

On Being  
a

Child  
of the  
Wind

Fr. Brian Murdoch



Jesus said, “Unless you become like a child, you cannot enter the kingdom of God.” Most people, down through the ages, have been taken by this gospel saying, even though Jesus never exactly explained how to do that. The kingdom of God, as Jesus revealed, has kept endless generations, and their brightest and best ones, masterfully teaching how it shows up. A major reason that occurs is because verbal language is vastly deficient and leaves us wanting. Visual language, such as gestures or signals, may augment the message due to its ability to convey the thought and intention more precisely and simply. Finally, “relational consciousness” is the blessed continuum we encounter and wrestle with, like Jacob and the angel. A recent study that questioned children’s spirituality explains

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that relational consciousness is an evolved human capacity for an awareness of connections, with self, the world, and a transcendent power. This human capacity serves as a way of helping individuals in their search for identity, meaning and purpose for their lives.

Who among us does not want that relational consciousness—that flourishing connectedness in our daily lives? What if ongoing identity, meaning and purpose questions could be answered in an artistic image that was aligned and rooted with the mythic Rabbi Jesus? I found this key image *Child of the Wind* in a song by Bruce Cockburn, and then remembered Plato’s foremost insight regarding life in the Republic: “Let me write the songs of a nation, I care not who writes its laws.” The 66-year-old Cockburn was raised as an Anglican, influenced by Charles Williams, and then catapulted out of Berklee College of Music in Boston, Massachusetts in 1970. This world

music troubador is a story teller like God’s story teller C.S.Lewis, yet more a poet-songwriter who has produced 31 albums, and is a member of the Canadian Music Hall of Fame, and now, even, his face appears on a postage stamp in Canada. Rolling Stone magazine called Bruce Cockburn “Canada’s Best-Kept Secret.” Cockburn’s collected work is a journey—both moody and revelatory—into the dark night and the sweet laughter of the soul, around the world with vivid imagery and unflinching observations of human cruelty, greed, courage, and survival through faith. He takes inspiration from his experiences and this is a staple for Cockburn’s method for instinctive spirituality. Cockburn testifies in an interview, after being asked about conservative religious people who wonder whether he is a Christian, “What’s important is recognition, there is a spiritual side of life, and that needs to be paid attention to. There’s a real distinction between materialism and a sense of the cosmos being a deeper place than that. If it’s a deeper place, then what does that ask from us? I don’t know the answer. I’m still working on it, and that is perhaps

why people are willing to listen to the stuff I put into songs.”

Bruce Cockburn has a keen eye for detail and a wry sense of humor, hallmarks of being childlike. His 1979 song, *Wondering Where the Lions Are*, was a national hit in Canada, offering a wake-up call to the world. It reached the Top 25 on billboard charts in America. The infectious song blended his highly personalized, finger-picking guitar style that merged Mississippi John Hurt blues with reggae backing by Jamaican musicians in Toronto.

Cockburn is a postmodern psalmist who ignites a renewed Christian imagination that offers hope in the midst of cynicism, doubt, struggle, and existential despair and anger. The heart of his radical spirituality is seen another of his song images, that of “...kicking at the darkness till it bleeds daylight.” This gifted artist lives the game-changing spiritual life heralded by Jesus in that one timeless, synoptic saying: “Unless you become like a child...” It is in this stance that we rediscover the crucially needed gift of discernment in our complex state of confusion. Cockburn is a master at keeping tough questions up in the air.

Two theologians, one major and one still rising like a morning star, articulate why I believe this song image in the title personifies Bruce Cockburn’s instinctive spirituality: The Jesuit, Karl Rahner, the major theologian of Vatican II and its aftermath, writes, “For it is the bitter grief of theology and its blessed task, too, always to have to seek (because it does not clearly have to present to it at the time) what in a true sense—in its historical memory—it has always known . . .

*“Hear the wind moan  
In the bright diamond sky  
These mountains are waiting  
Brown-green and dry,  
I’m too old for the term  
But I’ll use it anyway  
I’ll be a child of the wind  
Till the end of my days.”*

Always providing that one has the courage to ask questions, to be dissatisfied, to think with the mind and heart one actually has, and not with the mind and heart one is supposed to have.” This quote, “mind and heart one actually has” is where Bruce Cockburn’s artistic image of the child of the wind unfolded after he had traveled the global villages, reading the great writers and seeing what the spirit in the world taught and showed about God’s kingdom. Rahner’s doctoral thesis, inspired by philosopher Martin Heidegger, was originally published in 1939 (with 42 subsequent editions through 1996) as “Spirit in the World.” His stance from this theological work, until his death in 1984, was not motivated by scholars in erudition as such, but by pastoral concerns of 20<sup>th</sup> century people struggling with the secular and the scientific, and the individualism as manifested in European modernity. Rahner deeply held the conviction that there was always at play, in the tension of being human, both original sin and original redemption. Rahner’s profound openness, was held endlessly because he knew faith originated

(mostly) from within one’s own existence, and does not come from the outside by indoctrination. Rahner’s passion and genius utilized “...even the most humble aspects of daily routine, such as our working, sleeping, eating, laughing, seeing, sitting, and getting about.” The parallel stance

between Cockburn, the poet and Rahner, the priest is uncanny. Their

bodies of work point, compliment, and smile at one another. In the example of the image, *A Child of the Wind*, Rahner’s



theology about children purported “Children are open to God in a way that does not assume childhood, it is a prelude to later stages of development. This is because at every stage one can grasp one’s self as a whole. Eternity is not a final stage either, because the whole of existence is always redeemed. We, therefore, do not move away from childhood toward eternity, but we move toward the eternity of childhood.”

Priest and professor, Dr. Jerome Berryman, who discovered and developed “Godly Play,” a proposition that children have natural sense of God, and that what they lack is the appropriate language to help identify and express it, so that it can be explored and strengthened. Godly play is a brilliant approach that teaches classical Christian language in a way that does not block or distort the child’s authentic experience of God. It calls forth, like a chiming canticle, the creative life of big kids and little kids together, with their Creator and Redeemer, anytime, anywhere, anyplace. God’s stuff is here with us but just beyond our words. Jerome

Berryman’s cardinal insight highly suggests that language, for children and adults, must often be rendered non-verbally. Grace is non verbal. Montessori education builds on four core engagements or principles; concentration, coordination, independence, and order. Berryman, well-schooled in the Montessori pedagogy, has, over five decades drawn on these engagements, and learned and taught what the major theologians, down through the ages, have given—that children have cleared the way for grace. He has culled four interdisciplinary themes from this complex and



multicultural legacy that illuminates “childlikeness”, a supreme attribute of God. Berryman has summarized and synthesized these definitions into four distinct themes: 1) *Ambivalence*, holding two mutually conflicting feelings about a person, place, or thing at the same time. Ambivalence toward children is holding delight and aversion, attraction and repulsion, and a movement toward and away from them. It includes both a high and low view of children. 2) *Ambiguity*, refers to the possibility that a word might be understood in two or more ways when the context does not make it clear. It gets at the language problem that rises by assumptions people make about or during conversations with children. Berryman offers a superb practical ambiguity checklist. 3) *Indifference*, does not refer to an objective stance taken to better

study something one cares about. Rather it implies aloofness, a sense of being too superior to care. This blurs easily into disdain, although the shift may be unconscious. 4) *Grace*, has a colossal etymology projected through the Hebrew word *hesed*, and the Greek word *charis* translated into Latin as *gratia*. It abounds with a wide rippling meaning but always understood as a gift of affection and mercy even when the relationship is broken. In John’s New Testament gospel, Jesus is “full of grace and truth.”

Berryman’s work, kindly and brightly, calls forth Cockburn’s image of a child of the wind. Berryman insists, from his studies and his life experiences, that children are sacraments. Sacraments are “outward and invisible signs of an inward and spiritual grace, given by Christ as sure and certain means by which we receive that grace.”

Berryman proposes a formal doctrine of children in the last chapter of his book, then closes his 256 pages by taking maturing people of faith through the implication and application of the traditional seven sacraments that are experienced with a childlike presence. In the church’s wisdom and the secular sages’ convictions, sacraments have never been limited to just these seven. Why? Fine novelists suggest the answer—that Holy Communion has commonly been experienced as a playful compelling picnic in the park, and in a host of other sensuous holy ordinary images easily remembered by any of us.

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Christian Eucharist, the practice of thanksgiving, and the Mystery of Life cultivated by Mother Church, where human beings learn not to postpone the inevitable with God in their time. Moreover and critically, contemplation the matchless ancient spiritual practice that is the gift just beyond the stages of human development, brings us to a place of Grace, which is a sense of favor, kindness, friendship and always an elegant gesture of service to others. Grace can never be controlled. It’s just amazing. It is the sheer loveliness of God, like a Child of the Wind.

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