

by Dr. Richard House

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*'...trailing clouds of glory do we come...Heaven lies about us in our infancy.'* ~ William Wordsworth

*'Let children cast off their clouds of glory at their own pace.'* ~ Libby Purves

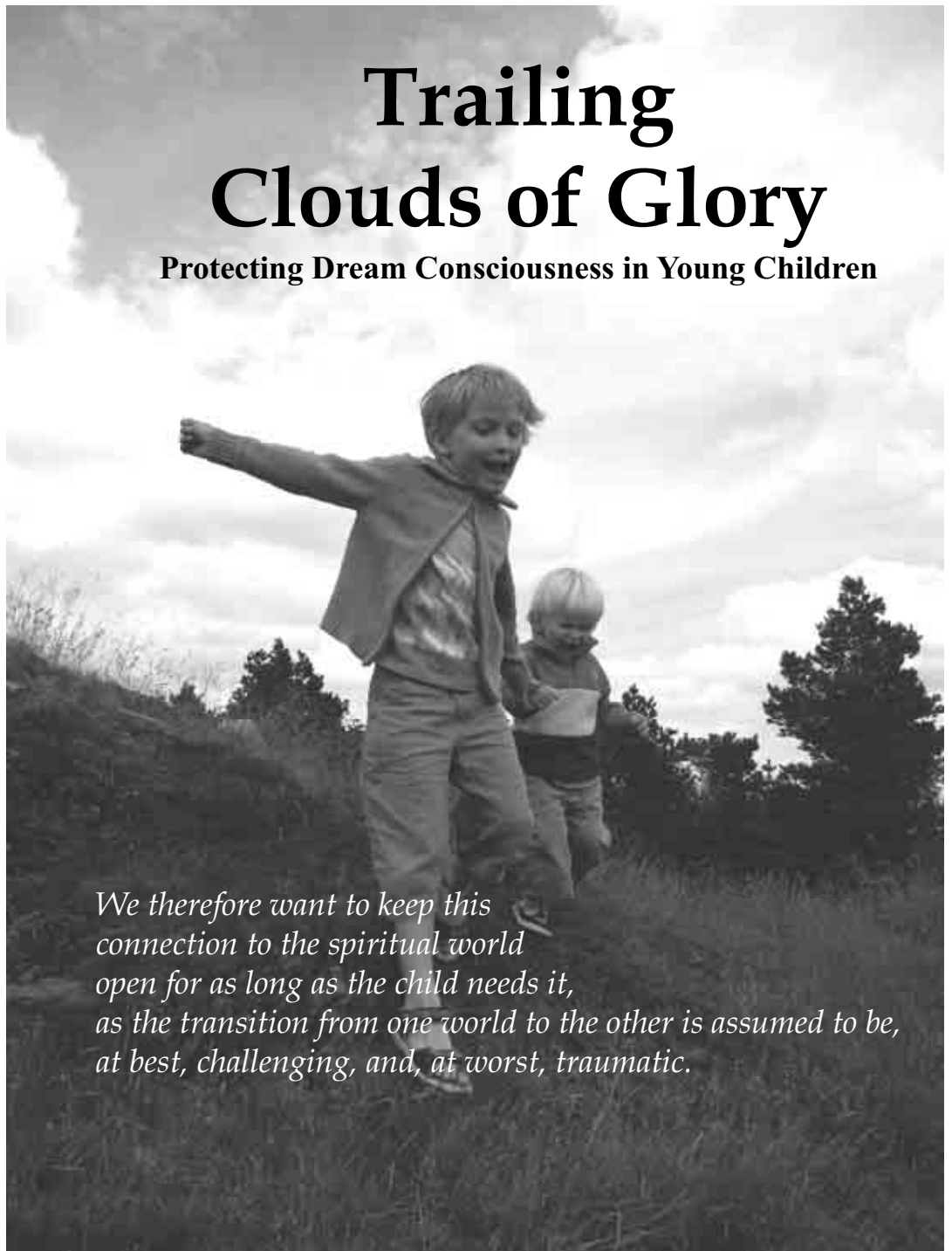
This article is devoted to young children's so-called 'dream consciousness', and how vital it is that we nourish and enable it, rather than extinguish it through our own ignorance, unworked-through personal issues, or ideological beliefs. There is a great deal of existing literature on children's innate spirituality ~ but interesting and relevant though that literature is, it's not my intention to focus on it directly here. Rather, my more narrow aim is to look at the phenomenon of the young child's consciousness, and how it is decisively different from adult consciousness. For this difference has enormous implications to how we parent and educate our young children ~ for both the kinds of home environments we create for them, and the kinds of care and educational experiences to which we expose them.

In Steiner education, we often speak of the importance of not 'waking children up' prematurely, and inappropriately, into adult-like consciousness. Sherrie Bintein puts it thus: *'The young child is not an unfinished adult; the child has a different state of consciousness, which allows her to be nearer to spiritual reality than an adult... It is difficult today for adults not to relate with children as little adults.'* Signs are certainly present all around us of adult-driven intellectual agendas, and a hyper-active, materialistic culture impinging ever more relentlessly on the lives of children at ever younger ages. As Mary Truilzi writes (quoted by Dot Male), *'In my work with parents and infants I have observed that already in the first months of life, the cultural attack on the very young child is immense.'*

Rudolf Steiner was alluding to such dangers some eighty-five years ago. In a lecture given in Torquay in 1924, shortly before his death, he said, *'If something takes place in the child's environment..., the whole child will have an internalised picture of [it]... The results of [such an] implanted tendency in the early years will then remain throughout the rest of the child's life... (E)verything that you do yourself passes over into the children and makes its way into them.'* (emphasis added) It follows from this that the environments and experiences to which we expose our young children, will have a major

# Trailing Clouds of Glory

Protecting Dream Consciousness in Young Children



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impact on their whole being ~ physically, emotionally, and spiritually. So with modern culture's assaults upon young children becoming ever more strident and difficult to avoid, key questions must be faced about just how we might protect our young children from these toxic forces.

Against this disquieting cultural backdrop, it is little wonder that mental-health problems and children's so-called 'behavioural disorders' seem to be at record levels, and that the anxiety-driven, hot-housing atmosphere of mainstream educational settings and hyper-parenting practices are now demonstrably leading to severe psychological and emotional difficulties for many children. It is modern society's intrusion into, and violent attack upon, young children's naturally occurring dream consciousness that is a major causative factor in these mounting symptoms of malaise.

## The Nature of Dream or Participative Consciousness

For Rudolf Steiner and other holistic educationalists, the dream consciousness of the young child refers to a state of openness and an awareness of the invisible world around the child and in Nature. Such a worldview maintains that the child still has a very strong connection with the spiritual world from which she has come. The young child's natural state is not to be self-conscious, and not to be aware of being separate from the world around him; rather, he is fully and unselfconsciously immersed in what is sometimes called participative consciousness. The child also lives primarily in his unconscious 'will' activities during the first seven years, and for this reason, it goes against the natural grain of the child's being, and is therefore *developmentally inappropriate*, to make the child self-conscious and self-aware of her own learning, as is commonly done in mainstream educational and care settings.

Further, *incarnation* is seen as a continuous process of gradually awakening consciousness in the Earthly realm. It is important that this process of developing consciousness occurs gradually, as everything on Earth is very different compared to the spiritual world. We therefore want to keep this connection to the spiritual world open for as long as the child needs it, as the transition from one world to the other is assumed to be, at best, challenging, and, at worst, traumatic. Thus, the young child is not separated from the physical world around him: rather, he experiences himself united with both the spiritual and physical worlds. The young child needs to negotiate experientially the previous stages of humankind's evolving consciousness before he is able and ready to develop his own self-consciousness.

If we accept this worldview, then it should be clear that to relate to, and think about, the young child in a non-spiritual, materialistic way is to do a particularly cruel violence to the soul and very being of the child. In Steiner and others' so-called recapitulationist cosmology, this state of dream consciousness is a reflection of a stage of consciousness through which humankind has also had to develop. Primitive people today can also be argued to possess a kind of dream consciousness, and as Sherrie Bintein points out, we can find similar states of consciousness in adults as they experience art and religion. In addition, the more self-conscious a young child's state of being, the more difficult it is to incarnate healthily into the physical body.

In Steiner early-childhood settings (with which I am familiar as a Steiner early years teacher), what Rudolf Steiner called the intangibles or imponderables of a learning experience (which mainstream materialistic education is rapidly and tragically losing touch with) are placed at the forefront ~ with delicate qualities like subtlety, presence, and ways of being, seen as far more important at this age than are didactic instruction and the imposition of developmentally inappropriate, adult-centric learning agendas which interfere with, and subvert, the child's own natural developmental needs and dream-like consciousness.

For through traditional mainstream teaching approaches to instruction and direction, children are *prematurely and inappropriately* awakened into self-consciousness.

At this tender young age, the child is busy developing his unconscious 'will' forces and physical body in what Steiner called a 'bodily religious' way ~ to quote Sherrie Bintein again, '*bodily religion*' refers to '*a state of being connected with the plant, animal, human and spiritual world around. There are no boundaries, there is only unity, oneness. The child lives in a*

*state of surrender to the other, in utter devotion, which could also be called religious trust.*' Thus, Steiner argued how crucial it is that young children do not divert their vital life forces into premature, adult-imposed intellectual activity and consciousness, when those forces should be being used in early childhood to develop a healthy physical body.

We do not therefore believe in giving young children lengthy verbal instructions or explanations about how to do something, or in giving them intrusive and patronising running commentaries telling them what they're doing, or instructing them on what things are called, and so on. Rather, the children *learn by 'doing'* and freely chosen *imitation*, with the construction of their experience being left to their own free imaginations, unintruded-upon, as far as possible, by an adult perceptual world which is qualitatively very different from their own.

We also passionately believe in the importance of *free play* ~ that is, play which is freely chosen and autonomous, rather than the fashionable, adult-led structured or directed play of the mainstream ~ which, of course, is not *truly authentic* play at all, in any meaningful sense. More generally, a number of key qualities typify the atmosphere and mood that is appropriate in



the home environment and the early-childhood setting, and which we believe nourish the young child in a way that is of inestimable importance in a world of increasingly frenetic activity, adult-oriented ways of being, and one-sidedly materialistic values and life-styles. The Steiner approach is just one way of attempting to cultivate and protect children's distinctive 'dream consciousness' and its associated closeness to the spiritual world, as set out in the following indications.

#### APPROACHES TO CULTIVATING AND PROTECTING DREAM CONSCIOUSNESS

- [ ] creating an environment of beauty, simplicity and truth, which cultivates reverence and trust, and reinforces the child's sense of unselfconscious participation in the world. This helps the child to gradually incarnate into her body, and to maintain her dream consciousness for as long as possible (quoting Sherrie Bintein)
- [ ] protecting the young child's vulnerable and still-developing senses
- [ ] giving precedence to an unhurried experience ~ which enables children's dream consciousness to flourish
- [ ] creating a nourishing and empowering 'transitional space' (to use Winnicott's helpful term)
- [ ] creating a mood of reverence, warmth and love
- [ ] modeling purposeful activity ~ e.g. shared craft-making, caring for the environment, etc.
- [ ] authentically cultivating feelings of awe and wonder so that the child's soul life is enriched, in turn helping to develop a reverence for life itself facilitating flowing *rhythm* (which unites spirit with matter, and allows the children to incarnate gradually into their physical bodies), repetition and order. Faithfully following the rhythm of the seasons and the festivals, for example, helps to cultivate children's sense of wonder, awe and reverence
- [ ] enabling free imaginative play ~ 'a sort of dream, and the dreaming is a manifestation of an artistic union with the world around the child' (quoting F. Hiebel)
- [ ] learning through freely chosen imitation (note that self-consciousness militates against healthy imitation)
- [ ] using appropriate gestures to speak to the dream consciousness of the child; we stimulate the imagination by creating inner pictures through the spoken word and gestures
- [ ] fairytales and enacted puppet shows which, again, meet the children in their dream consciousness. Story-telling strengthens the unconscious will of the young child, and listening to fairytales helps the child engage with change, enchantment and resolution, and the challenges life brings. 'Fairytales are about life with challenges to be faced, decisions to be taken, consequences to be born, which foster courage, and trust in the world. They take us into a magical world, which is full of spiritual beings. These are stories about the search for truth where good rules over evil' (Bintein). Fairytales originated in the 'childhood' of humanity, and so are rooted in another state of consciousness ~ a dream-like state of consciousness which existed before the awakening of the human intellect
- [ ] nursery rhymes, and music in the pentatonic, 'mood of the fifth', musical scale, with 'nursery rhymes reflecting the cosmic rhythms for the young child, re-establishing their connection with their cosmic origin' (Bintein). Pentatonic music is based on a five-tone system without a starting or ending base note, creating the feeling of never ending, and of anticipation of something to come.

Above: Tarka

Opposite page: Niall and Jonas

Authorities like Susan Isaacs, Donald Winnicott and Karl König also emphasise the crucial role of *fantasy* in children's experience. In their view, fantasy has a special place in infancy: as König writes in his book *The First Three Years of the Child*, 'Real experiences have their sources only in the child's fantasy... [T]he child can grasp his environment only as interpretation of his fantasy, and existence gains its true meaning and becomes experience in this way alone... Without [fantasy] all ideas stagnate... Concepts remain rigid and dead, sensations raw and sensuous.' Sherrie Bintein quotes Caroline von Heyderbrand, who links fantasy directly with the dream consciousness: 'The child experiences a kind of clairvoyance, which is bound up with the creative power of fantasy. The young child can reach the essential being of things because he lives in this dream conscious state.' (my italics)

I also agree wholeheartedly with Eva Frommer, when, writing of what she calls the child's 'time of magic and omnipotence' between three and six, she writes: 'The clumsy adult must be careful not to destroy this web of magic by stupid and tactless intervention... It is a world we adults have lost, and we can only regain understanding of it... by sympathetic intuitive insight and faithful non-interference' (my italics).

So what are the implications of these views for the way in which we create environments for our young children? First, the provision of *space* and *unhurried opportunity* are crucial, with opportunities for free, imaginative play to the forefront, and with adults intruding only to the absolutely minimal extent that is required by the specific situation. In terms of our personal development (which having children most definitely calls forth!), adults need to know their own 'inner child' and her/his needs very well, in order that they do not unconsciously 'act out' their own issues with their children. I believe that this is in fact what is often happening when adults *do* routinely and unawaresly over-intrude with adult-centric demands (and with policy-makers often actually advocating it!) into the worlds of the young children in their charge.

Another key issue is the *over-intellectualisation* that has tragically become routine practice in mainstream settings ~ as to *take children into reflective intellectual thinking is, by definition, the very antithesis of the kind of dream consciousness I discuss in this article*. In England's compulsory Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), for example, there is the very strong injunction to practitioners to ask young children questions in order to (I joke not) 'extend their thinking'. This is an extraordinary ~ and a quite terrifying ~ example of the way in which a waking-up, adult-consciousness ideology has infiltrated early-years settings, certainly in England (and, I suspect, further afield, too). Let's look briefly at a recently published academic paper, co-written by one of the chief movers behind England's EYFS and the famous EPPE research programme, Professor Iram Siraj-Blatchford with Laura Manni "Would you like to

tidy up now?" An analysis of adult questioning in the English Foundation Stage, *Early Years*, 28 (1), 2008, pp. 5-22). First, the whole paper is based on the tacit, unargued assumption that it is more appropriate to ask young children 'open' rather than 'closed' questions. From the perspective adopted in this article, the *very act* of asking young children any kind of question is itself thrown into severe question. 'Open' questions are, of course, widely viewed in *adult circles* (note) as being preferable to 'closed ones' ~ for example, within my own professional field of counselling and psychotherapy. Yet why uncritically assume that what is seen as being appropriate to adults is equally appropriate to young pre-school children? ~ unless, of course, one is assuming that the consciousness of both age groups (i.e. adults and pre-school children) is comparable and legitimately subject to the same treatment ~ which, I am arguing here, they most decidedly are not. And to add to the irony, if we accept for a moment that questions must be asked, then a very strong case could actually be made for 'closed' questions being more appropriate for young children than 'open' ones! ~ a counter-intuitive possibility that these researchers don't even begin to consider.

We also encounter another uncritically embraced ideology in this academic paper ~ this time regarding something called 'sustained shared thinking (SST)', which is, incidentally, also legally enshrined in England's EYFS framework. According to the Siraj-Blatchford and Manni, SST refers to '...practitioners supporting and challenging children's thinking by getting involved in the thinking process with them...; [and with adults] clarify[ing] ideas and ask[ing] open questions which... extends children's

Britain having the highest teenage pregnancy rate in Europe will not only wrench young children into adulthood all the more prematurely, but ironically, *it will likely have exactly the opposite effect of its professed intention*. Thus, we read that 'Children as young as seven will be taught the facts of life in compulsory sex education lessons. Pupils aged five will prepare for the classes by learning about body parts and sex differences. More explicit material will be covered if it is raised by the youngsters. Family campaigners are furious at the measures. However, ministers have yet to decide whether parents will be able to withdraw children from the classes, due to be introduced by 2010.' There is almost a wilful unwillingness to see that it is precisely the premature 'adulthood' of children that has led to this malaise, and such legislation will merely reinforce this toxic trend rather than reversing it.

Before concluding this article, I just want to 'pre-but' the most obvious objection to the arguments in this article ~ that is, that if it is simply wrong that children are in any sense 'spiritual' beings, then all of the practices and considerations discussed here are irrelevant and wrong-headed. There is a fundamental logical problem with such a critique, and it is this: in terms of the 'truth criteria' beloved of people making this kind of a-spiritual argument, it is simply impossible to say who is right about children's alleged innate spirituality and developmentally natural dream consciousness. And given this unavoidable uncertainty, the key question then becomes, which position is likely to generate more net damage to children and their development: assuming that children live in a spiritual dream consciousness when in reality they don't; or

assuming that they don't, when they really do? I believe that any dispassionate commentator would agree that, all other things being equal, it is potentially far more harmful to treat a spiritual being in a thoroughgoing non-spiritual way, than it is to assume children's innate spirituality when in reality such assumed spirituality is a

fiction. In his important book *The Secret Spiritual World of Children*, Tobin Hart writes that 'children's spiritual experiences have often been misunderstood: dismissed as fantasy, labeled as pathology, or feared by a parent, teacher, or therapist who has no map for understanding them. Ultimately, this attitude leads to repressing, rather than refining, the child's spiritual nature.' Most decisively, assuming the veracity of children's spirituality leads to all kinds of decisions about how we treat and relate with children that pretty much everyone would agree are nourishing and empowering, whether we be militant atheists or not! So when taking on the objectors on their own kind of rational ground, that ultimately we can't prove in an empirical scientific sense whether children possess innate spiritual dream consciousness or not, in my view the case for assuming children's innately spiritual-like consciousness becomes quite overwhelming.

**In terms of our own personal development... adults need to know their own 'inner child' and her/his needs very well, in order that they do not unconsciously 'act out' their own issues with their children.**

*thinking and helps them to make connections to learning'* (ibid., p. 15, my italics). Again, we can see in this the advocacy of early-years practices which are *guaranteed* to wrench young children out of the kind of dream consciousness discussed in this article. It's not so much that the authors are arguing this case that is objectionable, but rather, that they show no awareness of the implications of their position, and make no attempt to engage in the kind of complex arguing-through that would be needed to support it. This in turn illustrates all too graphically the extent to which the 'ideology of modernity', and materialistic thinking more generally, have come to dominate mainstream thinking in the early-childhood realm where they are singularly inappropriate.

The deeply disturbing trend towards waking young children up prematurely took a dramatic new turn recently with the British government announcing that sex education lessons for seven years olds were due to become compulsory in the schooling system. This panic response to

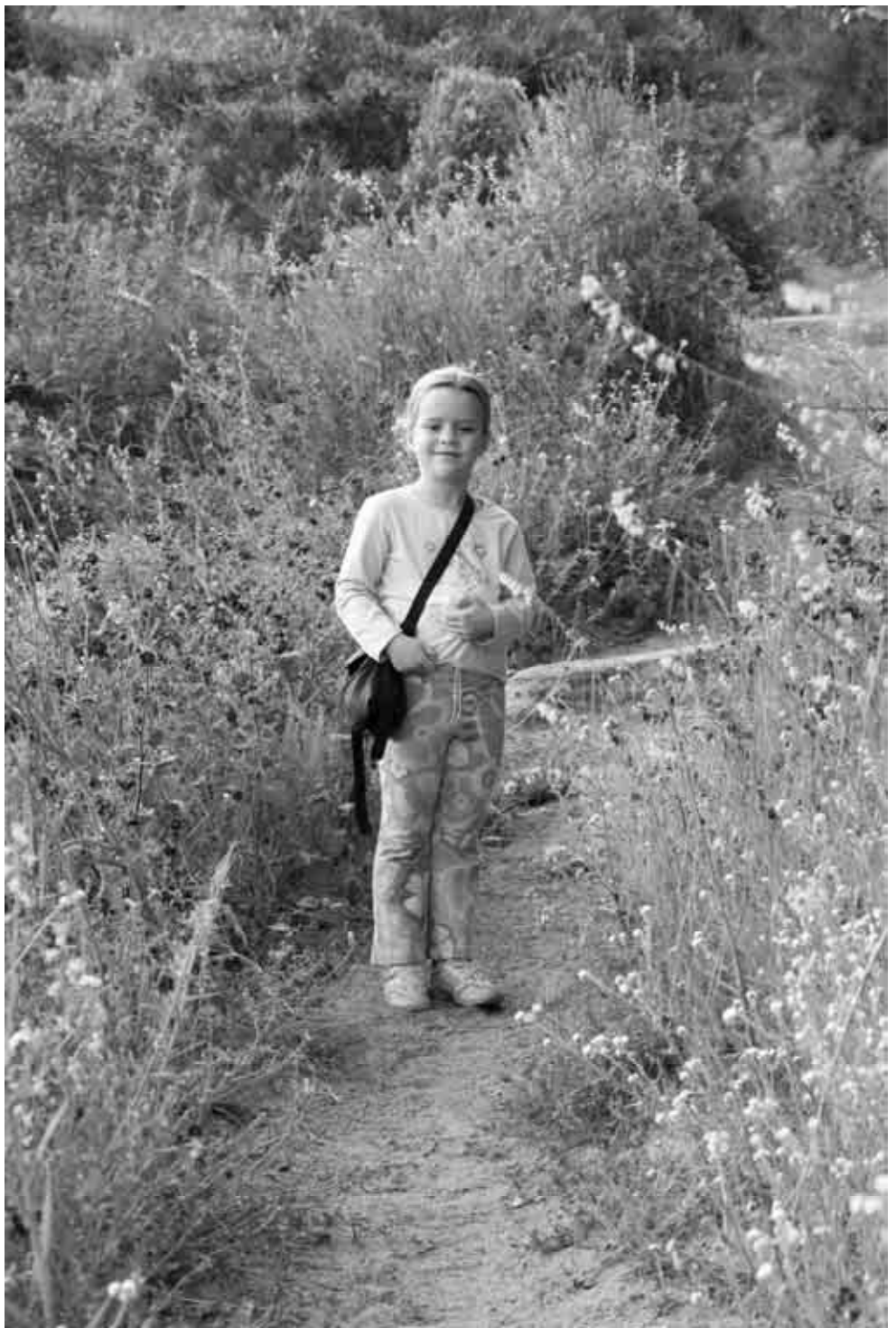
## Conclusions and Implications

'...the time of awakening is also beautiful – unless we are called awake too soon'.

Friedrich Holderlin's 'Hyperion' (transl. by Anna Meuss)

In her excellent article (listed below), Rahima Baldwin Dancy writes that 'the majority of programs and influences acting on the child today... try to prematurely "awaken" the child to the adult conceptions of time, space and cognitive thought'. Precisely. And that is why many holistic educators, including the 'Open EYE' campaign in England, are actively campaigning against the kind of mainstream educational and care environments that are being foisted onto young children today (and in the scandalous case of England, with full legal compulsion of the state via the EYFS). As Rahima points out, such approaches ~ albeit with the best of intentions ~ fundamentally misunderstand young children's need for space, time, reverie, and, above all, their need for protection from the crass materialistic world and the assaults it routinely makes on young children's delicate and developing senses and wider experience. Here is yet another example of the way in which the perennial and age-old intuitive wisdoms of parenting and child-rearing seem to have been substantially lost in the modern world, having been usurped by an arrogant blundering modernity, which casts young children in the mould of mini-adults, and hyperactively attempts to accelerate their development in what is an inappropriate and highly damaging way. Baldwin Dancy again: 'Just as the child's body does not have the same proportions as the adult's, the child's consciousness is not that of a "little adult".'

As the great scientist and sage, Albert Einstein, variously said: 'The true sign of intelligence is not knowledge but *imagination*... Imagination is more important than knowledge... The gift of fantasy has meant more to me than any talent for abstract, positive thinking. He who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead; his eyes are closed... Never lose a holy curiosity... The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious... The pursuit of truth and beauty is a sphere of activity in which we are permitted to remain children all our lives.' Amen...



Ariel, photographed by Cosibella Cristenas

## Further Reading

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