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M.A. Thesis

1998

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Personal Learning:

How Can Religious/Spiritual Education in the Primary School Contribute?

17 JAN 2001

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MA thesis 1998

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ABSTRACT

This thesis offers an account of 'personal learning' as learning that matters to the individual, where a person takes responsibility for his or her own learning and personal growth. It argues that religious and spiritual education can make a major contribution to such personal learning through focusing on *meaning* and cultivating *attentiveness.* Life is seen in narrative terms as something which must make sense as a whole; religious and spiritual education help develop that sense of wholeness. Goldman's developmental theory is reassessed in this context and its limitations discussed.

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Chapter One.

The Research Design.

Introduction.

This chapter offers an explanation for the origins and purposes of this research and an insight into the school community where the investigation took place. An outline of the main aims of this investigation is presented, as well as an examination of the advantages and deficiencies of the research design employed. An explanation for the limitations of this investigation is given at the end of the chapter.

Origins of the Research

My interest in the idea of education for personal learning resulted from personal experience of working with primary school children, observing *and* listening to them, and motivated me to seek teaching approaches and content which would 'matter' to them, as well as, of course, preparing them for life beyond school.

At the beginning of my teaching career, I was appointed teacher for a class of seven to eight year-olds in a Roman Catholic primary school, with the responsibility for 'preparing' these children to receive the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Eucharist. School policy dictated that I must use the national Catholic Religious

Education scheme "Here I Am", in an effort to help the children develop a good knowledge of the Roman Catholic faith.

However, my experiences with this class soon suggested that this material did not stimulate the children creatively and provided little stimulus for them to think seriously or independently about their beliefs or the religious concepts involved, and, more importantly it seemed to me, did not relate to their own lives. Religious education lessons were felt by the children to be something they had to sit back and listen to, then write about in their books. There was little opportunity for the children to get involved in a way that was meaningful to them; for example, the Bible was a book of stories about events that had happened in the past with apparently little relevance to life today. The majority of children believed these stories to be literally true, the unspoken school philosophy was that the children should accept them as such. Throughout this year I began to recognise that there may be possibilities inherent in using Biblical narratives to make a contribution to those areas of children's lives which mattered to them, to provide opportunities for personal growth and understanding as explored in Chapter Two.

Aims of the Research

What seemed to be a possibility was that the prevailing methods used in Religious Education, predominantly based on the research of Goldman over thirty years ago, were not developing the potential possessed by young children for understanding not only their beliefs but their own experiences (Goldman 1964; 1965). I was encouraged by research criticising the theories of Goldman (Petrovich 1988; Ashton 1996) to conduct my own research where I was in daily contact with children, to critically enquire into the reasoning underlying Goldman's research

and its impact in the field of religious teaching in the primary classroom, and explore the contribution that this area of the curriculum could make to personal learning. The main aim of this research was therefore to assess the contribution of using narratives in religious and spiritual education to provide opportunities for personal learning that would allow pupils to:

- search for meaning and purpose in their own lives

- explore questions relating to shared human experiences

- re-examine their beliefs.

The School Community

The primary school where the research was conducted had nine members of teaching staff, seven of whom had served in the same classes for a number of years (see Appendix 1). Although there had been a succession of newly qualified teachers in the school over the last five years, they had all chosen to find other teaching employment after one year. There had consequently been little new input into educational policies or teaching methods in the school, with the senior members of staff preferring to maintain established school custom.

The school admissions policy stated that the child should be "baptised according to the rites of the Roman Catholic Church" and this was the case in nearly all of the children. Those children who were not Catholic were admitted only if there was room and if the Governors were "satisfied that the religious and moral atmosphere and teachings of the school were of prime importance to those making application".

The Parish Priest was a frequent visitor to the school and prayer, liturgy and Catholic worship were an integral part of school life. Those children who were not Catholic were consequently judged to be "different" by their peers.

Parents were welcome into the school and the classroom in question had a large number of active parent helpers keen to offer their support in various ways, such as hearing readers, constructing art displays and acting as escorts on educational visits. There was an active, well-supported Parent-Teacher Association and the parents generally held high expectations of the staff and children, and were supportive of what they perceived to be the Catholic ethos of the school. There was a sense of belonging to a large 'Catholic family' and a general purpose of a shared goal, that staff and parents were working together to initiate the children into the Roman Catholic faith.

The Local Area

It is relevant to consider the catchment area for the school when reflecting upon the experiences and beliefs of the children, as they experienced a degree of hardship due to the high incidence of unemployment in the region. It was particularly noticeable that whilst a lot of the children's mothers had part-time employment in local shops or factories, many fathers had been unemployed for some time.

The school was situated in an urban area heavily dominated by the closure of two major local industries, coal mining and shipbuilding. The area was designated part of the Urban City Challenge scheme and an effort was being made to rejuvenate the environment by developing the local shopping centre and re-building the local

council housing estate which had developed a bad reputation due to the high incidence of vandalism, car theft and petty crime.

It was noticed that children living on the housing estate were often regarded unfavourably by some staff and parents in comparison to those children from the private residential areas. The children from the council estate often gave the impression they felt stigmatised and therefore lived up to the adults' expectations of them in a form of self-fulfilling prophecy. However, the atmosphere within the school was generally positive and the majority of children appeared happy to be there.

The Children

The class where the research was conducted comprised seven to eight year-old children of the Year Three Class. The class comprised thirty-six children of mixed ability, ranging from seven children placed on the register for special educational needs to the more academically able children. This class had suffered some considerable disruption in the previous academic year, due to the departure of their teacher in the Spring Term and the subsequent lack of a permanent teacher until the beginning of the next academic year. As well as having four supply teachers, it was the first time this group of children had been together as a class unit. One of my first aims as their teacher was therefore to encourage the children to actually begin *listening* to each other in the hope that this would begin the process of them learning to value each other.

This year group was referred to generally throughout the school as "The First Communion Class" and with this title came a sense of importance for the children. At several points during the academic year they were singled out in assemblies by the Head Teacher as experiencing a particularly "special" time in their lives. My hope was that *they* would come to find meaningful that which had been 'externally' designated meaningful.

Data Collection

The exact circumstances in which data was collected are described specifically in Chapter Six. The collection comprises three distinct groups:

1. Children's writing.

2. Conversations that took place in the learning environment.

3. Responses of the children to lesson material and educational visits.

Using Stories

The narratives used in the empirical investigation were not all chosen with great deliberation, as some were used as a result of the requests of the children to hear favourite stories and others were chosen at random. Those stories chosen with deliberation were selected in the hope that they would go beyond the children enjoying them, to provide real opportunities to develop understanding of themselves and others, and so enrich their religious and spiritual experiences of life. For this reason there were two forms of narrative used in the investigation: the

explicitly religious, in this case Bible stories, and stories with implicitly religious or spiritual themes.

Implicitly Religious Narratives

> It is difficult to predict what stories will function religiously and what stories will not...The storyteller works in the dark. His hearers bring their beauty and blemish, their resistance and readiness to each tale. Who knows what will happen? Storytelling is always a wager (Shea 1983: 117-118).

My strategy was based on the view that narratives which are not explicitly religious can still bring children to have a religious perspective on life, raise fundamental questions of beliefs and values, and stimulate a spiritual awareness of the mysteries at the heart of life by exploring shared human experiences and questions on common human themes, such as identity, purpose, worth and relationships (King 1992: 147). I kept an open mind as to whether those ultimately important themes and questions would be kept within the realms of implicitly religious and spiritual education or could be used as the vehicle to consider more explicitly religious teaching.

There was the possibility therefore that narratives could bridge the gap between the world of religion and the world of the child. For example, as King explains, often 'secular' stories will introduce religious themes and symbols such as light and darkness, good and evil, and

> reading them and identifying with the characters and their adventures helps children to recognise the relevance of these themes to their own lives and prepares them for story which is explicitly religious (King 1992: 147).

In other words, the value of using secular stories lies in the ability of children to relate personal subjective problems to them in a way which could possibly be easier to understand than the more general and abstract issues often dealt with in religious and spiritual education. For example, the story of Hector's New Trainers (Vesey: 1993) deals with issues such as sense of belonging, and valuing other people for who they are rather than what they have and feelings of jealousy. These issues can be found in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, but here the language is less familiar and therefore less 'real' to the children. It is easier to identify and empathise with a character who is not part of the coolest gang in the school because he is not wearing the latest, trendy trainers, than one who sets off to squander his father's inheritance, only to return and have the fatted calf killed in his honour.

The potential of secular stories for children's religious and spiritual development is that they contain truth, "truths about the human condition, about human hopes and desires", which can lead children to realise that Bible stories also contain inner truths and inner messages (King 1992: 151). Bailey (1982) argues that children are much less likely to reject Bible stories if they realise that they are like other kinds of story which contain truths but are not literally true throughout. Once children have been encouraged to search for the ideas and meanings they find in stories, and see that there are different ways of looking at things, then they have some experience to enable them to explore more explicitly religious stories.

Religious Narratives

I am not suggesting that there should be an either/or decision between using implicitly or explicitly religious stories, but that implicitly religious or secular stories may provide the ground for children to relate more fully to the "experiences,

insights and concepts" found in religious stories (CEM 1992: 15). Rather my point is that religious narratives or Bible stories should take place in a meaningful context for the child, either by developing the ideas and meanings explored in secular stories, or by attempting to relate them to similar experiences which have taken place in the child's life. Madge (1965) explains that children's boredom and rejection of biblical material lies in the lack of relevance to their ordinary lives. Because of the difference in the cultural background, language and imagery of biblical stories to those of today, children may be left with the impression that the stories Jesus told have little or no meaning to them now and therefore miss the concepts behind the story, whereas if we search for similar messages in contemporary literature, using the everyday experiences of their world and culture, the ideas are set in meaningful contexts:

> If Jesus, the master teacher, heard us, 2000 years on, telling stories to bemused children about camels going through the eye of a needle, importunate widows and prodigal sons, he would I think advise us to make up our own stories using the language and imagery of the twentieth century. And that would force us to think of the real point of the story (Bailey 1982: 154).

Which Stories?

The secular stories I chose to use in the classroom are examples of how stories, which have no apparent relevance to religious or spiritual education, can be used to demonstrate possibilities. I have selected them entirely because I felt they might contribute to children's personal learning as described in Chapter Two.

The key ideas outlined for each story were:

- explored within the context of the story

- related to the experiences and lives of the children (CEM 1992: 15).

Research Methodology

When planning my research, it appeared that there were two basic approaches I could assume (empiricist or cognitive) and therefore two models (normative and interpretative) that I could follow (Cohen and Manion 1994: 26/29). The researcher assuming a positivist stance would hold a view of knowledge as something which can be acquired and is therefore "hard, objective and tangible" (Cohen and Manion 1994: 7). Explanations of how a particular approach corresponds to a particular model follow.

The Empiricist Approach

To follow a positivist or normative model of research would imply that the researcher would remain outside of what they were investigating in the role of the observer, using a range of traditional, quantitative methods from the world of natural science such as surveys and experiments. This suggests that once human actions can be correctly observed they can also be predicted and generalisations can be made (Hitchcock and Hughes 1995: 22). Neutrality and objectivity are essential for the positivist stance, to provide support to its claim that "science provides man with the clearest possible ideal of knowledge" (Cohen and Manion 1994: 12).

The Cognitive Approach

The cognitive approach subscribes to a view of knowledge as personal, subjective and unique, and something that has to be personally experienced (Cohen and Manion 1994: 7). This view is characterised by the interpretative research model that rejects the ways of the natural scientist and uses techniques such as accounts or participant observation, which require *involvement* with the subject. The researcher who follows this method seeks insight rather than statistical analysis, questioning whether a "scientific approach can be used when dealing with human beings" (Bell 1987: 1).

I made a deliberate decision, as a classroom teacher, to adopt the "interpretative" model of research as well as maintaining an active teaching role (referred to by Bell as "action research" (1987: 6) and Hitchcock and Hughes as "reflective practitioning" (1995: 10)). I felt that to assume an air of objectivity and neutrality towards the children involved in the research was both impracticable and undesirable, denigrating the children to mere objects, and by definition excluding their individuality. Indeed I did not feel that I could avoid being subjective in my approach if I were to build a good relationship with them and thus elicit genuine, reliable and honest data. Claxton (1990) and Kutnick (1988) both place great significance on the quality of relationships in the classroom, between, teacher and child and between children and between colleagues, and argue that teaching is in part about putting together clear, interesting, well-judged lessons but above all else it is about relationships (Claxton 1990: 16). Thus my research approach is intended to be true to the nature of teaching, or a rich understanding of what teaching is.

Hulmes, who strongly argues for commitment as opposed to neutrality in the classroom, writes:

> Without this degree of personal involvement in which insights and commitments are shared and explored, religious education becomes confused with religious studies. It may be that it is the latter which our society wants in schools, but it is different from religious education. Religious education is concerned with something wider, in which information *about* religion is considered in light of pupil's *own* experiences and needs (Hulmes 1979: 31).

I felt if I were to remain detached from the children I was teaching it could result in them remaining equally detached from me, thereby reducing the possibility of them sharing personal experiences with a teacher they did not feel was interested in them. An important aspect of my teaching philosophy is to attempt to treat each child as unique and I felt it would be dehumanising, for them *and* for me, to subject them to quantitative methods of interpretation. The main body of the research comprises unstructured conversations and pieces of written work, yet if I had imposed restrictions on thought or agenda the more likely I would end up with " a pruned synthetic version of the whole; a constructed play of puppets in a restricted environment" (Cohen and Manion 1994: 24).

I hoped instead to be able to develop a relationship with the children where they would feel confident and secure enough to discuss matters of meaning to them, in an environment where their contributions were valued and their views and feelings were listened to with respect but their teacher and their peers. As relationships involve bringing something of oneself to the situation, or the individuals involved, it would have been difficult to justify remaining subjective, and as Murdoch (1992: 351) points out, "it is difficult for a moral philosopher to say anything of the slightest interest and be 'neutral'".

I tried to use indirect methods wherever possible, for

> an adult using a direct approach can never be sure that responses are reliable, since young children have a natural resistance to any attempt to probe their innermost thoughts and feelings (Madge 1965: 8).

Often, if we place children in a formal setting, they will be reluctant to talk about and analyse issues which are tied up in their own feelings, but this does not mean that because we cannot collect evidence of it it does not exist or that they are not thinking about it:

> What a child may not show comprehension of in a formal, academic setting, in choosing among multiple-choice alternatives, that child may well think about and talk about in his or her manner and time... Nevertheless, so often our notions of what a child is able to understand are based on the capacity the child has displayed in a structured situation (Coles 1992: 23).

For this reason I tried to keep an open mind concerning and evidence of the children's religious or spiritual understanding. I was torn between deliberately using the stories to illustrate specific religious and spiritual messages or waiting for the children to find their own meanings. I chose the latter approach because I did not wish to explicitly influence their thinking. As Aylen points out:

> The possibility must always be that the voyage of discovery might take an entirely different path from that visualised in the beginning, that expected questions are not raised, but other unexpected ones are (Aylen 1982: 148).

I always tried to tell the story aloud wherever possible, as I found it easier to relate to the children through eye contact and gestures, rather than reading from a book. The children were not intentionally given specific prompts as to the responses I

was anticipating from them but interpreted the narratives as a result of their own experiences:

> To tell a story, especially one with religious ambitions, is a very risky business. sometimes stories fall on deaf ears, as the storyteller at the foundation of Christian faith knew only too well. People see and hear and walk away. No impact is discernible. At other times, the story penetrates to the centre of the receiver and 'holds the soul in balance'. People hear and see and stay to talk. Something has been touched (Shea 1983: 117).

Shea distinguishes between 'story-time' and 'chewing-time', 'story-time' comprising the events of hearing the story, and 'chewing-time' involving the subsequent reflection on what was experienced during the 'story-time' (Shea 1983: 121). Often I found that I only needed to tell the story and say no more about it for the children to initiate their own discussion, but the majority of the time the children were offered the chance to get into small groups to reflect, discuss and explore the issues that interested or concerned them.

Aylen points out that "teaching through literature demands great sensitivity on the part of the teacher", therefore I stressed the point repeatedly that there were no right or wrong answers to the material and attempted instead to adopt a more open approach (Aylen 1982: 148). One example of an approach to using religious narratives is to "show children the difference between right and wrong", a moralising didactic attitude which concerns Mackenzie who feels that it only leads adults to "destroy the fantasy and teach, instead of lifting children out of the world" (Smith 1990: 11; Mackenzie 1984: 66).

My methods were therefore guided by the arguments of Price who asks that teachers focus on questions which relate to empathising with the characters within

the story, for example in terms of what these characters may have learned from the situation they are in, to elicit interpretations beyond the literal (Price 1990: 145). I gave children opportunities to work through initial empathy questions such as 'How did X feel?' before moving on to more personal responses, as Price insists that this sequencing of question provides the most productive responses (Price 1990: 145). Specific 'religious' questions asked were few and tended to arise when the environment fostered such an interest, and the focus was not on 'What happened in the story?' but 'What did it mean' and 'What might it mean for people today?' (CEM 1992: 5).

This is the "human sense" element that Price argues is so crucial in asking children for their interpretations of a narrative (Price 1990: 145). I tried to encourage the children to focus on aspects of the story which matched their own experiences, which they could the explore in greater depth in the hope of finding ways to resolve such concerns, by reflecting on their own lives and the solutions others have found in trying to come to terns with similar experiences. One idea which I would hope to try in the future is that of children of different age groups exchanging their interpretations of the story, justifying their views and hopefully demonstrating that stories mean different things to different people at different times in their lives (Price 1990: 145).

Price comments that " the traditional means by which a religious story is explored within the junior school has usually placed undue emphasis on some forms of written response" (Price 1990: 143). As I was dealing with children with a wide range of abilities, including those who were excellent verbal communicators but found the writing process difficult, I placed greater emphasis on oral response in the form of class and group discussions so that everybody felt they had something

to offer, and then those children who wished to respond to the story in written form could do so if they wished. My other reluctance in asking children to provide me with written responses lay in the fact that I did not wish to intrude upon an experience that might be intensely private to the child, and I hoped that by creating a supportive and sensitive environment, the children would feel comfortable enough to offer their writings to me.

Limitations of the Research

The research is limited to one specific case study and therefore generalisations cannot be made. It is recognised that the research conclusions are simply illustrative and illuminative of what children may be capable of, although this may be in advance of or less than the researcher's subjective interpretations. Particularly, those children with special educational needs often expressed frustration that what they felt or thought was often difficult to put into written form, therefore giving the reader an inaccurate view of the child's intentions or intellectual capacities. The research may also have been influenced or distorted by my own presence, although this was unavoidable in my teaching role. There is some information of a personal nature that I have not always included, to ensure that the child's rights to privacy and confidentiality are respected.

Summary.

I feel I should address here what others may view as a substantial limitation of this particular research. The issue of personal learning which I have chosen to research is a large and complicated area, and consequently difficult to write about without being open to the accusation of merely touching upon the

subject in a broad and shallow way. In the following chapter, I discuss these difficulties, but whilst recognising that attempting to address such areas may be problematic for the researcher in terms of the vast amount of literature on such a subject, I would suggest that this is no reason why attempts should not be made! There is the danger that such big issues will be avoided because we are unsure of *how* to write about them. There is a problem in reconciling many traditional ideas of 'research' with approaches that are based on personal involvement and commitment such as the commitment I felt to the children. Although, as I have indicated above, the more 'interpretative' conceptions of research offer some hope of such reconciliation, it would be wrong to proceed as if there are any easy answers here. This must be particularly so where the (interpretative) research is into 'personal learning', itself understood as a journey of interpretation and the finding of meaning. This is the subject of the next Chapter.

Chapter Two.

Personal Learning: What Kind of Education?

There are two educations:
the one that teaches how to make a living
and the one that teaches how to live.
(de Mello, 1988).

Introduction.

Educating children for personal learning is something that we as primary school teachers do every day, all of the time, often without recognition:

> **In an important sense personal...education has always been, and always will, be with us (White, P. 1989: 1).**

It is a natural part of our teaching, the 'hidden' curriculum, and at the heart of it lies the way we treat the children in our care. Dependent on this of course is our own philosophy of education, but I will argue that if the child is truly central to everything that we do as teachers, then "education for earning a living, a seemingly functional matter, and education for living a life, an elevating and enriching experience" can become inextricably linked (Alred and Fleming 1996: 7).

> **...this is the really fascinating conflict that sweeps back over the years, that ancient and eternal struggle at the very heart of learning, at the very heart of growing up indeed; am I learning in order to provide myself and others with indicators of my learnedness...Am I learning for show or for real? (Graham 1996: 42-43).**

Contrast with performativity. Personal learning is what you do for yourself as opposed to what you do for external ends.

Priority in the 1980s was given to an educational process centred on "performance" and "productivity", whilst little was said about the emotional needs of the child (Alred and Fleming 1996: 1). Priestley drew a distinction between the 1944 and 1988 Education Acts, saying that in 1944 there was

> the over-riding question that education must essentially be about the Socratic question of how men should live. Forty years later the dominant theme...is the much more limited question of how men and women should earn a living (Blackburn Diocese 1995: 3).

Lyotard (1984) has labelled the emphasis on measuring the efficiency and effectiveness of the current education system as "performativity", where everything and everyone within the system must be 'accountable' and monitored closely. One example of this is of course the school 'league tables' and the trend for education centred on test results rather than the child not only fails to recognise the 'real' child, but may not always take into account the experiences each child may bring to a school. According to Graham, this is because this form of education fails to take children "genuinely seriously", so concerned is it with the "appearances" of being educated (Graham 1996: 50). There may often be occasions therefore when children are not given the opportunity to draw on experiences that matter to them, so caught up are educators in the 'business' or 'busyness' of school life, meeting the appropriate programmes of study, implementing the literacy hour, preparing for OFSTED inspections under the pressure of performance related pay. All of these everyday aspects of school can often mask the true concern of the individuals involved (whether teacher or child) because it can often appear that we just do not

have the time to make real connections between the type of education based around results and performance, which is so necessary for life after school in an increasingly competitive employment market, and the form of education which enables children to engage in learning that really matters to them. Graham makes the impassioned plea:

> Where then are we to look for the educational initiatives of recent times that really are of value to us in the heart of our work, the ones for example whose priority really is to help people make living connections between what they learn in school and all that they know and have already become? Where are the initiatives which show that we know perfectly well that to chop learning up into a vast quantity of targets to be attained and skills to be mastered is just fine in so far as education is about seeing to it that things get done efficiently to a lot of objects out there, but that that really does have limitations? (Graham 1996: 6).

Crucial to all of this, I would argue, is children feeling a genuine sense of belonging, feeling that they are taken into account, and, wherever possible, secure in the knowledge that their teacher will provide opportunities for them to enter into a learning process that *matters to them*. This of course may be in the form of traditional subjects *and/or* something that may be of fundamental interest to an individual. I am not advocating a system where children can just do whatever they want and create their own rules regardless of others, in the belief that all self-expression is worthwhile. However, I am sure that I am not alone in finding myself working with children that have gone through a system that has labelled them as failures (often at an alarmingly early age), so that the children themselves eventually believe that there are some school subjects that they simply cannot do.

A prime example of this is David, aged eight, who struggled with reading, partly due to parents who did not value their son's education, but largely due to a system

that did not have time to spend with him to find out exactly what his needs were. David, in fact, had managed to conceal his inability to read from his peers and teachers by memorising passages from books that he heard read aloud, so that if he was asked to provide 'evidence' of his reading ability he could 'perform' to his teacher's satisfaction. Another box could be ticked, another target attained... As Graham argues:

> ...if you only see through the eyes of the judge or the observer all you see out there are objects, things, and that way you may perfectly well miss everything about them that matters (Graham 1996: 51).

Teachers, of course, need to accept responsibility for this, but some responsibility must also lie with the legislation behind 'league tables' where individuals like David become neglected behind the teacher's anxiety that the majority of pupils are seen to perform well.

> Again one wonders what, if any, of the changes and initiatives of recent times in the educational world make a priority of trying to help learners to disentangle themselves from wretched, crippled learning such as this boy's flat knowledge that he is "always the thick one in the class" (Graham 1996: 46).

One must ask oneself what impression of learning and knowledge did David take home from school - the idea that it was something imposed upon him by adults who thought "they knew what was best", that had no understanding of what he was really feeling or needing? It is a hard question to ask, and one which as a teacher, I cannot contemplate without feeling uncomfortable. Graham writes that "being on the receiving end of education can be fearfully dangerous" (Graham 1996: 42). If we lead children to believe that they are failures in certain academic areas for

example, then it must certainly be damaging to their self-esteem and self-confidence. Is this how David felt?

Alred and Fleming argue instead for an education system that not only takes people seriously, but in doing so encourages them to become *responsible* for their own education (1996: 8). This may mean taking responsibility for not only the *content* of education, but our own attitudes and feelings towards it.

Of course it is easy to talk of children as individuals, without actually recognising them as such. The National Curriculum, for example, with its statutory requirements for teaching specific programmes of study in subject areas and key stages, places children in the position of receiving certain types of knowledge which is assumed essential for them to learn depending upon their age. We therefore have a scenario of groups of children across the country who are different in terms of background, ability, culture, experience and needs who are treated as a homogenous mass and offered the same education:

> The National Curriculum ignores the process through which a child is moving, and concentrates on the hypothetical objective a child will reach. This places the weight, not on the child and her grasp of what life and learning is, but on what someone older thinks is going to be right for her (Sedgwick 1994: 147).

I am trying to point to the difference between offering children an education that shapes them to a social purpose depending upon the current form of curriculum that a government deems necessary, or the kind of education which is fundamental to individuals learning about themselves and others, in a way that they *know* they have a voice in the whole proceedings. In this way children cannot avoid caring

about their education, and thus feeling a sense of responsibility for it (for similar arguments see Graham 1996: 55).

Smail argues, however, that "school curricula (have) become aligned more closely with the business values of the social power in which education is buried" (Smail 1996: 70), and admittedly it is difficult to imagine an education system which is not concerned with helping children to acquire those skills necessary for finding employment, such as numeracy and literacy. However, this does not of course imply that helping children to prepare to live their lives to the full is not equally as important as preparing them to earn a living.

Claxton goes so far as to argue that formal knowledge and academic skills are not what young people need from school these days and such an approach lacks "psychological plausibility" (Claxton 1990: 163). Passive knowledge and the teaching of inert ideas can surely not be effective stimulants for independent thinking and learning, and children facing an uncertain future in the present economic climate need to have the competence and capacity to face this uncertainty. Piaget argued:

The principal goal of education is to create men who are capable of doing new things, not simply repeating what other generations have done - men who are creative, inventive and discoverers. The second goal of education is to form minds which can be critical, can verify, and not accept everything they are offered (Piaget quoted in Fisher 1990: 29).

Personal learning as learning to learn, as making connections.

Perhaps one of the keys to the whole education process involves teaching children to be good thinkers and consequently good learners, bearing in mind the research confirming that there is more to intelligence than merely IQ tests (see Claxton 1990; Fisher 1990; Kirby 1991 and Lipman 1991). Intelligence is no longer viewed as genetically fixed and immovable, and is also recognised as differing in kind, for as Kirby argues, "few of us would argue the question of who was "smarter" - Leonardo, Shakespeare or Einstein" (Kirby 1991: 178).

We need then to sort through those conditions that foster thinking and learning and consider ways of creating them in our classrooms which will provide individuals with opportunities to explore their own potential:

> Much of education is focussed on the achievement of certain basic skills, rather than on the potential that might be achieved. Perhaps our present mental and intuitive capacities are only a shadow of what might be (Fisher 1990: vi).

Fisher goes on to argue that as well as missing out on children's potential, we can unconsciously persuade them to "stop" thinking for themselves by rejecting their "immature" ideas and giving the impression that we know all the "right" answers. (I will develop this point in Chapter Six when I look at the importance of classroom discussion in creating a climate where children feel comfortable and confident enough to talk about their own experiences, some of which have been painful for them to reflect upon):

> A damaging change in the learning process often happens around the age of three or four, which can last a lifetime. The child learns to stop guessing and inventing answers when his efforts are rejected. After many rejections the

> child stops speculating...He learns that the answers lie not in what the child thinks but what the parent/teacher thinks (Fisher 1990: 30).

Elsewhere Donaldson's research (1978) on the study of human thought and language also questions why it is that children begin school as keen learners but end their school days "switched off". She describes a kind of utopian school where children are happily and actively engaged in their own learning (often seen in our own Reception classes) but then vividly goes on to create the kind of picture a visitor might see further up the school:

> ...the older brothers and sisters of these same children perhaps about to take their leave of school forever and heartily thankful to have done with it. And I imagined him reading our newspapers and listening to our television programmes with their recurring cries of educational woe: falling standards, illiterate and innumerate adolescents pouring forth from their schools in their thousands, not fitted to earn a living in the kind of world they must enter, discontented, disillusioned, defeated before they have begun. The visitor would certainly soon have abandoned the notion that he had found Utopia. But he would also surely have been very perplexed to understand what goes wrong (Donaldson 1978: 11-12).

Donaldson's response to this rather bleak (but still relevant) picture of education is to question some of the important aspects of Piagetian theory, although she admits that she was much influenced by her experience of working in Piaget's research institute in Geneva. Her main argument was based on the philosophy that as all children are unique so will be their pattern of development, contrary to Piaget's theory of one pattern of cognitive growth. She defines two forms of learning: social embedded (related to everyday life) and disembedded, and the key to successful learning is the connections the child must make between these two forms, rather than the actual content taught (Donaldson 1978).

This theory is also supported by Wells, who writes that,

> ...knowledge cannot be transmitted to students in a pre-packaged form in the hope that it will be assimilated in the form in which it is transmitted. Knowledge has to be connected afresh by each individual knower, through an interaction between the evidence (which I obtained through observation, listening, reading, and the use of reference materials of all kinds) and what the learner can bring to bear on it. The teacher arranges the situations - or encourages those that the children themselves have set up - and so has considerable control over the evidence that the learners encounter. But teachers cannot control the interpretations the children will make (Wells 1986: 116).

It is apparently the way that we connect our thoughts that makes the difference to our learning and the development of our thoughts. All experience is unique to the individual and we all have a lifetime of thoughts to connect, therefore the more connections we make the further developed will be our thinking. This has obvious consequences for the way we teach for if we tell a child something a two-way connection is made between the concept in question and the concept in the given answer. Alternatively, and hopefully what we would be striving for, we can encourage the child to speculate and therefore open up the possibility for many more connections (see Fisher 1990: 29).

Recent research has shown that children are capable of making these connections, given the appropriate stimulus, at an early age. For example, Matthews (1980) gives examples of children using language for abstract reasoning, and Petrovich (1988) argues that children of three to five years have an innate understanding of the abstract concept of God as a creator because they are thinkers with a natural interest in metaphorical and religious questions. Is there therefore really a need to 'protect' children from material that we feel they may not understand at a given age, as argued by Goldman? (see Chapter Five). Perhaps understanding occurs after a constant revision of existing ideas, and who knows if we ever reach an ultimate

understanding of anything anyway as all concepts are open to human interpretation?

> It is a normal part of life to have to make drastic revisions of one's beliefs as one grows up...There is no reason to suppose that those who initially picture God as an old man in the sky continue through life without recognising that this portrait will not do (Darling 1985: 32).

Darling points to the aptness of Bruner's theory that the curriculum should be designed as a spiral to allow for the same subject matter to be treated in different degrees of depth at different points in the child's development. He sees this as an advance on Piaget's theories that the child can either understand the subject matter or not, which has led to teachers greatly underestimating children's abilities (Darling 1985: 32).

Personal Learning as challenging the separation of cognition and feeling. This points to a sensible and defensible conception of 'the whole child'.

Few teachers would argue against the value of encouraging children to think and reflect upon their learning as being an intrinsically worthwhile aspect of the educated child, but a word of caution is sounded by Astley and Midgley for example, who entreat us to balance this against other intrinsic and instrumental goods such as happiness and kindness, for "what is supposed to be that good about cleverness?" (Astley 1994: 75). That is, is it so much more important "than being kind, brave, friendly, patient and generous?" (Midgley in Astley 1994: 75). Teachers should heed Whitehead's warning that in teaching you come to grief as soon as you forget that your pupils have bodies (Whitehead 1932). Elsewhere,

Leicester supports this argument and calls for the need to recognise the whole person, if we are to consider learning that is relevant and personal to the individual:

> Personal...Education, in its deep concern for persons conceived as more than intellects (disembodied and isolated minds) represents an education concerned with persons as sentient, social, sexual, spiritual, choosing and acting moral agents. Small wonder that an education confined to the development of knowledge strikes many parents, teachers and students as too narrow (Leicester 1989: 72).

Thinking is an important aspect of education but should not be separated from feeling or even given precedence, as research argues that these two important aspects of personality are one (see, for example, Fisher 1990; Kirby 1991; Sacks 1985 and Wood 1990). In order for children to develop to their fullest potential it appears that teachers must give as much importance to one aspect as to the other:

> There is no necessary dichotomy between thinking and feeling. Teaching children to think does not mean impoverishing their emotional development. They will not be turned into unfeeling robots, knowing the price of everything and the value of nothing. Thinking does not flourish in an emotional vacuum (Fisher 1990: x).

Teachers can not assume that learners' feeling are separate from their mental performance, rather they are inextricably linked, yet even the 1988 Education Reform Act, which sought to address the development of the whole child through education, assumes that feeling and cognition are separate by stating that schools should provide

> a balanced and broadly based curriculum which promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society (Education Reform Act 1988: Section 1, para 2a).

If we emphasise a curriculum that is content-led and which ignores students' feelings, we miss the opportunity to provide children with the activities that promote understanding of themselves and the world around them. For this reason Watson cites a letter written by the Head of a large high school in Boston, USA which she sent to all new teachers of the school:

> Dear Teacher, I am a survivor of a concentration camp. My eyes saw what no man should witness: gas chambers built by learned engineers; children poisoned by educated physicians; infants killed by trained nurses; women and babies shot and burned by high school and college graduates; so I am suspicious of education. My request is: help your students become human. Your efforts must never produce learned monsters, skilled psychopaths, educated Eichmans. Reading, writing, arithmetic are important only if they serve to make our children more human (quoted in Watson 1993: 177).

Some may feel this argument is overly sentimental, for indeed it appears to be an over-indulgence in feeling at the *expense* of thinking. To dismiss sentimentality however, risks abandoning or rejecting all possibility of exploring the connection between feeling and reason. What is the purpose of having knowledge if you cannot test that knowledge against your feelings, or use your feelings to inform your knowledge? If education is to be more than preparing children for earning a living, then we cannot ignore their emotional development in favour of their cognitive development. To educate the 'whole child' *is* to take into account their feelings; otherwise we are faced again with the possibility of dehumanising our students. For example, one neatly planned and prepared lesson of Personal and Social Education every week will *not* deal with the feelings of those children whose world is falling apart around them due to the break-up of their parent's marriage. Teaching our children to be human is not about sentimental 'sharing and caring' and 'loving all children as individuals' in a cosy idealistic sense, but about helping them to *cope* with these feelings on a day-to-day basis (which in itself

involves all the cognitive processes of sorting, clarifying, understanding for example), and as teachers, facing the sheer reality of certain situations as this in the classroom. In other words, supporting the child to face and experience learning that is real to them, and to see the truth of a situation. This notion of "seeing" the world truly is a crucial part of our journey in learning about ourselves:

> For better or worse we look, we see something before we act...the visual is an image of distance and non-possession. This idea of space and quietness, thinking, seeing, attending, keeping still, not seizing, is important in all education (Murdoch 1992: 461-462).

Teachers, therefore, have a crucial role to play in the development of the whole child, in other words to remember that there is more to our students than their 'intellectual' skills and strive to ensure they do indeed see clearly and thus become "more human".

Personal learning as being in tune with a thought-out version of the teaching relationship. The teacher as supporting and caring: neutrality and commitment.

Wells argues that a performance-based model of education is an impediment to the co-operative learning process between child and teacher:

> ...perhaps the most serious impediment to a more collaborative relationship between teacher and pupil is the mechanistic model of education that is implicit in so much of the discussion about accountability. To talk of the curriculum, or of the individual units of work, in terms of "input" and "output" is not only inappropriate in its implicit assimilation of education to the organisational principles and ethics of industrial mass production, but is also misguided in its simple assumption that well-prepared "input" is all that is needed to guarantee effective learning (Wells 1986: 118).

One recognises of course that there is a *job* to be done, and increasing class sizes, paper-work and mundane everyday tasks to be got through means it is easy to dismiss talk of personal learning as "ideal", but as Hare bluntly states:

> ...there is little point in getting on with the job, if the job we are doing is of dubious educational merit (Hare 1993: 10).

While our priorities as teachers may currently be based around the development of the child's knowledge, perhaps if we asked the children what their priorities as learners were, we would get a different answer. Rogers says that the child's sense of psychological security, essential for learning, results from three processes which will help the child think creatively. They are:

i) accepting the child as an individual of unconditional worth and having faith in the child no matter what his or her present state,

ii) avoiding external evaluation and encouraging self-evaluation,

iii) empathising with the child, trying to see the world from the child's point of view, understanding and accepting him (quoted in Fisher 1990: 35).

Smail describes a good experience of learning as being one where the learner ultimately finds some clarity and understanding of something as a result of a search that relates his/her own experiences and discoveries to those of others and explains that the job of the teacher is therefore to act as mediator between the child's desire to learn about the world and what is there to be discovered (Smail 1996: 76). I find this a much more comfortable definition of an education which offers opportunities

for personal learning than one which may argue that children attempt to re-invent the world and discover for themselves at the "appropriate" age, simply because it sets learning in a social context. We do learn from others and occasionally we need the reassurance of others to have the courage to continue that search for more knowledge or more understanding of a shared experience. The importance therefore of the teacher lies in his/her ability to form those relationships with individuals where they feel supported through their doubt and uncertainty and inspired and encouraged to extend their learning. Education can be viewed as a prepared package of knowledge which can be "delivered" to the child, but where does knowledge of one's own relationship to this fit, where is the knowledge of oneself? Hence, we can "transmit" knowledge, or we can empower children to take responsibility for learning.

So am I arguing for something like Personal and Social Education? Well, it all depends what you take Personal and Social Education to be. For example there is often the assumption that Sex Education and Health Education are the same as Personal Education. Certainly they are often subsumed under the same title. Whilst rightly occupying a place in the school curriculum, tutorials and programmes based around Sex Education and Health Education arose as a result of what Sedgwick refers to as "the curriculum of moral panics", where the concerns of society over issues such as drug abuse and AIDS are expressed in the hope that through education children will be prevented from any involvement with these problems (Sedgwick 1994: 7). However, whilst recognising that this aspect is often addressed in schools under the heading of Personal and Social Education, I am interested in a much broader definition.

A form of education designed to engage children in learning that is relevant and meaningful to them can not occupy only one slot on the timetable and be 'taught' by only one teacher. It is about providing children with those opportunities which will help them to move from partial understanding to a fuller one, which offers private moments for reflection as well as times for collaborative discussion, which offers them a chance to support their beliefs based on a sound knowledge of those of others, and above all deals with the "basics" of life. For as well as wanting children to be able to be literate and numerate in order to face the challenges of the employment market, and know the difference between what the National Curriculum Council (1994: 10) refer to as "right and wrong", education needs to offer children the opportunities to get to grips with the basics of *life* such as building relationships, listening to others, forming opinions based on understanding and knowledge, and to learn about themselves in order to have the opportunities to live to their fullest potential:

> Working in groups, problem-solving, dealing with love and death - these are the "basics", which are above all, opportunities to learn about our own nature, and the way we relate to fellow human beings (Sedgwick 1994: 19).

The reader will recognise this description of personal education in Chapter Six, when Andrew, aged seven, describes the loss he feels at the breakdown of his parents' marriage and the grief he shares with the other children in his class as a result of not seeing his father. At such times I realised that encouraging and supporting Andrew through this experience was a 'basic' need. His experience could not be cut up into tidy sections of the curriculum. As each week passed, I saw changes in Andrew's understanding of his parents' situation, which in time led to a reluctant acceptance of it. He had learned a difficult lesson but one which I still hope that he felt better equipped to handle and face up to, due to the support of

those around him and the knowledge that it was acceptable to share these feelings. Sedgwick insists that we must not exclude such difficult issues like divorce or death from our classrooms, as they are critical aspects of personal education and learning (Sedgwick 1994: 40), and I will hope to show that one of the approaches we can use to encourage children to deal with them is through the use of narratives (see Chapter Four).

All too often children have their feelings swept under the carpet by the teacher or even patronised, as it can often be a very difficult experience for an adult to realise that the world of a child can sometimes be as dark as our own. The teacher's response to the child is therefore crucial:

> ...strategies developed by children to learn about themselves - whether through writing, art, conversation or other means - will not always be encouraged by a teacher who is concerned with other, more prescribed modes and contents of learning (Sedgwick 1994: 65).

We do well as educators therefore to remember those times when we as learners feel alienated or misunderstood, or not listened to, and work out our own strategies for bridging the gap between the child and school.

The notion of development is central to the process of personal learning, but, as Leicester argues, development can be seen as open-ended rather than an ultimate definable state (Leicester 1989: 73). This then frees us to consider personal learning and education as a lifelong process:

> If education is to be recognised as a "lifelong process" and not as something belonging only to youth, then we might as well drop the concept of the educated man: there is no line to be crossed, the journey goes on and on forever (White 1982: 130-131).

Somewhere along the way we do seem to have lost sight of children as individuals. If we can see education as a journey, does our current teaching through its baseline assessments, end of key stage assessments for example, not in fact prescribe points along the way when and where a child should be? If we concentrated on potential rather than ability at given times would children not then have the opportunity to walk their own route? The attitude of the teacher towards the child can of course have the most profound effect on the learning that takes place in our classrooms. After all, learning can be a "risky business" (Claxton 1990: 136), as it involves making leaps between the security of the known into what can sometimes be the bewildering unknown. It is vital that the teacher makes this a positive experience as far as is possible for

> what are you to do when someone is calling to you from the bank with increasing exasperation, but you can neither see the stepping stones nor swim? (Claxton 1990: 92).

Jenkins sees the development of relationships between teacher and child as a fundamental priority and at the heart of the education process (quoted in Alred and Fleming 1996: 7). Hare describes Thomas Gradgrind as an example of an approach to teaching which lacks

> any attempt to encourage, or even permit, the students to think, to question to reflect on what they are learning. Nothing but Facts! (Hare 1993: 8).

Caring about children does not mean blindly accepting everything they say or do of course, but does involve caring for the child as "a student and a person" who is capable of monitoring his or her opinions and beliefs in light of new experiences or argument, as someone "potentially an equal, capable of independent thought and human responses" (Hare 1993: 112).

I am not suggesting that we must feed children a diet of continuous success as it would be wrong to suggest that we do not all make mistakes, and foolish to cushion children from those experiences which are so vital to the development of their maturity and wisdom. Of course no child should ever leave school scarred by a sense of failure, but they need to be able to cope with this aspect of life otherwise we deprive them of the responsibility and of the experiences of making mistakes and living with the consequences. (However there is research, for example Kirby 1991: 24, warning us to be careful of the expectations we have of children otherwise it can lead to self-fulfilling prophecies and a perpetual cycle of failure for "rarely do we get more than we expect").

It is difficult therefore to overestimate the importance of the teacher in creating a climate where learning can take place, at the same time as taking into account the emotional needs of the children. Claxton (1990) and Kutnick (1988) both place great significance on the quality of relationships in the classroom, between teacher and child, between children and between colleagues and say that teaching is in part about putting together clear, interesting, well-judged lessons but above all else it is about relationships. Some may be wary of the implications of the resulting influence that the teacher may have over the child and for this reason, particularly with reference to religious education, there have been fears of indoctrination. After all, many of us are familiar with the Jesuit phrase "Give me the boy of seven and I'll give you the man for life" but there are many who would argue that these fears of indoctrination are groundless and have merely provided teachers with an excuse to avoid a serious treatment of religion in schools.

> The Jesuit phrase is not untrue: psychologists point out that the earliest years of life are the most impressionable. If a child is loved and respected in those early years she has the best possible start in life. If a child is ignored or

> abused his life is most likely to be damaged. I question whether indoctrination is a form of abuse (Richards 1994: 36).

I would argue against attempting to emotionally and mentally distance ourselves from our own beliefs (religious or otherwise), values and commitments just because we have entered the classroom, which after all is part of the real world! It would be very rare that we could hide these essential parts of our own personality from another adult, so surely children deserve the same respect. If not, then are we not simply perpetuating a myth that such issues are beyond the understanding of children and therefore should be protected from them? Ultimately, as Claxton (1990: 17) argues, what are we teaching but ourselves, what we believe in and what we stand for? Teachers are role models whether we like it or not, often no better or worse than other role models in our society, such as footballers, pop stars and television personalities. This should not deter us from our personal involvement in our students' lives because what we can positively model is our search *for* and the commitment *to* personal learning. "Only thinking teachers... can nurture thinking students" (Kirby 1991: x). It is surely as important for teachers to really "live" in their classrooms just as we have been arguing the same for our students. Teachers *should* have commitment - to their teaching, to their professional responsibilities, to their own learning and above all to caring for their students as individuals. If not then we return to the transmission model of education where we value the passive acquiescence of knowledge above genuine learning.

Hulmes, who strongly argues for commitment as opposed to neutrality, in this case with specific reference to religious education, writes:

> Without this degree of personal involvement in which insights and commitments are shared and explored, religious education becomes confused with religious studies. It may be that it is the latter which our society wants in

> schools but it is different from religious education. Religious education is concerned with something wider, in which information *about* religions is considered in the light of the pupil's *own* experiences and needs (Hulmes 1979: 31).

It is only natural that children will be influenced by the example of the important figures in their lives (whether they be adults or other children) but if we have created a classroom where we value the thinking *and* feelings of our students then we will have minimised the risk of them becoming dependent on the thinking and feelings of others and come some way to making their education personal:

> They can be condemned to closed-mindedness or they can be encouraged to value the authority of their own reasoning capacities, to consider it natural that people may differ in their beliefs and points of view, to question their own reasoning and the reasoning of others (Fisher 1990: 65).

Summary.

Common to the four dimensions of personal learning as discussed above is the finding of meaning. The first dimension offers the possibility that learning will be significant to the individual, meaningful to his or her life rather than some abstract or disconnected sense. The idea of meaning as connectedness is there is the second dimension, where the learner gains insight into the very process of learning, and begins to 'own' it and take responsibility for it. The third dimension points to the importance of a proper understanding of just what, or whom, learning might be meaningful *to*. Finding meaning is not just a cognitive business: it is the person as a whole, in their feelings as well as in their understanding, who experiences the satisfaction and sense of coherence that 'personal learning' may involve. Lastly, the fourth dimension takes seriously the idea that we cannot divorce the so-called 'outcomes' of learning

from considerations of process. We tend to find learning meaningful when we are brought to it by someone for whom we see it has been meaningful in turn. If personal learning involves our feelings as well as our intellects then it seems impossible that we shall undertake it without a teacher who acknowledges our feelings and offers support to our attempts to find personal meaning in our learning.

Chapter Three.

Religious and Spiritual Education: The Search for Meaning.

Introduction.

This chapter suggests that because religious and spiritual education involves children in a search for meaning, they relate closely to the personal education as advocated in the previous Chapter. I begin by providing a brief summary of recent changes and developments in the area of religious education. As well as suggesting reasons why religious and spiritual education should be valued as subjects, I consider how certain approaches to the teaching of these subjects can offer helpful and unhelpful contributions to personal education. The connection between religious education and spirituality is then explored, and a search for the meaning of various definitions of spirituality in an educational context is presented. The Chapter concludes by arguing that certain definitions of religious and spiritual education can make valuable contributions to personal learning.

The introduction of the 1988 Education Reform Act appeared to herald a new beginning for religious education in the school curriculum, introducing certain changes and developments in this area. Most noticeably, the importance of the subject in the educational process has been stressed by the emphasis on religious 'education' whereas the 1944 Education Act focused on religious 'instruction'. Jackson (1990) and Cole and Evans-Lowndes (1991) have commented on the

significance of *educating* children rather than *instructing* them into a religion, emphasising that the aims and processes of the subject must now be fully justifiable on *educational* grounds. Like the 1944 Education Act, however, the 1988 Act still retains provision for teachers to withdraw from teaching religious education, and parents can request that their children be withdrawn from the subject. The 1988 Act also requires that all teaching must be multi-faith, stating that all agreed syllabuses must:

> ...reflect the fact that the religious tradition of Great Britain are in the main Christian while taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain (Ch. 40, part I, section 8).

Although religious education *must* now be included in the school curriculum, I suggest that we should consider its inclusion for more than our legal requirements, in particular the essential role it plays in the kind of personal education argued for in the previous chapter, which relates closely to children finding meaning. Cole and Evans-Lowndes passionately argue that every educated person should have an understanding of their own beliefs and values through the study of religion because:

> These are the things which make us human, to neglect them is to participate in an educational process which, if not actually dehumanising, is certainly not contributing to the personal and human development of the next generation of the planet's population (Cole and Evans Lowndes 1991: 9).

Religious education then should not only provide children with knowledge of world religions but also occupy a meaningful place in the child's world by relating to those experiences which contribute to an understanding of who they are. Jackson (1990: 8) comments that this experiential element is generally recognised in most Local Authority Agreed Syllabuses as making an important contribution to the

process of religious education. A checklist of elements of religious education consistent with many Agreed Syllabuses is offered by Jackson (1990: 8-11) and combines both cognitive and affective aspects of education in order that children might develop their knowledge *and* understanding of religion; to learn *about* and to learn *from* religion. It includes a knowledge and analytical element so that children can have the opportunity to critically think about and question the claims of religious traditions and support their own commitments with reasoned arguments. Jackson (1990) feels that this aspect of religious education which helps children to appreciate what it means to take a religion seriously provides a strong argument against the charge of relativism. Certainly, these elements of religion with their emphasis on children expressing an understanding of a religion do not necessarily lead to a situation where children have the impression that all religions are relatively true but none is the true religion. The teacher can encourage pupils to understand and be aware of a religious perspective without implying that they should agree with or adopt this perspective, particularly if these elements are combined with those others referred to by Jackson (1990: 8-11) as sensitising, imaginative and expressive. These elements are essential if we are able to understand religion as it is only by using our imagination that we can express our understanding of religion from another's perspective. I will argue in the following chapter that a narrative approach to religious education can help children to integrate these elements and provide opportunities for learning about themselves.

It is important to consider this in the context of the whole broad and balanced curriculum which according the 1988 Education Reform Act must now promote:

> the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society (Chapter 1, section 2, para 2 (a)).

As I pointed out in the previous Chapter, however, the task of fulfilling these requirements in a 'back to basics' dominated curriculum and an increasingly results-orientated school ethos is not always an easy one, and it is often difficult to reconcile these very different aspects. Religious and spiritual education, though, have both figured high on the political agenda partly as a result of the increasing violence amongst young people, and a perceived lack of morality and social responsibility in society as a whole. A feature of OFSTED inspections, for example, is the consideration of the contribution religious education is making to pupils' personal development, or as they put it "the outcomes of education" (OFSTED 1994: 3). Ignoring the language of 'inputs' and 'outputs' which somehow cannot be altogether reconciled with offering children the kind of education which recognises their individuality, it is difficult to disagree with the idea that religious education can have close links with preparing children for living a life (see Chapter Two).

An examination of most Agreed Syllabuses for religious education reveals that four main areas are provided which also have relevance to personal education. They are:

1. An awareness of self.

2. Relationships with family, friends, community and the world.

3. Responses to the natural world.

4. Understanding religious beliefs, practices and experiences (Cole and Evans-Lowndes 1991: 21-23).

The key point to consider here is the discovery of meaning that religion can bring to a person's life:

> The issue is a complex one and not at all easy to understand, nevertheless, research evidence gathered in Britain and the United States over the past few years appears to show that people reporting religious experience very often associate it with the discovery of meaning and a sense of moral responsibility in their lives. If that proves to be the case, then it would seem that religious awareness does have important social implications (Hammond and Hay *et al.* 1990: 17).

More important is the implication in this statement that religious education should not be merely a study *of* religion but is intrinsically related to understanding our own experiences and inner selves, and consequently connects very closely with the personal education I described in the previous chapter.

To take account of pupils' experiences of course does not necessarily imply an entry into religious education, but such an approach to religious education does imply a natural association with personal learning and education. The two areas both share common themes such as raising and deepening personal awareness, personal relationships, understanding and recognising shared human experiences, empathising with others, exploring common values and beliefs and having time for reflection. Religious education is therefore arguably:

> pertinent in relation to 'personal search' in that, irrespective of pupils' faith or non-faith position, it raises, and for some it answers, questions of individual concern (CEM 1997: 5).

The problem I feel that immediately arises here is the question of which approach to religious education is used to achieve this. Many of us will be familiar with religious education lessons which often failed to recognise our individuality or our

understanding of certain experiences, and I can distinctly remember learning by rote questions and answers from the Catechism and failing to find any meaning from Old Testament stories other than a literal interpretation. The teaching approach in this case was obviously more at ease with the process of someone 'instructing' another *into* a particular religion, which is entirely separate from educating someone to have a genuine understanding of religion.

Hammond refers to a more profound aspect of the teacher's role as "someone who helps pupils to recognise what they already know" (Hammond and Hay *et al.* 1990: 7). As I argued previously, central to the kind of learning that is personal and relevant to children is the teacher who sees further than the immediate and recognises the potential each child holds and then provides them with opportunities for developing and realising it. De Mello argued that, above all, the teacher of religious and spiritual education is the one who should see:

> ...the adult in the child, the eagle in the egg, the butterfly in the caterpillar, the saint in the selfish human being. "But don't try to teach a pig to sing," said a guru, "it's a waste of your time, and it irritates the pig" (quoted in Richardson 1990: 216).

(A reminder to us all perhaps to remember the realities of the classroom and a warning not to over-romanticise children.) This is a far cry from the 'confessional' approach to religious education, which has evangelism as its purpose and seeks to persuade pupils of the truth of a religion, and has the teacher in an authoritarian role providing 'all the answers'. The approach set out by the Christian Education Movement with its clear open-ended aims about the purposes and scope of religious education does not allow teachers the opportunity of using the fear of indoctrination as a reason not to teach religion, as it allows children the opportunity

to understand what it means to have a faith in terms of belief and practice. It invites teachers to explore with their pupils the following interlocking areas, summarised in the form of three questions:

> 1. What are the common human experiences which give rise to questions of meaning and purpose? (Shared Human Experience).
>
> 2. What are the beliefs and values of living belief systems which provide insights helpful in answering such questions? (Living Belief Systems).
>
> 3. How are these insights applied to the personal search for identity and significance? (Personal search) (CEM 1997: 5).

These questions are educational rather than indoctrinatory and reject attempts to influence children towards a commitment to a particular religion. Cole and Evan-Lowndes (1991: 17) rightly argue that teachers of religious education have no more or less responsibility than teachers of any other subject to influence children, particularly if such an open approach to religion is used.

When the confessional approach was therefore recognised as unsatisfactory, another programme for religious education came to the fore after the publication of *Schools Council Working Paper 36.* This rejects an approach which assumed that the teacher's role was to induct children into the Christian faith, particularly in an increasingly secularised society comprising of multi-faith communities. The 'phenomenological' approach to religious education was therefore firmly established. The central aspect of this approach is the description of the publicly visible and external phenomena of religions, such as customs, rituals and artefacts, as part of a supposed 'objective' and 'neutral' study of world religions which would hopefully promote tolerance and pluralism. (I have discussed issues

surrounding neutrality in the previous Chapter.) The difficulty I have with this approach is the superficial focus on the 'externals' of a religion which could appear meaningless and remote to children if there is no attempt made to understand what it *means* to the religious believer involved. Without this Hammond and Hay argue that children will become rather like "Victorian anthropologists" as it is:

> ...the personal experience, the inner *intention*, that matters to the religious believer, and without some grasp of that intention, students will have no real understanding of religion (Hammond and Hay *et al.* 1990: 10).

I feel that we should go beyond merely the externals of *describing* the faith of the religious believer and consider those inner experiences, otherwise we are in danger of ignoring what many researchers feel is the most central aspect of a religion - its spirituality (see Hammond and Hay *et al.* 1990; Ashton 1992; Priestley 1992; OFSTED 1994).

The research of Hammond and Hay *et al.* (1990) points to the perceived close connection between religion and spirituality amongst different groups of people, although there are also recognisable differences possibly as a result of the phenomenological approach to the teaching of religious education:

> They tend to associate the word 'religion' with external things like buildings, religious officials and public rituals such as weddings or funerals. 'Spirituality' usually make people think of more obviously personal matters like prayer, meditation and love (Hammond and Hay *et al* 1990: 9).

OFSTED also consider that although spiritual education is not synonymous with religious education, "spiritual development may be both an aim for religious education and an outcome of it" (OFSTED 1994: 8). I am not suggesting that people with no religious beliefs cannot experience spirituality or that only a

religious interpretation of it is correct however, and I am in agreement with the view of the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority (1996: 6-7) that *both* religious *and* secular philosophies provide us with a context, framework or language to understand our own spirituality.

Personal experience as a primary school teacher preparing children to receive the Roman Catholic Sacraments of Reconciliation and Eucharist taught me that an approach to religious education which concentrated on the externals such as doctrine and rituals underestimates children's genuine desire to understand and find meaning from their faith, and is certainly incompatible with personal learning in a fuller sense. For example, in the school where the research was conducted part of the usual Sacrament of Reconciliation Service involved the children dressing up as sheep and crawling around on the altar during a reading of the Parable of the Lost Sheep. A fuller discussion of this will be offered in Chapter Six, but on talking to the children involved it was fairly clear that they had little understanding of *why* they had been asked to do this other than they enjoyed dressing up. I would argue that this approach seriously underestimated the ability of the children to understand the symbolism behind the Sacrament and provided them with no real opportunity to find a deeper meaning in the story. I would also suggest that such an approach failed because it did not touch the children in some inner way that *mattered* to them or in other words develop their spirituality. Of course the receiving of the Sacrament should have been an enjoyable and celebratory experience, but surely it should also go beyond that to heighten the children's insight and awareness of their faith and provide opportunities to interpret their own experiences. Ashton, for example, argues that the true function of religious education is to "provide some form of stimulation to spiritual awareness" otherwise:

> ... the outcome seems to be a superficial understanding of life which lacks the power to sustain in times of personal crisis other than at a superficial level (Ashton 1992: 171).

Spirituality is difficult to define. Despite the fact that since the 1944 Education Act local education authorities have been charged with the duty of promoting the spiritual development of children, there have been few attempts to define it in an educational context, without resorting to such vague phrases as "awe and wonder" invoked by elevated images of "the beauty of the world we live in" (National Curriculum Council 1993: 63) or the "searching for explanation of existence" (School Curriculum and Assessment Authority 1996: 6). If spirituality is to do with "seeking answers to life's great questions" as is suggested in another statement form OFSTED (1994: 8), then it is certain that the mechanistic model of education concerned only with 'skills' and 'facts' required to earn a living does not constitute the education of the whole person:

> Knowledge in itself does not constitute education. It is the fuel of the process and like all fuels it can smother and extinguish if not properly mixed...Education should carry a health warning: it changes people. What we can learn affects what we become, not just in some narrow, mechanical sense of finding a job but as total persons (Priestley 1992: 35).

To become 'total persons' we need to look for a much richer understanding of spirituality based upon the need to know ourselves. Self-knowledge is not always an easy process, as I argued in the previous chapter. Spiritual education is not about cocooning children in a safe haven of endless magical and mystical experiences, or gazing in rapture at the wonders of the universe. It is about finding meaning through a process of self-awareness and seeing the world with all its shades of light and darkness, accurately and without wishful thinking. This struggle towards enlightenment is a struggle towards reality, a spiritual journey, as opposed

to the self-deception which involves us refusing to face up to the reality of situations (see Chapter Two for similar arguments). Richardson recounts one of the most famous stories on the theme of stages of spiritual development:

> ...the first stage is when trees are seen as trees and mountains are seen as mountains; the second is when one looks more deeply into things - then trees are no longer trees and mountains are no longer mountains; the thirds stage of enlightenment and hopeful confidence, is when trees become trees again and mountains, mountains (Richardson 1990: 215).

Spirituality does involve working through one's own hang-ups, hopes, wishes, problems and experiences in a sometimes painful and sometimes joyful struggle towards 'enlightenment'. This is the contribution that religious and spiritual education can make to personal learning. It is precisely this search for a pattern of meaning in life which is essential to the growth and development of the whole person, a process of "becoming" and of establishing who we are. I am not suggesting however that spirituality should be an endless process of introspection, for we could find no pattern if we did not fit our own piece of the puzzle into the wider jigsaw.

Opportunities for reflection should enable us to understand our own experiences and our own inwardness, but not to the extent that we find it difficult to see another person's point of view. The previous Chapter highlighted the importance of empathy and listening to one another as central to personal learning, so that children can come to realise that there are other ways of seeing the world without implying that they should adopt this perspective. Personal experience of taking a class of seven and eight year-old Roman Catholic children to a prayer session in a Muslim mosque and a service in a Sikh gurdwara proved invaluable in helping them to consider and understand their own beliefs and form of worship during a

retreat to a Roman Catholic seminary. They not only learned from their experiences but also the experiences of others. As Cole and Evans-Lowndes have remarked, it is normal to take for granted that with which we are so familiar because it is difficult to stand back and examine it with open and critical eyes:

> To be able to reflect upon, study, and criticise positively our own culture whatever it is, would seem to be the mark of an educate person...In school we can, we hope, help children to engage in the process of open reflection in an unthreatened way (Cole and Evans-Lowndes 1991: 51).

I specifically wish to highlight here the importance of engaging children in the reflection and empathy process in an 'unthreatened' way. If we are to allow children to engage in learning which is personal and relevant to them then we must support them through this by changing our role from an authority figure to someone who shares in the learning process and provide support through it. As I previously suggested in Chapter Two, the importance of the teacher in all of this is crucial and personal experience of teaching has shown me that children welcome such an approach and respond positively and warmly to the genuine sharing of this learning process. I will argue in Chapter Six that such conditions are essential if different experiences are to be shared and understood so that individuals can be enriched by relating to others and society as a whole.

Summary.

These attempts at understanding religious and spiritual education point to the relevance of these aspects of the curriculum to an open approach to personal education which offers children the opportunity to engage in a world that matters to them. It is a world which needs to be entered into and wrestled with

in order that it can be appreciated properly and fully understood. In the previous chapter I explained that one of the priorities for the teacher of personal education is to allow children to find some meaning in their lives by learning about themselves in light of their own experiences and through finding meaning in the lives of others. I would argue now that the priorities I have set out above for teachers of religious and spiritual education are compatible with those of the teacher of personal education. For this reason I suggest that religious and spiritual education can make an important contribution to the personal learning of children. (In Chapter Six, I will explore how this theory can be practically applied to the primary school classroom.) These aspects of the curriculum, along with the knowledge that children need for "earning a living", complete the equation for "living a life".

> **The need for the rhythm of teaching is once again to the fore. The solitary experience must be related to the experience of the community; the expression of the individual must be held against the dogma which is the expression of the group. The one feeds the other and each is challenged by contact with each other (Priestley 1992: 34).**

In the following Chapter I will explore how these aspects of the curriculum can be developed through exploring the value of using religious and secular narratives in religious and spiritual education, because they face up to fundamental areas of personal learning. I will suggest that a narrative approach is one way that we can enable children to find meaning in their lives.

Chapter Four.

The Narrative Dimension of Life.

Introduction.

The idea that narratives can contribute to the personal learning and development of children is not a new one. For example, many teachers turn to narratives to find an approach to education that will respond to the emotions as well as the intellect, the heart as well as the mind (Ford 1982: 114). A diet of religious education lessons for instance which have no meaning or relevance to the learner could turn even the keenest of learners hostile, by failing to take into account the religious or spiritual experiences of a creative, imaginative or intellectual nature which the learner already brings to the classroom.

If, as I argued in the previous Chapter, religious education is concerned with dealing with a personal search for meaning and understanding and learning from experiences common to all human beings, then children have a wealth of profound and complex experiences which should not be ignored by the teacher. Instead we may benefit children by allowing them to explore and understand these experiences and I believe we can do this by rediscovering the value of exploring the 'narrative dimensions of our lives' in education (Greenwood 1982: 121).

> Teachers must become storytellers again and open children's eyes to realms of knowledge that science or history cannot explore and what western culture has neglected (Priestley 1993:28).

Story is capable of extending our experiences and as a result is "an essential part in the growth and development of the mind and all that it contains" (Mackenzie 1989: 63). This is because narratives are fundamental to our identity (Ford 1982: 115). People are "natural narrative beings", story-telling and listening is a "central aspect of human existence...we are, by our very nature, story-telling animals" (Shea 1983: 106; Tappan 1991: 1). Brown and Gilligan have traced this relationship between stories and their listeners, arguing that they share a "world in common", that is listeners can learn from the text about their own lives and the lives of others because they encounter not simply a text but the "heart and mind of another" (Brown and Gilligan 1991: 47). Consider for a moment the depth and variety of emotions in the Bronte narratives, where we share in the deeply passionate emotions of, for example, destructive and redeeming love, despair and exhilaration, hatred and occasionally the most overwhelming sadness to be found in a novel such as *Wuthering Heights.* As an adolescent reader of this novel, I may not have directly experienced those emotions, but I could strongly *appreciate* how they affected the main protagonists, to the extent that the novel appeared to speak directly to me.

We collaborate with narratives through a process of identification. In the actual process of sharing stories, we can realise that we all have experiences in common that give us some form of identity as people or that add meaning to our lives. This relationship with narratives

> signifies an opening of self to others, creating a channel for information; an avenue to knowledge (Brown and Gilligan 1991: 47).

Narratives have an important role to play in developing knowledge of ourselves. We can observe characters and their actions, and we can participate in their emotions playing many different roles at once, from hero to villain, thus recognising the "many sidedness of our nature" (Greenwood 1982: 122).

There has been much research which has considered the importance of play in children's lives (for example, Greenwood 1982: 123). Story telling, or make-believe, is a form of play and the recognition of the multi-faceted aspects of our character allows us to resolve many anxieties that we may hold by making sense of our experiences in a cathartic way:

> ...the therapeutic activity of our telling a story...seems to be a way of controlling the world and our own experiences (Greenwood 1982: 123).

We can allow ourselves access to a world which may not otherwise exist to us, at the same time resembling our own lives and relating to our own experiences in such a way as to provide new insights and fresh discoveries on them, an aspect of the searching element of personal learning. Narratives blend the affective and the cognitive in the process of making sense of our world and experience and therefore having *meaning* for us. This is precisely the level at which I argued in the previous Chapter we should be approaching religious and spiritual education with children, if not all education.

The importance of a shared experience as a starting point for personal learning and growth is recognised by Ousley who states that narratives "help children to grow up inside themselves" (Ousley 1982: 84). They also enable us to look 'outside' ourselves, seeing life through the writer's eyes and thus enlarging our perceptions

of people, life, and more, a process of inner and outer exploration which allows us to find meaning in our lives.

Of course, imagination has a crucial role to play. There would be no stories without the ability to imagine. Hughes argues that imagination is a vital aspect of education, and narratives play a powerful role in realising the child's imaginative potential:

> Every story you tell a child is a whole kit of blue prints for dealing with himself and for dealing with his own imagination...I think if you are to think of imaginative literature as an educational tool, you are finally up against the fact that imaginative literature is therapeutic and does have a magical effect on people's minds and on their ultimate behaviour (quoted by Whittle 1982: 140).

This therapeutic dimension is particularly important if we consider those 'darker' aspects of spiritual education which contribute to the search for meaning, such as fear, death or loneliness. In offering children the opportunities to talk about or 'play' with these issues through the characters in a narrative they can imagine themselves having power over those situations which they may otherwise find difficult to deal with:

> ...if we allow them to play with danger mentally, spiritually and emotionally when they are young there is a possibility that we will make the threatening situation in the park a mere plagiarism, and they will have the power of will to do the safe, imaginative thing (Sedgwick 1994: 92).

If we allow narratives to play a central role in education, then we are offering children the opportunity to enter into even the most complicated stories. How can we achieve this?

> The answer is plain: by using our imagination, and by encouraging them to use theirs. We have to allow the words to paint pictures in our own minds, and encourage or enable the pupils to paint their own such pictures for themselves (Dennis 1997: 16).

In the educational climate of 'accountability' by results, the benefits of imagination are in danger of being overlooked among the demands of a transmitted basic curriculum, for as Porter and Smith point out, in school "busily doing tends to be regarded as automatically more valuable than *listening*" (Porter and Smith 1989: 22).

Through narratives, children can look for possibilities or alternative positions, and recognise that there may be layers of meaning to a text if they can look beyond the obvious. Teachers can encourage children to search for different meanings by valuing their interpretations of a story, even those which an adult may consider unusual, for as Hare argues, a suggestion from a five year old "counts as imaginative even if it would not count as such if uttered by an adult" (Hare 1997: 75).

Is there a possibility, however, that children are unable to imagine what certain experiences are like, if they have not personally encountered them? Hare strongly states the case that imaginative teachers can help students to enter the narrative world vicariously, and therefore encounter and learn from situations they have not directly experienced:

> This view, which is now part of conventional wisdom, flies in the face of all ordinary experience which tells us that by means of appealing to similarities in our own experiences with those experiences we have not directly had, we *can* enter imaginatively into those situations (Hare 1997: 157).

Arguably, then, if we do not encourage children to fully develop their imagination under the misconception that they can only relate to that which they have personally experienced, we are inadvertently preventing them from any *attempts* at imagining. The result of this in time may well be that they would not even begin to do so. Imagine the consequences of this for the approaches to religious and spiritual education advocated in Chapter Three if we could not empathise or make connections with the lives of others through our imagination:

> Those who encourage us to believe that we cannot enter imaginatively into the lives of those whose cultural experiences we have not shared, endanger values such as respect for persons and other cultures. For how can we respect that which we do not understand? (Hare 1993: 159).

I will attempt to illustrate in Chapter Six that children can not only engage in unfamiliar experiences through narratives on an abstract and intellectual level, but also on an emotional and imaginative level. We can understand familiar experiences because they are placed in contexts that are familiar.

Not everyone of course chooses to lead reflective lives, but that is not to say we, as teachers, should not sow the seeds for possible growth. Sedgwick argues that this is a crucial aspect of the teaching role, helping children to make connections by providing them with situations that enable them to move from a partial understanding to a less partial one (Sedgwick 1994: 21). Imagination can do this. With imagination we can see inside the "heart of things" and thus gain an understanding of our own lives and *life* by linking diverse experiences in a meaningful and relevant way (Priestley 1989: 24). Imagination is therefore central to the development of spirituality, as it is with imagination that we can begin to

take those steps of empathising with other points of view and ways of life and therefore begin to find meaning in our own lives.

The importance of using narrative in religious and spiritual education can be traced back thousands of years as one of our oldest resources, and central to the principles of all religions. For example, both Jesus and Buddha decided that the best way to communicate their messages to the hearts and minds of their listeners was through narrative:

> Jesus did not spend his time learning to become a theologian or leading thinker but was rather a ... storyteller (Coles 1992: 277).

Jesus did not always offer interpretations for his stories, any more than any great author would. Instead they rely on us to use our imaginations, to surrender ourselves to the narrative, drawing on our own experiences to find meaning, to use their words to paint our own pictures. Biblical writers chose to convey their messages through story or poetry, and demand that we try to make sense of shared human experience by providing a 'window' on all human emotions:

> They hope we will enjoy them, be moved, unnerved, enthralled by them... They hope we will laugh or cry, and they hope over all we will catch the coat-tails of the God who walks the stages of their words, or hides himself in the wings (Dennis 1997: 17).

Narratives do have their place in the classroom as casual entertainment, but their powerful ability to communicate should not be ignored. Watson suggests that it is the genius of the best stories that they can say so many things to so many different people at one telling, with extremely valuable results (Watson 1982: 127). For this reason we should perhaps avoid over-analysing a story, we should leave it to stand

on its own and speak for itself. According to Hughes, children can then walk round it, understand its characters and perhaps grow up a little through it (Hughes 1976: 80).

This point is particularly important if we consider Bawden's arguments that children do not always "see what adults expect them to see anyway" (Bawden 1976: 4). They extract what they want from a book and no more and "are more likely than we adults to see and hear what is going on", which is one reason why we should not be too specific or rigid about the message we are trying to convey in narrative (Dennis 1997: 16). Mackenzie outlines the "influences and constraints exerted on writers by the moral climate of the time" arguing that during the time of the puritans, children's stories were moralistic and instructive, their purpose being to "edify" whilst "feeding the imagination was not encouraged" (Mackenzie 1989: 67). The Victorian era is renown for its moralistic tone, although certain fairy stories such as The Water Babies and Alice in Wonderland indicated that the "victory of fantasy was in sight" (Mackenzie 1989: 69). Yet as I have already discussed, imagination plays a crucial role in children's growth and development as human beings, central aspects of personal education, and it is now understood that children have a wealth of experiences which they bring to every narrative and every situation.

Authors, like teachers, therefore play an important role in presenting the world to children in a certain way, and the value of not *imposing* one's own beliefs or morality has been referred to in Chapter Two. Narratives however do often contain "universal morality" in that they are embodied with binary conflicts such as good and bad, courage and cowardice, fear and security, concepts which Egan argues

children understand so profoundly "they understand *with* them - they use them to make sense of new knowledge" (Egan 1979: 26). He writes:

> What children know best when they come to school are love, hate, joy, fear, good and bad. That is, they know best the most profound human emotions and the basis of morality (Egan 1979: 10).

We can also create our own narratives, the story of our own lives. It is a learning process to realise that whilst we may not wish to accept a single ending to a story we cannot always choose the 'happy ending'. We do well to remember that constructing our own narrative can be a struggle, and the 'happy ending' may not always exist. Our lives cannot be compressed into linear order, their fragmentation and disorder often resembling the 'rough draft' rather than the unified and well-planned essay.

If we choose to be active characters in the narrative, rather than mere on-lookers, we are not condemned to a straightforward recording of our lives but have an opportunity to recreate our narratives, like Mr Thompson in The Man Who Mistook His Wife For A Hat (Sacks 1985). This man, suffering from severe amnesia, re-invents himself and his 'inner narrative', by creating different characters for himself until he is driven into a sort of "narrative frenzy" (Porter and Smith 1989: 21). Here then is the relevance of narratives to our own lives, even though it is not always a comfortable process:

> ... it should be equally clear that autobiographical writing is not, as sometimes asserted, necessarily self-indulgent, narcissistic or contemplative of the navel. We have argued that it is at least as much concerned with the making of a life as with the mirroring of what is fully formed; and only those who have never tried it can imagine that it is a cosy and comforting kind of exercise (Porter and Smith 1989: 32).

Engaging with narratives *does* involve reflecting on our own inner lives and coming to terms with experiences in order that we may move forward - it is a learning process which does not deprive us of our own voice. We can continue to create the narrative.

Arguably, this engagement with narrative is representative of 'the deeper dimension of life', those experiences and feelings which touch us in some way such that we can, through a process of identification, find some meaning and purpose. This dimension is therefore central to those aspects of personal learning that teach us "how to live" and all children should have this opportunity to grow (de Mello 1988).

<u>Summary.</u>

This Chapter has explored the 'narrative dimension' of life, in other words, the ability of narratives to allow us opportunities to make sense of our own experiences and those experiences common to all humans, so that we can find meaning from them. For this reason I have argued that they are one example of an approach to religious and spiritual education which can contribute to children's personal learning.

The following chapter will consider objections to this argument, by reassessing the theories of Goldman, who stated that young children were unable to understand the language of religious narratives, and that there should consequently be a reduction in the use of Biblical material when teaching

religious education. I will also consider the contribution his theories have made to the teaching approaches to religious education used in the primary classroom.

Chapter Five.

Goldman's Developmental Theory.

To know what a child is able to grasp intellectually is a surer foundation for education than to know only what adults feel the child ought to grasp (Goldman 1964: xi).

Introduction.

This aim advocated by Ronald Goldman when describing the purposes of his research into the nature of children's thinking (1964) is arguably as relevant for teachers now as it was thirty years ago, and therefore deserves further consideration in this Chapter, in light of the nature of my investigation into the narrative dimension of religious and spiritual education and its possible contribution to personal learning.

A change in educational philosophy behind the teaching of religion can be traced to changes in the society of the 1960s where there were felt to be inadequacies in the old 'confessional approaches' and patterns of religious instruction, scripture teaching and the largely Biblical syllabuses which openly advocated personal conversion. Dissatisfaction with such teaching methods which failed to actively involve children in the learning process or take into account the large scale immigration of Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs from the Indian sub-continent, for example, was reflected in the Plowden Report (1967: 203) which rejected the idea

of Religious "Instruction" in favour of Religious "Education", implying a move away from schools as places where pupils merely receive information. In the 'progressive' ideology of the time with its moves towards 'discovery learning' from practical activities, such teaching was felt to be educationally unsound and teachers began to look for other methods of teaching religious education which would follow the Plowden Committee's (1967: 208) recommendations that religious education ought to be directed towards the development of religious concepts rather than factual knowledge.

Ronald Goldman (1964; 1965) seemed to encapsulate this general mood of concern for changes in religious education which would include looking at the reasons why children think in certain ways, the development of religious concepts and the need for teachers to remember that thinking and learning is an active and not a passive process. His empirical research became a major influence in channelling misleading perceptions of children's religious thinking by comparing them with Piaget's stages of intellectual development, and according to Slee (1986: 84) became a focal point for subsequent studies into religious thinking.

> Owing much to the established reputation of Piaget, Goldman's writings were eagerly embraced as offering a chance to develop religious education on the same kind of scientific basis as primary maths. No book or report in this area of the curriculum was complete without reference to the importance of his findings (Darling 1985: 28).

Following queries raised by the Plowden Committee (1967: 207) over the ability of children for understanding religious material, Goldman's own interest in the intellectual and emotional development of children and his wish that "educational insights now applied to other subjects can now be seen as relevant to the teaching of religion" led him to investigate the nature of religious thinking which he argued

was " no different in mode and method to non-religious thinking" and consequently what constituted appropriate material for pupils' ages and abilities (Goldman 1964: 2/3; 1965: 204; 1964: 3).

Ashton (1996: 194) argues that the continuing influence of positivism, stemming from the nineteenth-century pedagogical movement, in which it was felt that for any subject to be deemed respectable it should be presented as factual knowledge in an objective and scientific, rational language, contributed to Goldman's choice of a framework of Piagetian stage theory for his investigations. Goldman set out to investigate the processes of children's intellectual development "taking Piaget's scheme of the development of operational thinking as a comparative guide" in order to "see whether Piaget's three stages could be applied to the realm of religious thinking" (1964: 34/36). Slee argues that Goldman merely assumed "the Piagetian account of the nature and stages of the logical thinking as normative" and that subsequent concern with staging "reflects no more than a second-hand acquaintance with Piagetian stage theory" (Slee 1986: 85).

Nevertheless, Goldman accepted the validity and relevance of Piaget's stages of development to religious education "from an essentially intuitive, undifferentiated structure of thought to thinking which engages wholly within the boundaries of concrete realities, to a final emergence of abstract, reversible and fully logical thinking" (Slee 1986: 85), although critics have since objected to this narrow focus which ignores the narrative or symbolic dimensions of religion (for example Priestley 1981: 17-24; Davies 1985: 76-80).

Following the clinical interview method used by Piaget, which as pointed out in Chapter One has both limitations and advantages, Goldman compiled pictures and

questions with multiple choice answers based on three Biblical narratives, Moses and the Burning Bush, the Red Sea Crossing and the Temptations of Jesus, and "the responses to these were scored independently by those psychologically trained and conversant with Piaget's ideas" (1964: 51). His research is dominated by this wish to establish the scientifically respectable and objective nature of his investigations, one of his major aims being to reduce "subjectivity" and remain "neutral" (Goldman 1964: 36; 1964: 250).

However, Goldman himself was hardly neutral in the objective behind his research, which was to initiate children into a narrow view of Protestant Christian religion, causing Darling (1985: 29) to remark that "Goldman's commitment emerges from under his psychologist's lab coat" when he argues:

> Christianity should be taught because it is true, because it answers the deepest needs of human nature, and without a knowledge of the love of God and a relationship with him men and women will live impoverished lives (Goldman 1965: 59).

From the outset, Goldman's intention was to prove his hypothesis that pre-adolescent children did not have the capacity for understanding religion:

> The research procedure and results outlined in detail in this volume would seem to stress the limitations of children in understanding religion. This indeed has been one of the purposes of this study (Goldman 1964: 220).

Goldman's belief in children's "limitations of immaturity" is possibly one reason why Hilliard (1965: 15) argues that those involved in Goldman's investigations were unlikely to have provided responses which would have met with his approval or proved inconsistent with his belief in Piagetian stage theory:

> (the results) substantiate very clearly that view put forward by Piaget that there is a continuum of thinking which follows an "operational" sequence (Goldman 1964: 62).

Ashton points out that given Goldman's (1964: 51) deliberate construction of research materials that were not open because of his intent to check children's thinking by Piagetian methods

> important questions ought to be asked concerning their reliability for helping teachers assess children's intellectual capacity for religious thinking (Ashton 1996: 199).

Goldman's interview design has also been described as "having grave limitations" (Slee 1986: 89) particularly due to his choice of difficult Biblical narratives, arguably texts which many adults would struggle to interpret, and for his modification of the stories themselves:

> Essentially, by de-contextualising the narratives and heightening the miraculous and supernatural elements in the stories, Goldman has radically shifted the emphasis of the biblical texts (Slee 1986: 89).

Other critics have identified similar limitations in Goldman's selection, for example Hilliard (1965: 15) and Petrovich (1988: 47), as well as the questions asked of the children due to their tendency "to preclude the very answers which Goldman would consider theologically mature" (Slee 1986: 90). A multiple-choice response to his questions does not allow children much scope for revealing their own insights or truly personal understanding of any material. It is not surprising therefore that Ashton (1996: 199) casts doubt on the "reliability of the Piagetian testing procedures" on which Goldman's questions were based as a useful measure of the development of the children's religious thinking, although it must be pointed

out that subsequent studies which have also tested the presence and nature of stages of religious thinking have appeared to support Goldman's account of its development (for example Greer 1980; McGrady 1983).

Critics (for example Slee 1986: 87; Petrovich 1988: 45/46; Ashton 1996: 204) have also cast doubt on the type of thinking investigated by Goldman, whether it was a narrow logical focus parallel to the Piagetian developmental sequence, or based on beliefs, attitudes and opinions. Goldman (1964: xi) seems to offer contradictory definitions between his stated aim of investigating "what a child can grasp intellectually" whilst remarking:

> Because religion is fundamentally a pattern of belief, and not an intellectual formula, the emotional aspect of religious thinking is of great importance (Goldman 1964: 31).

Superficially, therefore, Goldman's investigations were concerned with the illogical development of children's intellect whereas they actually appear to be concerned with children's feelings and opinion-based responses to his research materials. For example, he asks, "Why do you think the ground on which Moses stood was holy?" and "Do you think this story really happened?" (1964: 255/257). Opinions given by the children do not automatically imply that the child can not understand the material. For example, they may not have previously heard the de-conceptualised story (although Goldman (1964: 214) did enquire about this with each child). Therefore a lack of understanding on the first hearing of a difficult narrative does not preclude the possibility that the child could have learnt to develop their levels of understanding with help (see Chapter Three).

Ashton argues that there is confusion by Goldman between "a) levels of learning achieved and b) potential for learning new material" and justifiably points out the absurdity of testing children in areas they had not had a previous opportunity to learn, and then using the results to suggest children's inability to understand them (Ashton 1996: 203). Most teachers would recognise that to test children on a new concept, for example long division, would cause unnecessary anxiety amongst them as they struggled to make sense of unfamiliar material and procedures. This does not imply however that with teacher intervention they could not learn to solve such problems with ease and even enjoyment. This is an important point for all teachers and researchers to bear in mind when investigating children's potential for thinking and understanding.

Nevertheless, Goldman concluded that the development of children's religious thinking approximately followed those maturational sequences set out by Piaget (1953) with logical reasoning being the ultimate destination of the child:

> To sum up, we can say that in religious thinking, the stages reached in terms of mental age are very approximately: Up to about 7/8 years: Pre-operational thought. About 7/8 to 13/14 years: Concrete operational thought. 13/14 years onwards: Formal (abstract) operational thought (Goldman 1964: 64).

His main argument (1964: 242; 1965: 9) was that children before the age of twelve years and eleven months are unable to understand the Biblical language or traditional religious language in the form of the Lord's Prayer for example, because it does not relate to their "real world" or their limited experiences:

> ...we need to have lived long enough to have experienced the real problems of the human condition before we can see the point of what religion offers (Goldman 1965: 50).

These arguments are misleading and have served to create a misconception that there are certain religious narratives which cannot be understood by children and consequently should not be attempted in the primary school (Darling 1985: 29).

Goldman's (1965: 148) own conception of religion as a search for spiritual rather than literal truth seems to have concealed from him the possibility that given the historical basis of the Bible, literal interpretations could, quite simply, be correct and show true understanding.

As I outlined in Chapter Four, Biblical narratives contain layers of meaning which lead to a developing understanding and it is precisely this which make them so relevant to the growing needs and experiences of children and makes them worthy of continuing study. A literal interpretation of the Parables of Jesus, for example believing that The Good Samaritan is a factually and historically accurate story, can still be worthy of reflection by children of "limited experiences" for the explicit message of an ideal model of treating others as fairly and lovingly as we would hope to be treated ourselves.

Despite this Goldman insists that

> the more we know of children's thinking, the more we can see that not only concepts but the level of formal operations (or prepositional thinking) demanded by the Parables of Jesus make them, on the whole, unsuitable for children (Goldman 1964: 225).

Indeed Goldman (1965: 8) is decisive in his recommendations that an approach to religious education that "offers a more realistic alternative to our present ills" involving

> a move away from a Bible-centred content of religious education to a content which more closely models the real world of children using their experiences and their natural development rather than imposing an adult form of religious ideas and language upon them (Goldman 1965: 9).

His solution is to reduce curricula based on scripture teaching with a series of "life-themes" to help children see the personal relevance of the Bible, which are "couched in terms of the child's experiences", further illustrated by Biblical material until they are free of their "childish and immature" interpretations (Goldman 1965: 71; 1964: 67). His hope is that:

> in the child's view the Bible's value is enhanced because it is no longer seen as an endless and boring book, but a mine of relevant experience which is true to life (Goldman 1965: 73).

However, teachers may recognise from personal experience that it is often the case that it is the *approach* to certain material which children find boring, rather than the content, and that children can be nurtured and inspired by committed and enthusiastic teachers to become "thinking students" (Kirby 1991: x). Arguably any material, including Goldman's "life-themes", will become dull and uninspiring in the hands of dull and uninspiring teachers. In fact, Goldman's concern that an immature understanding of religious concepts acquired before his ultimate goal of formal (abstract) operational thought may lead to later rejection of religion, as well as the Plowden Committee's recommendations that "children should not be unnecessarily involved in religious controversy" (Plowden 1967: 207), encouraged his elimination from the "life-themes" of any particularly challenging or thought-provoking material which could be interpreted in an open or critical fashion (Goldman 1964: 64/86).

Goldman's assertions about children's intellectual capacities and their presumed inability to relate to Biblical material due to their limited experiences appear to have been heavily influenced by his notions of childhood as a period of unsophisticated human development, inferior in intellectual thought to adulthood:

> As adults we try to revise our thinking to see if our ideas are consistent. Young children seem unable to do this, moving only forward in their thought with charming but misguided assurance (Goldman 1965: 28).

Primary school teachers in daily contact with young children attempting to make sense of their world may find little justification for his rather naive and patronising notions of childhood. His own commitment to Protestant Christianity and personal definition of what constitutes religious maturity, appears to have precluded for him the possibility that pre-adolescent children possess the capability for developed religious thought:

> Their imprisonment within concrete concepts and their frequent literalism's make it difficult for them to step forward into a more spiritual understanding of religious truth...until some reflection at a personal level is achieved, the major insights of the Christian faith cannot be grasped (Goldman 1965: 30-35).

More recent research (for example Donaldson 1978; Minney 1985; Petrovich 1987; Ashton 1996) has highlighted that the children's apparent lack of success in responding to the Piagetian-style questions of Goldman is not because they lack the intellectual capacity or that it is necessarily any different to adults', but that they were not provided with appropriate opportunities to reveal their understanding:

> At least from age four, then, we must again acknowledge that the supposed gap between children and adults is less than many people have claimed (Donaldson 1978: 58/59).

Despite the above reasons for doubting the validity of Goldman's theories regarding the intellectual capacity of children for understanding religious narratives, his arguments have continued to exert their influence (for example Greer 1980; Bastide 1987; Miles 1996) and his insistence that since "intellectual comprehension is extremely limited" teachers should "help children fantasise their way into religion" through "music, dancing and creative work" (Goldman 1964: 233) has

> effectively banished explicit work on religious concepts in most primary schools, because children in those age groups are deemed unable to think in abstract terms but only concretely (Watson 1993: 59).

An exploration of certain approaches to the teaching of religious and spiritual education which have been pervasive throughout primary education demonstrates the continuing and widespread influence of Goldman's recommendations to reduce the teaching of Biblical narratives in the primary school:

> ...the teaching of large areas of it may do more damage than good to a child's religious understanding and... too much Biblical material is used too soon and too frequently (Goldman 1965: 7).

It should be noted however that Goldman was anxious to correct misunderstandings, arising from his 1964 research, that teachers should reject Bible teaching altogether:

> I would like to correct the widespread misconception that I advocate no Bible teaching before the age of 12. I do suggest a drastic reduction of Bible material in syllabuses before this age, but the difference does not lie so much in the quantity of Bible material used as the way in which we use it (Goldman 1965: 70).

Presumably here he is referring to those recommendations of the use of "life-themes" such as "People Who Help Us" and "Hands" for example, and

> imaginative activities of writing, cutting out pictures and adapting them, mime, movement and dance and any ways in which the children can genuinely explore in fantasy the experience they have encountered (Goldman 1965: 94).

This concern to relate religious teaching to children's experiences in order to develop their religious thinking and understanding is reflected in the Experiential Learning Approach to religion. Ashton (1996: 218) comments that this approach stemmed from "growing concern about children's spirituality and the desirability of addressing their needs". Such an approach which is designed to involve children in a personal search for meaning and values and make sense of their own experiences is worth considering, providing it does not lead to relativism, the consequences of which are described persuasively by Watson:

> Discussion or teaching based on relativism is dangerous in its naivety. Schools must look deeper; they must, in fact, challenge the assumption. If everything is relative, any opinion is as good as another regardless of considerations of evidence, logical consistency, comprehensiveness, or experience, then the basis for civilisation is destroyed. What will inevitably happen is that the one who shouts loudest and longest will prevail (Watson 1995: 45).

This argument that an emphasis on one's own meanings often undermines and undervalues the views of others is supported by Day who writes of the "essential arrogance" of

> the dismissal of alternative perspectives, along with a fashionable insistence on everyone's right to have his or her opinions (Day 1994: 91).

An essential element of education is surely the need for critically engaging with material which genuinely relates to children's concerns and experiences in an informative and positive fashion, and if we dismiss the opinions of others because they have no personal relevance, we are in danger of missing out on vast areas of potential for learning.

Goldman's arguments over thirty years ago for a more implicit form of religious education through "life-themes" are identifiable in the wariness shown towards explicit teaching from the Bible throughout recent recommendations for teaching religion in the primary school through the popular schemes, topics or themes:

> A reminder should be made here that everything in the bible was originally addressed to adults...And too much emphasis on Bible *stories* creates the impression that the bible is a book that people grow up out of rather than one which Christians grow up into. Some bible stories, such as those about Joseph and David, are appropriate for lower juniors but there are many other ways in which children can become familiar with the bible (Holm 1990: 94).

It is worth noticing that Holm does not explain the criteria on which she based her assumptions that those particular Bible stories are suitable only for lower juniors. The alternative offered by Holm is also firmly based in Goldman's theories of using a thematic approach, as she suggests that two themes, "Shepherd and Bread can be explored with the seven to nine age group" (Holm 1990: 94).

Also remarkably similar to Goldman's life themes are depth themes offered by the Existential approach to religious and spiritual education (see Grimmitt's description 1973: 52-55). Like the life themes they aim to develop children's understanding of religion by relating to their own ordinary experiences. However, Goldman was interested in helping children to understand the Christian tradition,

whereas the depth themes offer a more open approach, with their intention being to illuminate an understanding of *all* religions.

Another possible example of Goldman's present contribution to religious education is Scholastic's series of books Themes for Early Years (Farr and Morris 1997) based around themes similar to those suggested by him, for example, People Who Help Us, Water, Pets, Homes, to name but a few. Reminiscent of Goldman's arguments about children's developing intellectual capabilities and their need to "fantasise" their way into religion, the purpose of the "People Who Help Us" theme is to provide "lively, practical and workable activities" which are "firmly rooted in structured play" and "allow children to work from first hand experience" (Farr and Morris 1997: 5).

However, whilst the book offers extensive ideas for cross-curricular teaching of each theme, and is relevant to National Curriculum planning and assessment, the superficiality of its religious content is apparent. For example, under the sub-theme of "Helping at Home", the learning objective for religious education is "to discuss ways in which people can help each other" which can be achieved by a "simple version of the story of the Good Samaritan" followed by a discussion which should "suggest that the children are neighbours and can help each other during the day...for example by sharing crayons" (Farr and Morris 1997: 17). There are also similar suggestions for other follow-up activities. The material is not only prescribed in terms of the interpretation the children should have of the Biblical story, but also in the suggested activities, which allow children no real freedom to explore the story in ways which take into account their individuality.

There are many excellent examples of reference books *describing* religion, and the customs and practices of religious followers, for example, Folens Primary RE series offers poster packs with supporting teacher resource books to give vital background information of different faiths. Many teachers would find this information useful for preparing sensitive material on unfamiliar beliefs for example, but there are dangers if the teaching merely stops at a superficial "finding out about" religious customs and practices, an approach known as Phenomenology and according to Ashton also influenced by the theories of Goldman in its "attempt to ensure religious education would be a respectable subject in the school curriculum" (Ashton 1996: 215). Such an approach, as stated in Chapter Three, could easily lead to the opinion that religion is merely something other people "do", rather than looking at what it means to the religious believer involved and the insights they can offer children into their own faith.

A worrying feature of all of the approaches outlined above is their tendency to be determined by the narrow notion that "teacher knows best" about the interpretation their pupils make of the material, based on assumptions of their intellectual capacity. They fail therefore to provide opportunities for children to take part in learning which could not only be stimulating and interesting but of real personal benefit "with regard to what is really necessary and important in life" (Watson and Ashton 1995: Preface).

Summary.

Without doubt, Goldman's theories have made a significant contribution to the field of religious and spiritual education and continue to be influential. A positive factor arising from his research is the highlighting of major issues for future investigation, for example concerning

> **the conceptualisation of religious thinking, the development of an appropriate paradigm within which research may usefully proceed, and the development of reliable and accurate methodology for the examination of religious thinking (Slee 1986: 86).**

However, Goldman's determination to give his research some form of scientific respectability by adopting Piagetian stage theory and applying it to the development of children's religious thinking, has served to reinforce perceptions that primary school children are unable to understand explicitly religious material from the Bible due to its abstract nature, despite recent evidence to the contrary (for example, Petrovich 1988; Egan 1990; Ashton 1996).

The result of this narrow notion of childhood has been the inadequate teaching approaches and lesson content which have been described in this Chapter, and continue to be reflective of the religious and spiritual education offered to primary school children over thirty years after Goldman's research.

Goldman's aim, therefore, of investigating children's intellectual capacities for religious thinking led to his theories that are unhelpful and misleading when planning teaching approached to religious and spiritual education which

recognise the individuality of primary school children, due to their tendency to assume that there are certain things children of a certain age may not grasp. It is ironic therefore to return to Goldman's aim set out at the beginning of this Chapter and note that this was what he was hoping to eliminate from teaching as a result of his investigations, yet as a result of his influence over religious education in the primary school we are arguably no further forward:

> **To know what a child is able to grasp intellectually is a surer foundation for education than to know only what adults feel the child ought to grasp (Goldman 1964: xi).**

The following chapter focuses on data collected from the classroom which is presented and interpreted, showing the ways in which seven to eight-year old children were able to interpret and understand both religious and secular narratives, as well as arguing that it provided them with opportunities to find meaning. It is suggested that appropriate lesson content for religious and spiritual education in the classroom, can extend their potential for religious and spiritual thinking and understanding, and therefore make a positive contribution to personal learning.

Chapter Six.

Particular Stories.

Introduction.

I argued in Chapter Two that religious education should not be merely the "transmission of a body of knowledge" (Rudge 1993: 27) but should link the cognitive and affective by relating to the experiences children already bring to the classroom. The research of Fowler (1981), for example, based on nearly four hundred interviews, suggested that there are six recognisable and distinct stages of "faith development" which ultimately allow a person to develop meaning and value in life, and that by the age of seven years all children have a reality beyond their own experience. The narratives used in the classroom were not only relevant to the lives of the children but also appeared to sufficiently bring the children out of themselves to enter the heart and mind of another (see Chapter Three). The descriptions of learning presented in this Chapter fall within the realms of religious education, spirituality and personal education, and share common themes of personal responsibility, trust and relationships.

As I explained in Chapter One, the children of the Year Three class (seven to eight-year olds) had experienced considerable disruption in the previous academic year, and my immediate priority as a new teacher was to learn about the children as individuals and also encourage them to begin to see each other as individuals. One

obstacle to this aim was their apparent lack of listening 'skills'. Within days the large class had begun to form into cliques and there were many instances of children from this class fighting with each other in the playground, or complaining of bullying. As their teacher, I had the relative freedom within school policy to use strategies that I thought appropriate to overcome these difficulties (see Appendix 1). Filled with the heady power of being "in charge" of my first class and encouraged by colleagues to assert my authority over such a large "unruly" class, I soon learned that if I wanted to gain the respect of these children I had to change this attitude before I was to see any change in the attitudes of the children to their own learning and each other. My role instead became one of supporting and encouraging the children through their learning experiences, and to create an atmosphere of respect and co-operation. In agreement with Hammond (1990: 24), I found that the central teaching virtues I most needed were "compassion and a real sense of care and concern" for the children.

Initially, the children found it difficult to be still and quiet, particularly during story-time, and as I felt an important aspect of spirituality and personal learning was valuing stillness and listening to ourselves and others, I focused upon this initially. As Hammond (1990: 69) suggests, listening exercises are a recognisable aspect of personal and social education, although they may be less recognisable as part of a programme for religious education. Learning to listen, or simply be still and "wait", is an essential element in learning to examine our own thoughts and see clearly our own experiences. Weil (1950) regards this process as central to a developing spirituality, as does Murdoch (1992), who feels that we can not look on the world honestly without the space for quiet contemplation and reflection. I found that learning to listen proved essential in helping the children to understand another person's point of view and thus develop empathy, a feature central to personal

learning and religious education. How can we respect and appreciate those beliefs different to our own, if we have no understanding of what it feels like to be that believer?

> We can...look on the world more or less clearly, perceive it accurately or dishonestly, bring to bear a seeing that is steady, purified and just or wavering and occluded, distorted by the demands and fantasies of our nagging egos (Smith 1995: 91).

I chose the narratives to use during 'story-time' simply on the basis of their potential for deepening the children's awareness of their own experiences and emotions and their understanding of the experiences of others, as well as the hope that they would prove a useful vehicle for expressing feelings in a variety of ways. As well as the religious narratives chosen from the New Testament, I explained in Chapter Three that some of the narratives were chosen from popular children's fiction, in the hope that they would contribute to the personal learning of the children.

I placed great emphasis on 'Story-time' as a special time in our classroom and the children increasingly looked forward to this opportunity for private reflection and shared thought. We would gather together in a corner of the classroom which we called our 'Special Place', enclosed by curtains which we would draw, light a candle and settle comfortably on bean bags. Immediately, an atmosphere of calm and stillness was created.

I began each 'story-time' session by asking the children to concentrate on the flame for a short period of time. Eventually the children took this opportunity to speak freely or offer prayers, but initially I found it helpful to relax the children through

structured guided meditation and asking them to close their eyes and simply listen. The ability to listen is a central aspect of spirituality, and meditation is one way in which the religious traditions teach us to listen to the inner voice:

> In certain kinds of Buddhism, awareness meditation is the central religious practice, whilst in Western religion, the bible teaches believers to 'be still and know that I am God' (Hammond 1990: 57).

When the atmosphere was relaxed and quiet, I would begin the narrative or the guided meditation. Guided meditation is a story told in such a manner that the children can become participants and identify with the characters within it. Emphasis is therefore given to the senses, in order that a higher level of awareness can be achieved. For example, questions were usually asked such as can you see anything, listen to the sounds around you, what can you feel and smell? Meditation takes us into the lives of the characters within the narrative, and through them "we face dilemmas, weigh up alternatives and feel the consequences of an ill-considered or noble act" (Hammond 1990: 225).

The relevance of guided meditation to personal learning is clear if we accept that it is a powerful form of learning about our own feelings and emotions when confronted with certain situations. For example, during a retreat to Ushaw College (a seminary for candidates training for the Catholic priesthood), chosen so that the children could compare how they were preparing for their First Confession and First Holy Communion with the preparation of the seminarians, our focus for the day was 'forgiveness'. I was hoping that the children would think in depth about their own experiences of forgiving others and being forgiven. We relaxed and prepared for a narrative as usual:

> We lay on the floor and closed our eyes. I could smell the incense. Miss Irving told us to listen to all the sounds around us. Then we had to listen to the sound of our own breathing. Miss Irving told us to breathe in and think 'Jesus' and breathe out and think 'I love you'. We felt like Jesus was there with us. Then we imagined we were on a golden beach. We felt the sun on our face and the silky soft sand beneath our fingers. I felt calm and relaxed and I knew Jesus was there with me (Kayleigh, aged seven).

On this occasion I chose to use the narrative of John the Baptist baptising Jesus, to symbolise the cleansing and purifying effects of water and as an example of preparing for another Sacrament, this time of Baptism:

> We imagined ourselves on a river boat. We felt ourselves floating backwards on a clam and gentle sea. Miss Irving told us to think about what we were doing yesterday, then last week. We went back through the years of our lives until we could see ourselves being baptised. Then we stepped out of the boat and we were at the Sea of Galilee. The hot sun was shining on the back of my neck and I felt hot dusty sand on my feet. I was in a crowd watching a man called John walking into the sea. I could hear the murmuring of the crowd who parted as another special man walked through them into the water. John took this special man by the hand. I knew it was Jesus. I watched him being baptised by John. I had my own toes dipped in the water and felt its cool smoothness. It was the best experience of my life (Stuart, aged seven).

Although none of the children referred to the symbolic aspect of water, it seems that this experience touched them personally in some way and offered them possibilities for new insight into the narrative (see Appendix 2.). As a follow-up to the story, we thought about things we would like to ask forgiveness for and talked about how we could show symbolically that we wanted to make a fresh start (see Appendix 3.). One of the children suggested that we pour water onto each other's heads the way John the Baptist had with Jesus, which then led on to another child suggesting that we wash each others hands to show that "we were sorry for all the times we have fought or argued" (Helen, aged eight) and also to show that "we forgave each other" (Alex, aged eight):

> At Ushaw we washed each other's hands to show that we're sorry for all the bad times and that we forgive each other. I felt closer to the rest of my class after doing this and I thought about how Jesus did the same thing to his disciples feet (Jack, aged eight).

Jack's description of this experience demonstrates the power that narratives can have as a channel for our emotions, and also points to their ability to stimulate the imagination.

As I argued in Chapter Three, the ability to imagine is crucial to learning about and understanding personal and shared human experiences. Before children begin school, they will have experienced the thrill of playing imaginary games and thus adopting many different roles. Narratives build upon this experience by allowing us to free our imagination, so that we can extend our experiences by becoming both participant and spectator within them:

> Stories 'stretch' our reality. By giving the imagination free rein they can extend our sense of what is possible and lead us along paths we might not see of restricted to rational thought. Such stories are devices for learning (Hammond 1990: 149).

Where The Wild Things Are (Sendak 1963) is a narrative where imagination plays a central role, as Max, the central character, is sent to bed without any supper for getting up to mischief. Once in his room his wild imagination takes over and he sails away into a dream world where he meets the terrifying 'wild things'. In the end however his bad dreams come to an end when he returns to reality and thus the comfort and security of his own room, to find that his mother has supper waiting for him after all. Again, I hoped to explore the concept of forgiveness in the story, as most children will have had similar experiences to Max of being 'punished'. Richard puts himself into the shoes of Max, and relates the experiences within the narrative to those of his own:

> He's getting a bit lonely because he wants someone to love him properly. The wild things think proper love is having fun and going wild, but it's not. It's about caring for other people and he just remembers that they're only in disguise as his friends. They're not his real friends and they don't know proper love. So he goes back home to his mam because he's lonely and wants real love where she'll forgive him for anything he does. The minute I got to the place where the wild things are I wouldn't like it and would want to go back home to my mam and dad and brother (Richard, aged seven).

I asked Richard what he meant by "proper love" and he said that "it's when someone like your mam loves you no matter how bad you've been".

The children in the Year Two class found this particular narrative provided them with a focus for voicing personal concerns and sharing their feelings. For instance, Mark (aged seven) told us that he "found it hard to forgive my nana when she died because I felt like she'd betrayed me" and Brendan shared this experience with his friends:

> There's something I've never forgiven my mam for yet and that was ages ago because there's this girl in the other class and when she came to where I live she was being cruel to my brother and got this spade and was trying to hit him with it so I was trying to stop her and she ripped one of my t-shirts so I punched her on the nose and she was crying. So her mam came to see my mam and I ran up to bed and got my pyjamas on and my dad gave me the belt and I said "Oh my God I'm never going to do that again" and I still haven't forgotten it yet (Brendan, aged seven).

Richard thought about Max and began to consider how he might feel if placed in a similar situation:

> He might feel angry and feel his mam's been cruel to him so he runs off 'cause he thinks his mam doesn't like him, so he thinks I'll teach her not to give me any supper so he runs away (Richard, aged seven).

Where The Wild Things Are (Sendak 1963), a familiar picture book in most infant classrooms and which may be regarded as some as a childish or amusing story, offered these children the opportunity to reflect upon their own feelings when placed in a similar situation as Max, and led to a deeper consideration of the

concept of forgiveness than they had previously discussed with each other. They were able to see that they were not alone in their experiences and this led them to find personal meaning in the story, as well as empathising with each other and Max:

> (Narratives) offer layers of meaning which require reflection before they are uncovered... The original context of some teaching narratives has been forgotten so that they are now regarded as fairy tales while familiarity has robbed other stories of their power to surprise...Different patterns and new interpretations can emerge as we grow and change, becoming more adept at unwrapping the various layers of meaning (Hammond 1990: 149).

A fable, on the other hand, might bring about a sympathetic response because it contains a specific message; therefore the reader or listener is not invited into the text as a participant. Instead they are required to look at it as themselves, as spectators. On reflection I feel it was right therefore not to have pointed the children towards specific messages within the narratives, because the meanings they took from them proved to be mainly based upon personal feelings and experiences. In this way the experience of learning was more personal and meaningful to them than if they had learned something because I felt it was 'appropriate' for them.

Narratives appeared to provide a distancing framework for the children, allowing them to talk through their own feelings and experiences through the characters in the story, without having to 'bare their souls' to the rest of the class and their teacher. As Porter and Smith write, through narrative

> We can make sense of those experiences, motives and feelings we really have instead of continuing to present the image which those around us find acceptable (Porter and Smith 1989: 31).

For some of us, of course, this can be difficult to do in the relatively public environment of the classroom, and possibly for this reason I found that for the older

children the meaning often publicly stayed within the confines of the narrative. For example, when discussing the theme of forgiveness in The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe (Lewis 1950), Gary commented that

> Lucy must have found it really hard to forgive Edmund because he really betrayed her and made her look stupid in front of everyone else (Gary, aged eleven),

to which Simon replied

> Yes but he's her brother and she should have felt that her family was the most important thing to her so if she can't forgive him she'll never forgive anyone (Simon, aged ten).

A similar reaction was offered by Cheryl (aged seven), who after hearing The Parable of the Prodigal Son asked "God would forgive the prodigal son if he took some money wouldn't he?" The previous day Cheryl's mother had written to the school to inform them that Cheryl had been caught for the third time stealing money from her purse. The story appeared to be providing Cheryl with a means to express her fears and find some sort of reassurance:

> A good book for children should hold an honest mirror up to life, reflect the emotional landscape they move in, tell them what they want to know, and what they want to know is their own situation (Bawden 1976: 10).

In other words, a successful narrative can be described as helping children to cope with the realities of their own lives, and offering them an opportunity to explore meanings personal to their situation.

The children did reveal personal beliefs and values as a result of listening to the narratives, for example, after hearing the story of Mr Happy (Hargreaves 1971) they voiced different opinions on a fundamental theme - the meaning of true happiness. Stephanie (aged seven) thought that happiness was "having lots of nice things around you" whereas Brendan held the belief that

> Money's not important, it can't buy you love. Burglars want money, but some of them want love as well and they might think that money can buy them love but it can't (Brendan, aged seven).

Watson and Ashton state that because Brendan was helped to reflect on his beliefs and values, his comments show that his own experiences and understanding of the world "had already given him firm priorities with regard to what is necessary and really important in life" (Watson and Ashton 1995: Preface).

As in the case of Brendan and Stephanie who disagreed about the meaning of happiness based on their own perceptions of the world, the Year Six children found different messages in the story of The Little Prince (de Saint-Exupery 1945). Robert, aged eleven, felt that "it shows no matter what you do, there'll always be somebody to spoil things", whereas Jodie, aged eleven, argued that "it's saying that you can change things to make the world better and stop people spoiling it". Perhaps it is significant that Robert had been a victim of school bullying which had left him with low self-esteem and little confidence, whereas Jodie enjoyed all aspects of school life, and had an optimistic and positive attitude. I felt it was important, however, that the children had at least *shared* these thoughts with each other and thus began to develop an understanding of each other's feelings.

Imagination is essential if we are to begin to develop our sense of empathy, and by exercising our imagination through fiction we can begin to understand the experiences and feelings of others. The development of empathy appeared to link very closely to the children's growing spirituality, as they began to not only see things from another's point of view, but also recognise their own place in the world. Brendan, aged seven, recalls how in the evenings he says to his parents "all those people who are dead, their life isn't over yet. I just don't want to believe it".

Kelly also attempts to express her growing realisation of her existence in a "greater metaphysical dimension" (Ashton 1992: 170):

> I just feel that there's something there like God or something watching over you. He always knows what you're doing because he's really near us. He's over there in that chair and here in this room (Kelly, aged seven).

Such reactions, and a growing sense among the children in the class that they were not alone in their curiosity and feelings about these issues, is indicative of their emerging spirituality:

> If there's no God, there's no heaven and there must be somewhere you go when you die (Matthew, aged eleven).

Matthew's reaction prompted Chris and Michael to express their own beliefs while taking into account an alternative view:

> Well I'd like to believe that but sometimes I think it's just like a big dream where your body dies and a bit of your brain keeps going (Chris, aged eleven).

> But somehow you must get another chance at life and if that means you go somewhere like heaven then that's it (Michael, aged eleven).

The idea of heaven was explored by Caroline who had said little during the class discussion after hearing Where The Wild Thing Are (Sendak 1963), but the next day presented me with this poem she had written at home, after contemplating the make-believe or dream world to which Max had travelled:

> The Dream World.
>
> I dream of a world,
> Greater than others,
> Where the sun is shining brightly,
> And the stars in the sky sparkle like silver.
> The world is quiet and peaceful,
> Like the world we so call heaven.
> Is this another heaven or is it just another dream world?
> (Caroline, aged eight).

Perhaps Caroline's poem captures an essence of spirituality, as discussed in Chapter Three, this process of questioning and clarifying one's own thoughts by learning and growing through our own experiences and identifying with others. This can be talked about in the psychological language of Goldman's (1964; 1965) "stages of development" as something which can be empirically measured, or in the vague language of term such as "awe and wonder". Neither of these forms of language however, seem to get quite to the heart of the matter. Caroline's writing and the responses of Chris, Michael and Mathew show that there is an area of their lives which they cannot quite pinpoint but feel a need to identify and we should not withhold from children this discovery process. As I argued in Chapter Three, stories are fundamental to the essence of spirituality because they can enable us to search for identity, simply because we need some form of narrative to our lives in order to make them meaningful:

> It is the narrative of a life that constitutes its unity. To lack that unity is to have no sense of who you are, and no sense that life is meaningful (Porter and Smith 1989: 21).

Sedgwick also suggest that narratives provide us with powerful tools for learning, as 'playing' with experiences, either mentally, spiritually or emotionally, allows children to have power not only over texts but also their own lives:

> In giving this power over texts about birth, love and death, we are giving them power for later on when the three essential facts of our common humanity not only excite and thrill us, but threaten us with loneliness and finally extinction (Sedgwick 1994: 92).

I explored the idea in Chapters Two and Three that the ability of children to empathise with their friends and see another's point of view, is not only central to personal education but is also important when children are introduced to different

faiths and cultures, as well as the central beliefs of there own religion. The Parable of the Prodigal Son (or The Forgiving Father as the children referred to it) was a religious narrative very familiar to the children as they had heard it many times in different classes throughout the school, assemblies and church services. There were universal groans of "not this one again" when I introduced it as part of their Sacramental Preparation programme, and I must admit to having similar feelings towards it at the time. However, by this time, the children had begun to look forward to the experience of trying to understand the feelings of the central characters within narratives, and their comments (see Appendix 4) show that they were able to explain how they would feel if they were either the younger son, the father or the elder son in the narrative:

The Younger Son

I think I'm a big fool. My father will think I don't LOVE him anymore. I'm scared to go home, what if he turns me away, what am I going to do? I can't go home in this state. I don't think he will or will he? I'm sure he will. What about my big brother? I can't go home with a sorrowful heart or can I? (Holly, aged seven).

The Father

What on earth have I said to my son? each day he never comes over the hill. What have I said that's hurt him? I can't have said anything or can I? I wish he had come back because I love him so much. Lord make him come. I can't sleep anymore. My own son has left me. Maybe he is ill, or has died, what if he is in prison getting whipped? I can't believe he left me. Maybe I'm a bad father. OH HERE HE COMES (Holly, aged seven).

The Elder Son.

Why him? Why set a party for him? He isn't the one that's been working all his life for his Dad. I'm not going in there to see my brother being fussed about. Everyone will just ignore me. Just because he's back. Big deal (Danielle, aged eight).

As a result of their growing empathy and developing awareness of the feelings of others and how they may react to similar situations as described above and in Appendix 4, I felt that the learning that had taken place based upon this religious narrative provided the children with a deeper insight into the concepts of forgiveness and reconciliation as they prepared to make their First Confession. As I explained in Chapter Two, in previous years the emphasis on preparing for this Sacrament was placed upon learning various biblical narratives and then dressing up and acting them out during the church service. The teaching had been heavily based upon the idea of children as 'sinners' who needed to seek forgiveness. The Year Three children seemed to recognise that their own feelings surrounding the concepts of forgiveness and repentance were not so different from those of the characters in this religious narrative. As a result of this insight into their own emotions, the children looked forward to their First Confession as a cleansing process, a chance to make a fresh start (see Appendix 5):

> I can't wait to make my First Confession because I think it will be BRILL and I will feel BRILL. It will take all the weight off my shoulders. Besides I can't wait to say sorry to God. I'm sure I'll come skipping down the aisle. My big sister said it is wonderful and you Miss Irving have given me a lot of courage. I think I'll have a wail of a time. I think God will be happy to forgive me. THE END (Holly, aged seven).

I felt that the following comment from Elizabeth helped to sum up exactly the understanding I would have hoped the children would take with them after making their First Confession:

> We need your help God to help us make our First Confession. We need you to e with us all the way. You will be there with us anyway because we will be saying sorry to you for the first time. But you can't change what happened yesterday because that's passed. You can't promise to be brilliant tomorrow. All you can do is make a fresh start tomorrow and remember that God is with you every second and every minute (Elizabeth, aged seven).

This coming to terms with and recognising the sheer reality of life that we are all fallible is precisely part of the personal learning process which enables children to make meaning from their own experiences. It is a far more realistic interpretation of life than the promises the children had made in the past, such as "I'm sorry for all those times I've been naughty and promise never to be naughty again". In this sense, the children recognised the idea of truth-bearing stories. They understood that the parable was not literally true, but that it contained truths that were relevant to their lives (see Appendix 6):

> On Sunday I told a lie.
> On Monday I broke some glass.
> On Tuesday I kicked my sister.
> On Saturday I spilt some juice.
> But there's one thing.
> I know I am forgiven
> (Andy, aged seven).

The responses and reactions of the children after making their First Confession and First Holy Communion reinforce my argument that learning that involves children thinking about their own experiences and which is relevant to them can provide opportunities for them to develop their understanding of their own religious beliefs, and also enables the growth of the whole person, that is, spiritual and imaginative growth, moral and emotional growth and growth in relationships (see Appendix 7):

> I felt like crying because I was so happy. My mam was crying because I had a gloating smile...I skipped all the way home (Danielle, aged eight).

> I think I am doing OK with preparing for my communion. I feel excited and happy. Everyone has helped me with it. I think it will be wonderful. Miss Irving has helped me a lot. Mr D has helped me lots and has given me lots of confidence. I want to make my communion because I want to meet Jesus and I want to become a bigger part of God's family...I know first Holy Communion isn't about walking around in a frilly dress or a smart suit. It's about taking Jesus into your life (Holly, aged seven).

It is easier to see the depth of understanding that Holly has reached regarding the reasons for making her First Holy Communion if I compare them with the comments made by a parent of one of the children a week before the celebration, that "all the parents are bothered about is seeing the little girls in their white dresses".

By the summer term my relationship with this class had altered. They had begun to take more responsibility for their own learning, particularly with regard to preparing themselves for the Sacraments as the comments from Mark and Danielle below show. Their experiences at school had begun to permeate their relationships, encouraging them to think about the consequences of their behaviour, such as reconciling after playground arguments (see Appendix 8):

> It is easy to love our friends but it can be hard to be kind to people we don't like. I will try to do as Jesus asked me to do and love my neighbour by being kind and sharing my sweets and do what I am supposed to do (Danielle, aged eight).
>
> Every time me and Danielle fall out I'm quite sad. We always have a row and start a fight. At last play we always make back and forgive each other and play a game (Mark, aged seven).

The ability to resolve conflict and take responsibility for our own actions is central to our growth as individuals, and was an important aspect in helping the children to justify their own beliefs, as shown when we discussed the meaning of the religious narrative with the theme of 'Take Up Your Cross and Follow Me' (see Appendix 9):

> Take up your cross and follow me. The meaning of this isn't buy a cross and follow Jesus, it means stand up in what you believe in. Don't let people talk you out of what you believe about Jesus. If you believe he has power believe it. If people laugh at you ignore them because you might be right (Mark, aged seven).

The strengthening and development of relationships became a recognisable and distinct feature of the Year Three class as the year progressed, to the extent that staff and parents commented upon the sense of co-operation and positive attitude towards each other. The time for reflection and sharing personal experiences during our 'story-time' had, I felt, resulted in the development of personal qualities such as trust, openness, honesty and acceptance of each other. By supporting and valuing the contributions each other made to the 'chewing-time' after hearing the story, the children had made important steps in learning about themselves and each other as individuals:

> We all work as a team in this class and we try hard to be part of one big family. We're not always friends with each other but it doesn't mean we don't care about each other. We're just not perfect that's all! (Jack, aged eight).

This new atmosphere of caring for each other can be summed up in the story of David (I referred to his reading difficulties and the problems he experienced at home in Chapter Two). As the only black child in an all white school, David had also suffered some prejudice from his peers, as well as relationship problems with his previous teacher, and as a result he was withdrawn and quiet. I watched over the year as he became increasingly interested in 'story-time', and eventually joined in group and class discussions during 'chewing-time'. As he relaxed, he began to take a keener interest in our class library books, and became more confident when reading to me. I recall with emotion how the whole class spontaneously stood and cheered David when he finally progressed to the next level of his reading scheme and although I may once again (as in Chapter Three) be guilty of over-sentimentalising the whole experience, David hugged me for the first time on his way out of school that night. The growth of relationships had extended to us all.

I have placed great importance so far upon the children learning to listen to each other, but I also learned that I needed to listen to them. Teachers may frequently dismiss children's feelings or emotions, and automatically respond to them with patronising comments such as the familiar one in this school being "shake hands and say you're sorry" or "go outside and play". The teacher's own attitude is therefore of paramount importance, for how can we expect children to trust us enough to share their feelings and listen to each other, if we do not do the same? Although the children welcomed this approach and responded positively, I found there was a 'darker' side to personal learning as a result of the honesty and trust between us. Despite the positive experiences of many of the children I described earlier based around the theme of forgiveness, I also discovered how others coped and faced up to negative and painful experiences in their lives.

Andrew, aged seven, was trying to come to terms with the sense of loss he felt as a result of the separation of his parents. In a Catholic school, with its emphasis upon the family unit, Andrew was confronted on an almost daily basis with his painful emotions. During the guided meditation and periods of silence and relaxation, he would occasionally sit with tears rolling down his cheeks, but despite the concern of his friends and myself, he said he wanted to have this time to "think about things". He experienced feelings of anger, mainly directed at his father who had left the family home, as well as obvious grief at his absence. He remained very quiet during our discussion of the father's feelings in The Parable of The Prodigal Son (see Appendix 4), but stayed behind at the end of the session to say to me "I can't not forgive him can I? He's my dad". Andrew had apparently used this time to clarify his own feelings and possibly learned not to be angry with himself. He had taken responsibility for "seeing" his world accurately and honestly.

Although some may question the wisdom of including these more painful moments of personal experience and learning in the daily classroom life, I ask why they should be avoided. Coming to terms with and making sense of our experiences and feelings, both painful and pleasant, is the essence of personal learning, and we cannot expect children to become unfeeling robots the moment they enter the classroom, in the hope that they will have more time for the literacy or numeracy hour. These painful feelings will not go away, instead if we avoid them, there will not only be pain, but pain and confusion. There is no benefit to the children involved, if we do not allow them these opportunities to see clearly; perhaps the only benefit would be to the educator who does not wish the traditional sense of power to shift to the learner.

Bettelheim (1989) argues that the therapeutic aspect of narratives allows children to confront and cope with negative experiences through the disguise of the characters in the narrative. If we are to grow in terms of our spirituality, then we must learn to really know ourselves, and have the courage to see things as they really are, even those unpleasant areas of our lives:

> Spirituality is not simply about prayer and worship; it is...about being involved in the world, not about ignoring it. Michael Ball. Bishop of Truro, maintains that trying to grow spiritually means that our hands are dirtier. That when we get to the Pearly Gates the first thing St Peter will look at will be our hands! We have to be involved in the ordinary and in the messy business of relating to and caring for others (Blackburn 1995: 3).

Andrew had no choice but to get involved in the messy business of life, but he seemed to find it therapeutic to write about his feelings and share them with the rest of the class. His words show a child trying to cope with adult responsibilities, yet still with a child's every day worries:

> My target is so my dad has a nice time in his new flat. So he doesn't get too worn out. My second target is that my mam is alright in the house by herself. My third target is that the under nines team win the league next season. I offer these up to God (Andy, aged seven).

Summary.

In the end, I agree with Sedgwick that all we can do to support and encourage children to learn about themselves is to care about them, in fact, to love them:

> **...to love children is to treat them with the respect that is realised in encouragement and faith...To love them is to watch what they do, be interested in it, to help them make it better (not sentimental or possessive - just behave so that children know you love and approve of them) (Sedgwick 1994: 150).**

We can love children by allowing them to see clearly, by caring for their needs, and in doing so learning about each other through a truthful and honest relationship. I feel that Andrew's letter to me on my last day as his teacher is testament to this learning:

> **Here's a note to cheer you up. I was crying in the morning with sad of leaving you. But I will send you letters, the phone will be ringing every second. I will miss you so much I'll die (Andy, aged seven).**

APPENDICES.

Appendix 1.

The Children Involved in the Research.

In the cases of the Year Two and Year Six classes, the information was gathered from urban primary schools where I was a student on teaching practice, and I was of course obliged to adopt existing school routines and regulations.

Appendix 2.

Child's Response to Guided Meditation.

We lay on the floor and closed our eyes and did meditation, and prayers and we sang hymns. In meditation I felt calm and relaxed as I floated back and forwards in a little boat but as it went backwards I went back in time that went all the way back to when Jesus was alive. I was standing in the water now. I saw John the Baptist baptise Jesus. I felt like Jesus had come into our hearts even more and then I opened my eyes and I felt so Happy and Forgiving. Then we sang a few songs and we loved it... I was so excited that I couldn't stop smiling. It was just so amazing...after that had finished we went to Durham Cathedral and we went to see St Cuthbert's grave. We said an Our Father and I thought that was the best part of the trip because we put a lot of courage into it, well at least I thought we did. I just felt so happy, it was just so wonderful to see something as great as this. After we had done the Our Father we got a candle off Miss Irving and we lit them. After that we knelt down on a cushion and we said a prayer in our heads and then we went home (Amy, aged eight).

Appendix 3.

Child's Thoughts on Forgiveness.

When we did meditation I was crying a little because I pictured myself getting baptised...We made a circle around the altar and said one word each of Our Father. I felt very happy at that moment when I said my word. I thought Jesus was at my side. I was ever so happy. We washed each other's hands to say that we were very sorry (Mark, aged seven).

Appendix 4.

Children's Responses to the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

The Younger Son

If I was the younger son I would feel ashamed of myself and very sorry. I would think that I wasn't wanted anymore. I would think that he had forgotten me. All I've got is me and my empty hands (Elizabeth, aged seven).

I've left home. I'm foolish to run away from a loving family. I've been greedy and stupid to have just left. But what will my father say? Will he throw me out? Will he be mad with me for I have nothing to give him? I wish I didn't leave (Danielle, aged eight).

I am foolish from my own self. I have nothing but pigs mix. I'll go back because I've got Nothing at all (Mark, aged seven).

I was afraid that you would say that I don't want you, you are not part of my family any more. I went back home over the hills and along the sandy and rocky road. My dad saw me. He dropped all the things he was doing and ran out to meet me again. My dad was so glad to see me that he gave me a hug and a kiss. I am glad to be back. I'm foolish and I'm sorry (Alex, aged eight).

The Father

I was so depressed that my son had taken half the money and left me. I LOVE you but you had to leave me. I kept looking for you over the hills wishing and hoping for you to come back HOME!! One day my son came back and admitted that he was a fool. He thought he didn't want to be part of the family any more. He was so happy he forgot all about the money (Danielle, aged eight).

If I was the dad I would be thinking what have I done for my son to go away. I would stand looking up at the hill to see if he was coming. I would cry myself to sleep. When he comes I would drop everything and run up to him, give him a huge hug and have a party. I would be so happy if only he would come home (Elizabeth, aged seven).

Come back, come back son. I've been waiting for a long time now for my son to come home. If my son were to come down the fields any minute now I'd hug him to bits. I wish he would come home wherever he is. I love you so much I really want you to come home please (Danielle, aged eight).

I can't keep my eyes off the path because I love him so much. I could squeeze him to bits id only he'd come back. It's terrible. What if he's dead, is he? Oh no, no, no, no (Mark, aged seven).

The Elder Son

The older son was as jealous as can be. I worked my guts out for you and what do I get. He always gets the attention. He always gets parties and rings and clothes and shoes. But the son realised he was with him all the time when he needed him. The son would never ever do that again (Danielle, aged eight).

If I was the older son I would feel very left out because I was the one who worked all my life. I was the one who helped my dad all the time he didn't. I would say, "That's not fair. I don't ask for my share of the money. I don't run away. He doesn't throw a party for me". But he hot to love me all the time when he wasn't there (Elizabeth, aged seven).

Lord, I feel jealous, left out and unloved. I have worked all the days of my life and I don't have any parties (Holly, aged seven).

Appendix 5.

Children's Thoughts on Making First Confession.

I can't wait for my First Confession because it will take the weight off my shoulders. As soon as I get out the door I'll be skipping all the way home (Richard, aged seven).

I cannot wait to make my First Confession because the weight will be lifted off my shoulders. I will be forgiven, I can't wait to say sorry to God because he will say that I shouldn't have done those nasty things but I am forgiven. Soon I will be making my First Confession. I need some HELP to get ready (Alex, aged eight).

I can't wait to make my First Confession because Jesus will forgive me. It will take the weight off my shoulders and I'll do cartwheels (Mark, aged seven).

I can't wait until my First Confession. It will get all the weight off my shoulders. It's going to be great. I feel really happy. It will be good to pass all my worries on to Father McKenna. I know I'll skip all the way home because I feel really happy. It will be fun (Carmel, aged eight).

Appendix 6.

Children's Responses to Truth-Bearing Stories.

On Sunday I told a lie. I wish I could rewind my brain to Sunday and change it. Sadly I can't. So I need the help of the LORD to try not to do it again (Helen, aged eight).

Lord every day I do something wrong. No matter how hard I try I can't change it. It is impossible. Lord everyday I pray to you I can change the past but I never can. Lord I desperately need your help, please help me Lord (Holly, aged seven).

Appendix 7.

Children's Reactions After Making First Holy Communion.

It's OUR time - it's great! (Andy, aged seven).

First when I went in I felt nervous and I was shaking. When it came to read my bit I didn't feel nervous. I was happy to see all the smiley faces looking at me. When I made my confession, it was brill. I felt special (Holly, aged seven).

I felt a bit worried but then it cleared all away. I was dead happy (Danielle, aged eight).

I felt really excited about it, I can hardly sleep...On Saturday morning my body will be shaking all over! I better not be not very well like my sister Hayley was on her First Communion (Alex, aged eight).

I'm looking forward to my First Holy Communion. I've done jobs to get prepared for the big day. I've changed Shannon's nappy, helped cut the grass, tidied the living room and entertained my little cousins. I say my prayers every night before I go to bed. I'm all excited, it is only one more day to go (Mark, aged seven).

Appendix 8.

Child's Thoughts About Friendship.

He is a caring person.
He is happy, loving and has a great sense of humour and is clever.
He is grateful for what he gets and is good at singing.
He is full of joy and life.
He is my bestest friend.
His name is Mark (Danielle, aged eight).

Appendix 9.

Child's Response to "Take Up Your Cross and Follow Me".

Take up your cross and follow me means follow Jesus. Don't let people put you off just because you're a Christian. If you want to follow Jesus then you have to stand up for yourself and be brave (Alex, aged eight).

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