

Ready or Not

Children, spirituality and journeying together



Ruth Harvey

wild goose
publications



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Poems, prose, readings © the individual contributors
Compilation © 2012 Ruth Harvey
First published 2012 by
Wild Goose Publications, Fourth Floor, Savoy House,
140 Sauchiehall Street, Glasgow G2 3DH, UK,
the publishing division of the Iona Community. Scottish Charity No. SC003794.
Limited Company Reg. No. SC096243.

ISBN 978-1-84952-217-5

Cover design © 2012 Wild Goose Publications
Cover photograph © David Coleman

**The publishers gratefully acknowledge the support of the Drummond Trust,
3 Pitt Terrace, Stirling FK8 2EY in producing this book.**

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Overseas distribution

Australia: Willow Connection Pty Ltd, Unit 4A, 3–9 Kenneth Road, Manly Vale,
NSW 2093

New Zealand: Pleroma, Higginson Street, Otane 4170, Central Hawkes Bay

Canada: Bayard Distribution, 10 Lower Spadina Ave., Suite 400, Toronto,
Ontario M5V 2Z

Printed by Bell & Bain, Thornliebank, Glasgow



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Introduction

The story of this book

We are all God's children. As a child I relished this truth in the (at that point unarticulated) knowledge that I truly belonged to the whole inhabited earth, the *oikoumene* of God's kingdom. But no such grand notions could prepare me for what it actually felt like, in 1999, to be pregnant and full of the fears and the hopes of one carrying an unborn baby. I was ravenous – for good, wholesome food to fill my growing belly. But I was ravenous in another way too. I found not only that I craved three full breakfasts daily, but that I was hungry for reflections to feed me, body, mind and spirit through gestation. And so I searched for material that wove my spiritual yearnings with my physical and emotional path.

I found poems about pregnancy and motherhood, essays and narratives about the ups and downs of parenting, novels and theological reflections on the nature of motherhood. It was good material. But I was hungry for more. My senses and hunger had been alerted to children in a new way through my own pregnancy. My questions continued to grow as did my belly and the children of our home. What could children teach me about God, about faith, about the spiritual journey that, somewhere along the path of growing up, I had momentarily lost? In what ways did I need to open my ears and my heart to the still small voice of God talking to me through the unaccountably beautiful (at 3am?!) not so still small voice of the child in my arms?

If we are all children of God, if God dwells within each one of us, for all time, then in what ways could I retune my active mind to the wisdom of the children within and in my life?

And in the meantime, as life continued to grow chaotically and beautifully around us in our home, as I sat with my own needs and longings, we imperceptibly collected what turned out to be a notebook of original, deeply moving or funny things that our children began to say. Just writing down, word for word, some of their pearls of wisdom took on a life

of its own, and reminded me that children live and breathe and voice a depth of wisdom about God.

So the questions continued to grow and deepen, as I reflected as carefully as I could on the spiritual insights and wisdom coming from our very own children.

Conversations with friends about living alongside children, and the impact they have on our own spiritual journeying continued to deepen. I realised that there are few neat categories or essay collections that can capture the breadth and depth, the joy and the sorrow of being around children. But the desire to capture some of this ‘rainbow story’ grew, as the focus shifted from stories about birth and childhood, to those about the impact of children on our own adult spiritual journeys. And the question crystallised:

‘In what ways has being around children, whether as their parent or godparent, their aunt or uncle, grandparent, adoptive parent, foster-sibling or companion, deepened and broadened your own spiritual path?’

I have been involved with the Iona Community all of my life, and have been a member since 1994. And so I began to share this question with friends and relations within the Community, who have shared in so many ways their growing journey of faith with me. I shared this question too with friends and colleagues from outside the Iona Community – and so the responses – and the collection – began to grow.

Each year since, more contributions have been offered spontaneously or have been coaxed out after a particularly inspiring conversation. What is here, therefore, is not complete, or finished. Not polished or perfect. It is a collection offered at this particular point in time, exploring the organic glory of faith shared, and made wholly ‘perfect’ through our encounter with children and young people.

These pieces, written over a period of 10 years, capture a moment, or a thought, or an experience in the flow of life. Life moves on. Children grow. Stories deepen. In the midst of such flux, my hope is that the timeless wisdom gleaned through living alongside children remains.

Revisiting my childhood

Being amongst children is not a completely new experience for any of us, who have grown up with siblings, or cousins, with neighbours or peers. For my part, with brothers and a sister, foster siblings, nieces and nephews, the children of friends, godchildren, and now my own daughters, it feels like I have been ‘accompanying’ children all my life. My own childhood, lived for the first ten years in intentional Christian communities, in Glasgow with the Gorbals Group, and then on Iona as part of the Iona Community, had been a mixture of immersion amongst many families for short periods, with long-term connection to a tiny group of children in an island school.

At the same time I had in part experienced being collectively parented. So what did the other adults in my life, some parents, some not, have to say about the impact of children on their own spiritual journeys, particularly in an intentionally spiritual context? Many of the offerings here interweave actual experiences of being parented, along with reflections on what it means to be a parent, side by side with moving encounters with young children in our own adult lives. These pieces are autobiographical in the best sense of that word: reflective, insightful, humorous and deeply personal while at the same time revealing universal truths. Neat categories continue to evade.

Ordering the pieces

As the collection gathered, the question remained: how to present these unique stories in one cohesive volume? Should the contributions simply appear in the order received; should they follow a chronology based on the pattern of birth, living, death; or should they ‘talk’ to each other in a wholly subjective pattern?

In the end the questions became too vast, and the possibilities endless. While through this collection there is a consciously woven thread binding the stories one to the other in a light-touch pattern which makes sense to me, it is for the reader to engage with each piece separately, allowing one to speak to the other, and to the reader’s own story. And

thus the invitation remains open: in what ways, for you, does being in the company of children deepen and broaden your own spiritual path?

Thanks

My thanks go to Neil Paynter, Sandra Kramer and the Wild Goose Publications team whose patience and professionalism have steered this book to birth. Thank you in particular to Suzanne Swanson whose poem gave a title to this book. 'Ready or not, here we come ...' could be an anthem for children everywhere. My heartfelt thanks to each of the authors, who contributed stories from the heart; and to the children and young people who inspired them; and in particular to Maeve, Freya and Sophie, and of course to Nick: thank you for your wisdom, your humour and your creativity.

Ruth Harvey



Ready or not

There's a prayer
in here, a prayer

to God the father
and the mother, God

the child, God the arms
and the breast, this

prayer: keep us
in all our desire and lack.

Our failings
are not our whole.

You know us. Carry us
as we have carried within

our children. Listen
as we are learning to listen

to deep life in small bodies new
to the world and full

of refusal to use
our glazed eye. Follow

the skips and stumbles
of our feet following

the feet and the mouths
and the beating of heart

laid to heart, bass
and treble, rhythm and melody

trading anchor and flight.
Oh, the spirit that can enter

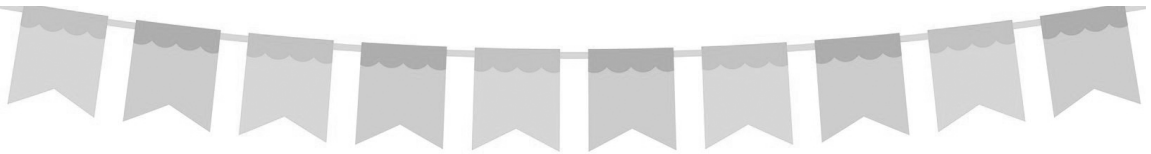
Introduction

when the wind of God
blows the breath

of a child through our
bodies ready

or not.
Keep us.

Suzanne Swanson



Arriving and Departing ...

... On how children take us literally and metaphorically full circle to the liminal spaces of life, to those edges where we encounter beginnings and endings, arriving and departing, life and death ...



Heartbeat

The still small voice,
pat, pat, pat.
The divine spark,
phut, phut, phut.
From the depths, from the dark,
present, here, there, within.
Thump. Thump. Thump.

No sign, no bump, no light,
no visible form.
This is the voice of the spirit,
this is the sound of the soul,
this is the accent of the unborn,
born within.

Ruth Harvey



Full circle

The extraordinary thing about conception is the intimacy between life and death. After the pain and desolation of an early miscarriage I learned how often the micro-cells of a life are seemingly tossed aside by a body – how often this most longed-for moment is held in suspension, only to be discarded. Yet no matter how ‘routine’ it may be, the agony of a miscarriage, of a death can be numbing and is often lived through in silence.

In the Western northern culture which I inhabit we are sometimes encouraged to hold the knowledge of a pregnancy ‘secret’ until the first trimester is over: until we are more confident that the baby will live. And yet it was at this very time, when the risk of miscarriage was greatest, when I was most vulnerable – feeling ‘blooming awful’, grim with the ‘joys’ of morning sickness – that I felt I most needed my friends. And if we were to lose our baby, then surely that was the time we most needed to lean on others. Certainly for me this turned out to be the case. So for each subsequent pregnancy I made sure I had a strong team of friends around me from the earliest days, there to support me and to listen, if I should lose the baby again.

The fragility of my second pregnancy was terribly poignant, therefore, and no more so than when I found myself in Linton churchyard in 1999. Taking part in a retreat, I took myself off to a quiet spot – then looked up and realised, of course, that, as I hadn’t gone out of the gate, I was still in the churchyard, surrounded by gravestones. My thoughts turned from the solid slabs of stone surrounding me, each one summarising a life in dates and names, to the fragile cells frantically at work weaving life deep in the darkness of my womb.

The following poem reflects some of my thoughts on that July morning:

A poem to an unborn child

In this place death
and life commingle –
names and dates written on stone
scribe the moment of life,
 the moment of death;
name the living and the dead.

The soft spiky touch of
the yew-tree roots me here,
in this place –
grounds me
on this earth –
firmly keeps me,
holds, pushes me
forward into the paradox
of living and dying.

In your place,
the dark, hidden, warming
womb within,
life and death commingle.
The spark of creation has been born,
in love, passion, flesh of our flesh,
 seed of our seed,
 bone of our fragile bone.

The sparkle of the soul now lives,
God-filled, Spirit-pregnant, holding, keeping,
warming, pushing out into the paradox
of a world of living and of dying.

Your vulnerable world
is close to truth
lives near to light
in the extreme darkness,
is held and nurtured
in the certainty of life beyond life.

Your fragile world
lives close to death,
to an ending that has no logic,
is clothed in mystery.

In my hand,
a rock – firm yet light,
solid, sure,
aged beyond belief.

In the paradox of life with death
in this place, and in your place,
let this rock be a reminder
of the solid, moving ground
of love in the midst of mystery.

Ruth Harvey



Birthing

I have given birth four times. Doubtless there are very many activities I am more practised at. Yet birthing is something I have always felt at home doing, and perhaps that is because it is such an inward-outward movement.

As a psychologist, my work is often focused on attending to what is happening in the unseen places of people's lives – the places where they feel or think or hold opinions. This might seem like an inward focus, yet it is in fact usually a process of connecting with the unsaid or unnoticed aspects of the person or family or group in order that there can be a movement towards an overt way of being which is more useful, authentic or powerful for the person or people concerned. This process is of course always most interested in the marginalised story or the exceptional voice, often the most silent and least powerful, because it is this hidden treasure which, when brought to light, can be the most dynamic agent of change.

Yes, looking inwards on its own is not what happens when we do this work. Moving outwards to new life is actually what occurs. And this is why it reminds me of birth. Or perhaps why birth was so familiar to me. Because birth cannot happen powerfully and naturally unless you move in and out. The inward movement is into your body, your instinctive urges, your sacred womanhood. You have to move to the limen – the threshold – the vulnerable place where you surrender all. All that has been – your desires for the future, your intellectual fantasy of control – all these must be left at the door to the threshold of birthing. And here in this zone, you go in, deep into yourself, to the place where only you and God can go, to the source, to the hub, to the waters of death and birth.

And of course when you are inside the limen there is a great rush of power which is the energy of the birthing, and there is an overwhelming series of waves of pain, which are the moments of surrender to the new life, and there are the pauses, the spaces in which to resurface before the waves take you forward again. When you are deep within yourself, powerful and free, in complete submission to the process, very little can

interfere with the birthing. It is like being utterly hooked up to God: terrifying and amazing and costly and the most positive act of self-giving going.

And of course it all ends with the movement out, from one of the most marginalised and silenced parts of the human body, into a world very keen to idolise an infant's story of innocence and hope. Into a world where our national laws may mean that a mother with a life-limiting illness must return to a country where there is virtually no treatment, leaving her child behind in care or taking him with her to be orphaned. Into a world where violence is commonplace in the home, legal and illegal drugs are standard ways of coping with emotion, and poverty of self-respect accompanies the struggle with housing and benefit institutions. Into our own fractured society.

And that is where the work of a psychologist must end, too. Not in the person, but through them, with them, in the decision to complain or fight harder or get together with others to have a say. In the tiny voice of value so deeply hidden, resonating with others in the community as a powerful agent of change. In the lives lived more fully, freer from fear, in enriching relationships, given to children growing into themselves.

And this, I believe, is also the inward-outward road Christ calls us to. Attentive to the least powerful, the unseen and the unsaid, costly, self-giving, beyond our control, energised by God, rhythmic and engaged with all that we see in the world. I surrender to it!

I am making my pilgrimage
down.

Down to the waters of death.

And although I have fought this
nothingness,
I find in it my very God, my very self.

For here behind the busyness,
the toil,
the mentalism of a modern life,

is death
and birth
and the stony path down to the shore
where I and I alone
my God in me and me in my God
can tread.

My loves, my strivings, all my fierce ideals
I must lay aside.

Only the power and pain and glorious colour
of my God
to flare in me as I go down to the void,
and am caught up within
like a ribbon in the tide.

So lay me wide and enter me,
sweet waters of death, and birth.

I belong to you.
I am yours alone.
I am ready to be submerged.

Elizabeth Wild



Butterfly wings

Like a bottle of water
turned upside down
you gurgled your presence,
fluttered your wings
across my middle
somersaulting near my kidneys,
my beloved inner organ,
swimming, flying, beating
a path across my
mediterranean.
Welcome!

Ruth Harvey



Having a coffee with God and chatting about parenthood

God, I was just thinking about the intense relationship between parent and child and wondering what it can tell us about your nature.

I am in essence inter-relational.

Can you say a bit more about that please?

Everyone and everything relates to one another through me and within me. There is no relationship that is outside of me.

That statement could lead on to a whole host of other questions but now I want to concentrate on *parenthood*. Why is parenthood so hard?

Because looking at your children is like looking in a mirror and brings back painful as well as positive memories.

I often find myself doing or saying the things adults used to do or say to me as a child. Why can't I move on and be original?

There are issues from your own childhood still to be worked through, and until you do that, they will continue to influence your ability to parent.

But I had no obvious trauma or loss in my childhood. I had a very fortunate start to life with a loving family.

We all have wounds to be healed and bruises that have never completely faded. We have all felt humiliated or ignored as children. We have all experienced jealousy or rivalry of some form within our families. The list goes on ...

I suppose I considered these issues to be petty and 'childish', undeserving of my attention.

Until you give whatever it is that still niggles at you from your childhood some attention, your ability to parent will be affected. Let me ask you a question. What has been one of your most profound experiences as a parent?

Losing my third child – whom we named Peter – very early in my pregnancy.

What insights did you gain from Peter?

That we bond spiritually with our children before they are even fully formed physically. That love between a mother and child is incalculable and never-ending. That to name, acknowledge and pray for an unborn child who has died brings healing and wholeness for all of the family and freedom for the child.

And ...?

And the sense of loss and pain is unimaginable. The depths of sorrow to which you plummet feel well beyond anyone else's reach. The memory of Peter and the sense that he is very much a part of our family is something ever-present in my heart.

But ...?

But since friends prayed with us and shared bread and wine, I have felt better in myself. I often picture Peter laughing on a swing. I have let him go, but he is as precious to me as are my four lovely daughters.

You faced your pain when Peter died. You stepped into a black hole and with the support of your loved ones, over many months, you found healing, wholeness and light. That same vulnerability and courage can enable you to face other issues from your past.

So basically, the more I experience healing and wholeness in my life, the more we will all benefit, children and adults.

Yes! Oh, and this listening and talking thing we're doing now helps a great deal. Not just with me but with your family.

Children *do* say the most amazing things. My third daughter, Katie, asked me, aged 5: 'Mummy, if we all love each other, then why do people need to get married?'

Children are very close to the light. They still have clarity in their thinking and an ability to see what many adults have been blinded to over the years.

How can I encourage these thoughts?

Listen to your children and accept what they tell you as being real for them, even if you don't fully understand them.

What about when they ask really profound questions?

As much as possible encourage the answer to come from within them. Ask them more probing questions. Jesus was a master at that.

Yes, that makes sense. I never feel satisfied when I merely pass on my own way of thinking. I do trust that they have the answers within themselves. I often feel that I learn a great deal more from them than they do from me.

That's good, but in reality you enhance each other's lives all the time, and you have chosen to be together in order to do so.

I do love life with all of its ups and downs, and I love our conversations. Thank you for life and love and communication.

It's my pleasure – enjoy the journey.

Shirley Billes