



Table of Contents

<i>Rachel Reeder</i>	5	Speaking to the Rock
<i>M. Douglas Meeks</i>	9	Speaking the Gospel Publicly in North America
<i>Juan J. Sosa</i>	17	Renewal and Inculturation
<i>Jeremy Hall</i>	25	The Gospel and the Welcoming Heart
<i>Frank C. Senn</i>	33	Preaching in an Age of Entertainment
<i>Rochelle Y. Melander</i>	41	Inviting People into the Mystery of Christ
<i>Peter M. Ghiloni</i>	49	Guides for Celebrating the Eucharist
<i>A Folktale</i>	53	The Man Who Had No Story
<i>Sharon E. Sutton</i>	57	Stewardship Education through Ritual
<i>Christie L. Jenkins</i>	63	Caring for Creation
<i>David N. Mosser</i>	67	Welcoming the Sojourner
<i>Nathan R. Kollar</i>	71	Rituals and the Disenfranchised Griever
<i>Jeannette Angell</i>	81	Evangelism and Hospitality in the Celtic Church
<i>Claude Poirier</i>	87	Vacation-time Liturgies
	92	Illustration Credits



I WISH A BETTER EARTH

Learning Stewardship in a Multicultural Society

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STEWARDSHIP—that process of managing one's life and property in a way that respects the rights of others—is an enormous challenge in a multicultural society with its competing needs and values. How can people learn to manage their lives appropriately when there is so little clarity about what is right and what is wrong? How can those who are struggling to share increasingly limited resources truly respect the rights of people who are so different from themselves? How can we help children protect and share the fruits of the earth when our educational system requires them to be so competitive? In this article, I suggest that the affective nature of ritual may be the one tool powerful enough to help us bridge cultural differences and to develop a new vision of stewardship.

Conversations with children

For the last few years I have been involved in creating a program for elementary and middle

schools that involves children in understanding issues of stewardship in a multicultural society. Students begin the year by studying urban design concepts in order to understand the physical and social qualities of their local neighborhood. During the second semester, they work with teachers, parents and community residents in an effort to make their environment just a little bit nicer. The community-improvement projects that have been completed include a wildflower garden, a mural, a clean-up campaign, a tree planting and interior decorations for a principal's office. By learning about the urban environment, then developing the skills and social responsibility to solve an identified problem, children are encouraged to develop a "we" that can work together to bring about positive change in the school community.

The program also provides information about children's perspectives on neighborhood life to designers of the urban environment. To this end, I asked children who participated in last year's

program to complete the sentence: "I wish my school community . . ." Here are the "wishes" the children most frequently expressed:

*I wish there weren't so much trouble
I wish there were no robbers or rapists
I wish it were a safer place for me to live
I wish people didn't drink and take drugs
I wish there were no guns or gangsters
I wish everyone could have a bodyguard
I wish people were kinder and not so rude
I wish we would help those who need help
I wish we had more houses and jobs
I wish we could get rid of pink slips
I wish there were homes for the homeless
I wish there wouldn't be poverty
I wish kids weren't poor
I wish broken-down buildings would get fixed
I wish there wasn't junk all over the ground
I wish the whole neighborhood could be a garden
I wish no one threw garbage in the seas
I wish it wasn't so smelly and noisy
I wish we could plant trees and flowers everywhere*

You might assume that these wishes were written by disadvantaged children coping with the daily affronts of poverty and urban decay. They were, in fact, written by about five hundred first-through-eighth graders in schools across the nation who on the surface are totally dissimilar. One school is surrounded by unemployment, garbage, drug vials and hopelessness. Another is filled with abundance and the bustling rush of high achievers climbing the ladder of success. It is apparent, however, that my respondents share similar visions of their different worlds: visions of violence, poverty, rudeness, lack of civility, ugliness and negligence.

Another similarity that I have noticed in talking with children is their belief that ordinary citizens can do nothing to make things better. When I suggest that people *have* been able to bring about positive change in the past, they insist that the only possible solutions are the National Guard, war, the police, vigilantes, bulletproof vests or (as the poem says) "for everyone [to have] a bodyguard."

Learning the wrong lesson

Walt Whitman wrote: "There was a child who went forth every day and the first object he looked upon, that object he became, and that object be-

came part of him." The physical environment bears the imprint of society's values. We create it through policy decisions, through design, through our behavior. Then it reflects who we are. We internalize its values, believe its messages, reinforce its patterns of behavior. Now just think for a moment about children who "go forth" into a world that they perceive as unsafe, unkind and ugly. How is that message being internalized? What behavior is being reinforced?

In recent years, there has been a lot of talk about the failure of children to learn. The proposed solutions focus primarily on regulating the output of children and teachers to comply with governmentally prescribed standards. "Get tough" suggestions include dividing the week into so many minutes per skill, ensuring that each child is focused at all times on completing a specific task, and increasing accountability which, of course, requires increased testing to document what has been accomplished.

I thoroughly disagree with this perspective. I believe that children *are* learning and that what they're learning is quite frightening; namely, that adults lack the will to make a caring and beautiful world, the spiritual resolve to address problems except through law enforcement, and the vision to invest in ourselves the same power that we've invested in keeping gas prices down. It is no wonder, then, that the numerous school reforms have done little to improve education. They have focused on mechanically improving intellectual output but have overlooked the social context in which both the poor and the privileged seem to have lost hope that they can make a difference in the world. Without this hope, the learning process loses its fundamental meaning and purpose, which is to better the human condition.

What would we have to do to rekindle the hope that even small children can contribute to the earth and its inhabitants? How can we restore to children the harmony and civility that have been diminished in our relationships with persons and with the world? How can we reinvent an educational process that has meaning and purpose?

Restoring harmony and civility

The educational challenge, as I see it, is one of reexamining our way of being, our basic moral



commitments to society, our struggle to express those commitments in everyday life. As someone long involved in the arts, I believe that creativity is a portal to such reexamination. All creative people seek to restructure their world with new images and ideas because of their persisting dissatisfaction with the way things are. They question the accepted, consider the unrealistic, search to escape the predictable.¹

Although creativity is often associated with self-indulgence, fantasy or flamboyant irresponsibility, it is also the way that people express their most fundamental values. Whether explicitly acknowledged or not, a moral decision is made each time the earth is altered through human activity.² In my work with students, I emphasize that being creative is about causing change—positive or negative. The act of creativity is fundamentally an expression of one's moral values and should involve thoughtful questioning of what is right, what is wrong, and who will benefit.

Moral imagination of this sort requires an ability to be compassionate, which is not at all the same as being sentimental. In *The Moral and Spiritual Crisis in Education*, David Purpel differentiates these two concepts. Being sentimental, he says, brings on an inward, nostalgic feeling; it causes guilt and a sense of inadequacy that weighs heavily on the shoulders of powerless individuals.³ Being sentimental is saying, "What a shame there's so much pollution." The context in which a given problem is occurring remains unchallenged. The pollution is out there, objectively resting under a magnifying glass, separate from its dispassionate observers.

Being compassionate, on the other hand, is an ability to look outward at a problem's context, placing the burden squarely on the shoulders of societal values.⁴ The voice of compassion says, "As long as extravagant, excessive lifestyles are signs of personal and professional success, the remains of those excesses will continue to outstrip all efforts to clean up the environment." This approach turns observers into participants who must confront their collective responsibility for creating the context. Compassion, then, puts the social critic in a position to act; it is fundamental to moral vision, developing regard for others and making the sacrifices required to "dress and keep" the fruits of the earth.

But how will change occur if people do not believe in their own power to improve their lot? A social-change theorist, Amitai Etzioni, maintains that social progress requires knowledge, shared values and a clear set of goals⁵—not the sort of technocratic, measurable goals that motivate our educational system but, rather, a "mission" that becomes a focus for people's energy and draws them together.

John Lerner, a social activist interested in group dynamics, puts the idea another way; he shows how social progress occurs when large numbers of people feel they are part of a "we" that is committed to a larger purpose. "We need each other," says Lerner, "we are mutually interdependent, and the height of pathology is persons who have convinced themselves that they can be autonomous."⁶ Yet all of society's recitations emphasize independence, autonomy, individuality, competitiveness; and education echoes this chorus. How can the complex institutions of modern society, where individuals seem in perpetual conflict, develop a "we-ness" or, "be nice and respect one another?"

Searching for meaning through ritual

David Purpel offers his own perspective on the issue. He believes that what is needed is "an overarching mythos of meaning, purpose, and ultimacy that can guide us in the creation of a vision of the good, true and beautiful life and in the work that this vision creates for us."⁷ He suggests that religion, as a narrative about the aspirations of society, can help to bridge diverse cultures and provide a sense of mission. I became interested in Purpel's perspective because his description of religion's role in education parallels my thoughts about the role of art in education. Religious rituals share with art a capacity to involve people in exploring the mysteries of the human being. Rituals transcend both linguistic and cultural differences. They give expression to the individual, while creating a collective imagination and spirit that allows a community to comprehend its relatedness.

I am not speaking about the virtuoso arts that evoke passive appreciation from well-educated visitors to museums, concert halls and theaters. I refer instead to the arts of tribal and folk cultures.⁸

Like the liturgy, those arts use ritual in such a way as to allow a group to experience their collective purpose. As participants repeat a gesture or ceremoniously act out a prescribed pattern, a sense of social bonding and communality occurs. The group is empowered by being actively expressive within the boundaries of established conventions. Through ritual, participants acquire a point of reference outside themselves, a sense that they are doing something for a larger purpose, that they are the inheritors of what has gone before them. For children ritual is an aesthetic way of internalizing society's finest aspirations.

Unfortunately, rituals have virtually disappeared from the social life of secular institutions. As a high-tech society, we are more fascinated by science than by art or religion. We are happier to be spectators of virtuoso performance than witnesses of collective purpose, and more comfortable with objective, rational discussions than with spiritual, magical processes.⁹ Overreliance on the left brain has limited our potential for acquiring a language of responsibility to the earth and to one another.

Imagine a typical social exchange in modern life: a meeting of educators discussing a favorite topic—school reform. The meeting has been designed on a bell curve. Easy decisions, like approving the minutes from the last meeting, will be handled first. Harder ones, like which programs to fund or cut, will be made after the latecomers arrive but before people begin to leave. The end of the meeting will be devoted to an open-ended topic such as how to teach more effectively. A clock in the margin of the agenda will keep everyone on track, following the inevitability of the bell curve.

Within this rigid, bureaucratic format, the group will address only the most pragmatic issues. Their focus on decision making will create a false notion that "right" answers exist for every question. At no point will they develop their sense of social bonding, experience their collective purpose, pay homage to the unanswerable, contemplate their inheritance of human history.

Imagine what might happen if these same educators were to dispense with their meeting and sit in a circle in a beautiful, candlelit room. Imagine if they were to get rid of all the posturing and

engage in silent communion. Imagine if they wore wonderful robes, sang beautiful songs, shared a libation. Imagine if they allowed art and religion to shake hands and make visible a compassionate, purposeful way of life.

I can imagine it. In fact, it is the only way I can imagine that we will be able to grant children's wishes for a better earth. It is the only way that we will be able to overcome the tremendous odds that are stacked against those children for whom drugs, crime and violence are part of everyday existence. It is the only way that we will be able to bridge the widening gap between poverty and affluence, and develop respect for one another. It is the only way that we will be able to help children make the whole earth a luscious garden where "every tree . . . is pleasant to the sight, and good for food" (Genesis 2:9)—an earth where life flourishes alongside awareness of good and evil.

Notes

1. S. Arieti, *Creativity: The Magic Synthesis* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), p. 62.
2. Y.-F. Puuan, *Morality and Imagination: Paradoxes of Progress* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), p. vii.
3. David Purpel, *The Moral and Spiritual Crisis in Education: A Curriculum for Justice and Compassion in Education* (Granby, Massachusetts: Bergin and Garvey, 1989), p. 43.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Amitai Etzioni, *The Active Society: A Theory of Societal and Political Processes* (New York: Free Press, 1968).
6. John Lerner, *Surplus Powerlessness* (Oakland, California: Institute for Labor and Mental Health, 1986), p. 176.
7. Purpel, *Moral and Spiritual Crisis*, p. 68.
8. G. Anzaldúa, "Tlilli, tlapalli: The Path of the Red and Black Ink," *Multicultural Literacy: Opening the American Mind*, eds. Rick Simonson and Scott Walker (St. Paul: Graywolf Press, 1988), p. 42.
9. Sharon E. Sutton, "Searching for Meaning in the Ritual" in the W. K. Kellogg Foundation Fellowship Program Newsletter *Focus* 3:3 (November 1989): 8.

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