



Story: A Special Morning

LIFELONG LEARNING

>> Lesson 6: Developing an Inner Life

Eight point: By calling ourselves progressive Christians, we mean we are Christians who commit to a path of lifelong learning, compassion, and selfless love.

Affirmation: I will always look for ways to learn and be loving to others.

Getting to the Heart of the Lesson

As adults following a spiritual teaching, we are aware of how important an inner life of prayer, introspection or stillness is. It looks different for each of us, but it is clearly necessary to devote some time to connecting with our spiritual nature deep inside ourselves, as well as through our outer activities and relationships. It is an obvious part of the lifelong learning we commit to as we walk the path that Jesus walked.

But it is less obvious that children need an inner life as well. After all, they have their world of imagination and the need to play and be lighthearted; serious contemplation can always be addressed later, when they are grown. But children also need to see how to balance the fascination of the world with the stillness of spirit. The outer world will not support or encourage an inner life, and to assume it will just happen as children grow is a serious miscalculation of the power of the endless sensory stimulation we have available to us.

We don't have to define what the inner life should be for children; we can just show them the direction to go when seeking answers the world does not offer. It is an incomplete picture if we teach all about behavior and leave out the critical piece that helps us make

decisions about our behavior and keeps us moving in the direction of greater love and unity. There are so many ways to blunder as we try to stay on the path of lifelong learning. Let's be sure to share with children the secret of going within for guidance, comfort and renewal.

Teacher Reflection

How do you nurture and nourish your inner life? If you would like to do something new (after all, this unit is all about learning and growing in new ways), try one or more of the practices that Owen's parents do in this lesson's story, "A Special Morning." Their practices include reading the Bible aloud, writing in a journal, going for an early morning jog, reading quietly, and watching a sunrise. You may even want to write some poetry as Owen did. Whatever new activity you choose, do it for at least four days. You may find that you want to cultivate it as a new habit in your life.

Quotations

In today's rush we all think too much—seek too much—want too much—and forget about the joy of just being.
— Eckhart Tolle

Why do you want to open the outside door when there is an inside door? Everything is within.
— Yogaswami

In the space between your thoughts there is your truth.
— Reuben Lowe

Sometimes the most important thing in a whole day is the rest we take between two deep breaths, or the turning inwards in prayer for five short minutes.
— Etty Hillesum

>> Lesson 6: Developing an Inner Life

Bible Verses

Psalm 37:7

Be still before the LORD, and wait patiently for him;

Psalm 46:10

Be still, and know that I am God!

Matthew 6: 5-6

And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Opening the Lesson

Outdoors and Indoors Art Activity

Materials needed: paper and drawing pencils, crayons or markers

Tell the children, “Today we finish our unit on lifelong learning.” Explain that the topic is about developing an inner life as we walk the wisdom path that Jesus showed us. The way we behave towards others in our outward activities is very important, as we have discussed in other lessons. But we also need to balance our outward activities with an inner life. Our inner life of prayer, meditation, self-study, silence and stillness will be very important as we grow and learn. Inner stillness and quiet help keep us balanced and in touch with our spiritual self.

Use the contrast of indoor and outdoor activities to illustrate the concept of an inner spiritual life with these words or your own, “Imagine living indoors all the time, without ever going outside to play. Now imagine living outdoors all the time, without ever being able to go in where it is warm, comfortable and safe. Either way would eventually be very difficult. It is also important to have both an outer life of busy

activity and service and an inner life of stillness.”

Instruct the children to use a piece of paper and fold it in half. Invite them to draw outdoor activities they enjoy on one half and to draw indoor activities they enjoy on the other half, making a balanced picture over all.

The Breath as a Door to Inner Calmness

Ask the children if they have ever noticed their breathing when they are very physically active, such as when playing a game of tag or soccer. It's usually pretty obvious that breathing becomes faster, louder, or deeper. How is it different when focusing on something that takes concentration, such as building a complex Lego structure or drawing a detailed picture? During those times the breath is slower, quieter and more shallow. Our breathing is a clue to our consciousness; it can show us if we are calm or restless.

We can also use the breath as a doorway to calmness and concentration. By changing our breathing with intention, we can change the way we feel. That is why breathing techniques are often part of different exercises that are used for relaxation, concentration, reducing stress and harmful emotions, and keeping the body healthy.

Have everyone sit in a circle on the floor with their legs stretched out in front of them and their feet in the middle of the circle. Lead them in this breathing exercise using these words or your own:

1. Take a deep breath in and feel the air filling up your lungs. Let out the air slowly.
2. Now slowly stretch forward and touch your toes. It's okay to bend your knees.
3. Take a slow, deep breath while focusing your attention on your toes. Imagine the air filling up your toes just like it fills up your lungs. Let the air out slowly.

>> Lesson 6: Developing an Inner Life

4. Move your hands to your ankles and breathe in while focusing your breath in your ankles. Shut your eyes and imagine the air filling your ankles with energy.
5. Now move your hands to your calves. Breathe in and fill your calves with air and let the air out slowly.
6. Move your hands to your upper legs and fill the muscles there with fresh air and light.
7. Place your hands on your hips and breathe in, sending the air down to your hips.
8. Now put your hands on your lower abdomen, below your waist, and take a slow deep breath. Feel your abdomen expand and imagine the light and energy there.
9. Wrap your arms around your chest and place your hands on your ribs. Inhale slowly and feel the air expand your ribcage and imagine your chest full of light.
10. Place your hands on your shoulders and breathe calmly into your shoulder muscles, filling the muscles and bones with beautiful energy.
11. Raise both arms up over your head, stretching them toward the ceiling. As you breathe in, fill your arms with air and light and imagine the energy sparkling up and down your arms.
12. Now place both hands on your head and breathe in, filling your head with air and light.
13. Now bring your hands down to your lap and sit upright in a relaxed position.
14. Breathe normally, and just watch your breath as you sit calmly and quietly. Your entire body is now filled with light and calmness and is sparkling with peaceful energy.

Before the children get restless, explain the next activity to them. Have everyone move back and expand the circle enough so you have space to sort piles in front of each person.

Building the Lesson

Quiet Sorting

Materials needed: a variety of pasta of different shapes and sizes or beans that can be sorted by touch alone, relaxing music.

Show the children the variety of pasta or beans you will be giving them. Explain that each person will have a pile of pasta put in front of them and they are to sort them into the different types. Each player will be blindfolded and will have only their sense of touch to help them sort the pasta. Also explain that the activity is a kind of meditation, or inner activity, so everyone must work quietly. You will be playing music to help keep a peaceful atmosphere. It is not a competition or a race, but an opportunity to be calmly active.



Music Tip: The Ashana CDs, available at our store, will have great songs for this activity. Other ideas are on our Teacher's Page.

Allow everyone to have a place on the floor with enough space in between so they don't accidentally touch each other. Turn down the lights and play soft music. Tie the blindfolds on each person. Encourage them to relax, listen to the music, watch their breathing or just sit quietly while waiting. When all are blindfolded, place a bowl or pile of pasta in front of each person and tell them to begin. Be prepared with more pasta if they finish quickly.

Afterwards, ask the children to share what it felt like to be actively engaged in a task without being able to see. Meditation and prayer is also usually done with the eyes closed, yet requires a lot of focused concentration. Explain that shutting off the outward senses allows energy to be used for inward activity, which is why

>> Lesson 6: Developing an Inner Life

people often use earplugs and sit very still during meditation.

Tip: Three or four kinds of pasta is enough; more varieties will make it confusing. Allow very small children to sort without using a blindfold.

Transition: After sitting quietly for the last activity, most children will need an opportunity to stand up and move their bodies. Lead the class in a short game of “Mirror Me.” Demonstrate some simple standing stretches and movements that can easily be copied. Tell the children they have to try and move like your reflection in a mirror. If you stretch out your right arm, they must stretch out their left arm to reflect your movement as a mirror image would. Do enough movements to provide a good stretch for everyone before going to the closing activity.

Listening Meditation

Explain that another way to focus our attention inward is to narrow our concentration to one thing, such as looking at a candle or listening to one sound. It helps us focus our energy in one direction, rather than scattered around to many different things.

Explain that you will all be listening to the recording (whatever you have chosen for this activity) and trying to experience that sound in a way that goes deeper than just listening with the ears alone. Encourage the children to try and feel the sound in their body, to be inside the sound and to let it be the only thing they think about for just a few minutes.

If possible, dim the lights and have everyone sit a bit apart from one another. Encourage them to be comfortable and lie down or sit on a cushion while they listen. Play the recording and gradually increase the volume to a comfortable level. Gradually decrease the volume to finish. Allow for a few moments of silence before any talking.

Choosing a Sound for Meditation — Choose

something that inspires you and is something children can relate to. Online resources are plentiful. Search for relaxation or meditation music or nature recordings such as Tibetan singing bowl meditations, Chinese bamboo flute, Japanese flute, or nature sounds like ocean waves, bird sounds, or streams.

Instead of showing videos with the music, encourage the children to use their own imagination and see how the sound inspires them. Judge the appropriate amount of time for your group. It may only be two or three minutes, but that is enough to have an experience.

Ask them to describe how they feel afterwards. Are they more calm, relaxed, peaceful, alert, or happy?

Tip: If you don't have enough time to do all the activities for this lesson, you could play the listening meditation selection during the quiet sorting activity. Although not as effective as focusing just on listening, it would still be an inward experience.

Closing the Lesson

Introduce the story by reassuring the children that developing an inner life is very personal and everyone will do it differently. There is not just one way, or a right way to do it. The important thing to remember is that if we want to continue to feel close to our spiritual nature, or to feel connected to God within us, we need to allow some time in our life to quiet the mind and the heart and go inward, where that connection is strongest. Our inner life will grow and change just as our outer life will, as we go through all the stages of our life.

Read the story and use the discussion questions for closing the lesson.

Story: A Special Morning

Owen struggled to wake up as his dad stroked his back and called his name softly. His brain couldn't figure out why his dad was waking him up in the middle of

>> Lesson 6: Developing an Inner Life

the night. Then suddenly, Owen remembered and he sat up eagerly, shaking the sleep off.

It was actually 4:30 in the morning and today Owen was joining his parents for their morning quiet time. As long as Owen could remember, his parents had what they called their “special quiet time” early every morning while he and his brother slept. Owen wondered what happened during those dark hours before his day began. His parents had finally agreed that he was old enough to see for himself.

He got dressed quickly. His little brother was still buried deep in his covers hugging Fred, his stuffed turtle. Owen went downstairs with his dad. His mother was putting on her running shoes by the front door. She gave Owen a warm but surprised smile. “Wow, you did it!” she said softly into Owen’s ear while hugging him. “You stay here with Dad while I go for a jog. I’ll see you in a little while.” She went out the door into the frosty dark.

Being quiet was part of this special time, so Owen knew he shouldn’t ask a lot of questions. He followed his dad into the office and they sat together on the floor cushions facing the window. His dad picked up a Bible from the table and opened it. He read some out loud and then closed it, with a bookmark keeping his place. He told Owen, “I’m going to pray and meditate a bit now and you can sit quietly here next to me. You can pray too, or read or watch out the window for the sunrise.”

Owen loved the quiet peaceful feeling that came over him while he sat there with his dad. Sometimes it was quiet in the house when his parents were reading and he worked on his schoolwork, or when his little brother was napping. But that was a different kind of quiet. This morning Owen felt like the quiet was in his heart and it was easy to sit very still. He remembered what his parents had told him about their morning routine. They agreed that starting the day in the peaceful stillness before the sun came up helped them to face the challenges of the day that would come later. His mom jogged and his dad meditated. Both said the

time was used to find their inner direction, something that guided their actions and decisions.

The light gradually changed outside the east facing window and there was a beautiful pink glow as the sun came up behind the trees. Owen could feel the world waking up.

His mother came home and went upstairs to take a shower. Owen could hardly hear her because she moved so quietly through the house, but he could feel her and he was aware of her gentle presence. His dad finished meditating and got up. They watched as the morning came alive outside. His dad whispered with wonder, “Every sunrise is different, Owen. Every morning is a new beginning.”

Then they went to the kitchen and his dad made tea. He offered to make Owen a cup of hot chocolate, but Owen wanted to have the full morning experience, so he had a cup of tea, too. His mom silently took a cup and sat in her favorite chair with her favorite quilt over her lap. She opened her journal and immediately started filling in a page with her smooth handwriting as her thoughts poured through the pen to the page. Owen’s dad pulled a few books from the shelf and sat at the dining room table with them spread out before him.

Owen had to decide whether to read or write. It was still early and it would be more than an hour before his brother would be getting up and they would have breakfast. His library book about rockets didn’t seem to fit the mood of the quiet morning, so he took out his pencil and his notebook.

Something about the stillness and the special feeling of sharing the morning with his parents got him thinking about the poetry lesson they had at school that week. Owen had written a silly poem about slimy slugs, but he felt some idea inside trying to come out that wasn’t silly. He just started writing and didn’t even ask about spelling or anything. When he was done, he was surprised and pleased.

>> Lesson 6: Developing an Inner Life

Morning was always for yawning
and dressing and brushing and rushing
Had to eat and pack and run like a fool
to catch the noisy bus to school
Brain and hands and feet would hurry
Heart would jump and thump and always worry

Morning can now be for dawning
and praying and hearing and hushing
Get to watch and listen and feel and think
as the world wakes up to silent pink
Brain and hands and feet are still
Heart is calm and love can fill

Discussion Questions

1. Do you ever have a special quiet time at home? What do you do?
2. Do you think quiet time is as important as the busy times we have? Why or why not?
3. Are there times of the day when it seems easier to remember God's presence? When is that for you? Why do you think that is true?
4. Have you ever been up before the sunrise?
5. Close your eyes. Listen to the sounds of your own mind. Just notice. You don't need to share with us yet. Is your mind busy and noisy? Or is your mind still right now?
6. Keep your eyes closed. Breathe in deep, all the way down to your stomach. Notice your thoughts. In this way, you can be the observer of your own inner life. Keep your eyes closed and focus on your breath, until you are feeling still within. Open your eyes. What was your inner life like in that moment?