

When Did I Die Inside?

by Ernest O'Neill

The sermon explores the loss of childhood joy and the suppression of our spirits by societal and educational pressures, urging a return to our inner aliveness.

Scripture: Psalm 8:2, Matthew 18:3, John 10:10, Romans 12:2, Galatians 5:1

Topics: "Spiritual Decay", "Lost Innocence"

Description

Ernest O'Neill reflects on the loss of innocence and boundless possibilities we experience as we grow older, attributing it to societal pressures and the transition to adulthood where responsibilities overshadow the carefree nature of childhood. He delves into the impact of education and societal norms on stifling the unique spirit within individuals, leading to a disconnect between our souls (minds and emotions) and our spirits. O'Neill questions why the joy and aliveness we felt as children seem to diminish as we conform to societal expectations and material pursuits, leaving many feeling trapped and unfulfilled.

Transcript

Wordsworth wrote a poem in which he said:

'Heaven lies about us

in our infancy!

Shades of the prison-house

begin to close

Upon the growing boy,

But he beholds the light,

and whence it flows,

He sees it in his joy;

At length the man perceives it

die away,

And fade into the light

of common day.'

Have you ever felt something like that? That you were more alive in some ways when you were young than you have been since? It's customary to dismiss this with the grey, adult comments that 'we all have to grow up someday and come to grip with the world'. But have you ever wondered 'do we'? Is it not possible to retain that sense of the boundless possibilities of life and the excitement of the future? Can one not still sense the aliveness of the invisible world behind a spring morning? Can we not still soar in our thoughts and imaginations? Why do 'shades of the prison-house begin to close upon the growing boy'?"

When Did Life Close In?

Most of us trace it to the time when we realized that our parents would not take care of us forever. We began to sense that we would have to someday provide for ourselves. We'd have to work at some job that would bring enough money to buy the food and clothes that we needed. Around that time, life ceased to be quite as much fun as it had been. We felt less free to pursue the things we enjoyed doing and we became more interested in the occupations that would bring in the necessary money. About that time, too, we saw that everybody didn't think as much of us as our parents, so we came under the burden of making others see that we were important. Somehow, life was never as free again! What happened to us?

The truth is that our parents provided a human version of what our Maker really is. They gave us a great sense of security - we worried little about our next meal when we were five: Mum usually provided it on time. We had little concern about our importance because Dad seemed to think the world of us. So there seemed to rise from within us a joy in life that was spontaneous. Everything wasn't perfect: many of us hadn't a lot of clothes - some of us were hungry at times - but our hearts were usually light, and life was a simple round of playing with our friends and spending evenings at home with our parents. In this atmosphere we had fun realizing that there was within us an individual life and spirit that seemed to rise with the singing of the birds on a spring morning. Our minds and emotions were alive, but they seemed to be simply reflections of this free spirit within us. We used our minds to learn the alphabet and were aware of our emotions when our grandmother died, but generally there seemed to be such a living spirit of life inside us that we were not very conscious of any difference between our souls (our minds and emotions) and our spirits inside.

School

For many of us, the joyous freedom of life that seemed to characterize our apparently innocent spirits appeared to fade when we started school. For some of us it happened later, but the great educators like Pestalozzi and Montessori imply that education has often spoiled rather than made adults. The word 'education' comes from two Latin words 'e' or 'ex' plus 'duco' meaning to lead out. Even pre-Christian educators believed that some unique life and purpose existed in each individual and that education should lead that out to fulfil its potential. This 'spirit' of life' inside each person was the clue to their existence and fulfilment

But society did not seem to develop that way. It became preoccupied with the material products of the world and treasured especially the merchants and leaders that could extract and amass its gold and copper, its fruits and grains. Such people grew in influence and importance while human spirits that could paint or sing or heal or comfort were regarded as less valuable. As the world lost consciousness of its

precarious position as a sphere spinning through limitless space with no visible means of support, the eyes of humanity, turned increasingly from contemplation of the infinite to preoccupation with the finite. Schools obeyed society's dictates and began to concentrate on teaching children to use their minds and emotions to promote their success in society rather than express the unique spirit within them.

Thus, most of us found school cramped rather than freed the spirit of joyful freedom inside us. Some of us (who found our homes repressive) found school initially stirred this individual spirit into activity, but eventually this fragile life-spirit faded into the background as we concentrated on training our minds and emotions to meet the challenge of the acquisitive hedonism that ruled our society.

Elephant Sitting on a Mouse

That's what it has seemed like ever since. Our heavy, over-developed souls (our minds and emotions) seem to have squashed our spirits out of existence. Now and again we may have memories of the way we used to feel as five-year-olds, but generally we have little spontaneous joy from inside anymore. We live lives of quiet desperation dominated by mental equipment that is controlled by society. Can anything be done about a dead spirit? Let's examine this in the next article.

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