

DEEP DOWN AND ALL AROUND

facilitating conversations with the sacred through multi-sensory engagements

Rev. Christine Gilbert

It was early in the Season of Advent and I was rostered to lead the multi-age children's group that met during worship at the Douglas Congregational United Church of Christ in my then hometown of Saugatuck Michigan. Much of the session is now sketchy in my mind, but I remember well the responses of the children during the opening activity from the *Seasons of the Spirit* material.

With the intention of connecting the session's theme with our everyday lives, we were invited to place a glass bead into a jar and name someone who might be sad at this time. Such a seemingly serious activity had the potential to go pear-shaped given the variety of ages and maturity levels within our group, but I was delighted to see all of the children participate willingly and with a great sense of sacredness. I watched as one-at-a-time children took a bead from the basket and drew on stories from their families, neighbourhoods, school community, and vague recollections of news items to create a kind of prayer with their simple words and gestures. The activity continued for several minutes with each child sharing on more than one occasion.

The idea for this activity flows from an application of Dr. Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences.¹ It is not my intention to give a detailed account of Gardner's theory, nor do I assume to be an expert on his or any other system of education. But I do seek to highlight the basic principles of Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences and recognise his work as the starting point of what I refer to as multi-sensory engagements of faith.

In short, Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences holds that learning does not occur through a single medium for every student. Rather, a variety of intelligences – or modes of learning – exist, and every person's learning style is comprised of a unique combination of these intelligences. In other words, some modes are more effective at helping individuals to learn than others. The most recent list of intelligences includes visual-spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, linguistic, logical-mathematical, and nature. (See the end of this paper for a basic multiple intelligences questionnaire.)

Anyone who has had the experience of struggling to understand a particular concept only to have the light bulb go on after the same concept is introduced in a different way, will know first-hand the relevance of Gardner's work. Yet, sadly, when it comes to nurturing our spirituality – and here I have in mind practices such as worship and faith formation – we rarely give consideration to the mode. Instead, one or two intelligences are traditionally employed which are found in familiar elements such as singing, spoken prayers, scripture reading and sermonizing. In faith formation settings, more creative activities might connect marginally with the theme or they are used for entertainment value only.

¹ See for example Gardner, Howard, *Frames of Mind* (New York, New York: Basic Books, 1983, 2004, 2011).

These habitual default positions unintentionally limit the possibility of practices of faith that are enlivening for everyone. My own father, for example, was a regular attender of Sunday morning worship but his illiteracy made it impossible for him to sing hymns or read liturgy meaning his participation was limited. Consequently communal practices were not a primary avenue for spiritual growth nor were they a place to express his faith with others.

More positively, perhaps, are the times when those who might otherwise seem indifferent come alive when their learning style is employed. How well I remember my then eleven-year-old son (a kinesthetic learner) standing in the aisle of the church in order to watch as Julie Perrin suggested simple movements to accompany her song “For You, Deep Stillness.” Though Luke usually preferred to make paper airplanes out of the order of service, he unreservedly leapt at the chance to participate soul *and* body for a change.

Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences has the potential to open new channels for Christian discipleship. As such, those who plan and facilitate such practices do well to put thought into the *form* of worship and faith formation sessions not just their content. For example, might an art image be used to encourage a reflective time of prayer? Could an impromptu drama help participants hear a familiar story in a new way? Might people be invited to respond to a scripture reading with a symbolic action that enables a deep and personal encounter? How can the space setting usher people into a particular season?

HAVING A GO

Consider one of the readings from the first week in the Season of Advent. How might this reading be engaged in worship and/or faith formation settings using Howard Gardner’s multiple intelligences as a guide? (eg. visual-spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, linguistic, logical-mathematical, nature)

Jeremiah 33:14–16

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah.

In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.

In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: “The LORD is our righteousness.”

DEEP DOWN AND ALL AROUND

As someone who has both benefited from the use of multi-sensory engagements and is a facilitator of them, I have come to understand that worship and faith formation are not primarily arenas for learning but *encounter*. In other words, my intention is not to impart particular doctrines, behaviours and teachings but to facilitate an encounter with the Holy

One. Of course there will always be a need to nurture biblical literacy, share the traditions and teachings of the Christian faith, and gently promote an agreed upon ethos and character among members of a community. But I would suggest that such things are not at the heart of an invigorated faith and therefore should not be at the centre of our practice. In *The Wisdom Jesus*, Cynthia Bourgeault makes this observation:

In the gospels, all the people who encountered Jesus only by hearsay, by what somebody else believed about him, by what they'd been told, by what they hoped to get out of him: all those people left. They still leave today. The ones that remained—and still remain—are the ones who have met him in the moment: in the instantaneous, mutual recognition of hearts and in the ultimate energy that is always pouring forth from this encounter. It is indeed the wellspring.²

Ideally, then, worship and faith formation hold the promise of genuine encounter with the Divine. Through the elements of worship and the activities of a faith formation session, we hope to discover the wellspring of Christ's Spirit deep down and all around. Our encounters with this Spirit help our faith to flourish, encourage loving actions in daily life, and nurture authentic Christian community.

Central to this perspective and reflected in the phrase "deep down and all around," is a theology of the incarnation that sees the potential for holiness to be found in the ordinary stuff of life. Jesus' incarnation opened the possibility for us to catch a glimpse of the force of spirit within all matter, and thus, all things have the ability to manifest something of the Sacred. As Madeleine L'Engle encouraged, "There is nothing so secular that it cannot be sacred, and that is one of the deepest messages of the incarnation."³

In contrast to a more prosaic and prescriptive practice of faith that primarily seeks to provide explanation or impart knowledge, multi-sensory engagements use physical objects to facilitate an internal conversation with the Holy Muse. Light, shadow and figures, melody, rhythm and lyric, textures, dreams and wisdom arise from deep, pre-cognitive places – places that are in touch with the Source of All Life – and are the forms in which Spirit can reside and speak to those who have eyes to see and ears to hear.

As Amos Wilder rightly, I think, observes, "When imagination fails doctrines become ossified, witness and proclamation wooden, doxologies and litanies empty, consolation hollow, and ethics legalistic. ...Then that which once gave life begins to lull and finally to suffocate us."⁴ Thankfully the in-breaking one is always seeking new avenues for fresh revelation in the world. Things such as crayons, glue sticks, stones, and tealights take us to places we simply cannot go with cognition alone.

² Bourgeault, Cynthia *The Wisdom Jesus* (Boston, Massachusetts: Shambhala Publications, 2008).

³ L'Engle, Madeleine, *Walking On Water: Reflections On Faith and Art* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crosswicks, 1980).

⁴ Wilder, Amos, *Theopotic: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 1976), 2.

FOR REFLECTION

What piece of visual art or selection of music best reflects your journey of faith at this time? Explain your choice as best as you are able. How does this image or song reflect growth and change over the years?

WONDER AND MYSTERY IN FAITH

My exploration of multi-sensory engagements has brought to the surface significant differences that exist within Christian community regarding the nature of faith and the role of faith practices themselves. Is worship and faith formation primarily concerned with maintaining and preserving certain norms and doctrines expressed in and through religious traditions? Or does faith seek to be nourished by its practices in a way that often liberates it *from* religion and its structures, and is thereby always in a state of growth and change? For an individual or community that holds the first perspective, even the most creative and accessible activity is likely to fall flat. Therefore an essential component to this model of faith practice is an open heart that is free of fear and willing to take risks. Such freedom is possible when the participant trusts the facilitator, the community, and ultimately the Holy Guide.

In this regard, I believe Brazilian philosopher Rubem Alves offers an image that is helpful:

I am a psychoanalyst. In my office I have two pictures. One of them is a luminous landscape, with bright colours, red poppies on a green prairie, and at the end blue mountains touching the skies. When people see it for the first time they usually say the same words:

‘How beautiful it is!’

Clarity says everything which is to be said. The conversation is brought to an end. The soul is possessed by ten thousand things.

The other is a dark and deep forest, hazy shapes, indefinite trees, a lonely trail which disappears in an eerie atmosphere of diffuse mist. Everything suggests mist-eerie... When people see it they stop: they do not know what to say. But after some moments of indecision, the same question:

‘I wonder... What is it which is hidden by the mist, behind the trees, in the dark?’⁵

Personally, I am most interested in living and encouraging spirituality that is more like the misty trees alluded to by Alves. To this end, I believe multi-sensory encounters bring to faith practice the phrase, “I wonder...” – a necessary ingredient in our conversation with the Spirit who is in the mist and behind the darkened trees.

⁵ Alves, Rubem, *The Poet, The Warrior, The Prophet* (London: SCM Press, 1990), 32.

Far from being iconoclastic or tearing down of religious tradition, multi-sensory practices allow us to return to the same scripture readings, sacraments, seasons in the church year again and again with the possibility of receiving new insights and inspiration each time. For finally, the allusive nature of the Divine and the open-ended quality of multi-sensory engagements enable the ceaseless exploration of T. S. Eliot in which we are able to “arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.”⁶

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⁶ Eliot, T. S. “Little Gidding”

BASIC QUESTIONNAIRE TO DISCOVER PREFERRED LEARNING STYLES

Verbal/Linguistic

- I enjoy telling and hearing stories
- I have a good memory for trivia
- I enjoy word games (Scrabble, crosswords)
- I read books for fun
- I like talking and writing about my ideas
- If I have to memorize something I create a rhyme or saying to help me remember
- If something breaks I read the instruction book first
- For a group presentation I prefer to put together a speech or oral presentation

Visual/Spatial Intelligence

- I prefer a map to written instructions
- I daydream a lot
- I enjoy hobbies such as photography
- I like to draw and create
- If I have to memorize something I draw a diagram to help me remember
- I like to doodle on paper whenever I can
- In a magazine, I prefer looking at the pictures rather than reading the text
- If something breaks I tend to study the diagram of how it works
- For a group presentation I prefer to create something artistic

Bodily/Kinesthetic Intelligence

- I like to play sports
- I enjoy activities such as woodworking, sewing and building models
- When looking at things, I like touching them
- I have trouble sitting still for any length of time
- I use a lot of body movements when talking
- If I have to memorize something I write it out a number of times until I know it
- I tend to tap my fingers or play with my pencil at work/school
- If something breaks I tend to play with the pieces to try to fit them together
- For a group presentation I prefer to get people moving around

Musical/Rhythmic Intelligence

- I enjoy listening to CD's and the radio
- I tend to hum to myself when working
- I like to sing
- I play a musical instrument
- I like to have music playing when I work
- If I have to memorize something I try to create a rhyme about the event
- I can remember the melodies of many songs
- If something breaks and won't work I tend to tap my fingers to a beat while I figure it out
- For a group presentation I have been known to use music

Intrapersonal Intelligence

- I like to work alone
- I like to keep a journal
- I like myself (most of the time)
- I don't like crowds
- I know my strengths and weaknesses
- I find that I am strong-willed, independent and don't follow the crowd
- If I have to memorize something I tend to close my eyes and feel the situation
- If something breaks I wonder if it's worth fixing up
- For a group presentation I like to contribute something that is uniquely mine, often based on how I feel

Interpersonal Intelligence

- I get along well with others
- I like to belong to clubs and organizations
- I have several close friends
- I like helping to teach others
- I like working with others in groups
- Friends ask my advice because I seem to be a natural leader
- If I have to memorize something I ask someone to quiz me to see if I know it
- If something breaks I try to find someone who can help me
- for a group presentation I like to organize participants to get involved

