Beyond logic – entering the realm of mystery: hermeneutic phenomenology as a tool for reflecting on children’s spirituality

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This paper suggests hermeneutic phenomenology as a theoretical framework for reflecting, interpreting and gaining insight into children’s spirituality. It describes an episode that took place in a Year 5 classroom involving a 10-year-old child and his response to an Australian Aboriginal Dreamtime story. The possibilities this observed incident opens for hermeneutic phenomenology are then explored using van Manen’s notion of lifeworld existentials as guides to reflection upon the life expression of this child. The four lifeworld existentials are lived space (spatiality), lived body (corporeality), lived time (temporality) and lived human relation (relationality). In using these as a means by which to interpret the life expression of this child, it is argued that some insights into his or her spirituality can be gleaned.

Keywords: Children’s spirituality; Hermeneutic phenomenology; Mystery

The life expression

The following piece of hermeneutic phenomenological writing (the text) resulted from the life expression of a ten-year-old child named David.¹ It was observed while conducting research involving multiple visits over a five-week period in a Year 5 classroom, in a Catholic primary school in suburban Melbourne, Australia. The text below describes an event that occurred as a part of the classroom programme. It was not staged for the author’s benefit.

‘This is the Aboriginal Dreamtime story of “Dirrabigal”, or “Split Rock” as we would call it’, explained the Year 5 class teacher.

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Together, he and the children read the story of Walguy, the brown snake who was protecting the coals of fire. They read of Banjinjila, the spangled drongo bird who stole one of the coals and woke the angry snake, who then lunged at the bird, missing it, but splitting the rock that formed the summit of the hill. Using the Children’s Jacaranda Atlas, the students found the location of Split Rock in far North Queensland. They examined a photograph of Split Rock as it is today and a traditional Aboriginal painting that depicted Banjinjila escaping the clutches of Walguy.

‘It must have been a very thick and big brown snake’, commented Michael thoughtfully. ‘It would have had to have been to split the rock like that’. This comment reminded me of the basilisk from the Harry Potter stories.

‘And it must have been a very hot coal that Banjinjila dropped to penetrate the snake’s thick skin’, added Richard.

The comments of these students, I began to think, may have indicated the influence of westernised modes of thought and socialisation referred to by Hay and Nye (1998) that seek to examine things logically and rationally. There was a sense in which it seemed no longer enough to enter the story and wonder about its message or truth. The story now had to be subjected to scholastic processes of thought. This stood in contrast to the thought processes of their younger middle primary counterparts (with whom I had also been working) who seemed to more readily accept the story as what it was without such a critique. I could not help but think that while these Year 5 students were still able to wonder about this Dreamtime story, their wondering was now leading them to seek logical answers. Might this signal that they were losing something of their sense of mystery? Was that which was once considered to be mysterious becoming demystified?

It seemed these thoughts were confirmed when one of students declared that the whole story was not logical. But then another student, David, entered the conversation. His was a voice that, in its own way, sought to be heard. He thought reflectively for a moment and added with calm authority, ‘It is beyond logic’.

A short silence followed. The students themselves seemed to reflect upon this last statement. Some nodded thoughtfully, other shrugged.

I was stunned by the insight of this child. Was David simply confirming the rational critique of his classmates? Or was this comment in some way signalling that the essence of this Dreamtime story was literally beyond the domain of logic? Perhaps David’s reflective comment indicated the beginning of an awareness that such a story allows the listener to enter the realm of mystery. Perhaps there was a sense in which David’s comment indicated that not everything is governed by logic and rationalism. Some phenomena are mysterious. Some experiences allow people to enter the realm of mystery.

Perhaps David’s comment was more revealing of his spiritual life than indicative of a diminishing of it. Perhaps it signalled a movement towards the spiritual, or at least an openness to the spirit. Perhaps it represented an openness to the possibility that something other (Other) might be the case.

A short silence followed David’s comment. David himself sat quietly and reflectively, almost hopefully as if awaiting further discussion from his peers and teacher. The class teacher nodded thoughtfully for a moment before redirecting attention to the particular activity in which the students were to engage. I sensed a lost opportunity. It was as if, albeit unintentionally, the teacher had brought closure to what could have been an opening to take David’s statement as an initiation into the hermeneutical process, thereby taking seriously the notion of ‘beyond logic’. It seemed as if an opportunity to explore
further a statement that may have led to the children expressing something of their spiri-
tuality had been missed. David’s face hinted a look of disappointment as he and his class-
mates redirected their attention to the instructions of the class teacher.

This paper suggests hermeneutic phenomenology as a theoretical framework for reflecting, interpreting and gaining insight into the features of children’s spirituality. It outlines some of the insights that have influenced and guided the author in employing this as a theoretical framework in the scholarship of children’s spiritu-
ality. In addition, it presents a reflection upon the above life expression of David, drawing upon van Manen’s (1990) lifeworld existentials as guides to reflection. The four lifeworld existentials are lived space (spatiality), lived body (corporeality), lived time (temporality) and lived human relation (relationality). The reflection presents not so much a multiplicity of possible readings of David’s life expression, but rather different insights that may be gleaned as indicative of his spiritual dimension of life.

A brief comment on mystery and spirituality

An important notion in the discussion of spirituality is the idea of mystery. Mystery involves that which transcends human understanding. Although it pertains to the inexplicable, mystery captures and engages the human imagination (Hyde, 2003) it permeates the relational understanding of spirituality in terms of connectedness to self, others, the world or universe, and to the Transcendent as outlined in much of the contemporary literature (e.g. O’Murchu, 1997; Hay & Nye, 1998; Tacey, 2000, 2003; Zohar & Marshall, 2000; de Souza, 2003). While spirituality can be described using human language and concepts, it cannot be confined to these. Nonetheless, an encounter with it may prompt the recognition that one is dealing with mystery. That is to say, it is possible to recognise ‘the mystery of the sacred in what is’ (Champagne, 2001, p. 82).

Hermeneutic phenomenology

The hermeneutic phenomenological tradition developed from the work of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger and, in particular, Hans-Georg Gadamer (Schwandt, 1994; Sharkey, 2001). While the natural sciences seek the attainment of knowledge and truth through method and through adherence to a set of rules pertaining to a particular method (van Manen, 1990; Kvale, 1996), the philosophy underpinning hermeneutic phenomenology is that knowledge is realised in the interpretation and understanding of the expressions of human life (Sharkey, 2001). It is a tradition that attempts to be attentive to the way in which things (phenomena) appear to be, and to be interpretive, since all phenomena are encountered meaningfully through lived experience and can be described in human language (van Manen, 1990).

Phenomenology seeks to provide a true description of an object (phenomena), based on what the object is in itself. (Sharkey, 2001). It is concerned with allowing ‘that which shows itself [to] be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself’ (Heidegger 1980, p. 58; original work published in 1926). In order to do
this, van Manen (1990) has maintained that phenomenological texts need to contain *thickened* language; that is, richly descriptive and evocative language that invites the reader to encounter the phenomenon in a new and fresh way. Such language has the effect of dispelling the everyday and taken-for-granted meanings about the particular phenomena that is the object of the researcher’s interest. If the description is phenomenologically powerful, then ‘it acquires a certain transparency, so to speak; it permits us to ‘see’ the deeper significance, or meaning structures, of the lived experience it describes’ (van Manen, 1990, p. 122).

Hermeneutics has been described as the interpretation of texts, the purpose of which is to obtain a common understanding of the meaning of a particular text (Kvale, 1996). It has been in common usage among Biblical scholars for the interpretation of Scripture. However, in drawing on the work of Schleiermacher and Dilthey, Sharkey (2001) has noted that the concept of ‘text’ has come to be understood more broadly. Texts could refer not only to literary writings and works, but also to a wider range of notions, including discourse and meaningful human action.

Gadamer (1989, original work published in 1960) was a key figure in typifying the synthesis that has resulted in hermeneutic phenomenology. There are six Gadamerian insights that have had an important bearing on the author’s research into the spirituality of children in Australian Catholic primary schools. While it is acknowledged that these insights are not mutually exclusive, each has been distinguished here for the purpose of discussion and will now be explored.

**Method**

One of the fundamental insights of philosophical hermeneutics is that the researcher who seeks to understand a text, another’s life expression, does not rely on any one particular method in order to do so. Gadamer’s (1989) work intended to demonstrate the ways in which human understanding both unfolds and is embedded in language and history. The ascertaining of truth is achieved not though scientific method but rather by entering into genuine conversation with the text, or life expression. No one method exists that informs a researcher as to how to inquire into the life expression of another.

Rather, the power of hermeneutic phenomenological research ‘is animated by the researcher’s powers of observation, reflection and judgment’ (Sharkey, 2001, p. 22). It is the value of such observation, reflection and judgment, lying beyond the employment of any one particular method that is brought to the fore in hermeneutic phenomenology.

This is not to suggest that hermeneutic phenomenology is ‘method-free’. Rather that empiricism and the claims of objectivity made by those employing the so-called ‘scientific method’ are called into question by a hermeneutical approach, practitioners of which argue that the subjectivity of the researcher is always and already present. In hermeneutic phenomenology reflexivity in research is embraced, rather than the notion of rational objectivity. In this paper, the approach to reflection, the ‘method’, has been guided by van Manen’s (1990) lifeworld existentials.
Conversation

Gadamer (1989) has put forward the metaphor of *conversation* as an ideal for that which ought to occur during the hermeneutical process. His assertion has been that conversation exemplifies the qualities of responsiveness, creativity and freedom that are central to genuine understanding:

We say that we ‘conduct’ a conversation, but the more genuine a conversation is, the less its conduct lies within the will of either partner. Thus a genuine conversation is never the one we want to conduct. Rather, it is generally more correct to say that we fall into conversation, or even that we become involved in it. The way one word follows another, with the conversation taking its own twists and reaching its own conclusion, may well be conducted in some way, but the partners conversing are far less leaders of it than the led. No one knows in advance what will be the ‘come out’ of a conversation. (1989, p. 383)

A conversation works most effectively when the subject matter of the conversation assumes control, while those in dialogue allow themselves to be led by it. In hermeneutic phenomenology, what is sought is a genuine conversation between the researcher and the text, or life expression. The researcher and the text become conversation partners, neither dominating, but rather asking questions of each other to weigh and test what the other has to say in conversation.

Play

Gadamer (1989) has suggested the metaphor of play to complement his reflection on conversation. The notions of both play and conversation express the human capacity for engagement and responsiveness that are to be found at the centre of the phenomenon of human understanding. The playing of a game has the capacity to draw the players into its power, and so the players become lost in the playing of the game. Importantly, Gadamer has noted that the players themselves have no control over the outcome of the game. The whole point of the game is that its conclusion is unknown. It is not clear exactly what will happen – who will win, what a player’s next move might be and so on. Rather, there is a sense of engagement in which the players seek to resolve the unknown.

The notion of *middle space* (*Zwischen*) is important in Gadamer’s (1989) reflection on play and conversation. Interpretation is an event that unfolds in the middle space of encounter between the text, or life expression, and the interpreter, or researcher. Just as the playing of a game is resolved on the playing field or game board, common meaning between a text and its interpreter is to be found in the encounter between them; that is, in the middle space. It is here that the ideas and horizons of the interpreter are brought into a creative fusion with those of the text. The hermeneutic task is one ‘where the meaning of a text opens up in an encounter that is best described ... as contextual, playful and dialogical’ (Sharkey, 2001, p. 24). Therefore, a researcher who attempts to engage in hermeneutic phenomenology takes seriously the challenge to enter the middle space that is opened up in a playful and dialogical engagement with that which is the object of the researcher’s interest.
Understanding as a productive activity

Gadamer (1989) has maintained that the hermeneutical activity always transcends the mere reproduction of what was in the author’s mind. The meaning of a text is always co-determined by both the hermeneutic situation of the interpreter and the horizon projected by the text, or life expression. As Gadamer himself declared, ‘a hermeneutics that regarded understanding as reconstructing the original would be no more than handing on a dead meaning’ (p. 167). Because the text must necessarily always be understood from within the particular context of the interpreter, the hermeneutic process cannot be one of simply reproducing or reconstructing that which may have been in the mind of the author. It is a productive activity where the meaning of a life expression or text is co-determined by the particularity of the interpreter and the text itself.

Understanding as a fusion of horizons

When engaged in hermeneutic phenomenology, Gadamer (1989) has maintained that what takes place between the interpreter and the author of a text is a ‘fusion of horizons’ (p. 306). The situation of one’s understanding can be deemed a horizon. It marks the limit of everything that can be understood from a particular point of view. Weinsheimer (1985) has suggested that the notion of a horizon implies that it is possible for a person to see beyond an immediate standpoint. Thus, an individual’s horizon of understanding is constantly in the process of formation. It is not something that remains static.

Understanding occurs when the horizon that is projected by the world-view, or life expression (the text), combines with the researchers own comprehension and interpretive insight. Hermeneutic phenomenological research then results in the production of something new, created out of the encounter of the interpreter and the life expression, or text, being interpreted.

Prior understandings (prejudice)

While many research approaches endeavour to eliminate the prior understandings of the investigator, hermeneutic phenomenological research views such understandings as a prerequisite for any act of interpretation (van Manen, 1990; Sharkey, 2001). For Gadamer (1989) it is these very prior understandings, or prejudice, that ‘gives the hermeneutical problem its real thrust’ (p. 270). The goal of hermeneutic phenomenological research is not for the investigator to eliminate these prior understandings, but rather to test them. Such a testing unfolds as a genuine engagement with the object of the researcher’s interest, where such an engagement is open to the possibility that something else might be the case.

The text, or life expression, becomes the vehicle for this testing of prior understandings. Weinsheimer (1985) has maintained that the interpreter needs the text in order to place his or her own prejudices – prior understandings and taken-for-granted
meanings – at risk. The text is needed as a means by which to highlight the dubiousness of what the interpreter takes for granted. In this way, new possibilities for questioning and extending of the interpreter’s own horizon by fusing it with that of the text are disclosed.

**Hermeneutic phenomenological reflection and children’s spirituality**

This paper suggests hermeneutic phenomenology as a theoretical framework for reflecting, interpreting and gaining insight into the features of children’s spirituality. The insights from the hermeneutic phenomenological tradition presented above have influenced the author’s engagement with the life expressions of children in gaining insight into their spirituality. The following reflection, guided by van Manen’s (1990) lifeworld existentials, is an attempt to enter into conversation with the text. It is an attempt to produce something of meaning as the result of a fusion of the author’s own horizon with that projected by the text, as well as to test the author’s own prior understandings. Each of the lifeworld existentials are not described individually here. Rather, they unfold in the following reflection. In phenomenological literature, the lifeworld existentials have been well utilised and have been seen as belonging fundamentally to the structure of the lifeworld (e.g. Merleau-Ponty, 1996, 2004). They have also been drawn upon by the author in preparing the ground for his own research in reflecting upon the life expression of another (Hyde, 2003). The following reflection is by no means exhaustive, but indicates something of the relationship between David’s comment ‘It is beyond logic’ as observed by the author, and the possibilities this opens up for hermeneutic phenomenology in seeking to shed some light upon David’s spirituality.

**Entering the space of mystery (lived space)**

Some experiences, like the one in the life expression of David outlined at the beginning of this paper, may enable people to enter the realm of mystery. Is it actually possible to enter such a space? When we think of space we usually refer to geometrical space; that is, we perceive space in terms of its dimensions – length, width and depth. We speak of a crowded space, such as a busy street in London, or perhaps of an open space such as a field or a plain. But the phenomenological literature indicates that space is more than this. It refers to felt space. van Manen (1990) has maintained that lived space refers to the landscape in which people move and in which they consider themselves at home. Home is where we can “be what we are” (p. 102).

Similarly, Merleau-Ponty (1996) has maintained that this notion of spatiality refers not necessarily to geometrical space, but rather to a spatiality of situation. It is a spatiality of orientation towards a possible world. It is thus feasible for a person to be physically situated within a particular geometrical space, but be dreaming, or longing to be somewhere else – oriented towards some other space that might be possible. This might typically occur when a person is homesick or longing to be with a loved one.
from who she or he is physically separated by distance. Merleau-Ponty has maintained that in such instances, a person feels that towards which their desire goes out:

> Our body and our perception always summon us to take as the centre of the world that environment which they present to us. But this environment is not necessarily that of our own life. I can ‘be somewhere else’ while staying here, and if I am kept far away from what I love, I feel out of touch with real life (1996, pp. 285–286).

It is possible then, to enter a space that is not necessarily geographical or geometrical in nature. There was a sense in which David, in the text being reflected upon, has perhaps recognised intuitively that if one is to enter into the Aboriginal Dreamtime story, then rational thinking alone will not provide the key. Perhaps in his comment ‘It is beyond logic’, David has begun to sense that the space that is required to be entered is a space beyond, or outside of, enlightened thinking – the space of mystery. To enter the space of mystery implies that one needs to be able to ‘sense’ the mystery of, in this case, the story.

In their research, Hay and Nye (1998) have referred to this as the notion of ‘mystery sensing’. It involves the wonder and awe, the fascination and questioning that is characteristic of children as they interact with the mystery of the universe. While not articulating these wonderings in the sophisticated language of adults, it could be said that all of the students involved in the discussion – Michael, Richard and David – were in their own ways engaged in mystery sensing. Their questioning and seeking to make meaning of a mythical story, which itself is an attempt to interact with and explain something of the creation and mystery of the earth, points to their engagement in this category of spiritual sensitivity.

There was a sense in which, more than simply recognising that the space of mystery is beyond that of reason, David, who maintained ‘It is beyond logic’, and the moment of silence that followed, suggest that there may have been a longing to enter such a space. Perhaps there was a yearning to enter a space in which to be at home (van Manen, 1990), in which to place one’s self back in touch with life as it should be (Merleau-Ponty, 1996). This could be seen in David’s quiet and reflective waiting, and perhaps anticipation of his teacher’s response to his comment. It could also be seen in the hint of disappointment on his face when the class teacher returned attention to the activity to be undertaken. The desire to enter such a space would be neither unreasonable nor uncommon. The opportunity for children to be able to enter other spaces in which they can be what they are has been shown to be frequently sought, for example, in the retreating to a favourite place to be alone and to contemplate (Erricker et al., 1997).

**Corporeality and the activation of the indigenous archetype (lived body)**

Phenomenologically, human beings are always bodily in the world. It is our way of *being-in-the-world*, our *Dasein* (Heidegger, 1980). It is our way of belonging to the world and facing our tasks (Merleau-Ponty, 1996). When people encounter one another in the life world, they do so in a sensorial manner, through touch, sight, taste
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and so forth. Van Manen (1990) has also noted, for example, that when the body is the object of someone else’s gaze, it may lose its naturalness, or even grow enhanced in its modality of being.

Corporeality, as a means of belonging to the world, sheds further light upon the text under consideration. In David’s desire or yearning to locate himself in the realm of mystery, there was a sense in which he may have been seeking an alternative way of being in the world. A way of being that is not dependent upon the materialistic desires of the secular world. A way that is at least open to the possibility of mystery and a sense of the sacred.

The Dreamtime story that the class were exploring was in itself a corporeal narrative, infused with the indigenous people’s way of being and their relationship with the land. The story comprises natural elements – the rock, the heat of the coal and native wildlife – all of which are encountered in a corporeal sense. The Australian indigenous people even today speak of their intimate connectedness with the land. The land upon which they walk is sacred. They understand themselves to be one with the land – an intimate union. Split Rock is then, for the Aboriginal people of Northern Queensland, a sacred site with a Dreamtime narrative to explain its existence.

In Australia, it has been argued that the Anglo-Europeans long for such a connection to a place with which they might feel physically at one. They long for a way of being in the world that includes such a connectedness with the land. This theme of connectedness may be seen as emerging in David’s claim ‘It is beyond logic’. The Anglo-European psyche has been one of colonisation, of conquering the land and claiming dominion over it. The notion of connectedness has tended to be foreign to that of divide-and-conquer. Yet, many Australian people of more recent times have longed for such a connection, opposing the logic of their collective psyche. There was a sense in which David too was perhaps longing for this type of connectedness with the earth. Such a notion accords with Tacey’s (1995, 2000) understanding of activating the indigenous archetype.

In drawing upon Carl Jung’s concepts of the collective unconscious and the archetype, Tacey (1995) has maintained that the deep world of the psyche of the Anglo-European Australians is directly influenced by the forces of the land that surrounds them:

> Certain Australian Aborigines assert that one cannot conquer foreign soil, because in it there dwell strange ancestor-spirits who reincarnate themselves in the new-born. There is a great psychological truth in this. The foreign land assimilates its conqueror. (Jung, cited in Tacey, 1995, p. 134).

Such an idea can be extended, Tacey has argued, to include the notion of the conqueror – White Australia – becoming, or taking on the likeness of those who have been conquered (Indigenous Australia). The earth exerts power of the mind, and this can be seen as a direct link between the deep unconscious and the world of nature. White Australians have begun to be ‘aboriginalised’ (p. 136) from within. There is, Tacey claims, an indigenous archetype within the collective human psyche. It can take on different expressions and can be activated within the modern soul in various
ways. White Australians need to acknowledge the indigenous archetype within themselves. Tacey has argued that the unconscious is already attempting to impose the indigenous soul upon white consciousness. This is evidenced by the growing numbers of urban Australians who come into contact with Aboriginal figures in their dreams. These ‘big’ dream motifs indicate that for many Australians, the indigenous people are the ‘significant archetypal others’ (p. 135). If dreams and archetypal processes are to be taken seriously, then it could be argued, as indeed Tacey has, that Jung was accurate in his contention that the white psyche is being aboriginalised from within.

Perhaps there was a sense in which David’s claim ‘It is beyond logic’ may bear some witness to this process of aboriginalisation. Perhaps the indigenous archetype had stirred his longing for connection with the soil of the place in which he now found himself. This could be glimpsed in the hint of disappointment on David’s face when the teacher redirected the attention of the class, thereby cutting short any exploration of this connectedness. There was a sense in which the land conquered by David’s ancestors now sought to assimilate him and, drawing upon Tacey’s (1995) animistic and mythological construct, ‘strange ancestor-spirits [have] reincarnate[ed] themselves in the new-born’ (p. 137).

A space of merging temporal horizons (lived time)

The phenomenological understanding of time refers to a time that seems to speed up in enjoyment and slow down in periods of boredom or anxiousness. It is the human being’s temporal way of being in the world. Merleau-Ponty (1996) stated ‘Time exists for me only because I am situated in it … Time exists for me because I have a present’ (p. 423). Van Manen (1990) has maintained that the ‘temporal dimensions of past, present, and future constitute the horizons of a person’s temporal landscape’ (p. 104). As a person’s identity emerges and grows, s/he not only lives towards a future that is taking shape, but also reinterprets the past in light of who s/he has now become. The past changes because a person lives towards a future which she or he can see beginning to take shape. Through an individual’s hopes and dreams for the future, a perspective on the life that lies ahead is gained.

There was a sense in which David’s claim ‘It is beyond logic’ may indicate a longing to enter a space in which the temporal landscape of the ancient past and the distant (as well as immediate) future fuse into a single horizon. In this space the time in which the Dreamtime story was set was brought into the present moment. It fused with the here-and-now. The narrative of the Dreamtime story presented David with an alternative perspective on life: that mystery, rather than materialism, was an integral part of what it means to be human. This realisation may give a direction and a perspective on the life that may lie ahead.

The power of the narrative to merge the temporal horizons of past, present and future is not a new phenomenon. In the Christian tradition, for example, the stories of Scripture have always contained such a power. When sacred text is proclaimed, the saving acts of God are made present in the here-and-now (see Martos, 1981; Cooke, 1983; O’Loughlin, 2000). The deep remembering – anamnesis – makes
present the events of long ago, enabling the Christian to ‘enter’ the story and so (potentially at least) be transformed by it. In the same way, the Dreamtime stories of the indigenous Australian people, when retold and celebrated, are made present in the immediate temporal horizon, in which past, present and future merge as a single reality. David’s claim ‘It is beyond logic’ perhaps intuitively indicated a desire to enter such a space. Possibly as the result of the process of aboriginalisation (Tacey, 2000), the Dreamtime story was in some way brought into the immediate temporal horizon of this child. Perhaps he, like other Anglo-European Australians felt the ‘pull’ towards this space, to experience the connection to the land, a ‘spirit of place’ (Tacey, 1995, 2000) with its ancient past and the promise of a beckoning future.

Kelly (1990) has spoken of this attraction to the land as ‘a new imagining’. It involves a re-examination of the Anglo-European’s relationship with the uniqueness of the Australian continent. As an Australian, Kelly has maintained the land is ‘our place; the place where our lives are earthed and grounded. We are coming to reverence it as our own “holy land”’ (p. 103). Perhaps the beginnings of such a new imagining were evident in the innate wisdom of this Year 5 student, who indicated a longing to enter a space in which the temporal horizon of the future was one of possibilities – of new imaginings and a promise of what might come to pass.

**Relationality (lived human relation)**

Relationality refers to the lived relationships that people maintain with others in the interpersonal space they share. In the larger existential sense, human beings have searched in their experience of the other for a sense of life’s meaning and purpose (van Manen, 1990). Tacey (2003) has maintained that the self only comes to know itself in relationship with the other. Without a personified ‘absolute other’ (p. 156) the self lacks a sense of identity, definition and form.

Yet the notion of an Absolute Other is in many ways beyond the logic of enlightened thinking. To encounter and enter into relationship with the Other, one needs to enter the realm of mystery. Mystery does not pertain solely to the notions of other-worldliness and esotericism. It is sensed and experienced in the ordinariness of life. For example, it can be encountered in the retelling of an Aboriginal Dreamtime story such as the one referred to in this paper, which is itself a narrative set within the ordinariness of the Australian landscape. Mystery then involves Tacey’s (2003) notion of experiencing the sacred in the ordinary, of being able to recognise the mystery of the sacred in one’s surrounding environment (Champagne, 2001).

There was a sense in which David appeared to recognise and sense the mystery of the sacred in the ordinary. The Aboriginal Dreamtime story provided him with the opportunity for this to occur. While perhaps unable to articulate this in the language of adults, there seemed to be a sense in which David encountered the sacred and recognised that it was indeed beyond logic. The encounter was not an event that could be reasoned through. It was an experience, an entering of the mystery, perhaps in many ways beyond explanation.
This encounter with the sacred, the longing and openness to enter the realm of mystery may have represented a genuine willingness to enter into relationship with the Sanctified. It was characterised not so much by adoration and worship that typify religious discourse, but rather by questioning, pondering and searching. Elton-Chalcraft (2002), Hay and Nye (1998) and Zohar and Marshall (2000) have suggested that these characteristics can typify the expression of an individual seeking to enter into relationship with the Transcendent that many have named as God. There was a sense in which all of the children involved in the discussion – Michael and Richard, as well as David – were searching in this way. Their wonderings, although not expressed in terms of religious language, point towards their searching in the Other for a sense of meaning and purpose. Do the children in the text being reflected upon name the Transcendent as God? Are they aware of this relationship with the Transcendent, and that their engagement in the Aboriginal Dreamtime story may be indicative of this? These are questions in need of further reflection, ultimately by David and his peers themselves.

Conclusion

The hermeneutic phenomenological reflection upon the text undertaken above may indicate that something of David’s spirituality was revealed in his life expression and uttering of the phrase ‘It is beyond logic’. The various insights resulting from each of the lifeworld existentials point to David’s recognition of the realm of mystery and indicate his desire to enter this domain at least on some occasions as an alternative way of being in the world.

The text outlined at the beginning of this paper, of one child thinking in this way, is an example of the primary school classroom as being a potential site of spiritual disclosure, where educators may gain insight into, as well as nurture the spirituality of their students. Incidences such as the one described in this paper do occur frequently in the classroom context. They can arise from the planned activities that comprise the classroom curriculum. The episode described in this paper was not one that had been especially designed for the author to observe. It was a part of the planned classroom programme. The important factor is for the teacher to be aware of and to be open to such possibilities and to encourage learners to think more deeply in this way. The classroom teacher in the incident described in this paper seemed to have missed a valuable opportunity to explore further with the students the idea of something as being beyond logic, and so, in the business of the reality of life in the classroom, missed an opportunity for nurturing the spirituality of his students. The teacher did not seem to take seriously David’s statement as an initiation into the hermeneutic process, and a potentially valuable learning encounter was lost. In this instance, David’s statement was at once a point of epiphany and closure. To have engaged with and taken ‘beyond logic’ genuinely may have resulted in the students exploring issues of ultimate meaning and value, as well the chance to nurture the spiritual lives of the children.

Perhaps this paper has also pointed towards the importance of reflection as a valuable educational tool that may require greater emphasis, practice and usage.
among classroom practitioners. In the educational context, reflection on the part of the teacher can be critical, not only in terms of evaluating the approaches to learning and teaching, that is pedagogy, but also as a means by which to come to know students. Reflexivity may enable educators not only to refine their teaching, but also to discern the importance of particular events within the classroom context for students. Such reflection on the episode described above has indicated one child in particular as potentially revealing something of his spirituality, and may give rise to the possibilities that could exist within the classroom context for nurturing the spiritual dimension. Without adequate reflection and time set aside specifically for this activity, it may be that classroom teachers such as David’s could continue to miss opportunities to explore and to nurture spirituality.

Notes
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1. David, and the names of other students in the text, are pseudonyms used in order to protect the children’s identity.

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References
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