

YOUNG PEOPLE AND SPIRITUAL AWARENESS

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ENTER ANY GOOD RELIGIOUS BOOKSHOP and wander over to the section headed 'Spirituality' and you will find there a plethora of works addressing almost every aspect of spirituality in many different guises: Celtic, feminist, black, creation, Eastern and so forth; all have well-worked-out advice on spirituality growing from and appealing to a particular perspective. All, in some sense or other, are out-growths or developments from the single stock of salvation history – paths towards personal and communal salvation.

What you will not find in anything like such abundance are works around spiritual guidance of young people or the spirituality of young people. Certainly there are some such works but for the present let us accept as a fact that the number of such works is few. One plausible explanation for this lies in the fact that books and articles concerned with spirituality tend, as a rule, to come from practitioners, or devotees, or gurus of a particular approach and these, more or less suitably, recommend their readers to practices or pursuits in line with that approach. How many adolescents or teenagers does one find in print? How many parents or teachers or catechists recommend to their younger charges the written works of other young people? The answer to both questions is 'very few'. That in itself should be reason for a note of caution – whatever resources exist for young people, or for those who work with young people, in the area of spiritual development or spiritual guidance, they tend to come from the top down. They are written by adults for adults, and occasionally by adults for young people, and somehow in looking at what it means to discuss the spiritual guidance of young people we must try to distinguish the adult agenda at work, be that the agenda of the teacher, the catechist, the parish priest, the parent, or whomsoever. Such an agenda is often not the best starting point for young people.

Now, that is not to dismiss the value of those works which seek to help the young to understand themselves, nor those which help adults understand the young, but the really interesting approach in this area of spiritual guidance of young people is from those who are prepared to listen to the experiences of young people in a manner which allows

support, encouragement, challenge, growth and learning to happen within the context or scope of the Christian community. This is no longer a top-down approach, but opens the adult in the community to accept and learn and grow from the exchange with young people and the challenges which that exchange produces, as well as helping the young people in ways which are appropriate to their needs and situations.

That is the broad thrust of what follows, in which it is proposed to do four things: firstly, to try to identify the content of the spiritual as that word is used in this article; secondly, to look at the kind of work presently done with and for young people and the inspiration for it; thirdly, to say something about the variety of the spiritual experience of young people as it has surfaced in the work of Southwell House Youth Project; and finally, to make some modest but concrete suggestions about the spiritual guidance of young people.

Southwell House Youth Project

A brief word of background, to put these reflections in context. Southwell House Youth Project is a residential youth centre established by the British Province of the Society of Jesus in 1988 in London. Its remit is threefold: firstly, to work outside of formal education with young people between the ages of 14 to 25 (although in reality the majority of these young people are in the 14 to 18 age range): secondly, to work in a reflective and helpful way with those adults who themselves work with young people: teachers, catechists, youth workers, school governors etc.; and thirdly, to develop programmes and exchanges which reflect the links which exist across Europe both inside and outside the Jesuit networks.

The young people who use Southwell House, about 5,000 a year, are drawn from every conceivable background and represent an enormous diversity by any measurable indicator. Some come as part of a school programme, voluntarily or otherwise, while others are from a faith group, Christian in the main, but not exclusively so. Some come residentially, others come only for the day. Some choose to be here because of their own interest in an area such as social justice, or homelessness, others are sent on Leadership Courses or the like. In short, it is not what brings the young people to us which is always most important, but rather what happens once they get here.

I

There is great play made of the term *spiritual* in the present time. Along with its most common companion *development*, the word pops

up in the most surprising places. Within the educational world no school mission statement (even for schools with no religious affiliation), or OFSTED report, or guideline for curriculum planning can escape the need to say something about the *spiritual development* of young people. The phrase is present too in local and national authority youth-agency aims and objectives. One encounters yet more buzz words which touch on the value of *holistic* approaches involving the formation and development of the whole person from many aspects: physical, emotional, social, personal, psychological, intellectual and sometimes, too, even religious. If such development is an aim then an important part of realizing that aim is a strategy towards action with all that implies in terms of target-setting and achieving.

But it is not immediately clear that there is a single accepted use of the term *spiritual* or its companions: *spiritual development*, and with it *spiritual guidance*, are not straightforward in their meaning. Before exploring either any further it would be wise to say a little more about what we mean by *spiritual* and *spirituality*.

Spirituality is not a term synonymous with a philosophy of life although a philosophy of life may well be one part of what constructs a spirituality. It is not, for example, an adequate response to the question, 'What is the spiritual or spirituality?' to say that potentially it embraces everything: the world of rock and pop music may well be an aid to a young person in uncovering some questions of their own but it is not an end in itself. Likewise an overly permissive attitude towards a culture of sex and drugs may seem to offer some fulfilment for the present but it is not deemed to be a suitable expression of all that is noble or of value in the journey of the human spirit towards fulfilment. Nor should any study around the area of spirituality make the mistake of the relativist seeking to affirm and authenticate every single opinion, life choice or whatever. There are many philosophies of life, opinions and choices made which are quite lacking in any sense of the spiritual, although they may well be dressed up in the same language. For spirituality to be properly spiritual, at least by the standards of the present writers, requires that at some point in the process of our development, or our articulation, we are opened up to and by a sense of mystery and wonder concerning our own purpose and destiny in a way which is at once challenging, meaningful and formative. For some individuals encounters with such a process of opening can be foundational in their arriving at some understanding of their own being and identity.

Within the Christian tradition the authentication of any understanding of the spiritual is according to quite clear paradigms built upon a

more or less precise history of salvation. Experience and tradition together are useful guardians against the excesses or improprieties of any unbalanced approaches. Other religious traditions too have their own checks and balances, and across religions there can exist a commonality of approach which allows fruitful dialogue and the possibility of at least understanding differences, even if they remain points of contention. Such an approach, based on a shared sense of the spiritual, allows at least the construction of a platform from which one might begin to address questions about the spiritual guidance of young people on something other than narrowly confessional lines.

Of course, such a platform, or shared understanding, ought not to be allowed to become a disguise for the moral high ground from which viewpoints are handed down more as dogma than as shared learning.

II

It has to be said that there are a great many groups which lay claim to working spiritually with young people or include the concept of the spiritual in their own identification. There are local, regional, national and international groups organized either according to some common interest, e.g. sport, or according to a shared code of beliefs, e.g. religious youth groups, or according to a historical pattern enshrining certain values and principles, e.g. scouts and guides. There are groups for young people with disabilities, young people who are unemployed, young people who need challenges, and so on ad infinitum.

What all or most of these groups have in common is the desire to make a difference to the lives of the young people with whom they work. Each organization will express that difference according to its own lights, but in general the very clear nature of these organizations is philanthropic, humanitarian and directed towards creating a better end product, whether that product be the world in which we all live together, or simply the young person as an individual agent within the world, or any combination of both. In this assortment of groups the language of development is key – development of the individual, of opportunity, of talent, of community, of so much that lies in need of development.

Now, bearing in mind what was said earlier about the spiritual and spirituality, it is important to acknowledge that not every avenue of activity, not every group or organization, is going to share the same understanding of whether and in what ways and to what extent the development of their particular aim is actually *spiritual* development. Being a member of a sports team may for many young people develop some very valuable skills for life: it may teach them about responsibility and community, about accepting the victories and defeats in life

with grace and equanimity. Belonging to that group may be the most important thing in the life of a young person and in no sense is its value to be undermined, but it may yet fail to bring that young person to any point of encountering his or her own identity as a creature of inestimable value in the eyes of a loving God. Similarly, for all of the many life-skills which guiding or scouting might teach, for all of the closeness to the world of nature which might be reached through outdoor pursuits, it is not until the young person comes to a recognition of the link between the beauty of creation and the beauty of the creator that properly *spiritual* growth is accomplished.

In what senses then do youth organizations legitimately claim to engage in *spiritual* development? One could argue, perhaps simplistically, that any development of the human being, physical, intellectual, emotional, etc., is intrinsically a development of the human spirit, since there is no real point in perpetuating a view of some separation between body and spirit. But if we are to keep to what was stated above as being our understanding of *spiritual*, then it is possible to narrow down the range of what might count as *spiritual* development. As was mentioned earlier, there is a common presumption that *spiritual* is to a degree synonymous with *religious*, and like most presumptions this one deserves to be challenged. David Hay does precisely that in saying:

Religion tends to be associated with what is publicly available, churches, bibles, prayer books, religious officials . . . Spirituality is almost always seen as much warmer, associated with love, inspiration, wholeness, depth, mystery . . .¹

Although the distinction between spirituality and religion is an important one, so too is the relationship between them: if spirituality is neglected then religion is dry and barren and often becomes a matter of rule and external observance. If religion is ignored then the corresponding danger is that young people (and adults, too, for that matter), free of the duties and responsibilities they owe towards the community, wander off in search of their own personal nirvana, and a sense of connectedness between peoples, integral to a sound spirituality, is lost.

With regard to young people in particular, this need for connectedness, acceptance and belonging is high on their list of immediate wants. Their fear is isolation or, in other terms, alienation, and the journey which moves them to a healthy sense of their own identity as both personal and corporate is one which takes them through many stages of growth requiring skills of reflection, times of experimentation, moments of stillness and awareness.

Now it is, of course, quite possible to help a young person grow spiritually without that young person belonging in any significant way to an organized religious group, but it is equally possible, and perhaps more desirable, to help a young person to grow spiritually within a specific religious community or tradition of their own choosing. This sense of community is an important aspect of what is involved in *spiritual* growth, at least as an ideal; within the Christian tradition, and others too, human beings are not intended to be isolated beings pursuing their own individual paths towards enlightenment. The sense of the community around us in space, behind and ahead of us in time, is important in tying us into the tradition which is in part guarantor of the wisdom of our path. The community as a worshipping entity is the locus for our collective desire to articulate in a public way the inner need to praise, thank, belong, etc.

Consequently, in this business of spiritual guidance, the anchoring which is found in and through membership of a community is an important aspect. For those whose work it is to foster that spiritual growth there needs to be a clear understanding that while it is the individual's relationship with the God who is Other which is central to growth, such growth takes place most satisfactorily within a community. Now, what differentiates the religious community which is church or mosque from the community which is the sports team? Surely, it is that the one seeks to move its members (however inadequately) towards that moment of encounter with God, while the other has as its aim something more measurable: success on the playing field. Is one more important than the other? To the young person, almost certainly the success in sport will be more immediately important than anything to do with God. Rather than imagine that these two are competing for importance, however, let us say that both are important and relevant to the short- and long-term development of the individual. Their differences are important requiring different strategies. When we want young people to reflect on their lives and begin to consider some of the challenges ahead of them, we look to create a space and a time in which they can retreat in relative peace and quiet, a space and a time in which they will be helped to consider reflectively, creatively, appropriately, their own questions and issues. Such space and time should complement, not compete with, the other things to which young people have to, or choose to, attend. That retreat space is the environment in which spiritual growth begins to take place – the opening up to the sense of awe and wonder as it exists in the human condition, as it is expressed in such a variety of ways in all religions. But it is crucial that

the time in retreat and the daily grind and trudge of activities outside retreat are related one to the other. This moves us into the third part of this reflection which concerns the experience of the present writers and their own methodology.

III

Southwell House Youth Project works on the premise that it is far better to help young people recognize the spiritual, the presence of God, in their daily lives than to attempt to create in little privileged moments of retreat a sense of God which lasts for the moment only. To raise the spiritual temperature of a group or of individuals artificially through stimulation of the senses is only to move them forwards to a time of disappointment, a time when they are let down and once again have to face the very ordinariness of their day to day reality. We begin with the young people where they are: to ask about their experience long before they arrive at our doorstep, and to enquire about their issues and concerns. As any teacher can confirm, just as one year or class group is never the same as any other, so no two groups of young people are the same simply on account of age, geography, or parish identity. Each group has its own story, each individual her or his own experience. The young people can be both ordinary and extraordinary and it is always interesting to watch and be a part of a group of young people responding to what is placed before them. But what is placed before them is relevant: it is about issues – drugs, racism, conflict, sex and sexuality, relationships, social justice, single gender concerns; it is about skills – assertiveness, confidence-building, leadership. It is about all of those things which form the backdrop to daily life for young people, and they are helped to identify the importance of their decisions. They come to see that their choices do matter, that if they are to be people on a path of growth then they must be open to the challenges of the world and at the same time capable of making informed decisions according to their own lights. Is this the stuff of spiritual growth? Most certainly it is, for when this is situated within the context of the Christian message then there emerges a picture of what it is to be fully human: to be free from the present-day oppressions such as drugs, racism, gender stereotypes; to be able to see the wrongs in our world, inequalities between nations, and the situation of London's homeless, for example; by taking up leadership roles and involvement in action for social justice to help those who are bowed down. And all of this must happen according to the lights of the particular religious tradition from which the young people come. The goal is not to foster religious adherence, although that may come too.

The goal is to help young people learn the skills of reflection, be better informed, more enabled to move through the stages of growth which accompany adolescence.

Two situations illustrate the points made above. A group of young people came to Southwell House for a day whose Catholic school was facing closure for a variety of reasons – social, economic and political – which had nothing to do with them. There was no point or sense in having them pray or worship together as a central part of a day. What they needed was help to accept the reality, however cruel, which was their lot, to understand that the years which they spent with friendship groups would still count for something, even though those friendship groups were about to be shattered as a result of a decision remote from their experience. They needed support to avoid becoming any more angry with or disillusioned by the world of education, than they already were in having to live with the label of being students at a failing school. Our task is to bring a little bit of the gospel to the world of young people such as these, to evangelize their culture and help them recognize in it things of worth and value. We do not try to impose our own culture on them, nor do we seek to borrow their culture and attempt to make it our own. That does not work.

Recently an experiment took place in which an alternative eucharistic liturgy for young people was organized at a diocesan level. It borrowed heavily from what is called 'rave culture'. Although the idea was admirable for many reasons, and little was spared in terms of the effort which went in to the preparations, the experiment was really about adults attempting to bridge the gap between their experience of their own culture and their perception of one aspect of youth culture. It is quite impossible to say whether the experiment was a success or not, but it is worth asking whether rave culture is sufficiently widespread in the experience of young people themselves for this to be the best vehicle for reaching out to them. We may also consider the implications of the laicization of some of the leadership roles within the eucharist. As they were carried out extremely competently by the young people, it begs the question why this is not the norm rather than the exception. How much richer would have been (or could be) a liturgy which actively involved all the young people in some creative and appropriate way. As for rave culture and its appropriateness or otherwise for liturgical use, there is a great danger in seeming to tell young people, however subtly, that this is how they should be or act or respond. Far better to help them articulate for themselves their own desires. That at least raises the possibility of responsible ownership of

liturgy, and consequent participation in it, on the part of those whom the liturgy is meant to serve.

This last example illustrates how difficult it is to work with young people when adults try to be something which they are not – when they try, in other words, to behave and act as young people. Far better to be ourselves and in that capacity to enter into dialogue with the young people. Certainly it is our experience here that young people immediately see through any attempt on the part of those who work professionally with the young to be anything other than that which comes naturally. It is worth noting that there is little which happens here in our work with young people or adults, or even with our own staff, which does not follow the same guiding principles – go to where the others are and be yourself. Do not wait for them to come to you, or expect them to be as you would wish them to be. They too must be themselves.

In being themselves young people undergo many transformations. One participant on a Leadership Training programme came to his own realization that his preferred style of leadership, modelled fairly immediately on his own experience of the Officer Cadet Corps, failed quite spectacularly when set against a Christian model of leadership which valued service above command. Another young person who joined us for a residential programme for young people who were experiencing difficulties at school, and who plainly had her own share of problems, arrived at a point when she felt able to share with the group, at a particularly sensitive time, that her dream upon winning the lottery jackpot was to establish children's homes all over the world in which love was guaranteed. For another young woman, the experience of taking part in our Poverty Programme, which includes exposure to the homeless of London, led her to write in gratitude:

I have learnt a valuable lesson and that is to take time out to consider others. In society human beings can be so selfish, think only of themselves and not of others. This weekend touched me so deeply that I now, in deep thought, think about those who suffer and are deprived and say a few words that they might be helped and that peace may be with them.

These are the stories of young people who have themselves been touched but who also touch us; they have been exposed to the challenges which come with reflecting on their own situations, or on aspects of the world, and we too have been exposed through them to our own areas of need for growth.

IV

It may seem now that to make concrete suggestions about the spiritual guidance of young people is to invite the criticism that we are doing precisely that against which we cautioned in the opening paragraphs, namely, a top-down approach. But in fact, what we propose here are more properly seen as principles upon which we may seek to engage young people, rather than a detailed strategy for working with them.

Perhaps the most important point is that one must be open to young people in a radical and challenging way; it has never been our preferred style of work to attempt to bring young people to a point on the horizon which we have fixed for them. Our own understanding of our work is that we help young people come to terms with their own sense of themselves as individuals, or as community, or as church. We help them to uncover for themselves their own sense of value or morality; we try to make possible for them an encounter with the sacred, named or otherwise. We do not set out to catechize; we do not aim to bridge the chronic gap between the day-to-day experience of young people and the Church; we do not seek to turn them into images of ourselves. We want them to be themselves, free-thinking, caring, reflective, committed.

But as part of all that we do challenge. And however much openness we feel needs to accompany our working with young people, we ourselves must be sure of the background and tradition from within which we ourselves work. We represent a face of individual, communal and even ecclesial identity by the very fact of our being constituted as a youth project inspired by a particular religious charism. Out of this identity we must know when to challenge, how to challenge and why to challenge. So challenges, whether around inappropriate language, poor behaviour, or opinions which denigrate the other, are all rooted in the fact that from within our perspective and tradition there are some things which are not acceptable, and young people need to learn, not to behave like us, but to behave in a way which is not offensive to others. A large part of the success of our work with young people is that the young people sense some degree of integrity between the individual, communal and ecclesial approaches which are encountered here.

Alongside openness and challenge there is the need to help some young people deal with the confusion arising from their own experience in relation to what they hear or have reported to them about church teaching. There can often be pain and guilt around this, particularly when it touches on the area of sex and sexuality, but the

same dynamic of distance and isolation can be felt with respect to liturgical matters. Why is it that their everyday experience of liturgy is so remote and un-involving, and how can such a situation be improved? That is surely a matter for schools and parishes to reflect upon, but it is a felt need of many young people.

Another concrete suggestion around guiding young people must surely be that as adults we must allow ourselves to be challenged and changed by what we encounter in our work with young people. If the young articulate their own sense of disappointment or frustration with an adult world, or if in their own idealism they point older people towards injustices, real rather than imagined, then there is a responsibility on adults to treat seriously what is being said to them, rather than simply inflicting further alienation or disenchantment upon the young by patronizing or disempowering them.

These suggestions around guiding young people, along with many others which might be added, are summed up by saying that in working with the young we must have the disposition to dialogue. Such dialogue requires clear and keen listening which is not only a matter of hearing, or of time, but must include the real possibility that the communication is two-way and effective, that is, capable of changing not only the young person but also us who listen. Such dialogue requires that we too speak clearly of our own experience, questions and doubts as well as certainties. Perhaps the single greatest gift we can offer to young people in this day and age is our own readiness to accept that our generation, and those which have preceded us, while doing as good a job as possible, cannot yet say that everything in life is as it should be. A little more humility about the state of affairs which we seek to hand over to up-coming generations may just ease some of the narrow-mindedness or short-sightedness which exists.

NOTE

¹ David Hay, 'Religion lacking spirit', *The Tablet*, 2 March 1996.