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Design by Elaine Keating

Introduction

This little booklet is designed to accompany the CD Meditation with Children: Songs and Reflections by Alana Levandoski from Canada and Noel Keating from Ireland. The album features beautiful songs and chants by Alana which illuminate how children experience the deep inner fruits of meditation. Each song is accompanied by a brief spoken piece by Noel whose book *Meditation with Children: A Resource for Teachers and Parents* (Dublin: Veritas, 2017) was the inspiration for the album. This booklet contains the lyrics of each song, the spoken word accompanying it, a short commentary which may be used to engage with children about the depth of their experience in meditation and the sheet music in each case.

While the most important thing about meditation is the practice itself, it is important also to create opportunities to talk with children about their experience of the practice; to discuss with them how sitting in stillness and silence helps us to discover who we really are, to discover the Spirit deep within. For religious education to contribute in a meaningful way to children's spiritual growth requires an opportunity for children to share their own stories. A number of children in Noel Keating's research expressed their delight at having an opportunity to speak with him about meditation 'because there was no one else to speak to about it'. They were pleased to have the chance to talk about it 'with someone who would take it seriously'. This suggests the importance of engaging with children about their experience of meditation, its deep inner fruits, the spiritual nature of the experience and how their spirituality is nurtured through the practice. Such opportunities enable their spiritual experience to be affirmed, helping them to appropriate for themselves that which cannot easily be expressed in words and giving them confidence in the truth of their own inner wisdom. Of course, any such conversations will need to be in language appropriate to their age and cognitive development and would need to be informed by an understanding of the nature of the spirituality of children, in particular its non-verbal expression.

These songs were created to do just that. Using Noel's book, Alana reflected on what the children had to say about their experience and crafted these songs to capture in simple chants and verses the essence of what they had discovered for themselves through their meditation in school and at home. The intention behind the CD and this booklet is to create a way for teachers and parents to chat with the children meaningfully about their experience. We created a CD of ten songs to match the ten months of the typical school year of primary-school children. We suggest that, in the first instance, in addition to meditating with the children at least twice each week as a class-group – ideally on a whole-school basis or as often as feasible with a parish group – it will be helpful to set aside a short period just once each month to listen to one of the songs and to explore what the words mean to the children in light of their own experience. Each song is accompanied by a brief commentary from which teachers parents and catechists can draw inspiration. In the longer term it is hoped that the accompanying sheet music will be used to teach the songs to the children and to have the whole school community give voice to them in song at school assemblies or parish services. As the children sing the words themselves, their meaning deepens and

becomes embodied, helping them to appreciate the validity and depth of their own spiritual experience. In his book Noel also suggests two other ways of engaging with children about meditation.

While it is important to create opportunities for children to speak about their experience, they should never be put under pressure to do so. Because serious discussion of spiritual experiences is not common in daily conversation, children often feel a fear of ridicule or dismissal, and for that reason retreat into silence. The children in Noel's study confirmed that they were not in the habit of speaking to one another about meditation and some were reluctant to do so. Sometimes the reason offered was very straightforward as, for example, when Frances (11) commented simply, 'It's not really one of those things that crops up in conversation.' Others, however, expressed the view that it was a deliberate choice not to talk about it. Pamela (11) explained, 'I don't say it to anyone, because I'm afraid they might think I'm weird.' Natalie (11) said, 'I think if I told anyone that I sensed God or that I was closer to God when I do meditation, I think they would laugh. So, I just keep it to myself.'

It is possible, therefore, that even if opportunities were created for discussion, children might still find it difficult to contribute because it is a deeply relational and personal matter and it is very difficult to express what one has come to realise in words. It is hoped that the songs we have created will help to bridge that gap but children should never feel pressured to speak.

It is important to stress that all of the wisdom traditions – including the Christian tradition – express the view that the deeper, long-term fruits of the practice arise from the discipline of regular, ideally daily, meditation and this too should be explained to children. As well as meditating several times each week in school, they should be encouraged to meditate outside of the context of school also. This will enhance their capacity to appreciate meditation as a gift that can be accessed at any time, at any age and at will.

We would love to encourage the development of a sense of community among teachers and parents who use these resources and we encourage you to contact Noel (meditationwithchildren@eircom.net) and/or Alana (alana@alanalevandoski.com) to let them know what seems to work best and to let them hear examples of what the children say to you. As Noel discovered in his research, children have a great capacity to give metaphorical expression to very deep inner experience. Witness, for example, the young Canadian girl, Alex (11), who said that when she hears the three bells ring at the start of meditation, she imagines it is God ringing her doorbell and she opens her heart to let him in. Or Jason (12) who said that 'Meditation is like a map and your destination is who you really are.' So, please, do get in touch and share your experience with us.

Noel also runs a monthly e-Newsletter for teachers and parents and anyone can sign up for it by clicking here (in the pdf version of this booklet). Noel also manages a Facebook page on meditation with children which can be accessed by clicking here or by entering <https://www.facebook.com/meditationwithchildren/> into your browser.

Alana Levandoski & Noel Keating

