



‘Seeing One Tree Can Make a Person Smile Forever’: Research into Children’s Spirituality and Silence

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The study investigated the impact of opportunities for, and attitudes towards, silence and solitude on children’s spirituality. The researcher hypothesised that the paucity of opportunities for children to find silence would negatively affect any expressions of spirituality, with important social implications.

The research adopted a largely qualitative methodology using an initial questionnaire with 26 children aged 12-13 from a West Midlands Secondary school. This explored daily life, attitudes towards silence and meaningful experiences. The subsequent videotaped, individual 2 half-hour interviews with 10, largely self-selecting, children were informed by the children’s responses to the questionnaire though were predominantly child-led.

In both the interviews and the questionnaire approaches to silence were varied and often contradictory. Many children associated silence negatively with bereavement, and opportunities for seeking silence were often rare and seen as challenging in the context of the time pressures of a personal and societal achievement agenda. Yet despite this, many expressed a desire to find silence, with few completely averse.

Without exception the children interviewed exhibited a frequent and wide variety of those forms of spirituality already identified by previous researchers, including a sense of connectedness or relationship with the world as identified by Hay and Nye peak experiences and flow, and the expressing of life as a mystery. The children manifested profound spirituality irrespective of their access or desire for silence and often in the context of busyness or noise. This suggests that they are accessing and able to live within a non-binary, inner silence. The initial hypothesis of the research was, therefore, not proven, though whether increased access to silence might intensify such spirituality remains unanswered.

Key words: children; spirituality; silence; solitude; connectedness.

The Impetus

When the geodesic ‘*Silent Dome*’¹ arrived for the first time at a Midlands Secondary School for one week in 2005, the students were invited to come and sit among the cushions for up to 30 minutes in total silence. The response of the student body was bemusement, some derision, curiosity and not a small amount of trepidation. But still

¹ This was a freestanding geodesic tent-like structure. It had been normally used for public astronomy purposes.

they came, some to avoid lessons, one to catch up on sleep and yet others who came to think, pray, reflect, dream or listen. Invited to write of their experiences in the visitors' book they wrote of their fear of silence, boredom, and of their wonder and pleasure at being exposed to such quiet for the first time, many living in busy households with shared bedrooms. They wrote of feelings of calm and peace and, though expressed in their own words, of transcendence. This was the generation of children accustomed to being surrounded by electronic gadgets and digital media, ever in communication with their peers, and experiencing an educational context emphasising personal targets and constant progress both within lessons and throughout their time in school. Opportunities, and a desire, for 'silence' are, for the majority, rare, possibly intimidating or seen as unproductive, yet it might be in such 'silence' that 'spirituality' may be deemed to flourish.

Having been a secondary headteacher and educationalist (German and History) for a period of over 38 years, I was occasionally taken aback or at least intrigued, on taking 'cover' for absent RE teachers, at the sudden eagerness displayed in classrooms when we strayed from the designated-by-the-curriculum lesson plan (usually facts about world religions) into deeper topics involving questions such as "Why *are* we here? What is love? What happens when we die? What is spirit?", usually prompted by the children. At such times the energy in the classroom crackled with vibrancy and classroom assistants vied with children to be heard. Where, usually, was the space in children's lives for such things to be discussed; was it legitimate/helpful/productive for them to ask those questions in an educational setting? I was particularly aware of my prejudices borne of a Catholic early upbringing, my training and interest in Transcendental Meditation and Buddhism, and my long-standing membership of a Julian meditation group², all with an emphasis on silence. Unsurprisingly, the introduction of 'The Dome' led by a practising Buddhist teacher was catalysed by all the above experiences.

The positive responses in the classroom and the impact of this 'Silent Dome' prompted the desire to explore, by research, any connection between a child's 'spirituality' and the available opportunities (or lack of them) for silence and solitude; and, in truth, the rare and privileged opportunity to listen at length to children talking of their lives and possibly their spirituality was irresistible.

This article describes a pilot study and one leading to further, wider research. It does not, therefore, present a generalised view on children and silence. A brief overview of the influential literature in respect of silence and of children's spirituality is provided, followed by an explanation of the organisation of the interviews and the background of the cohort. Details, transcripts and analysis of the interviews under key headings already identified by previous researchers in the field are followed by an assessment of the importance, contingency and impact of silence for the children in respect of their spirituality. Finally, future research imperatives are suggested.

Interest and research into both child spirituality and into the relevance of silence in general have intensified over the last few decades, in particular due to the debate

² A Julian meditation group is a group of 6-15 people who meet for contemplative prayer in the Christian tradition. There is no special method of meditation and the group comprises both church members and those with no formal links. The meetings are inspired by the work of Julian of Norwich (1342-*ca*1416), anchorite, and her 'shewings', printed as *Revelations of Divine Love*.

around secularisation, its impact and concerns, and the perceived raised level of the problems of adolescent alienation and poor mental health in Western and Antipodean developed nations and also, increasingly, in the Far East.³

William James' (1842-1910) work on Religious Experience (James 1982, first published 1902)), here equated with spirituality, suggesting that such experiences might be the subject of scientific analysis, provided a foundation for later work on spirituality in the 20th and 21st centuries. Alistair Hardy's (1896-1985) subsequent foundation of The Religious Experience Research Centre in Oxford in 1969 and his collection of data prompted his analysis that spirituality was a fundamental human trait and an evolutionary survival mechanism. His successor, Edward Robinson's (1921-2013) methodology (Robinson 1977) of in-depth interviews with children led to a challenging of the dominant current view of the linear and chronological development of childhood itself, suggesting instead that these experiences are best described as an element of the whole person, independent of any chronological stage.

Key studies involving large -scale interviews with children were undertaken in the mid and late 20th century. Robert Coles' (Coles 1977: xvi) taped research with 500 children across a broad international base determined that the children were indeed 'seekers' and work with 3,000 children in Finland by Kalevi Tamminen (Tamminen 1994:62) concluded that religious experience was relatively general among children, though decreasing nearer adolescence. Such views were concomitant with Thun's findings of the capacity for wonder in children from the early primary stage, though vanishing by adolescence. (Thun 1964)

The expression of this spirituality was not unproblematic, with the knowledge gained often varying from previously taught truths and a trope of the taboo of expression and listeners' doubt leading to suppression, repression (Hart 2003) and depression (Farmer 1992, Scott 2004), or a culturally mediated 'blotting out' (Hay and Nye 2008:57).

The last decade of the 20th century saw a major and pivotal piece of research by David Hay and Rebecca Nye (Hay and Nye 2008) Also cognizant of the paucity of research into the spirituality of children, in contrast to many other areas, especially the cognitive, and countering the work of the Piagetian Ronald Goldman – who describes mystics as rare and almost unknown amongst children – and with a strong belief in the reality of children's spirituality, often hidden due to 'the culturally constructed forgetfulness' (Hay and Nye 2008:9) and social pressure earlier recognized by Lorelie Farmer (Farmer 1992: 267), they sought to examine how this spirituality might present itself. They noted that following the 1944 Education Act and the 1988 Education reform Act, the word 'spirituality' was increasingly publicly acceptable, though usually linked with religion and religious terminology. Although accepting that all human experience is at least partly culturally created, Hay insisted on the biological contribution to spirituality, regarding this as our inheritance, which permitted us to transcend culture and indeed religions, a view supported by Champagne (Champagne 2003:56)) whose 3 modes of spirituality: sensitive, relational and existential, reflected a concept of the intrinsic

³ Janet Seden, Dept. of Social Work at the Open University 2004 'Childhood', Open Learning, suggests that neglecting children's sense of truth, justice or mystery may leave them expressing their terror and pain in ways which society might find unacceptable, and that it is important to respect spiritual values.

nature of spirituality. Hay went further, however, regarding Religious Experience as a *perception* of an objective reality and not just a subjective experience.

Hay posited the need for a more holistic shift in the understanding of children's spirituality, a move away from the previously prevalent 'god talk' of earlier research, with a focus, rather, on the responses of children to every-day and ordinary activities. This theme was underlined by psychiatrists Houskamp, Fisher and Stuber (Houskamp, Fisher and Stuber 2004: 221-230) and researcher Janet Seden (Seden 2004) in their emphasis on the therapeutic importance of relating to children as spiritual beings.

Hay and Nye's interviews resulted in the identification of 3 key categories for the discerning of spirituality: awareness sensing (heightened awareness and flow, including a felt sense and reflecting the work of Gendlin and Csikszentmihalyi), mystery sensing, and value sensing (the search for ultimate meaning and purpose). A signature phenomenon was perceived: that of relational consciousness⁴ – an unusual consciousness or perceptions relative to other passages of conversation spoken by the child expressing how the child related to things/ people and herself or himself or God – a meta-cognition by children of themselves as subjects in certain contexts and a possible model for adult spirituality.

Noting Zohar and Marshall's (Zohar and Marshall 2001) assertion of a neurological basis for spirituality⁵ and the theory of spiritual intelligence, Australian educationalist Brendan Hyde's (Hyde 2008) work with catholic primary children prompted a view beyond that of David Hay - that spirituality was concerned with more than connectedness and relationality - it was concerned with ultimate unity and transcendence of the ego. His identification of 4 key characteristics: Felt sense, Integrating Awareness, Weaving the Threads of Meaning (responding to the question - *I wonder what you think really, really matters*) and Spiritual Questing were felt to be particularly acute when traditional forms of reference were diminishing. (Hyde 2008(b): 117) His view was that such characteristics could be nurtured, with important pedagogic implications.

This approach reflected and found resonance with the work of Clive Erricker, the founder in the 1990s of *The International Journal for Children's Spirituality*, whose listening to children with 'an open ear' catalysed much research in the 21st century. Educational Psychologists Anna Lipscomb and Irvine Gersch (Lipscomb and Gersch 2012) and their interviews with 20 children (aged 10-11) using 6 core listening concepts, reframed spirituality within a philosophical rather than a religious context, examining the meanings children attach to their lives, motives, drives and desires. Importantly, they averred that the concrete and metaphysical aspects of a child's search for meaning could be perceived as a relationship between their visible manifestations (behaviour and learning) and the *root* of these (spiritual and

⁴ Hay questioned in 2010 whether in fact this were the right phrase, suggesting Heidegger's 'Dasein's comportment towards', though he continued to use the term relational consciousness. 'Spirituality versus Individualism; Why We Should Nurture Relational Consciousness', an article based on the Roehampton Conference of June 1998. *ICJS* 5 Vol.1 (2010), 37-48 p.40.

⁵ In this the idea of Spiritual Intelligence (SQ) was introduced, extending the work of Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences. This SQ was based on the brain's 3rd. neural system, the synchronous oscillation that unifies data across the whole brain; often referred to as the 'god spot'.

philosophical beliefs), the connections between which a child might usefully be supported to discover.

The interrelationship of aspects of spirituality was posited by the Australian educationalist Micheline Moriarty (Moriarty 2011) following research with 24 Primary-age children, using Champagne's 'spiritual modes of being' methodology. She also noted the importance of a 'felt sense' and the meaning-making shaped by community values, the mass media, and their own sensory and imaginative experiences. Although she noted a progression across her four stages – Consciousness, Relationality, Identity and Roadmap – she then modified her model to a more dialectical conceptualisation, envisaging a circular or spiral mode, a process, rather than a state of being, with external circumstance affecting spirituality at any stage, a model supported by the work of Tobin Hart (Hart 2003) and Tony Eade⁶ (Eade 2003). Later work focusing particularly on the development of an age-appropriate measure for spiritual sensitivity – *The Spiritual Sensitivity Scale for Children (SSSC)* – was undertaken by Stoyles *et al*, using questionnaires with 118 children reflecting 4 domains of spiritual sensitivity (Stoyles, Stanford, Caputi, Keating and Hyde 2012). In seeking this, however, they did not wish to dilute the concept of 'the unique signature phenomenon' noted by Hay and Nye. They acknowledged previous research findings which noted a child's ability to express wonder and fascination about experiences and sharing 'special moments with others', and also being able to reflect and be lost in an activity, both of which might correspond to Hay and Nye's Relational Consciousness analysis. Their caveats of the use of this scale included stressing that SSSC did not measure spirituality per se, but provided a measure of the sensitivity founded within the child's spirituality, that any religious experience may be variously interpreted, and that children (in particular in a therapeutic context) should be made comfortable with the uniqueness of their own spirituality, valuing it independently of any external valuation – a recurrent research finding.

Connections between emotions and spirituality were particularly explored by UK educationalist Ron Best (Best 2011) who advocated looking at the feeling of an event, and the transcending of emotion, and that a holistic approach to children's spirituality with schools providing opportunities to experience '*the dance*' and restoring emotions, as Scheindlin had already suggested, to their proper place.

The by now rich research and scholarship into children's spirituality has concentrated thus far on the definition, identification and acceptance of the critical importance of this for children in terms of mental welfare, social stability, personal development, fulfilment and happiness. In contrast there has been far less research into the possible contexts for the nurturing of such spirituality and the importance and power of 'silence' in this respect has been powerfully advocated rather than extensively researched.

The teaching of silence, immobility and a 'conquering of the self' for children were notably emphasized by Maria Montessori (1870-1952) (Montessori 2004, first published 1948) whose definition of silence related to that which detaches us from the noise of everyday life, isolating the mind and 'a call upon their souls'. Theophil Thun's

⁶ Eade also challenged the concept of EQ, believing it to be unhelpful, as if spirituality could be measured like cognitive intelligence.

(Thun 1964) introduction in Germany of *eine regelmaessige Denkstunde*⁷ into the curriculum and Karen Marie Yust's (Yust 2008:4) work with 5-6 year olds during 15 minutes of silence, suggested that children not only have the ability to sit in silence but desire it, and noted, too, by Brendan Hyde (Hyde 2008(a): Chapter 4) who comments that children seemed to need to honour the quiet and the sacredness that the activity required.

Work in China by Margaret Taplin (Taplin 2011) on silent sitting identified the positive effect of this on children's well-being and Rachel Kessler's (Kessler 2000) work in the USA proposing 7 pathways for feeding the spirit, included silence and solitude, noted the hostility of contemporary culture to this and the process of tactile *defensiveness* where children envelop themselves in, for example, blanket due to overstimulation. This work was mirrored by Julian Stern's advocacy of enstatic schools (Stern 2013) supporting 'being contented in the self alone' and making time for quiet contemplation in busy lessons.

A more nuanced approach to the understanding of silence was provided by Helen Lees (Lees 2012). Lees differentiates between 'strong' silence, silence which delivers positive effects and benefits, and 'weak' silence which is negative in effect and often externally imposed- a 'silencing'. She stresses the non-binary nature of 'positive' silence, as a silence, which is not in contradistinction to noise, and, importantly, she describes states of mind such as hypersynchrony, (Lees 2012 referencing Siegel) a meditative state, which is by its very nature silent. Referring to Sikszenmihalyi's concept of the state of '*flow*' when the mind is concentrated on a task she stresses that this is not a 'techniqued silence' but rather coherence, a natural part of human experience, occurring often spontaneously and repeatedly and is a non-dualistic state of mind. (Lees 2012: 7)

This reflects the work of Dauenhauer (Dauenhauer 1979: 437) whose definition of silence stressed the 'yielding to a power beyond our control following upon an awareness of finitude and awe'. Though the yielding in silence binds and joins. The latter two approaches to silence had particular resonance in this research, suggesting as they do active states that are inner, ever accessible and not contingent on the external provision of 'non-noise'.

The context

The defining of 'Spirituality' is fraught with difficulty. For the purpose of the research, therefore, 'spirituality' – a 'not observable reality' (Moriarty 2011: 276) – was understood to include a broad spectrum of definition including relational consciousness (Hay and Nye 2008) the search for meaning and purpose in life (Bussing, Foller-Mancini, Gidley and Heusser 2010: 28) the transcendence of the ego, connectedness, and the experience of something greater than the self, including the sacred (Lipscomb and Gersch 2012:8 referencing Benson Roehlkepartain and Rude). Silence, too, may be variously interpreted and in the early stages I chose an inclusive definition to incorporate stillness and solitude as well as an absence of sound. A more complex understanding of silence, however, emerged during the process of research.

⁷ Literally a regular thinking session.

The research undertaken had several aims: to examine the daily life of the child in order to establish the frequency of, or potential for, silent episodes; to establish whether the child manifested any aspects of spirituality and to analyse the nature of any such occasions where this was the case; to determine whether silence was a *sine qua non* or precipitant of these manifestations; to examine the attitudes of children towards solitude and silence in general.

It focused on a single class of 26 school students from a West Midlands Comprehensive school with a cohort deemed average, 18 girls and 8 boys, aged 12-13 years. The age group had been selected partly for organisational and partly for child developmental reasons. This age group was unlikely to be adversely affected by any removal from timetabled lessons, being pre-GCSE and they are still organised as mixed ability groups. They are mostly in early puberty and so potentially less inhibited than a post-pubescent child and marginally less driven to the social conformity so strongly evident in a young teenage population. This class was selected from 7 similar classes of mixed ability, ethnicity, religious affiliation and family size, to suit the convenience, and following the judgment of, the Head of Religious Education, who supported the research.

Following completion of the initial questionnaire, containing questions and a prose section, the dynamic of the subsequent interviews was affected.

The unanticipated emphasis on death, grief and silence prompted a shift in the questions to be asked in the in-depth interviews, particularly in the second set of interviews. Here a photograph was introduced of a child alone by the sea and in silence. The researcher then offered a series of questions examining the emotions of being in silence and its associations, including the question: *Is it scary for you?* The apparent frequent association of silence with negative life events merited deeper exploration.

***'It's just like a place of happiness'* – The Spirituality of Peak Experience and 'Flow'**

Two occasions stood out in the interviews. They indicate what Ron Best describes as 'affects'. (Best 2008a: 80) when he cautioned against the over-inclusive nature of definitions of spiritual experience, leading to 'just about everything' being so defined, he advised instead that we examine what the experience felt like from the inside, beyond emotion: 'I am the recipient or object of an unexpected, unpredictable affect, which happened *to* and *in me*'.

Penny⁸, a very intense 13 year old, leant forward smiling and, speaking quickly and volubly, despite her self-declared shyness, regaled the researcher with her views on what mattered in life. When asked, towards the end of the first interview, about a moment of joy in her life, however, the atmosphere changed.

R: (Researcher) When were you happiest? (pause) Can you think of a moment when you were really, really full of joy?

⁸ All names have been changed to preserve anonymity

P: (Penny) Yeah. (**Quietly and clearly moved**)

R: Can you share it with me?

P:(**slowly**) I remember... 'cos I felt real happiness when I reflect back on it. One time I was truly happy was when I was out with my friends and we were just walking and talking about nothing and...crazy, pretty much...and we went into McDonalds and we were talking so loudly you could feel everyone staring at us while we were just being these crazy people...even though I knew they were watching us I didn't feel self-conscious like I usually would. I was just laughing and naturally trying to be happy. That's when I had a revelation (**voice breaking**)... and I decided that... I tried to be a happier person in my life. (very **moved**)

Pause

R: How did it feel?

P: I don't really know, (**small voice**) I think I really let myself go and just.....not had all these thoughts about ...everything, and just let myself go really. That's it.

Penny is very tearful as she recalls this moment. She went on to describe how her negative thoughts which always floated around her brain were '*finally let go*', how much being with other people had helped and when prompted by the researcher with '*It's something we feel...?*' She responded: '*...We should keep to ourselves.*' She then added that she had never shared it with another person.

A similar moment of release was described by the self-described 'quirky' Sandra, who lives with her mother during the week, going to her father's at weekends, says she has trouble concentrating, thinks about religion 'a great deal' and who stated that she '*has her own thing going on*', which includes the burning of incense sticks to help her relax and think. The year before she was interviewed she went with her father's adopted children to the hospital to see her newborn sibling and their mother, her stepmother. When asked about a moment of joy she responded:

*I liked going to the hospital in the car with my other brothers because we were all getting excited, and we had, like, some crisps and sweets in the back of the car, because it was a long journey to the hospital. And when we got there, it was like we were running and someone was saying 'Don't run!' but we just didn't care about the other person saying 'Don't run!' because we were so excited. And we had to run up, like, four flights of stairs and we seemed to get just so much energy from being just so excited. It was **really** good.*

Both of these peak experiences stood out for these girls, not just because of the emotions involved, it was beyond emotion, but because the experiences were transformative and physical. Both girls were beyond caring about normal conventions, being transported by happiness. In these experiences both were in relationship to others, whether friends or a baby, achieving the I-thou relationship that is achieved by

the letting go to receive another subject. As Ron Best describes, 'In letting go of the self we allow the other to fill our world and in a sense be completed by them'.

These experiences are also an example of 'flow' identified by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (Csikszentmihalyi 2008) where an experience, providing unique and memorable moments, changed a person's perspective. Such 'flow' during periods of very intense concentration, where the activity is so totally absorbing that all outside stimuli seem to disappear, was readily experienced by many of the children. The 'point mode', a 'heightened awareness of the here and now' and single-pointedness were repeatedly exhibited.

Rosie, who has 'little time for reflection' described her experience of playing an on-line game:

R: Have you ever been so involved in what you're doing that everything goes?

Ro: Yeah. Maybe like when I'm playing a game or something that I'm really interested in and like it's full-screen and I lose track of time and it just flies by, then I just turn round and it's like ten o'clock already! And I forget about everything else and just concentrate on that.

R: And what's that like when you're in that state?

Ro: Mmm... It's a good place to be, I guess. 'Cos then that means you're enjoying it and that you're involved and it's good for you and it's.....

R: Are you still there? Is Rosie still there or are you in a different place?

*Ro: **Thinking hard.** I guess I'm like 'in' the game sort of thing. Like involved. Mmm... I don't really know how to explain it. ..I guess....I am.....sort of **in** the game. I'm just sort of playing it and my mind is fully on the game and it's just playing along, I guess. (**very quiet now**)*

*R: Stay there. Stay where you are right now, because you're thinking about you and the game... right...(Rosie is focused and smiling) hang on... **pause.** We're just trying to get you to describe what that is like 'Time goes...'. **Pause.** What does that feel like?*

*Ro: **Long pause.** Rosie smiles. I dunno. It's hard. It's just like a place of happiness. So like I'm fully involved and it just feels good. It's interesting...pause....., you can get into it and ... shrugs. That's it really.*

*R: What's interesting is that you've used the word 'in' and 'into' twice. You said, 'I'm **in** the game, I'm **in** it. Is it Rosie who is in the game?*

Ro: Yeah.

R: Where is Rosie at this point?

Ro: I'm still like outside but my mind is in the game (smiles). My mind is, like, involved. I'm still like outside but my mind is like in the game (This was said twice). Involved.

R: So...is that Rosie's body is kind of outside there?

Ro: Yeah

R: But the mind is somewhere else?

Ro: Like the mind is in focus and inside the game.

R: And that makes you happy?

Ro: Yeah

This detailed questioning method was deeply influenced by the research of Claire Petitmengin⁹ who describes a form of questioning which might require 30 minutes of questioning to probe 1-2 seconds of experience. She describes the evoking of a past experience as a very specific act and the type of memory is a passive memory. A detailed series of questions, with each answer determining the next, may help to evoke things that were possibly unknown or unnoticed at the point of experience. Petitmengin describes the process as 'Loosening our grasp on the 'what' in order to let the 'how' appear' – an invisible microgenesis. She describes this process as 'an underground universe' and it is this universe that some apparently persistent questioning in these interviews is seeking to explore.

Penny, describing this absorption, declares herself to be surprised:

R: Have you ever been absorbed in something so totally that you don't know what on earth is going on? And you kind of come out of it?

P: (Laughs) Yes!

R: Have you?

P: Oh yes! I definitely have been like that. 'Cos I was walking one time and got absorbed in my thoughts and suddenly I looked up and I've no clue where I am (laughter) and I found myself just lost, 'cos I actually just got myself lost in thought.

R: Gosh.

P: And I had to find my way back home. That was definitely when I completely lost myself .I just didn't realize I was still walking. I didn't know where I was going. I was just following the route...

⁹ Presentation of a paper 'Researching the Dynamics of Lived Experience' Boston 2014 at The International Symposium for Contemplative Studies, Mind and Life Institute.

R: So, who was doing the walking, Penny?

P: What do you mean?

R: Well, you lost yourself.

P: In thought

R: In thought, and yet you were walking, so...what was happening there I wonder.

*P: You just do it subconsciously. I feel like you have certain reactions, like it feels ... **(inaudible as she is covering her face)***

R: Did you enjoy that?

P: Yeah! It surprises me but I really love how you can be thinking about something but still acting like you would in the normal world and you just like....it's really weird, it's just like, you're thinking about one thing but you're doing something else fine and normal and you just come out and think how have you done it.

This surprise at the experience of absorption was a common theme in the interviews. Karl describes deep absorption so that he doesn't notice the passing of time when playing at a school concert:

R: So, What's it like when you're in that space?

K: It's... er... I don't know it just happens.

R: But it's different from other times when time is moving dud u dud u..

K: Yes. You've got... it's just a rush where you're so excited and energetic and it just goes and you just do it

R: And are you in your own body? Or are you outside it, or where are you?

*K: I'm **in** but yeah, I'm in.*

R: You said I'm in but....

K: Aargh!!

*R: You knew I wouldn't let you get away with that! **(Laughter)***

*K: **(Long pause for thinking)** But I think er... I don't know...I'm in, like playing or whatever but then I'm out, taking everything in, just experiencing it...even more.*

Penny shook her head in wonder as she described her utter focus in an Art lesson whilst drawing a human eye:

P: I just started drawing and I just completely involved myself in this 'cos we were drawing eyes-I just love drawing eyes, 'cos many people say it's hard but I love the complexity of them... and suddenly it's like... Oh the lesson's over and I just look at them and say 'Huh?' And I look at my piece and realize that I've done so much. And I didn't realize because it felt like I'd done barely anything.

R: So what just happened?

*P: I'd done it and I'd lost myself in the thought of Art and imagining the different details...and I barely noticed that it had already come together. It's really strange. **(Covers her mouth. She seems to do this at key moments.)...(Thinking)** In a way it feels like your mind is empty. Like when you're focused on one thing, you're completely focused **on** it, usually like you can have a few thoughts floating round then they suddenly vanish and...it's almost like you're clearing your mind... All this thought, you just go, and you just focus on it and you're just completely unaware of your surroundings, like, for example, you may not feel thirsty and this is a strange thing because now, when I'm talking, I'm just drinking and drinking, but when you're focused you just sometimes forget the normal things you'd do, like you forget you're blinking, you forget you're blinking completely...all the things that you normally think about just disappear and your mind is really empty apart from that one thought.*

R: Why do they disappear I wonder

P:I have no idea... 'cos it's almost like you can be thinking about almost everything and anything, but then you're only focusing on one minute thing, like almost like a speck of dust... 'cos your mind's endless in a way and you can think about almost anything.

Asked whether this experience was pleasurable, Penny explained that it was good in a way 'being lost' as she just wanted to be hidden.

P: It feels like it's me when I'm completely lost. I feel like the true me, the one that nobody really knows, 'cos that's the 'me' that's hidden.

She expands on this when asked which 'you' was there when she is absorbed.

P: It's kind of like hard to explain. It feels like there's one me there but it's almost like a me that I don't know fully myself...so, in a way, it's a 'you' but you don't know who they are. And in theory then, they're truly lost in a way.

This graphic description of a developing self-transcendence in which 'the self is embedded in something greater than the self' underlines the view that spirit is not

simply a part of religiosity but rather a central part of human nature (Lipsom and Gersch 2012) It corresponds to the relational consciousness identified by Hay and Nye by virtue of its particularly high level of perceptiveness in contrast to other parts of the conversation. Furthermore, this distinctive and highly significant mode of speech, frequently signalled by a shift in voice quality, for example a reduction in volume and pace, and accompanied by a palpable alteration of atmosphere and vibration, increasingly emotional, highlighted an important, memorable and seemingly ineffable event. Hay and Nye noted that such consciousness reflects an awareness of the child of themselves as subjects: a reflective consciousness and a form of spirituality. Spirituality in children has many manifestations. In examining the forms of spirituality that should be looked for when talking to children, Hay and Nye referenced Alfred Schultz' description of a raised awareness described as 'tuning' as a sense of unity, for example when listening to music or at family celebration. (Hay and Nye 2008: 68) This was strongly evident in the children interviewed.

Describing himself as 'more philosophical than religious', sportsman Karl describes a period of happiness in Kenya:

R: Why were you happy then?

K: Because we were just out... together!... and looking at stuff, stuff that you wouldn't normally find anywhere else, like elephants and cheetahs and stuff. But I felt we were all together and looking at like... the wonders... if you want... of the world. That's what made me happiest.

Karl explained that his parents worked long hours in demanding jobs and his two siblings were either at university or with a girlfriend.

R: What is it about that that was really special then?

K: It was just sharing the experience. .. I think that sharing makes it bigger, so... 'Cos if you feel happy, but you're on your own, you can't express it to anybody, so when there's other people around you can express it, and then you can be happier... and then people will then be happy as well.

'It's an infectious thing'– Children in Relationship with Others, God and the World

This desire for and joy in connectedness, illustrated by Karl proved a common theme amongst the children interviewed, whether a connectedness with others, animals or nature. Described by Hay and Nye as 'one of the core motifs of spirituality' (Hay and Nye 2008: 109, 141) and one, which has specific societal and individual benefits, the children repeatedly described their belief in its importance.

When Carla stated her belief in a God, and one who created us to be happy, she stresses that such happiness is when:

Not only you're happy, but the people around you are happy as well.

When asked how that worked, and after a long pause to consider the question, she stated that when someone else had done something, (and this was presumably something positive)... you felt happy inside for them. In a later interview she expanded on this to suggest:

*When you're close to people...I think anything that makes **them** happy touches you inside as well.... it's an infectious thing.*

Sadness, too, was infectious for her.

Such connectedness was echoed by Sangeeta, who was asked when she had been most happy:

*When I just make someone else happy, that makes you feel happy... I feel good about myself 'cos I've made someone feel good that I care about... Ooh, when there's someone really, really, really old (**an appreciated diplomacy**) and they're walking past and you smile, and they smile back – that's one of the nicest feelings ever, because it's a stranger and we know nothing about them, we're going to never see each other, but we smile and say 'hello' – like people are caring.*

Karl went further, declaring that although he didn't think there was a God, that: *as a unit, the whole race, we are like one big God... together we can do stuff... that we just couldn't do on our own.* He expressed the importance of sharing experiences: **You're feeling that and then you feel that **they** feel what you feel, which is... happiness or something. And then it just makes you feel better.** Screwing up his face in his efforts to convey this more accurately, he described this form of happiness experienced by him at a live Rugby match where his team won, though stressing that had they failed the feeling would have been the same: *Because you know that you're not the only one who feels it.*

According to Stephen, all beings have a role-as part of the 'team': *cos if there wasn't a spider for flies, then flies would be everywhere. So it's like everyone has a job to do.* Being part of 'the collective' was crucial for Stephen and he, too, stressed that when everyone around you was happy, then it made **you** happy as well.

Though these children had little opportunity to experience nature daily, living in an urban environment, the impact was often profound when the opportunity did occur. Susan, describing walking under a canopy of trees, described it as: *Like being blocked from the rest of the world in a way.* She went on to express her joy at being able to converse with her family, away from the distraction of iPads, and was clear in her concern for nature: *Because nature made us... and stuff like the crops and water comes (sic) from nature... like, all the stuff in the rainforests, like, helps cure, like, medicines and stuff... like, we need it, so we shouldn't bring it down.* She then extended this duty of care to animals.

When examining the proffered photograph of a girl looking out to sea, Sandra was emphatic about wanting to be there, for the beauty. Describing walking alone and the very brief interludes of silence following a rare lull in road traffic she lowers her voice:

You can just finally hear the trees... I always just smile to myself, 'cos you just hear nature itself and hear the birds and see the trees... and it's really beautiful... and it's just the hint of nature, almost like a speck of dust in the universe. Like seeing just one tree can just make a person smile forever... if you look at it truly and just think about it, 'cos nature is giving you life, with oxygen and it's working its whole life to preserve nature in a way... I almost feel that every part of nature and every single plant, kind of has a mind of its own... and helps us live, as a sacrifice of their own life.

This connectivity – joy and relationship with nature and others – was often expressed by the children in suddenly quiet voices, and, as they appeared to go inwards, they manifested pleasure, fascination and wonder. This corresponds to the *mysterium tremendum* identified by Rudolf Otto, manifesting as ‘supreme fascination, and that which cannot be ‘unfolded’. (Otto 1958:41)

‘The key in the engine that makes it start’ – Life as Mystery with Meaning

When asked by the researcher ‘Why are we here?’ few of the children said that they didn’t know. Instead their responses often showed a sense of purpose in a world, which had meaning, though they struggled to find words to convey their comprehension of it. David Hay suggests that such responses are often ‘the secondary products of spiritual stirrings’ and thus the comments were particularly pertinent to this research. (Hay and Nye 2008:77)

Catholic Carla, stressing the importance of happiness, believed that God created us to be happy, that we go to heaven after dying where there was a better life and where we would all be happy. After pausing at length for thought, she declared that if the world were a bit more like heaven... it would be better for everyone. Describing the intense pressure of homework, activities and sport and describing her weekends and holidays as ‘almost like a school day’ she explained:

Because you don't want to let anyone down... I just think that sometimes it can get too much... everything, with the homework and netball and everything. Because I think in 200 years, I don't think it's going to be that important... I don't know how to describe it really.

Sangeeta, a devout Muslim, talking of death and the purpose of life, laughed as she explained that at death it was like results day in school and that life was a test of faith and the ability to show strength in weak times. She ‘*tried to be good*’ and believed herself to be religious but not really spiritual, though she would like to be.

I would like to think that being spiritual means ‘in peace and calm’ and just being connected... I don't really know... connected to like... God? Or things you believe in.

The non-theist Karl pondered much on the free will of the human species - the prime species. Asked whether being the prime species was important he quickly retorted:

Yeah, I don't think about me being whole. I think about me being inside this body and making it work and stuff, like...yeah...like my personality was chosen to be inside this body. I kind of believe that if we die, we don't just die... our personality, we all get consciousness inside another body or something.

This view was echoed by Susan, an only child, who believed in reincarnation and a soul. Attempting to explain why we are here she posited:

I'd probably just say normal evolution, but for some reason we just got an extra thing and we just started sharpening things, to, like, make weapons and how we made this all happen I don't really understand how... I don't really know if there's something out there, but I believe in reincarnation, because (otherwise) it would be like so many souls gone...

When asked how she would describe a soul she was very clear:

Like something within you that makes everything work; like the key in the engine that makes it start. I don't particularly believe in heaven-I just believe you're put back into use, like, on earth. And I think it's got your characteristics as well, like, and your genes, but that's just how you look, but also your characteristics, like who you really are, like inside.

The children needed time to express themselves and such descriptions were almost always punctuated with pauses for concentrated thought. Once again it was these pauses that were often the indicator of an imminent expression of wonder about life. Penny asked herself whether life weren't some big experiment and wondered often why we were here. Her voice broke as she manifested a completely different persona:

Sometimes I think... we're just living to try to expand on... this big challenge... and to live through all these ages and to develop more... a goal... and to try to build up to it.

She had already engaged with such questions and was envious of others who had a faith. Following a lengthy discussion about reincarnation, she concluded:

*I think that it would actually be quite bad if we found out. It would go into chaos for some reason and it's like if we knew what happened when you die it would just change everything; it would affect your whole life. I mean, if you knew you were going to be reborn, you would think 'Oh, it doesn't matter what I do in life and I can risk everything'... but when you're about to die you make one final choice whether you'll be a bad person or a good person in this next one (**meaning 'life'**)... so I kind of feel that there is an earthly or godly presence, but I still stick to my scientific facts.*

Sandra also stressed her belief in a strong external control, prompting much laughter:

Maybe just like a larger game of SIMS.¹⁰

One of the most joyful interviews expounding a clear view of the meaning of life was with Greg. For him heaven was rather like earth, though everyone was nice and it felt like your best day, but every day. He believed himself to be quite spiritual:

Because I think I'm lucky to be who I am... I'm lucky to be alive. I believe in Science as well. I believe that God made Science.

Greg prayed to God in whom he had a strong belief when he was quiet and believed that God was very near him, not judging. When he described his own happiness, particularly when achieving at sport, he insisted:

It makes me feel that I'm kind of in heaven, 'cos I'm really happy. It makes me feel out of this world...it feels like God's sort of thanking me, or God, like, appreciating me and giving me the joy of being happy.... I feel like he's on my side.

These children's thoughts were prompted both by a range of questions and by none: Why are we here? What do you think happens when we die? What makes you happy? What is the meaning of life? However, sometimes they arose impromptu. Though their backgrounds differed in respect of religiosity, from the deeply and actively religious to avowed scientific approaches, their search for meaning did not. This concurs with the findings by Bussing (Bussing, Foller Mancini and Heusser 2010) from research with 254 adolescents where meaning in life, rather than religiosity, mattered to the teenagers. This was reiterated by the educationalist Marian de Souza who, citing Eckersley describes well-being as derived, amongst other causes, from 'a belief that we are part of something bigger than ourselves', the awareness of a transcendent dimension. (De Souza 2009) This awareness was most clearly expressed when the children discussed the 'going beyond everyday things', questioning who they were.

What am I doing here? – Who Am I?

Carla, almost whispering, asked about times when she might be going beyond everyday things, answered:

I don't know when it happens but I actually...I go a bit, like, blank I suppose...and I sort of, it's really weird, I go blank and then I sort of question where I am and like 'who are we?'...and it's really weird.... It feels a bit scary and it only takes a couple of minutes and then I suddenly go back to.... just as if I sort of think like 'How am I here?' and 'And how is this? What am I doing here?'

Of particular pertinence to the research was her response when asked if this were experienced alone or in silence:

¹⁰ An interactive computer game, popular with teenagers and some adults, where whole towns are created and populated and lives are determined by the player.

Not always. Sometimes at home, I might be sitting at a table and suddenly.... it's very strange.

Penny, asked to explain what spirituality meant to her, was very clear in her intense and tremulous response:

I think that spirituality to me, in my opinion, is where you reflect on life and see the decisions you have made, you can see how they made an impact on it.... you just, like, let everything out and you just have a moment to just be yourself. That's what I feel spirituality is about: trying to figure out your own person, even though you really can't.

Stephen's confident belief in reincarnation and its *sort of continuous cycle* was just part of his regular conjecture about humanity and its purpose:

I just sort of think. Whenever I'm just walking down the road my mind will be on something. Sort of thinking about various questions I ask myself like: Why did this happen? Isn't it weird that that happened?

Sandra's view of life was unequivocal:

Don't take it for granted, don't do things that you'll regret, 'cos you know, you're going to regret them but you're going to make a few mistakes along the way to learn about people and yourself...I think that we'll evolve into something better.

The ever-grateful Greg, reflecting on the world and on his own self ponders on how lucky he is to be himself:

And I'm really lucky that I'm myself and I'm living when I am, and I'm having a really nice life. I feel happy just thinking about who I am and how lucky I am to be me... Sometimes I keep it to myself... most of the time I just smile.

In many cases the children would not have described these experiences or views as spiritual; for them it was just a part of who they were and part of the mystery of life. Nevertheless, and within the context of the definition of Spirituality already outlined, these children manifested manifold examples of those forms of spirituality most associated with children. The question to be answered is whether such forms are contingent on or affected by access to and attitudes towards silence and solitude.

***'I think it would be a bit weird'* – Attitudes towards, and Opportunities for, Silence**

Following the results of the questionnaire, where attitudes towards silence were seen to be often ambivalent and associated with loneliness and negative life events, both sets of interviews sought to explore these themes either by direct questioning or through a picture prompt of a girl staring out to sea. Similar tropes emerged of thoughts of bereavement and funerals, loneliness, being viewed as a 'loner' and, emphatically,

fear of non-productivity in the context of a school and social environment dedicated to achievement.

When Rosie described obtaining silence between gaps in homework, she then continued:

I always have to be, like, doing something. So, if I'm not doing anything, like anything at all, then I feel that I've wasted that time... 'cos I wouldn't really be doing anything, like,...productive...even though I don't really do much productive anyway!

In contrast, the active Muslim Sangeeta, in a household of 8, many having left home or working, feels comfortable with silence:

I think it's peaceful... everyone needs space... and time when they can reflect... and let just... because you need to keep that composure... because without that you'd just fall apart and you'd be depressed.

She went on to explain that when you were happy, you tended to be silent, just to think about it.

Karl felt differently. When viewing the photograph, he explained that this was something he would like to do, if stressed, but not if happy. Being alone was the worst thing. Asked why he felt that he replied:

*No-one is like experiencing with....when you experience something you like, I think it's best to share it with other people....because that amplifies the feeling...because when **you** feel something and you share it with someone else, that feeling, like, grows between you...and it just feels better.*

He reiterated that being alone was the worst thing. When this was pursued by an imaginary offering of 10 minutes silence, Karl became very serious and, clearly thinking very deeply, he pondered whether, after all, such a silence might be less stressful:

There wouldn't be so much stuff on your mind...like homework or whatever. Or like worrying what other people think about you and stuff.

This drive to be social and 'get the best friends' was a theme in his conversation. Susan, still grieving from the loss of grandparents two years before, certainly did not want silence. Having revealed in her questionnaire that it made her 'feel bare', she repeated that she didn't like silence and that she didn't like thinking about 'stuff' as it made her depressed. She did, however, appreciate the silence available to her during her grandparents' funerals:

I needed silence to, like, just think about that and to think about them not being there any more.

Her associations were, nevertheless, negative:

Like loss, or having something really deeply (sic) or having to, like, concentrate really hard. I don't like being quiet, otherwise my mind drifts to things I don't really want to think about.

Peter, however, actively wanted silence at the funerals of his grandparents, both to pray and as a way of remembering. He felt that the period of time available to him at this time was healing and particularly important lest his grieving disrupt 'schoolwork or normal life'. Silence was also available to him during his fortnightly visits to church and on other occasions:

If I'm not in the mood to go on anything electronic, that's when I've time to reflect on everything that's happened or on... life itself.

Saying he would 'crack up' if denied silence, he took a pragmatic stance as it gave him time:

To think of new skills; the lack of it would take away imagination, maybe...people have come up with ideas when they're just thinking about everything-their ideas have been evolutionary for the world.

Sometimes in darkest or horriblest times, it can be an idea to pray, such as...if there's so many tests going on (laughs) and sometimes, if I'm run down, or if I've done so much, that's when I just go on my bed for a bit, staring through the window... and... Yeah!

His views of the offered picture were mixed. When asked what was good, he suggested that it would probably just relieve you of all anger and emotions and also allow you to just feel better about yourself. When asked what might be bad, he was very open:

It could also waste time, a bit of your personal time .It could also be perceived by others that you're... they could try to make fun of you in some way, maybe some people would think you were some kind of sappy person. Another thing... it might show that you're quite alone; it can make others think that that you've not got many friends or something.

Describing an issue with daydreaming in Year 3 (8 years old), he records that his teacher had asked him whether he had gone into 'Peter-land' when he had been staring out of the window. In a reassuring manner he reported that he now had control of this issue, as at end points it had disrupted his work. Nevertheless, he described, nostalgically, a small game where a ball is hit back and forth repeatedly and he, staring for hours, loved this feeling of peacefulness.

Penny, when looking at the picture, felt that the girl would be really relaxed and completely free:

It's not like anyone's restricting you. You can just look out into the sunset and it's just inspiring you in a way, and think about what's out there and beauty.

Penny stood out amongst all the children in her relish of quiet and reflective moments. Her love of nature and the contrast with a busy city, the commotion of cars and even the neighbours talking loudly, prompted her to indicate her deep pleasure in silence and a silence which she would welcome:

Not every day but maybe 3 times a week. And when I've finished all the work in class, I go 'Aah, I can finally think to myself and just go off in my daydreams or stuff like that'... that would be really nice.

The scientific thinker Stephen found quiet when reading, an hour on most days. Once again Stephen felt that the picture represented calm and peace and that it was good in that it was time away from normal life and not having to worry about much. When asked about these worries, he highlighted schoolwork and projects. Despite this, being alone for him would precipitate boredom: *not scary – just dull.*

Artistic and quirky Sandra liked to burn incense sticks that *made her think*, and loved the scents, which put her in a calm, calm place:

And I just think, like, deeper inside.... inside my mind, inside, you know, my heart. It's almost like absence.

She explained that seizures were familiar to her from family illness and that the absences she described might be similar:

Almost like you're not aware of your surroundings. You're just thinking about...more in your imagination.

She disliked coming back from this as it was calming and reassuring:

Though what the reassurance was, was unclear, I don't actually know. That's the one question I can't answer. I don't really know what is so fascinating to me, like, finding that so great. It's just the way it is really!

She went on to suggest that the girl in the photograph might be thinking about how beautiful the world was, or how the earth was made. She went on to express a liminality prompted by her senses:

If it was me, I'd feel quite safe in the situation because it's nice and there's warm colours around and that would make me feel safe... and you've got the sound of the sea, and all the colours... and all your senses are, like, awake if you like.

Despite having given this positive response to a girl sitting in silence, she exhibited the contradiction shown by several children, saying she would be incapable of sitting still:

I have to have a kind of constant excitement, you know, to keep me entertained.

Clearly boredom was for her a major antipathetic factor, yet she described, vividly, that she often went deep within herself, even staring at a candle flame for up to 10 minutes:

Anything could happen around me. Me and my dad can just look at something and not think anything. It's quite cleansing actually. I like to do it .I can't really choose exactly when I'm going to do it...I have to be nice and calm you know and have done everything that I can, homework and things like that... but if I want to do it, then I can, you know. I can clear my mind.

Greg, too, having been adamant that he always liked to be active, engaged in competitive sport and busy, identified positively with the photograph:

It would be nice and peaceful getting away from like everything noisy and work for a while, and relaxing.

Asked whether he would like to be there he admitted:

Yes sometimes I would. I always like to be around people, quite noisy, but I always like sort of being quiet sometimes... where I can relax rather than always... stuff like getting away from homework or badminton or being...doing that sort of thing... there's quite a lot of homework and if I'm not doing that I'm normally doing badminton... about 2 hours a day. Yes, I appreciate silence, like not all the time but sometimes just to get away from work and just relax and have time to yourself.

Carla, who attended mass weekly, described how there was very little silence available to her then, perhaps before people arrive, or if they stayed to pray afterwards. Silence was available to her just before sleep:

I think it's good to have silence, 'cos you can reflect on maybe everything really. You can think about anything you want to whether it was last week or five years ago or yesterday.

She engaged strongly with the picture, saying she would love to be there, to escape all the busyness, give herself time to think and to take everything in. Yet, when offered the chance to sit for 10 minutes during the day, she squirmed slightly:

I think I'd want to do something like. I don't know... I just... I think it would be a bit weird almost being...silent for that time when you've got other stuff to do. It's like every spare minute of the day you want to be doing something so it's out of the way.

With a pronounced worried expression, she explained that every day she had things to do; then there were clubs, homework and things outside school. She had a little notice board with a 'to-do' list and ticked completed tasks off each day. Imagining what it would be like to be in a room in silence, she stressed that worry about the list would stop her enjoying it. Asked if she might enjoy silence if there were no list, no homework, she nodded emphatically, and with a deep sigh and a smile, said she definitely would. Asked if she could see a time when that might happen, she replied, after a very long

pause, *perhaps when I'm old*. She thought we shouldn't have to worry about deadlines and homework. Instead, *people* were a compensation and a solace:

I don't think I'd like to be on my own at all. I think I'd be very scared being on my own. I just think it's very reassuring to have people around you that care for you and love you and that even if you don't have free time and you don't have space, at least you know that you've got people around you. So it sort of makes it worth it I suppose...all the work.

In summary, only 2 of the children (Susan and Stephen) were averse to finding silence, with Susan's view changing over time to express that it might be calming. Stephen, as we have read, ultimately would find much boredom in silence. 4 children (Sangeeta, Penny, Sandra and Peter) were particularly positive about its benefits and sought it, in Peter's case irrespective of its associations with mourning. The remaining 4 showed strong ambivalence and, whilst not completely rejecting the idea of, for example, being offered 10 minutes silence, they felt that the lack of productivity inherent in this and the subsequent stress of failed deadlines (and in Carla's case fewer ticks off her 'to-do' list) meant that it might create more stress for them. We have also seen that social considerations, peer pressure and the children's individual personalities and time-consuming hobbies played a part.

Nevertheless, in this group there was a yearning to be alone and quiet - work pressures notwithstanding, even if, as in Carla's case, you might have to wait until you are old to achieve it. The conflicting views shown by some were particularly apparent when offered the pictures. It was here that positive aspects of silence were expressed, albethey prompted, though being alone was a negative, and understandable aspect, cited by many.

Approaches to silence were varied, often contradictory, and sometimes vehement. The researcher was also aware that the children, knowing the focus of the research, sought to please her and may have skewed their preferences accordingly. Given this variation and as all the children showed aspects of spirituality in their lives, the question remained whether such spirituality usually manifested in silent moments and, indeed, whether those children with positive feelings about silence presented with more, or more intense, forms of spirituality.

Manifestations of Spirituality within Silence

Without exception the individual children's expressions and experiences of spirituality were seen both in the context of quiet and solitude, and also in the context of general busyness and life. Key moments described by the children of 'letting go' and instances of peak joy, absorption and even 'absence' as described by Sandra, all within a social or school context or even around a dinner table, were evident. Some children have stressed that being with others actually precipitated and amplified the experience and changes of state and the point mode, a 'here and now' awareness.¹¹, believed to be available to all children were frequently experienced when surrounded by others.

¹¹ Penny with friends in McDonalds, Sandra with siblings in the hospital, Karl on safari with his family. Rosie in a game, Penny when drawing the human eye or lost in conversation, or Greg getting lost deep within even when watching television.

Other major aspects of child spirituality including mystery sensing, value sensing and awareness sensing referred to by Hay and Nye as well as meta-cognition, were evidenced in both silent contexts and in social. This conforms with the view taken by Alistair Hardy- that Spirituality is a fundamental human trait, and is perfectly consistent with the comments by Jane Hallowell, Robert Coles' wife and collaborator, that children were on a road with some purpose in mind.

Of the 3 children who actively sought silence (Penny, Sandra and Sangeeta), Penny and Sandra both described themselves as 'lost in nature' or conversation, and both had notable experiences of joy and transcendence yet with others and in a noisy public environment. Sangeeta spoke passionately about her need for silence, regarded herself as religious and not really spiritual, and described key moments of connection (with a 'really old person') during her walk to school. Even for these children, silence was not the precipitant of all manifestations of their spirituality, nor were their experiences more obviously acute.

Several children (Susan, Penny, Sandra, Peter) described a reverence for and a connectivity with nature and the joy this brought them, often in silence, yet this was an aspect of their spirituality rather than the whole of what they expressed in the interviews.

Helen Lees' (Lees 2012: 4) view of silence not being a state of audible quiet, but rather a meditative state of mind, using the natural resources of the body- not the absence of something but a positive 'something', found correspondence in this research. As has been seen, the children provided many examples of this state. Surrounded by others, in the middle of a classroom, within the family or in a public place they described, movingly, the 'yielding' noted by Dauenhauer (Dauenhauer 1979:437) and referred to earlier, underlining Montessori's view that silence was not an absence of noise, but rather an isolation of the mind. (Montessori 2004:115)

The children exhibited, and without exception, a range of those aspects of children's spirituality identified by key researchers in the field. The analysis of approaches to and opportunities for silence indicated a range of responses including antipathy, negative associations and those actively seeking such silence and these within an educational and social context of achievement, pressure and productivity. They manifested spirituality irrespective of access to or desire for silence, an outcome contradicting the expectations of the researcher and more consistent with a non-binary understanding of silence, as a space within which children live. This was, therefore, a different silence, an inner silence, not one which could be offered or obtained, because it always 'is'- 'the basic dimension of being' identified by Champagne. (Champagne 2003:46)

Though one of the initial prompts for this work was the concern shown in many western societies and some eastern, for the mental health and stability of its young, the children in this survey afforded an optimism that the human spirit cannot but be made manifest. Whether this might be strengthened through increased access to silence and solitude and, indeed, through a greater recognition and acceptance of its existence, remains unanswered in this research.

Finally, the children selected were interviewed at the age of 12-14, during early puberty. Further research might fruitfully focus on the same children at a later

developmental stage, 16-18, comparing attitudes and experiences during early and post-puberty, examining Tamminen's noted decline in religious experience post 13. A comparative study of children in educational centres where no formal opportunities for silence are offered with children in centres where silence, even meditation, is the norm, would also offer future research potential.

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