



Spirit in the Home

by Kathy Anuszczyk

The nurturing of our spiritual lives is the most important work we have here on Earth. The decision to educate our children outside of any school system reflects the importance of that soul-life to our family. Most importantly, we see no separation in the daily life we lead and our spiritual life. Spiritual development can't possibly be left to something we "do" once, or even twice, a week; neither can we confine our education to school hours. We become aware of our spirituality's influence in our every action and decision throughout our day. As in any other discipline, there is a rhythm that must be learned and practiced, so that, over time, our mindfulness, and presence will be achieved. An environment conducive to growth and development, as well as to experimentation and creativity must be made or found and carefully protected. As parents, our primary role in life is to aid our children in their development of a spiritual practice. As we model what that looks like, discuss with them how and what we do, and incorporate them into our own practice, they will learn to recognize their own spiritual yearnings. Their learning experiences and academic endeavors are completely meaningless without knowledge of who they are, how they relate to the Divine, and where they fit into this culture and world.

While spirituality and religion are complementary, they are not interchangeable. Religion deals with defining what is considered sacred, drawing boundaries between acceptable and intolerable behaviors, creating tenets of belief, and providing opportunities for liturgical worship and celebration. Religion certainly can provide an avenue to or a framework for spiritual practice, as well as an environment for mystical encounters and the like. Spirituality is the more internal work and involves the individual's relationship with the Creator. Spiritual boundaries

and experiences often differ from person to person. Spirituality has everything to do with respect, understanding, and tolerance, and very little to do with strict adherence to a specific doctrine or dogma. Spirituality connects our everyday actions with the nobler work of truth, justice, love, and peace. The spiritual life is the deep soul work where one meets the Beloved, where one learns to bare oneself completely, and where one may be in touch with the deepest desires of one's Self. I grew up Presbyterian and converted to Catholicism as a young adult. My husband was raised Catholic. We find a wonderful framework for our spiritual life within the Catholic Church, and consider ourselves extremely blessed in having wonderfully gifted leaders, well rounded and open-minded faith communities, supportive relatives, great diversity of religious traditions within our friendships, and a clear vision of our family's ideal spiritual life.

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One's spiritual practice is as necessary as breathing. Just as we hope to protect our children from inhaling toxins, we also attempt to create the ideal environment for spiritual development. In education, as in spirituality, this environment provides the structure so that children may uncover the gifts and talents within themselves, learn to trust and know themselves, and become comfortable with their strengths as well as their weaknesses. In such an environment, values and ethics are modeled, and the surrounding community provides relation-

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ships and experiences within which children can learn to make wise choices, careful decisions, healthy friendships, and, of course, plenty of mistakes from which to learn. In this space, a child will learn to hear and follow the voice of Truth, Love, and Justice. They will learn the disciplines of self-control, negotiation, and reconciliation. Very important is their mastering of peace-making skills. Their developed character and nurtured soul will serve them forever, in any path they choose or find themselves traveling later in life. The spiritual practice begun in childhood will always be more important than the particular religious tradition they follow. A beloved and content soul will lead a person through hardships, failures, successes, and whatever else life might bring to them. Academic and artistic gifts will blossom, develop, and bring joy as long as the soul tending has taken priority.

Educating at home allows us much more freedom to create this ideal, soul-tending environment. We certainly do not aim to hide our children away and never let them out into the world! Quite the opposite is true, as we spend a lot of time out in the public, learning about and enjoying the world in which we live. This world provides all that we need in order for us to live and learn and work. Compared to non-homeschooling parents, we homeschooling parents have more input into and supervision over how and with whom our children's time is spent. Much more family time is available for the nurturing of sibling relationships. Our children are each other's constant companions, and so they learn to work through difficulties and become friends. And as a family, we are able to remain together even when my husband's work might otherwise separate us. My husband, Bob, works for an employment agency for developmentally disabled adults. The agency has two offices, both in California, one in Sacramento and the other in Crescent City. Throughout the year, he attends out-of-town conferences and seminars, the agency occasionally hosts a weekend retreat for the staff, and he goes up to the north office to train new staff or

relieve someone for their vacation. Because we homeschool, we can travel together and thus not have to experience the kind of familial separation that is the norm for so many non-homeschooling families (not all homeschooling families have our good fortune, but, from what I can determine, far more homeschooling families are able to be together on business-related trips than are non-homeschooling families).

Prayer is an important part of our daily life, as are discussions on morals and ethics. Our children have wonderful relationships with people of many ages, backgrounds, faiths, and fields of expertise. We attempt to balance the outer life of dance and art classes, park days, and museum trips with an inner life in which we find comfort in the tending of family, home, and garden. (Given that "socialization" is still a concern to those unfamiliar with homeschooling, perhaps this catalogue of life activities will help them see that our children's social skills, like those of many, if not most, homeschooled children, are quite strong and healthy. In fact, the librarians and museum docents whom we meet regularly comment that they can spot homeschoolers as soon as these children start asking questions, as their interest is genuine and often insatiable; their interactions with adults, quite confident and mature.)

Homeschooling also allows us to spend time doing projects and activities which support our values. We practice organic gardening and teach sustainable agriculture practices to our neighbors and friends. We collect and deliver needed items to food lockers, outreach programs, and maternity homes. We sing Christmas Carols at the soup kitchen during the holiday season. We prepare and deliver meals to families in need. We're involved with the Earth Day Event this year and are considering the creation of a community garden in our neighborhood. We attend mass during the week and are deeply involved at all levels of the liturgy there. We gather and pray with our faith community regularly. We research current events and frame them in the context of our faith. We treasure relation-



Simon's Baptism at Catholic Worker Farm, 1998

ships with our parents and grandparents, as well as with other friends we've "adopted" into our family, seeking out their stories, gifts, and talents.

A wonderful example of combined spirituality and education is our yearly All Saints Day project. (All Hallows Eve is the evening before All Saints Day, and church festivities follow Hebrew time, so the day starts at sunset.Hallow eve.....Hallow E'en.....Halloween.....I find it interesting to know the roots of the holidays we celebrate!) In our Catholic tradition, we have many Saints in our history — people who have led holy and exemplary lives. We learn the details of their lives and deeds, and also their hardships, so that we might be inspired by them to choose what is good, holy, and just in our own lives. They are our heroes and heroines. Early each fall, our children choose a new Saint, research her or his life, the time in which she or he lived, the symbols associated with them, the miracles attributed to them, and their manner of dress. The children put together a biography and costume and then prepare a dramatic presentation of their saint for the public. Our choices have included Archbishop Oscar Romero, Thomas Merton, Scholastica and Benedict, John Bosco, Katherine Drexel, Clare, and Francis of Assisi.

Learning as they go, doing the work that makes up our days, our children interweave their education and spiritual nurturing with daily life. Emily takes a dance class twice a week and Jacob has art lessons with an outside instructor. Their studies follow their interests and passions. We fall into the "student led" or "unschooler" category of homeschoolers. Perhaps quarterly, we sit down to discuss goals and map out new fields of interest so that I may arrange field trips, reading lists, and activities accordingly. I find experts to answer their questions when I am unable to do so myself. I learn alongside them quite often. We practice math skills when doubling recipes, charting

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a gardening map, drawing perfect stars for a craft, comparing prices in the grocery store, and figuring the time of arrival on a trip. We 'do' our geography when we follow a friend's travels, look up a country mentioned on the news, or do a little more research on a place mentioned in a book. We learn English skills as we read and read and read! We also write letters to friends as well as to editors of newspapers and magazines, make timelines and graphs, keep journals, create cards, and write poetry. We visit science, art, and historical museums often, spending long hours questioning the docents about the exhibits. Spending time with friends who speak foreign languages gives us an opportunity to learn new vocabulary and something of their culture. Music plays a big part in our lives as we all sing and work at playing various instruments.

We garden together, bake bread, and make jam from the fruit trees in our back yard. We play deductive reasoning and



Emily's 1st Communion, 1999

logic games. We experiment, taking things apart and then putting them back together again. Service personnel and repairmen answer our questions. We tag along behind the landlord and ask questions. We often stay within reach of the encyclopedias and dictionary. Even Gabriel (who's almost two years old) spends regular time browsing through an encyclopedia, the Audubon Waterfowl Guide, and a National Geographic Mammal Book, having someone name every thing he sees (I learned the difference between a Dugong and a Manatee from him). We read biographies of interesting people and then reenact them. One morning I awoke to hear the older three children recounting significant parts of Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I a Woman" speech! Artistic expression is highly valued and, I believe, holds a significant role in spiritual development by allowing us to participate in the creative process. So, daily we reserve space for crafts, painting, drawing, observing, cooking, shaping clay, making collages, or needlework.

Although our vision of family spiritual life has been strong ever since Bob and I married, a key experience helped further shape our attitude about lifestyle. About five years ago, we took a leap of faith: We sold our home, Bob left his unfulfilling warehouse job, and we moved to a Catholic Worker Community about a hundred miles away from family, friends, and our church. We hauled a construction office trailer up to the property and set about making it into a home for ourselves. Our third baby was expected at the time, Emily was about six years old and Jacob was four. We cleared land, piped gas and hot water lines, and laid sewage pipes to the septic system. We had no electricity. I hauled diapers and laundry to the common building across the meadow where there was a generator for the washing machine. We lived six miles away from a very small town with a post office and no store, 45 minutes from a town with stores, church, gas, library, and hospital, and the last mile of our dirt road was home to big rocks and holes.

Given our circumstances, we found ourselves thinking hard about what we really needed before heading out! This time taught us so much about our basic needs and how easy it is to make do and get by without. The lack of electricity and poor quality of gas lighting taught us to go to bed earlier and enjoy rest and sleep. We spent much time discussing as a family our choices, our decision-making processes, and how the Spirit led us through these. We also shared our fears and doubts. The community attempted to live by radical Gospel values, provided retreat space for people with terminal illnesses, and created liturgical candles to financially support their other endeavors. Some meals were communal, as were times of prayer and work. We learned so much about relationships, communication, and creating emotional, spiritual, and living space during our year and a half of internship there. The spiritual growth and education that took place during that time is wonderfully valuable to us. What we learned and how we grew would not have happened elsewhere.

As we go about our work of creating community, learning life skills, pursuing passions and interests, and seeking spiritual wholeness, we must pay attention to details in the bigger picture. Many of our seemingly small choices and actions have the potential to be monumental as others, following our example, choose also to act mindfully and lovingly. At first glance, these choices and actions may not seem relevant to our education and spiritual growth, and yet, how can they not be? Truly, there are so many layers within ourselves, and they really all surround two issues: our spirituality, or who we are created to become, and our education, or how we fit into our world. As we structure our days in ways which enhance the spiritual call and our learned response, we've found the following aspects to be useful in keeping our broad thinking focused very tangibly:

- **Prayer** offers us an opportunity to build a relationship with the Divine, express our gratitude, be aware of others' needs, and celebrate meaningful liturgies and holy days. We also learn about rhythm, discipline, history, and other religions.



*Garden blessing, house church gathering 1999
(fertility celebrated with pregnant women at front!)*

- **Purchasing Power** is a tool used in the spiritual works of mercy and justice, and in seeking fair wages for all. Our practice has a great impact on the earth and on other people's lives, and so we keep in touch with what goes on around the world, boycott those whose behavior is unethical, buy second-hand whenever possible, purchase seasonal produce from local, organic growers and support small, local businesses, intentionally avoiding large chains and corporations. Our education grows as the damage to the earth and to human relationships continues to be brought to light and as we continue to learn about economics, environmental politics, geography, and government trade agreements.

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- **Limited Media Exposure** allows us to teach values and ethics without so much competition from the destructive, seductive, violent, and manipulative industries of television and advertising. Our spiritual path encourages us to let go of material articles and not be distracted from the vision of a world where all people have what they need to live content and healthy. Television viewing has been absent in our home for over 5 years, and we can't imagine giving up our rich and satisfying activities to make space for it in the future! We learn to be strong and self-assured without the media assault of our culture, able to stand up for truth and justice instead of falling prey to the seduction of vanity, desire, greed, and cultural contradictions.
- **Eating and Fasting** are physical, bodily expressions of prayer. A completely vegetarian diet allows us to stand in solidarity with our sisters and brothers throughout the

Annual trip to Bodega Bay with grandparents. Jacob checking out the pelicans and seals! (Kathy, Jacob, Simon, Bob, grandma, Terry in front).



world. This lifestyle is also easier on the environment than is a lifestyle involving the support of our meat, poultry, and dairy industries. Our choice is mindful of the health of our bodies, the impact on the land, and the knowledge of limited resources available to feed all peoples of the earth. We unite ourselves with all who are hungry and know that we are making a positive statement and action on the side of life for all. Meal preparation and digestion also provide opportunities for understanding of nutrition, physiology, the politics of power in nutritional standards, medical care, and animal care, not to mention the math and chemistry involved.

- **Advocacy and Action** against war, aggression, and violence are powerful tools in peace and justice work, which, of course, is the goal of the Spirit, the Creator, who desires true freedom for all created. Seeking solutions to end the dehumanization of people in any environment or institution leads to communities in which love, tolerance, respect, and dignity of all creatures are valued. We seek harmony in our world. That pursuit gives us quite a broad education in politics, power, poverty, governmental procedures, historical context and perspectives, economics, and environmental issues.

- **Creating Community** becomes more and more important as technology, employment, and suburban living tend to push us further down the road towards isolation. We need each other — families, singles, children, retired couples, and the elderly. Our spirituality calls us to celebrate together the liturgical seasons in meaningful, tangible ways, and to break down the barriers that separate us from others, especially those whose beliefs or lifestyles differ from our own. Our horizons broaden as we learn others' rituals, languages, foods, and stories. We find ourselves belonging and being challenged in ways we never dreamed possible.

- **Awareness of Natural Rhythms** allows us to be awed by the cosmos' great mysteries, touched by each season's gifts, and graced by the serenity of all that is created in nature. Creation is blessed by times of darkness and light, suffering and celebration, productivity and rest. We honor the cycles of fertility as we struggle to understand sexuality, reproduction, and hormonal influences. We study weather, astronomy, and botany. We decipher tide charts as we visit the ocean, pay attention to the moon's coming and going, and attempt to capture our feelings and observations through our artistic expressions in various forms.

*All Saints Day — Jacob as archbishop,
Oscar Romeso, Simon as Thomas Merton,
and Emily as Katherine Drexel*

Realizing that each of our decisions and actions has the potential of honoring the Divine, we go through our day mindful of our impact on others and on the planet, aware of the lifelong learning process in which we take part, and incredibly grateful for our participation in the process.

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As learning and soul tending weave through our days, our role is to make space, trust the natural process, observe, and be present. We have faith in the learning and soul tending that is happening even when we don't see the signs or fruit of the labor. Time to dream and imagine is critical, since we don't mold geniuses, artists, and mystics, nor are they able to blossom out of a schedule with no open space. Love and meaningful relationships are keys to one's having an incredible sense of belonging, trust, and health. Mentors and community provide all that parents can't be and do for their children. Meaningful celebrations round out the experiences of our lives. Rituals of passage and liturgical gatherings mark our time on earth and help us to make sense of it all. Our hope is that, as our children grow and grapple with the difficult parts of themselves and their world, eventually they will claim who they are and what they believe in for themselves. Since neither spiritual development nor learning is ever "complete," we continue on this mystical, exciting journey, grateful for our companions and for the opportunities to mentor others, and hopeful that our energies will engage others to join us in making our world a place of peace and harmony, where all are met with dignity, respect, and grace.

