." As there were always the more adventurous ones who showed how brave they were by putting their fingers through the candle as it went around, there were the hungry, eager ones who stuck their fingers into the cupcakes, or tried to get a

crumb before everyone else. Part of learning to function as a group (a community) is to wait for the group to do something together and then to choose to participate or to contribute. This learning comes hard for some two or three year olds, as it does for some 40 and 50 year olds.

SINGING/MUSIC

Fortunately we had some people in The Family of God Foundation with wonderful voices and musical ability and they would sometimes join us and sing with the kids. But if it was just myself and the kids, with my musical abilities, we were lucky to sing Jesus Loves Me, which we did regularly, only we changed it: "Jesus loves me, this I know; for the MASTER (not Bible) tells me so." And the rest of it is as you remember it.

CLEAN UP

This was where the sense of community responsibility came into play with these young ones. We all took turns in the important event of blowing out the candle, helping to take down the temple, collecting the clothespins, and putting it all back (and rediapering the toddler). This was usually a fun, free time, rolling around in what was left of the temple and inventing games with the clothespins and forming the soft wax of the candle into things.

Now, I would like to jump ahead about 15 or so years: last year at the Jesus' birthday celebration in Golden Gate Park, sponsored by Golden Gate Circle of students of *The Urantia Book*, there were about 12 children of many ages who built a temple, with the addition of balloons, streamers, poles, and rugs to sit on. We sat inside with several candles and a large birthday cake for Jesus. The adults were about 1/2 block away in a large circle holding communion and worshipping. As soon as we finished our ceremony with the candle, saying "Thank you, God", and cutting and eating the cake, we began to plan what we were going to do for the adults. I am sure the angels had directed me to a garage sale where I bought a full bolt of beautiful golden 60" wide material. It is at least 1/2 block long. The kids planned which rhythm instrument they wanted; who wanted to sprinkle the flower petals, who wanted to lead the "parade," who wanted to squirt the good smelling water on the heads of the adults, and who would carry the gigantic pumpkin in honor of harvest (you use what's available). Then we quietly snuck out of the temple, leaving it in total disarray. The kids held sides of the beautiful material and set up a rhythm with their instruments. I walked ahead playing an Ocarina (the only thing I know how to play and then only one song). When we got to the adult circle the children encircled the gold material around the backs of the adults sitting on the ground, enclosing them in an exquisite symbolic golden circle; some of the children threw the flower petals over their heads; others sprinkled water and still others went inside the circle and gave flowers to each adult. The pumpkin ended up in the middle and the children went and sat by their parents. It was magical and meaningful.

I am not sharing this to start a cult or to say how ceremonies and rituals have to be done. I am sharing this as an example of how rituals and ceremonies can be developed at the level of the children, with their input and can be allowed to expand, with adult guidance and organizational skills. They love it. It is a process and an attitude on the part of the adults which frees the children to do it their way, which can be beautiful, exciting, and full of spirit.

Before I go onto another factor of community for children, I would like to share one more ritual which has provided a certain feeling of community and depth of ceremonial experience at our center. We always have rats—yes, rats—those little furry cute things with wiggly noses, long whiskers, and ugly, horrible long tails. They do make wonderful, holdable pets, but one of the more valuable aspects of them is that their life span is not too long—about 3 years for most. This means that in a three-year span children can see them mate, have babies, raise them, holding them, loving them; and then in the end walk quietly and respectfully past a cage that has a hand made sign: "Please be quiet. This rat needs to die in peace." We have lost count of the number of our rats that have "gone on" (and this has been speculated on much by the children). We have had circles where the rat who has just died and is still warm is passed around very gently and reverently from hand to hand as they say their last good byes. A kindergartner can be sitting next to a 6th grader as they engage in this almost sacred ceremony. For some children, this is the first time they have encountered death, and it is awesome to see something very precious that was moving around and eating yesterday, be so still today. I have stood back and watched over the years what the children do with this situation when they are faced with death and grief; and children being very practical little beings inevitably ask, "What do we do with it now?" They know they have to bury it. So they get shovels and start digging. We actually have kind of a "rat graveyard" and some of the kids who have been there 4 or 5 years can point out where various ones are buried. I remember one group who dug for almost a whole day because the ground was so hard, but they finally gathered around a little mound with a cross on top, flowers from our garden, and a sign: "Here lies Smokey our hamster. Death by choking." They figured it was choking because he was found with his mouth open in the morning. I do not give input on the ceremonies, but I help them do whatever they need and want to do. They have archetypal concepts of what is needed. The kids have always put it in a box with beautiful material; dug a hole; put flowers on the box before the dirt; the cross comes from somewhere; then there must be flowers and a sign.

I remember the very first ceremony for the grandfather of all rats—MacRat, who died of old age. He was a special rat because he lost most of his tail when the kids were erecting a block building and his tail got under a block and was stepped on by a kid. Anyway he had half a tail, which increased their feeling of compassion. They not only did

all of the usual ceremonial things I have mentioned, but they got a teacher who could play a guitar, asked her to compose a song for MacRat, sat in a circle, some crying while the song was sung; they sat for many minutes of quiet remembering MacRat; then each got up and threw some dirt on the box in the hole and then it got covered up, flowers, cross, the whole bit. Do you see the value of this kind of ceremony? Some of these children had been denied the right to participate in a loved one's funeral because the adults couldn't handle the idea of death and funerals, but what a beautiful ceremony they put together when given the chance and how healthy was their view of death, of even an animal.

Enough said about rats. If I'm not careful, I will be accused of upholding a rat cult!

SOCIALIZATION

WHAT IS COMMUNITY?

The best definition I found for community was in the Webster's Unabridged Dictionary, way down the list of definitions: community—shared activity; social intercourse; fellowship, communion; esp: social activity marked by a feeling of unity but also individual participation completely willing and not forced or coerced and without loss of individuality. (In order that there may be a community, there must be conscious and purposeful sharing. —Ernest Barker.)

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF COMMUNITY?

"The living experience in the religion of Jesus thus becomes the sure and certain technique whereby the spiritually isolated and cosmically lonely mortals of earth are enabled to escape personality isolation, with all its consequences of fear and associated feelings of helplessness. In the fraternal realities of the kingdom of heaven the faith sons of God find final deliverance from the isolation of the self, both personal and planetary. The God-knowing believer increasingly experiences the ecstasy and grandeur of spiritual socialization on a universe scale—citizenship on high in association with the eternal realization of the divine destiny of perfection attainment." (p. 1985B)

In the Garden of Eden "The entire purpose of the western school system of the Garden was socialization. The forenoon periods of recess were devoted to practical horticulture and agriculture, the afternoon periods to competitive play. The evenings were employed in social intercourse and the cultivation of personal friendships." (p. 835C)

Socialization began very early for Jesus. We are told that during his infancy, "In the home where Jesus chanced to be there were two other children about his age, and among the near neighbors there were six others whose ages were sufficiently near his own to make them acceptable playfellows." (p.1355C) Joseph felt especially strongly about Jesus being allowed to play like other children so that he wouldn't be deprived "of the helpful experience of learning how to adjust himself to children of his own age." (p.1355C)

Between the ages of eight to ten, even though Jesus received his moral training and spiritual culture in his own home, and his intellectual and theological education from the chazan, his "real education—that equipment of mind and heart for the actual test of grappling with the difficult problems of life—he obtained by mingling with his fellow men. It was this close association with his fellow men, young and old, Jew and gentile, that afforded him the opportunity to know the human race. Jesus was highly educated in that he thoroughly understood men and devotedly loved them." (p. 1368)

When he was 8, because he did so well in school, he got to spend one week out of each month away from home visiting his uncles and aunts at their farms or fishing villages. Socialization for Jesus was not an exclusive, inbred, narrow experience. His community widened year by year, until he finally came to understand that his community was the whole of mankind.

One of the great joys of working with many children of six different ages is watching them develop as they learn the skills of socialization. At the day care center, we watch as the 4 1/2 year olds come into the program almost totally concerned with self and own needs, grow into 5th graders anxious to serve and explore the bigger world. As we watch hundreds of children mingle daily, we are given a multitude of opportunities to participate in aspects of their socialization—from problem solving and conflict resolution to self control; from organizing self and one's own stuff within a group situation to sharing one's stuff with others; from pursuing one's own interests to helping each other; from self-realization to being aware of the needs of others—striving for the balance of their own individual rights and the rights of the group. We watch as they grapple with the needs of self and the needs of the group.

WHAT CAN WE DO AS COMMUNITY TO GUIDE THIS PROCESS OF SOCIALIZATION?

1. Be sure that we as adults aggressively study and put into practice the excellent current understandings about how children develop. Much of what is written now is based on more than 40 years of research and study about how children learn and grow; about what is developmentally appropriate at certain ages. For example, you don't make a 2-year-old sit for one hour listening to a preacher preach. (You don't successfully make adults do that either.) Children learn by doing; they learn in teams. *The Urantia Book* is full of the ways children learn. It is the responsibility of every adult who is to be around children to gain this knowledge, look at their own background, and then look at the individual child and respect his/her needs, abilities and age.

2. Provide a safe space for children—both physically and emotionally—where children can be themselves; pursue self-realization; go to an adult for holding, clarification or mediation, and have expectations of what it means to belong to the group.

3. Create a sense of belonging by involving the child in discussion regarding the environment, the problems; respect and listen to children's ideas and concerns; create a vision for the child of his/her responsibility to make the world a better place for all children. "We are beginning right here with our own environment and here's what you can do."

4. Expose children to a wide range of other children of different ethnic groups, different ages, different socio-economic levels, different talents and abilities. This will help children from a young age appreciate diversity. We go out of our way in our day care to point out the different talents of children. Nathan draws castles that look like you could go right inside. Katie can write interesting stories. Alex can hit home runs. Susan is creative at making up dances. Becky can make puppets and put on shows. This happens hundreds of times during the day—pointing out to other children the strengths of each. Things have changed in the world of crayons now too, as far as recognizing ethnic diversity. Remember the days when there was only one crayon for skin color—flesh? Now there are crayons and paints in many beautiful tones of browns, yellows, tans, reds, which are called skin tones. Every religion and culture has its stories and fairy tales. These can be read to children daily, giving them a flavor from around our planet in cultural and religious diversity. Fortunately it is a strong mandate coming from all sectors of education to promote appreciation of diversity.

REQUIREMENTS, RESPONSIBILITIES, COMMUNITY OBLIGATIONS, AND SERVICE

1. SELF CONTROL

"And the *manifestation* of greatness on a world like Urantia is the exhibition of self-control. The great man is not he who 'takes a city' or 'overthrows a nation,' but rather 'he who subdues his own tongue.'" (p. 317A)

The first and most basic responsibility which I believe must be considered in order for a child to experience successful community is to receive a call from the adult world to be responsible for him/herself. Now, I must remind you that I am talking about school age children—kindergarten—5th grade. This would not necessarily be expected, at this level anyway, with children who are younger than about 4 1/2. I often ask the question of the younger and older children, "If you don't control yourself, who will control you?" Of course the correct answer is, "You will" (meaning the teacher in charge) or "Someone else will." If a child is lacking in self-control, (and who isn't at some level?) then we will let that child know that s/he is being watched by all of the adults and perhaps even by the group, if such watchcare is demanded because of a child's lack of self-control. We will let the child know when his/her behavior is out of control or unacceptable. The child is always given a chance to choose to correct this objectionable behavior. Children this age don't like the feeling that they are going to be watched all the time and this, put together with the possibility that an adult will control them if they cannot

control themselves, is a strong call for them to exercise their own power over themselves. I often put forth the saying in an appropriate moment that, "He who controls himself is stronger than a king who rules a city," and children of this age seem to be able to understand this. Children like the idea of freedom. The more they show they can control themselves, the more freedom they have to "be their own boss." Children are not "bad" if they lack self-control. They need help because their energy level is too high, they have eaten "bad" food; they have had to sit too long, etc. Often we help children control or use up their "negative" energy (energy which keeps the rest of the group from enjoying a story or listening to each other), by having them do jumping jacks 100 or 200 times. They feel much better after doing something physical like this. It is not used as a punishment, but as a technique to help them become more powerful over themselves. Sometimes a child will come to us and say, "I need to get rid of some energy. Can I jump before the story?" This is just one example of an endless array of adult guidance. You will notice the attitude here—one of helping the child, not punishing the child. And let me tell you, they know the difference; they know where you are coming from.

2. RESPONSIBILITY OF OLDER KIDS FOR YOUNGER KIDS

In our day care center, we often talk in terms of older-younger children and what this means. Another way of putting it to them is, "Monkey see; Monkey do." The older kids (8-11) really enjoy this. We have experimented with this premise. An older kid will do something like stick out his/her tongue around a younger one and watch the younger one immediately do it also. The "Monkey see; Monkey do" principle can have many helpful ramifications if you can get the older kids in a group on "the right track." At the day care center we now are reaping the benefits of working with the older kids since kindergarten. This can mean from 4 to 6 years of training. I would like to emphasize that we still have many problems, but we can ask any of the "older" kids to help out with a younger one and usually they will do so eagerly. This can be anything from tying a shoe (better yet, teaching the younger one to tie), to reading a story, to putting on a bandage.

We now have middle school volunteers who grew up in day care and have come back to work in our environment and are showing forth the fruits of years of training in taking the responsibility for the training of the younger. We can put these 7th or 8th grade kids in most areas, and give them responsibility for watching over five or six kids in their area. This could be computers, games, pool, drama, blocks, etc. Because they are older they seem to naturally have a sense of responsibility for the younger and like the position. They love to teach the younger ones what they know. And as you are well aware, teaching what you have just learned is a universe principle: "As morontia ascenders studied and worked on the worlds of the local universe, so spirit ascenders continue to master new worlds while they prac-

tice at giving out to others that which they have imbibed at the experiential founts of wisdom." (p. 342C) And on Government on a Neighboring Planet: "After the first three years all pupils become assistant teachers, instructing those below them." (p. 812C) Rarely do the older kids misuse their position; and if they do slip and utter a cuss word, we hear about it immediately from the younger, who cannot as yet handle the gray areas.

3. REQUIREMENTS AND COMMUNITY OBLIGATIONS

Once again, I am going to use examples from my "laboratory" at the day care center because I think the principles represented by these examples can easily be put into operation in other arenas of community. It is interesting to watch how some of the desires for overcare of the environment comes about as a natural evolution. Each year, there seems to evolve a group of kids, usually boys, without any adult encouragement, who seem to want to take on the responsibility of watching out for problems around the day care environment. These are probably the policeman of the future. They call themselves by various names—the three that have surfaced in the last couple of years are: The Peace Patrol, Spy Club Incorporated, and Search and Rescue. Each time a club surfaces, a group following an obvious leader type will come and say they want to set up a club. I ask them to write up for me their purpose and why they want to be a club and what they are going to do as a club. Their main purposes turn out with the same theme: to keep the peace; to look for and solve problems; to report on other kids who are causing problems; to look for suspicious activities of others outside day care. What we are observing here, I believe, is a desire on the part of school age children to participate in helping their community keep order. They can and want to take much more responsibility than most adults are willing to let them have. We are underestimating, undervaluing, and perhaps negating the abilities and altruistic desires of children if we do not allow them to take responsibilities in their communities, and in the community in general. *The Urantia Book* tells us how civic responsibility works on that other planet. "Children remain legally subject to their parents until they are fifteen when the first initiation into civic responsibility is held. Thereafter, every five years for five successive periods similar public exercises are held for such age groups at which their obligations to parents are lessened, while new civic and social responsibilities to the state are assumed." (p. 811D)

4. SERVICE

"Spiritual living mightily increases true self-respect. But self-respect is not self-admiration. Self-respect is always co-ordinate with the love and service of one's fellows. It is not possible to respect yourself more than you love your neighbor; the one is the measure of the capacity of the other." (p. 1740A)

There is no question that self-esteem is a building block of success for children. Of course this foundation is laid in the home, but the wider community adds to the child's self

esteem by expanding the realms within which the child can do things which make him/her feel good. Serving others is one of these realms that the adult guides should work vigorously to provide. It is not easy to find realms these days where children can really be of service, aside from perfunctorily emptying the garbage at home and cleaning the board at school. Our culture today is much geared toward making the child happy and fulfilling the child's needs and entertaining the child. This is not the way children develop compassion and a sense of responsibility toward others. All communities should find ways for its children to serve others. At our day care center, we take groups of children to a retirement home where they play games or just visit, listening to stories of war wounds and grandchildren that the elders tell. When I was working with the FOG children, I would pile these little 3, 4, and 5 year olds in my car and drive to the nearest nursing home. These old, old people just loved to look at and touch these little ones and the little ones were told they were helping the older ones to "feel life." And it didn't take much looking for the children to realize how little life there was around. They came away talking about how they made an old man smile who looked like he was going to cry; about how they gave an old lady one of their Bingo numbers so she could win and be happy.

Our middle school volunteers are so eager to serve when they come to the day care after school. We do not even begin to use this energy. A walk through Mission in San Francisco, giving pocket change to mothers, children and old men and women, puts a lasting image in a teenager's mind and perhaps even creates a desire to do something about it someday. Some parents think they are protecting their children by not allowing them to even see such misery, much less encourage them to do something about it. At Christmas, in our area of California, there is a very active Christmas bureau called Adopt a Family which collects food and presents and distributes them to thousands of poverty stricken families. We "adopt" 10 or so families at the center, and the children willingly give up a present or two of their own as they bring in presents for people that have almost nothing.

"Service—purposeful service, not slavery—is productive of the highest satisfaction and is expressive of the divinest dignity. Service—more service, increased service, difficult service, adventurous service, and at last divine and perfect service—is the goal of time and the destination of space." (p. 316C)

We can provide the opportunity for children to experience this "highest satisfaction" within community. When they see other children so serving, it quickens their own desires and they will model after what they see other children doing and telling about.

FOUNDATION OF SPIRITUAL REALITIES— VALUES AND LOYALTIES

The one quote from *The Urantia Book* which has saved me from the guilt of the many mistakes I have made with children and from my own human weaknesses which seem

to become more obvious when I am in the presence of children, is the quote on loyalty:

"Children are permanently impressed only by the loyalties of their adult associates; precept or even example is not lastingly influential. Loyal persons are growing persons, and growth is an impressive and inspiring reality." (p. 1094D)

In order to answer the obvious question of "What are these loyalties to which children respond?" and extend the meaning of this quote, let's look at page 2088:

"Always did the Master co-ordinate the faith of the soul with the wisdom-appraisals of seasoned experience. Personal faith, spiritual hope, and moral devotion were always correlated in a matchless religious unity of harmonious association with the keen realization of the reality and sacredness of all human loyalties—personal honor, family love, religious obligation, social duty, and economic necessity."

These loyalties are what children will be "grocking" on an unconscious level every minute they are in our presence. We do not tell them these things; we live them. They will be listening when we don't know they are listening; they will be watching our face as we have a chance to get into a movie cheaper if we lie (personal honor); they will be aware if we go out of our way to help others (social duty); they will watch how we treat each other and give support and love in our families (family love). Whether or not you have thought about religious training in the home will become more apparent as they grow day by day (religious obligation). They know, on some level how we make our money and on what we spend it. They look at how we use our free time. When we really become aware of how pervasively this truth about children responding to our loyalties must be in our everyday life, we are faced with the biggest challenge of spiritual community: living the truths and the values that are put forth in this revelation and which are operating in all genuine religions of the world.

Too often, it seems, parents, communities, churches, society have kept spiritual realities and spiritual development in a realm all by itself. "It's Sunday, or Saturday; time for your religious training. This is the time to pray, to read your Bibles, etc." Now, hopefully, students of true and genuine religion know better. They know that religion and spiritual growth is a way of life. But in order to make this a reality, we have to develop a continual and progressive consciousness about how we are living our values. What are some of these values which can be embraced in a living consciousness as we live with children in community?

RELATIONSHIP

"Values are not conceptual illusions; they are real, but always they depend on the fact of relationships." (p.1097A) If we are to translate this into working with children in community, we must ask the question: How are we interacting with our children, and how are we teaching our

children to interact with each other, which promotes the value of relationship?

It's nice to think of interaction and relationship as being a warm, loving, caring experience, and hopefully most of the time it is. But sometimes we notice that what kids around the center, and perhaps kids anywhere, are really interested in is: How do the adults solve their problems? Do the adults see problems as ways of learning things? What is the difference in the learning experience of a child when s/he observes a situation when (a) an adult getting a child in trouble because that child hit another and (b) the adult helping the two children to learn to express their feelings to each other and try to understand where the problem happened and how it can be worked out better next time? One way is punitive and isolating; the other establishes the value of relationship. This is not to say that the child who hit another won't experience a consequence. But the emphasis must be put first on the relationship between those two children and what went wrong and what can be done next time to solve the problem without hurting. These techniques lead the children to understand each other and look at each other's motives:

"You can best discover values in your associates by discovering their motivation. If some one irritates you, causes feelings of resentment, you should sympathetically seek to discern his viewpoint, his reasons for such objectionable conduct. If once you understand your neighbor, you will become tolerant, and this tolerance will grow into friendship and ripen into love." "If you could only fathom the motives of your associates, how much better you would understand them. If you could only know your fellows, you would eventually fall in love with them." (p. 1098C)

If children are encouraged to talk and listen to each other before they get in "trouble," so as to understand what went wrong, what was the other thinking or feeling; then the emphasis for the kids is not on, "Oh, Oh, I am going to get in trouble," but rather on the parties involved understanding what to do next time there is a problem. We use this technique with hundreds of children at the center. You will see even kindergarten children "talking about it" with each other. The teacher or adult stands by as a mediator or moderator, helping each to ask the questions which will bring forth understanding. This technique helps tremendously with creating a feeling a community, because it creates understanding which creates love.

PROBLEM SOLVING AND CONFLICTS

"New religious insights arise out of conflicts which initiate the choosing of new and better reaction; habits in the place of older and inferior reaction patterns. New meanings only emerge amid conflict, and conflict persists only in the fact of refusal to espouse the higher values connoted in superior meanings." (p. 1097C)

Most of us do fine when the road is smooth, but just let a few bumps come up like spilt milk on a nice tablecloth and

a problem becomes an excuse for dumping on a kid rather than a mistake from which a lesson can be learned. Children seem especially interested in problems and conflicts. When something happens around the center which is a problem we usually do not make an attempt to keep it quiet or bring it over to the corner. We want the children to see how mistakes are handled and problems are solved. We want them to hear two children telling each other how they feel. We do not want to isolate them from problem solving because it is often through problem solving that the nitty gritty of the spiritual life can come through. If "Mortals only learn wisdom by experiencing tribulation" (p. 556D), and "Success may generate courage and promote confidence, but wisdom comes only from the experiences of adjustment to the results of one's failures" (p. 1779D), then we must become more conscious of the many daily, normal and ordinary things that go on in children's lives which may help them develop wisdom from their failures, mistakes, and problems, rather than these becoming a breeding ground for fear of making mistakes and being put down for trying and failing.

Many a time I have heard a parent say in a voice, the tone of which adds, "You dummy," after something like, "What, you left your coat in your classroom again? (You dummy.)" Children first respond to body language and they are reading unnoticeable subliminal changes in our faces and bodies even before we come out with the tone of voice which puts them down for making a mistake. It is a wonderful experience for the child when a parent responds with, "Oh dear, you forgot your coat again. Let's see if we can work out a plan for you to remember it next time. What ideas do you have?" This may not seem like a spiritually developmental step for the child but the parent is teaching the child that she is not dumb for leaving their coat behind, and is helping the child to think about next time—what wisdom can be developed from the present experience. Things like this happen everyday which I think are the true foundation of spiritual realities for children—the true definition of morality—how we treat each other.

TRUTH, BEAUTY, GOODNESS

There seem to be many kids in the generation now in their early 20's or so who grew up without these concepts because their parents were afraid to emphasize these concepts in their moral training. Even teachers in classrooms have stayed away from these concepts for the fear of teaching "religion." I believe that community can be furthered with children when they are called to live according to the highest, to make decisions which honor the goodness of life and each other; to seek for truth and to do good to each other. It is so powerful when the call is made to groups of children, because there are the ones who heed the call and they can become the moral standard bearers to the ones who are weaker or less clear about where real strength is. We have had discussions about the "baddest people in the world," and of course, Hitler and Hussein are on

everyone's list. Then I have made a line for them in their minds and have told them that there is good and evil and that they can choose which side to be on. Some are really not sure what side to be on, because unfortunately in our society, good has been intertwined with female and wishy washy and not very much fun or exciting, so many of the more adventurous ones, especially the males, are lost to the side of the "bad," which definitely carries more adventure. We are told on page 159D that love of adventure, curiosity, and dread of monotony are traits inherent in evolving human nature. How can the adult world make Truth, Beauty, and Goodness adventurous? I am not sure what the answers are, but we must be creative and open to all possibilities and share with each other what we find out works.

Being out in nature is certainly one way to allow for a combination of adventure and religious experience. Kids will come together in community just at the thought of the possibility of having adventures together, of exploring the world and making discoveries. At the center we take periodic "backpacking trips" where we go up into the hills on a 5-mile hike with the possibilities of snakes and bulls, and high hills that one could fall down. On the last trip a few months ago most of the 50 or so of us were walking on the cow path but about 15 (all boys) wanted to climb a huge hill and walk along parallel with us on the hill. These were children of all ages. The more adventurous ones needed that extra sense of challenge. It looked to me like the hill was almost straight up and down. They loved the challenge of getting to the top and then getting down, falling and rolling and complaining about how hard it was, but they talked about the conquest of that hill all the way back to the center.

I would like to end this sharing with the call which Norman Lear gave in 1990 to about 8,500 teachers gathered at the National Teacher's Association Conference in Kansas. He gave forth a lot of wonderful ideals directly from *The Urantia Book* in this talk. He began by telling teachers everywhere to pay attention to the

"...mysterious inner life, the fertile, invisible realm that is the wellspring of our species' creativity and morality. It is that portion of our being that gives rise to our sense of awe and wonder and longing for truth, beauty and a higher order of meaning. For want of a better term, one could call it the spiritual life of our species."

And he ended his talk 45 minutes later after about 12 interruptions of applause with these inspirational words:

"The progress of our species, I believe, requires whatever horizontal progress must yet be made. The progress requires a giant vertical leap, a leap in our inner development. We have been embarked from the beginning of human history on a search for transcendent meaning, connecting with a higher order and that is where the next great improvement in our condition, where the next bit of progress must occur.

"We must respect each other's faiths, of course, but we can't be so squeamish or parochial as to think that one of the great human imperatives of our time, the rediscovery and reinvention of a common spiritual life in our desolate modern age, can or should be suppressed. The answer is not to banish these issues from the schools, it is to fling open the doors and find new ways of learning more about each others' values and spiritual traditions and what we all hold in common as a species.

"If one were to look at a very long river, one might see flora and fauna and trees and shrubs of varying nature along the many miles of its banks. If we think of our many and varied religions as uniquely different trees along a thousand-mile river and appreciate that they are all nurtured by the same stream, can we not agree to discuss that stream openly, freely and anywhere and everywhere as a river of common values? It will both nurture all of our spiritual traditions while uniting us as a people. In that metaphor, perhaps lies our challenge.

"There is ample reason to strip away our cultural conditioning and give free rein to a fresh examination of what we regard as sacred in the universe, on earth and in our daily lives. Now, I realize that you in this hall already face enormous pressures and problems in your classrooms; and you hardly need another responsibility, but the problems and needs of the culture have thrust this upon you. A civilization cannot progress when the majority of its youth devote their interests and their energies to the materialistic pursuits of the sensory or outer world. When the young neglect to interest themselves in ethics, philosophy, the fine arts, religion, and cosmology or in the values of truth, beauty, goodness, love, loyalty and devotion, civility itself ceases.

"So wouldn't it be wonderful, if in the process of teaching, you uncover or discover a new, more spiritually satisfying notion of progress; one that relies less on a millennial faith in technology and rediscovers the center of our being. One could imagine this search taking place in other institutions of our society, but none are as suited to this task or as likely to have as great an influence as you. 'In the long run,' wrote Henry David Thoreau, 'men hit only what they aim at. Therefore, though they should fail immediately, they had better aim at something high.'

"You could not aim higher or better prepare the next generation for the world that we live in than to teach it to look deeper into itself to that place that humans from the very beginning of time have shared—the same sense of awe and wonder as they groped for meaning. I thank you so much."

And I thank you for going with me on some of my personal journeys with children. If you and I and all other adults get clear on our own values, attempt to live them, and courageously, assertively, and lovingly go forth with our younger ones into the adventurous light of God's will, then most of them will come along, eventually. And remember we are

not doing this alone. Each of our children has or will have his/her own Thought Adjuster. The Universe Mother Spirit encircles each one with the seven powerful adjutants; the Spirit of Truth is pervasive, and there are millions of angels

of all types who stand by willing and ready to help bring us and our children into the everlasting community of our Father's eternal worlds of love and service. All we have to do is live the truth!
