

Chapter one of *Gateways to Spirituality: Pre-school through Grade Twelve*(ed .Peter Cobb, 2005) by Catherine Powell

Pre-School Spirituality

Four-year-old Paul sat at the art table in our after-school program. He worked quietly, making a paper chain. Though his work did not seem at all responsive to the day's lesson on prayer, we adults left him to it. At the end of the afternoon, we called all the children to our regular ending time of prayer and song. Several children brought things they had made or symbols from throughout the room to be focal points for our prayer: a drawing, a statue, a globe. Paul dragged over his long paper chain. "Uh-oh," I thought, ready for trouble as other children turned interestedly toward him. But Paul took the chain directly to the globe. As he wrapped it around and around, we saw that he had stamped a heart on every link. He sat down quietly and smiled as we sang the children's favorite song, "There's enough love to go all around the world..." When the other children were leaving, Paul took me by the hand and led me back over to our prayer area. He stuck his finger between layers of paper chain and pointed to a spot on the globe. "This is where we are," he told me. Then he moved his finger around to the other side of the earth. "This," he said, "is where my father is." His mother, when she picked him up, confirmed that his father was on a business trip to China.

Preschool children have spiritual lives. They do not depend on us to give them spirituality. In fact, they have important spiritual capacities rarely found in adults. We adults, especially parents and teachers, need to recognize, protect, and develop these capacities of the children in our care. Sofia Cavalletti in her book *The Religious Potential of the Child* invites us to explore children's innate spiritual characteristics, including their ability to be absorbed in the moment, their capacity for wonder, and their openness to love.

Preschool children have their own sense of time. A little girl might stay absolutely still for half an hour, squatting by a line of ants, absorbed in their journey. A little boy might be sent to the sink to wash up for dinner and be found there fifteen minutes later, still rubbing soapy circles on his hands. From an adult point of view, this absorption in the moment can be a problem. "Sense of time!" we might say. "They have no sense of time!" But from a spiritual point of view, they have a wonderful sense of time. They have the ability to be absorbed in the moment. Adult practitioners of many religions spend hours and even years learning to be absorbed in the moment; young children do it easily, and invite us to join them. This ability includes both full awareness the reality at hand and a sense of timelessness.