

“The Spirit of the Child”

by Amy Andrews

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It is good to be children sometimes, and never better than at Christmas, when its mighty founder was a child himself. - Charles Dickens

I have loved children as long as I can remember. I was always more interested in my baby dolls than Barbie dolls and I received a doll each Christmas of my childhood. I believe it was the Christmas I was 18 months old that I received a soft doll along with a cradle built by my dad and a doll quilt made by my mom. There are home movies showing me desperately trying to wrap my doll the “perfect way”, rocking the baby in the cradle and of course lovingly carrying it with my arm around its neck. For me, this was pure bliss. That movie also pans around the room capturing the adults in my life getting to experience the joy of a child’s Christmas again.

To me nothing says holidays like children, and few things allow adults to become childlike as holidays do. Think about it, Halloween and its costumes, Fourth of July (or here in Wyoming Rodeo) and its parades, birthdays and their pastries set ablaze; sugar and flames, what more could the child in you want?

Yet, as one grows older it can become more difficult to express unabashed joy, to wonder aloud at the everyday miracles around us and to maintain faith that there *is* good in the world. We learn about and experience so many ways things can go wrong in life that it is easy to slip into the mindset of Charles Dickens’s Ebenezer Scrooge or Dr. Seuss’s Grinch.

I try to stave off such hard-heartedness by maintaining the spirit of the child. This process is actually a reciprocal one. When I start to feel the Grinch in me slip out I just have to look to one of the many children in my life and they quickly bring the spirit of the child back for me. And when I see the spirit of the child start to wane in a young one, I fight like hell to help them hold on to it reminding them that goodness, joy and hope are rightfully theirs as a child.

Though I am a teacher now, I resisted that path for a while. In that time I still worked with children. For several years after college I worked in a lock-down psychiatric

residential facility for children ages 5-12. These children either had experienced repeated horrific abuse, severe mental illness or a combination of the two. Their response to these circumstances was behavior so acute that they were a danger to themselves and their communities, requiring that they live in this facility. In place of parents to care for them they had people like me, most fresh out of college, caring for them day and night. These little ones had nauseating histories and yet...they were kids. They rode bikes, and jumped in piles of leaves. They sold lemonade, and played dress up. Amazingly, much of the time they were able to dig deep and access the spirit of the child within, which you would think certainly had been destroyed. Other times, they needed a helping hand, to be the children they deserved to be.

Let me introduce you to several of these kiddos or as I like to think of them, spiritual guides.

First is Rick. Rick was seven when I met him and very angry. He was intensely violent and did not really know how to play. One day we were sitting on a couch together when I suggested that we go fishing. He knew that he was not allowed to leave the locked building, so his look of confusion was understandable. I turned around and pretended to cast a line over the back of the couch. "I bet I can catch a bigger one than you can," I said. The switch was flipped. "Oh, no you can't!" he hollered and with a "Yeehaw!" (because Rick *was* a cowboy) he threw his line in and his joy poured out. Over many imaginary fishing trips, Rick learned to play and I was lucky enough to be along for the ride.

Next is Waylon. Waylon was a charismatic 10 year old who was street-smart way beyond his years. Fortunately, through all of his bravado I found his soft spot. One of the many routines at the treatment facility, and my favorite routine, was what we called "bedtimes". At night, each child could chose an adult to spend one-on-one time with by reading a story, singing a song or just chatting about the day. I often did Waylon's bedtime and he would request that I sing "You Are My Sunshine". The hardest, but most important time I sang for Waylon was after he had made suicidal threats. He kept saying

that he didn't think he was a good kid and that he didn't deserve to be alive. That was when I first said this, which I use with kids to this day. I looked him straight in the eye and said, "I will believe in you until you believe in yourself. Then we can believe together." And then I sang.

And now Kara. When it was time for me to leave the residential treatment center, I told the kids that I had learned how to help children and that I would now be learning how to help parents be better parents. I couldn't tell them the real reason for my leaving was that I couldn't support the new management, which referred to the children as "beds" and said that there wasn't time in the day for them to play. So I asked the children what I should teach parents. I received lots of advice, but the most profound was from a 5 year-old girl named Kara. As I braided her frizzy hair she turned around, put her hands on my knees and said very seriously, "You should teach parents to rock their kids, and hug them and read them stories." Despite her past, Kara's faith that adults could learn to be good shone through bright and clear.

These children inspired me to finally go into teaching special education. So, the spiritual guides I will share with you next are my students. In one of my teaching positions, many of the students had experienced or continued to experience similar life circumstances to those of the children in residential treatment. However, their behavior was slightly less destructive, which allowed them to stay in public school. In my next as well as current teaching positions, my students, though most coming from safe loving homes, endure the daily struggle to learn in spite of their learning disabilities. All of them children needing reminders, and more often reminding me of the spirit of the child within.

Being a member of a class for students with emotional disturbance, whether you are a teacher or a student, is stressful to say the least. On this particular day, I don't remember what was happening, but I do remember what happened to me. My inner thoughts went "live" and came out of my mouth. I said in frustration, "What am I even doing here?" To my horror, a student overheard me and looked at me in disbelief. "Ms.

Andrews,” he said, “don’t you remember? You said you care about us and you want to help us.” Nothing like divine intervention in the flesh to remind me of what is important.

One year had been particularly rough and at the end, I decided we needed some plain old fun. Now, I run a tight ship in my class, even more so in this particular class, which had required assistance from the police several times that year. So when I very seriously gave the kids instructions to tear all of the paper off of the walls, they were frozen in disbelief. When I repeated myself they hopped to, first tentatively and then with great enthusiasm. And what do you do when you have piles of torn paper? You have a “snow ball fight” in June of course! Three adults against ten kids threw paper balls at each other and laughed until faces hurt. Pure fun. Pure joy. Pure kid for all of us.

That was at the elementary level ages 8-11. More recently I have been teaching at the middle school level, students 11- 15. And of course when you are a student in middle school or junior high, it is childish to be a kid. Not cool at all! Or so they would like to believe. But they just can’t help themselves. One day I walked to the front of the class with a picture book and said, “Story time!” To my surprise and by the looks on their faces, to many of the students’ surprise as well their response was a rousing “Yay!” Little Kara was right, reading stories is important for kids of all ages. As it was an obvious success, I continue to use picture books to teach literary elements tapping into that joy of childhood, being read to.

I think perhaps my favorite example of the spirit of the child is that of the belief in Santa Claus. A funny thing happens around about age 10 or 11. For years, children hold fast believing in the jolly old man. Then they flat out stop believing. It seems to coincide with adolescence, so I have a hunch that this disbelief is hormonally driven. Because once people enter college they seem to recover their belief in old St. Nick and the belief strengthens to equal, if not surpass, that of their belief during childhood, even if it is not quite the same. “Wink, wink.” One of my greatest fears is that one student whose beliefs are hormonally altered may destroy the belief of a student who has yet to experience this temporary shift. However, the older students have never let me down. No matter what, the spirit of of the child who believes in simple joy and goodness has always come through in each of them.

As you can imagine, I can get very frustrated with all that gets in the way of allowing kids to be kids. At one point, I realized that I had to try to stop being angry about what I cannot do for children and focus on what I can do. So now my mantra is this. "I can't give every child the life they deserve. What I can give them is the best of myself." Many times the best of myself lies in the spirit of the child within me.

A mighty power exists in the spirit of the child. Children symbolize goodness, innocence, joy, and hope for the future. The Christmas story exemplifies this beautifully. Jesus, the child within the story is the goodness, the joy and hope for the future in dark times. Even when separating the divine elements, no, *especially* when separating the divine elements, we can apply the story of Christmas to ourselves. The spirit of the child, goodness, joy and hope for the future exists within each of us. When times are hard, dig deep, find the child within and when you find it, revel in its glory. I know I do.