

# Reawakening the inner child

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Can we imagine a God who sings a happy song over us, a God who dances with shouts of joy? Could our God be the one who laughs and enjoys life? Scripture tells us that God's playground is creation and the people who dwell in it. God enjoys this beauty, sees that it is good, and takes great delight in all that is. The Spirit of God dances among us, calls to us to appreciate and enjoy life, and invites us to participate in the divine song that makes melody in the heart of creation.



This God of play created life “to the joyful concert of the morning stars” (Job 38:6-7) and did so with Holy Wisdom “ever at play... at play everywhere on God's earth” (Proverbs 8:30-31). The God of vibrancy constantly assures the people: “I shall be joyful ... I shall rejoice in my people” (Isaiah 65:19) and sends an envoy whose central message is to “become like little children” in order to enter into the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 18:3).

There is gusto, passion, and enthusiasm in this dimension of God, a sense of awe, wonder and delight. The joyful, wondering side of God is evident in both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, although churches may be more likely to present God as a serious, somber person who means business. Some people frown upon any sort of revelry in church services. They look askance upon reverent, serious dance as part of worship. There seems to be little encouragement for awe, wonder, laughter and passion for life.

Why do so many deny or suppress the God of dance and song, of celebration and enthusiasm? Perhaps because adults often lose a part of themselves. Their inner child has been forgotten or pushed aside for adult business and busyness. Sometimes, too, this inner child has been terribly wounded early in life, crushed by adults who abused the spirit or body. The child may have gone into hiding or fled into responsibility.

Who is our inner child and how does our inner child respond to life? This is the part of us with which we were born – trusting, wondering individuals. The natural child of our very young days took great delight in life, discovering everything for the first time, being full of awe at the most ordinary things of life. The natural inner child responds spontaneously to people and situations.

Emotions come forth easily. This trusting, enthusiastic child is amazed at life and greets the world with a clear gaze of utmost integrity.

As we grow older, this part of ourselves gets lost. Adults begin to tell us how we ought to think and act. While children need to learn appropriate boundaries for their behavior and to develop social skills, too often the wonder and joy of life is lost in the process of learning how to grow up and adapt. Many times a child's words and behavior are judged according to the way they fit into an adult's agenda. Children learn to adapt to situations by keeping their mouths shut, by not talking or laughing or asking questions. They learn to worry about what others will think, to fear the consequences of not doing the proper thing, and to be terrified of failure.

The disciples reflected this adult response to the inner child when they tried to chase away children being brought to Jesus for a blessing. The disciples couldn't be bothered with children. They interrupted the day's schedule. The disciples scolded those who were bringing children. When Jesus saw this he was indignant and said to them: "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs" (Mark 10:13-16). Jesus was free enough to accept the young children with their eyes of wonder, giggles of shyness, and unabashed openness. He welcomed them into his life, altered his schedule for them, and told the disciples that their own spirits needed to be like children's in order to enter into God's kingdom.

When I reflect upon my early years growing up on a farm in rural Iowa, I often recall the grove of trees west of the house. Those trees seemed like a huge forest to me. The thickly leafed summer branches hid much of the sun, and the wild brambles of tall weeds and chokeberry and elderberry saplings certainly gave the grove a jungle effect. I remember it as a safe place. I never worried about insects or animals. I enjoyed the dampness and darkness. It was a place of joy and mystery. It was the playhouse of my older sister and myself. We would spend hours among the trees making up games, playing house, baking mud pies, telling wild stories – and, of course, fighting with each other.

When I used to think about those days I would sadly wonder where I left that happy, spontaneous child. My sophisticated, hectic adult world seldom felt like a playhouse amid the trees on a summer day. I rarely knew that carefree inner joy I had as a child.

How did I lose that connection? School knocked it out of me with its rules, laws and regulations. Because I was a creative child I found the unwise discipline of my elementary school years very painful. I know, too, that my German upbringing with its strong emphasis on work and responsibility contributed to my loss. My religious life training was oriented toward doing and being responsible. No one ever encouraged me to be spontaneous, to take time to wonder or to let myself be unproductive. Even prayer was supposed to produce something.

Reading children's books has helped my inner child to awaken. Rediscovering my five external senses has also nurtured my inner child. When I made a five day retreat in the foothills of the Rockies, my director recognized my need to recover my inner child, so each day she asked me to take one of my five senses and spend the entire day exploring it and coming to appreciate its value in my life. I remember the day of smell most of all. I never gave much thought to that sense until then. I was astounded by all the odors I experienced as I walked the trails, ate my lunch, and sat in stillness under the pine trees.

I believe that rediscovering our inner child can have a significant impact on our spiritual life. This inner ability to wonder and to be in awe helps us to become contemplative. Contemplation is the prayer of quiet in which we are at home with God. We do not need words. We can be content simply to look upon God and to have God look upon us with love. Contemplation is the prayer of being in God's presence.

Adults who find their lost inner child carry more happy songs in their hearts. They wake up each day feeling deeply grateful for the gift of life. Their days are less frantic and fretful because their hearts can trust and hope. They do not let a day go by without appreciating something they might easily take for granted. The adult who rediscovers the inner child learns "what is to be taken seriously and laughs at the rest" (Herman Hesse). This creates a deeper harmony of the spirit and oneness with the Creator.

From *May I Have This Dance? An Invitation to Faithful Prayer Throughout the Year* by Joyce Rupp

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**Prayer action suggestion:**

Do the same exercise that Sister Joyce did on her retreat: take each of your five senses and spend an entire day exploring it and coming to appreciate its value in your life. Now, live differently.

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