

## Primary Communication and Spiritual Transformation

I wrote this research proposal in response to an organization's call for the study of "spiritual transformation." I thought it might be a winner because most other proposals would not be focused on children and their natural inclination toward full participation through primary communication skills.

Letter of Intent for Spiritual Transformation Scientific Research Program

The language of the Call for Proposals implies that "spiritual transformation" usually happens to adults from an alienated or "fallen" position and that research will focus on "outcomes for individuals who undergo" it, the "pathways," "techniques," and "practices" leading up to it, and so forth.

I make a simpler assumption: we are born spiritual; born interconnected with interbeing; born to maximize the four kinds of necessary unconscious processes and the "patterns that connect" as described by Gregory Bateson (1972/2000;128ff) in "Style, Grace and Information in Primitive Art;" born to experience William Blake's fourfold vision (Keil 2001) as a given in early childhood; born to experience "the common glad impulse" of all species (Hudson); born to integrate the "triune brain" (MacLean) through ritual as described by Victor Turner in "Body, Brain and Culture" (special issue of *Zygon* 1983), Born to Groove on reality and each other. If it were not for massive mass media, declining schools, replacement of community by networks (Bly 1990:261), and the many contemporary forces of alienation that repress most children to varying degrees, the need for "born again" experiences might not be so urgent. With our assumption the researchable question becomes: ***which practices best sustain a child's capacity for spiritual growth and transformation?***

Following the works cited above and a precious few child culture classics like Edith Cobb's *Ecology of Imagination in Childhood* (1977), Jonroar Bjorkvald's *The Muse Within: Creativity and Communication, Song and Play from Childhood through Maturity* (1989) and Patricia Campbell's *Songs in Their Heads: Music and Its Meaning in Children's Lives* (1998) I will work with MUSE (Musicians United for Superior Education), Incorporated and similar organizations to research ***the nurturance of childhood spirituality through skills acquisition and performance practices in early childhood.***

The thesis to be tested, explored, and documented ethnographically is that children acquiring the most interconnecting skills in primary communication (dandling songs, hand games, dancing, drumming, singing, musicking, dramatizing, reciting, in the greatest variety of oral/aural traditions) will be the most eager, enthusiastic and able to participate in secondary communication (reading, writing, math and science practices) over time. Put as a comparison: Won't children who maintain a capacity for spiritual growth and transformation via full participation and full expression have learned how to learn? Won't they approach learning in all subject areas with the same spirit? Because they have the tools of spiritual transformation in their own minds/bodies, in their grey

matter and in their muscles, sinews, bones, won't they be happier, more creative, more capable by every measure, than the children who acquire fewer of those "interconnecting skills in primary communication"?

MUSE, Inc. is a non-profit organization with a fourteen-year record of teaching children to dance-drum-sing-dramatize in diverse cultural traditions and a proven track record in grant administration. The current (circa 2003) board of directors includes Carlos Crespo, epidemiologist researching impact of media on childhood diabetes, Josephine Cross, Montessori school Assistant Principal, Robert Knox Dentan, internationally known ethnographer and expert on non-violence, Greg Dimitriadis, qualitative researcher on educational and extracurricular outcomes, Michael Frisch, recent President of the American Studies Association and currently pioneering data management techniques that will allow us to do rigorous microtiming research on videos and recordings of children's performance practices (Keil 1995, Keil and Feld 1994, Kelso 1995, McNeill 1995, Benzon 2001), John Jablonski, former basketball professional and corporate executive, Lilliam Malave, bilingual and bicultural education researcher, Charles Mancuso and Rick Flemming, colleagues in SUC/Buffalo's Performing Arts department, Amy Witryol, classical guitarist and retired bank Vice President. Different combinations of these board members and current MUSE personnel will play parts in any eventual full proposal.

With a two-year grant impending we will seek out the most performance-arts-oriented Montessori and Waldorf schools, the most promising home schooling-pooling-for-performance practices, the leading pilot programs of Music Together, Kindermusic, and other "for profit" efforts to maintain early childhood love of music-dance as mind-body-spirit practices, and then make strategic choices about how best to research and evaluate all available strategies for maximizing skills, arts integration, performance practices, in early childhood. Our intention is to use a combination of ethnographic participant observation, journal keeping by participants, video taping and methods both qualitative and statistical (Keil 1995, Proglor 1995, Keil and Feld 1994) to identify those performance practices and skill acquisitions which best sustain children's capacity for spiritual growth and transformation throughout life.

It might not be difficult to work out some comparable research designs with colleagues in other parts of the USA and the world. Colleagues in Spain, Japan, Norway, Greece, Germany, Cuba, and Nigeria come immediately to mind as capable of finding funding and/or institutional support for comparable work.

While some of the more controversial assumptions behind our work – e.g. a) children are "born spiritual," b) music-dance-dramas of childhood nurture spiritual growth and transformation, c) arts-integration in childhood is a form of ritual, d) "participatory consciousness" (Barfield) and "ecology of imagination" (Cobb) can be maintained into adulthood, etc – may run counter to, or at angles to, the assumptions of the Call for Proposals, I believe it is extremely important to the overall achievement of your goals to have at least one proposal like this (child focussed, arts integrative, skills

oriented, spirituality a given) in the mix of your ten large research projects as you go forward.

Significance: children suffering, schools failing, laying the foundation for major reforms.

Approach: ethnography is time tested, flexible, adaptable to circumstances.

Innovation: are other proposals child focussed, arts-integrative, skills-oriented, assuming spirit as gift?

Investigator: seven ethnographic books published and more coming.

Environment: excellent "collaborative arrangements" possible, locally and globally.

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