

*“Ten times a day something happens to me like this – some strengthening throb of amazement – some good sweet empathic ping and swell. This is the first, the wildest and the wisest thing I know: that the soul exists and is built entirely out of attentiveness.”*

*“Still, what I want in my life is to be willing, to be dazzled—to cast aside the weight of facts, and maybe even to float a little above this difficult world.”*

*Mary Oliver*

Your children are not your children.  
They are the sons and daughters of  
Life's longing for itself. They come  
through you but not from you, and  
though they are with you, yet they  
belong not to you. You may give them  
your love, but not your thoughts. For  
they have their own thoughts. You may  
house their bodies but not their souls,  
for their souls dwell in the house of  
tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not  
even in your dreams. You may strive to  
be like them, but seek not to make  
them like you. For life goes not  
backward, nor tarries with yesterday.

Khalil Gibran

In preparing for this service, I was offered the opportunity to consider how my spiritual life and work life intersect.

I grew up going to a big Mennonite church, then having a small Quaker meeting in our home after church. We also had silent meeting most mornings before going to school. In hindsight, I think I learned from silent meeting how paying attention can be a sacred act. I learned to be attentive to my thoughts as well as others', and I learned to consider the act of listening to be holy.

For some time, I have felt certain that if I was meant to do anything, it is to be with young children, and to practice this sacred act of attentiveness. For those of you who don't know, I work as a preschool teacher at Allen Creek Preschool. Our classroom consists of 10-12 3-4 year olds. Allen Creek is a psychoanalytic school, which serves a typical population. The psychoanalytic identity refers more to the philosophy that feeds our teaching than to the children who attend. What I have found that to mean is that in our education, we are focusing on the inner life of the child. This approach to teaching young children feels like a good fit for me, because it makes use of what I find to be sacred: being attentive to who each child is, and learning from them about how to observe the world more fully.

We are all such emotional beings, and in working with young children, we have an opportunity to give them the gift of our attentiveness. We can notice and name their emotions. We can look at a behavior with the perspective of what emotions lie beneath it. There is also the wonderful opportunity to learn from young children how to be more attentive. My goal in work and life is to listen deeply, and let them express whatever their truth may be. It has been said that an examined life is one

that is given the opportunity to become most human. In working with children, I find myself offered this opportunity daily.

Loris Malguzzi, the founder of the Reggio-Emilia philosophy in Early Childhood Education says, “Observe and listen to children, because when they ask, ‘Why?’ they are not simply asking for an answer from you. They are seeking the courage to find a collection of possible answers.” I believe that children have ways of looking at life that we have gradually lost over time. Before the age of 4, most children have not fully developed what psychoanalysts refer to as “mentalization.” This means that they do not understand that their thoughts are separate from others’. So, they assume the people around them can read their minds, can know their thoughts without having to tell them. As they master mentalization, they can think about a person or thing without physically being with that person or thing. In the process, they are discovering that their thoughts are their own, and they experiment with how to distinguish between thought and action.

Once mentalization is mastered, children can use this skill to develop imagination, because they are able to perceive a mental image and understand that it is different from reality. Imagination is an important way for the child to learn to regulate their emotions. With imagination, they can think about why something might have happened, about what other feelings might feel like, about how others might feel. As such, regulation of emotions is important in developing relationships.

I find that tuning in to a child’s imagination is a way for us to remember to extract meaning from simple things. It gives us a chance to look at the world through a broader lens. This can help us to see old problems in a new light, to be resourceful and find solutions. It can help us to deepen our relationships. It may help us to

think of what is good or holy in another person. It is a sacred act. In a book I have been reading to the kids lately, there is a great illustration of the difference between illusion (the freedom to imagine) and reality (the experience of lacking imagination, and being confined by logic and rules).

(read from Phantom Tollbooth: Illusion/Reality p. 115-119)

When we take the time and interest to listen to the children, and to imagine alongside them, they sometimes have such deep insight for us. For example, once I was having a conversation with the children about where we see light. Lamps! Stars! Moon! Sun! Candles! Fire! Then one girl said, “Eyes.” She was talking about a deeper concept of eyes being “lit up.” The light in our eyes when we express love, tenderness, compassion, or excitement is something that is too easy to overlook, but here was a 3-year-old, who not only noticed, but was able to identify it. When Quinn was in preschool, he said to me, “I love when your eyes shine on me. Do you love when my eyes shine on you?” A child in my class this year expressed love to me once by telling me he wanted to climb into my heart. Young children have ways of expressing tenderness that we have somewhat forgotten. They offer us reminders, which beg for us to use our imagination.

Pope Francis described tenderness this way: “It is the love that comes close and becomes real. It is a movement that starts from our heart and reaches the eyes, the ears and the hands. Tenderness means to use our eyes to see the other, our ears to hear the other, to listen to the children, the poor, those who are afraid.” I like to imagine children expressing themselves this way: from their heart through their eyes, ears, and hands. Love, yes, but also fear, sadness, excitement, joy, anger, loneliness. Sometimes it is many of those feelings at once. I like to imagine the

pathway between their hearts and their limbs being so short, that the feelings are fresh: as if the feelings don't have time to be filtered or watered down. The children offer us their fresh perspectives on life when we listen deeply and intently, when we open ourselves to the world of illusion. They sometimes have ways of telling us what we may intuitively know, but have fallen out of the habit of noticing.

Reflecting on these things has taught me this: attentiveness and imagination are holy, and children are vessels for our understanding of them. Listening to children is a sacred act, and we are offered it daily.

In your hands

The dog, the donkey, surely they know  
They are alive.  
Who would argue otherwise?

But now, after years of consideration,  
I am getting beyond that.  
What about the sunflowers? What about  
The tulips, and the pines?

Listen, all you have to do is start and  
There'll be no stopping.  
What about mountains? What about water  
Slipping over rocks?

And speaking of stones, what about  
The little ones you can

Hold in your hands, their heartbeats  
So secret, so hidden it may take years

Before, finally, you hear them?"

— Mary Oliver, *Swan: Poems and Prose Poems*