

# Touching Young Hearts

## The Medicine I Needed to Put My Life Back Together

by Rahima Holmes

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### Acknowledgment

Eight months ago I was floundering without a practicum project for my Masters in Ministry Degree at the University of Spiritual Healing and Sufism. My teacher, Paul Hamid Werder, suggested I use my volunteer job as my project. He helped me to see its value. It's been an eye opening experience and has helped me realize that I don't give myself credit for what I do or who I am. I see now that I had bought into the old belief that "I'm not good enough" to such an extent that I didn't feel the work I was doing was worthy of a practicum. Now I realize that it is.

For twenty-one years I had a wonderfully creative and satisfying job as a theatre professor at Whitman College. I taught acting, movement, voice, and directed plays. My students and I explored how to bring characters and relationships to life using one's emotions, psyche, intellect, body, and imagination. This involved carefully analyzing scripts, creating characters by fusing one's imagination with the findings of the analysis, letting go of one's personality traits to step into the character's skin, collaborating with one another, and presenting the results of our exploration to an audience. It was exciting work.

This is what I do now: I volunteer with 3-5 year old children at Kids' Place, a pre-school. I soothe hurt feelings, put ice on wasp stings, eat imaginary soups and pies, am the tickle monster who chases squealing potential victims, get marched off to prison to be tricked into drinking poison, read story upon story, and praise artistic endeavors and athletic feats. It's also work that I love.

Here's what happened: In 2005 I had a stem cell transplant. The procedure saved my life but left me debilitated. The chemotherapy impaired my memory and my ability to focus, to solve problems, and to communicate clearly. I was unable to keep my job as a college professor. My job had been my identity, and without it I, was bereft. I became very depressed. One day I was talking to a young girl across the street, and I got a very clear image of one of my spiritual teachers urging me to work with children. The next day I volunteered at a preschool.

I have always loved children—their innocence, their unbridled joy, their curiosity, their wonder, their spontaneity, their truthfulness, their directness and their vulnerability.

It is easy to see the Divine in them. They live without ruse. They live in the moment. As my husband says, *they are all there*. The kids were life-affirming and just the medicine I needed to help me put my life back together. It has been a gift to be part of the children's lives. It has given me a sense of purpose and the feeling that I am of value.

I have been volunteering at a preschool, Kids' Place, for five years now. I work in the Big Room with 3-5 year old children. My intention has been to keep the children physically and emotionally safe while they play, to help them learn how to socialize with love, compassion, and respect for each other and for all living things (ants, roly polies, grasshoppers, trees and flowering plants included), to encourage confidence, creativity and sensitivity, and to help them realize their gifts.

These are small things, but they constitute the fabric of the children's day, and they shape each child's development. It is crucial to do those things with love, kindness, patience, and joy. The children absorb those qualities and express them in their behavior. They tend to treat others as they are treated. I often look for the child not engaged and try to connect with him or her by acknowledging his/her feelings and then finding an activity we can engage in together. It needs to be one that brings the child joy, one that can override the sadness or anger the child is feeling. I see my job as supporting the light of each child I come into contact with, so that his or her light can shine a bit more brightly.

There are times in the day that I don't remember words or that I lose my place reading, but I try to remember the Divine at those times, and I'm always carried through. It has been comforting and humbling. Because of my diminished capacity, I have not been able to take full responsibility for the classroom, but I have been able to assist the head teachers by working with the children one on one and supporting the children in small ways. And I pray for the children both in my own daily prayers and silently while I'm working or playing with them.

Here are some of the children I've worked with:

**Teddy** is a strong five-year-old who has trouble communicating. He can't speak clearly and it frustrates him. He wants to play with the other kids, but he doesn't know how. It makes him very angry. He often grabs and hits. The other children are afraid of him and they try to steer clear of him. The only time he seems at peace is when he is painting. Even then, his strokes are always full of rage. It's clear to the teachers that he needs special help, but his parents can't yet accept his special needs.

I tried reaching out to him several times, but he would turn away or hit me. One night I prayed for quite a while that he receive the help he needed. The next day I was sitting on the floor with another child building with Legos. Teddy climbed up on the bench beside me, squeezed himself into the tight space between me and the bench and

pressed against me for 20 minutes while he played silently and intently with Legos. He never said a word, but he was content.

Later that day when we were outside, he was throwing sand out of the sand box. He ignored my request that he keep the sand in the sandbox. I asked the Divine for help. It came to me to start shoveling sand back into the sandbox. As I did that, I explained to Teddy that we needed to keep it there and I asked him if he could help me put it back. We both then shoveled sand back into the sandbox. When we were done, he filled a bowl with sand and thrust it toward me saying, “she.” It took a minute, but I realized he was offering me a cake. I told him how I loved cake. After I asked him if it was for me, he broke out in a big smile. I asked, “Was it a birthday cake?” He nodded, and I blew out the imaginary candles.

Teddy and I are friends now. Yesterday he accidentally spilled a tub of ice water on the floor in front of me. I said, “Oh, dear,” and went for paper towels. I gave him some and he was right beside me helping me clean up. He is a good boy. I hope he will get to the point that he can play with the other kids and not scare them. I hope his parents will accept that he needs special help and seek it out. That is my prayer for him.

**Lilah** is a sweet, loving little bit of a girl. She has a speech impediment, and it is hard to understand her. One day she came to me with a dried worm. It took a while for me to understand that she wanted to bury it. She decided to bury him next to Lucky, a gold fish who had recently met his demise and now rested next to the grape arbor. She dug a hole and decided she would mark the grave with a stone. I showed her how to spell Lilly, the worm’s name. Using purple marker, she copied L-I-L-L-Y on to a small stone and put it on the grave. She felt relieved and happy that she could do something for Lilly. I felt relieved and grateful that I had been able to understand her and that I had been able to facilitate her compassionate wish to bury what had been a living thing. Respect for all living things is a crucial aspect of a child’s education.

**Stella**, an intense and confident child was told by Charlie, a charismatic and fun-loving boy, that he didn’t want to play with her. She was very hurt, got angry, and went off to sulk. I went over to her and sat beside her. I told her I was sorry that she had been hurt. She said that Charlie thought he was better than she was, that he was “more special.” We talked about everyone having special gifts. I pointed out that Charlie was special in his own way—fun and bright—and that Stella was special in her own way; she loved her friends and felt strongly about things. Stella thought about what I said and calmed down. She went back to play with Charlie but soon tired of being bossed around. She found other kids to play with.

I felt I had been helpful in showing Stella a different way of looking at things. And Stella, like so many of the children, also taught me. I realized in talking with her how much I compare myself to others and feel bad about myself when I’m not regarded as “special.” I get angry with myself and silently demean others because I’m jealous of the attention they are getting for whatever they do well. I was shown how important it is to

know myself—not just my faults, but my good qualities as well. I need to nurture those good qualities, rather than berate myself for not being as competent or as evolved as someone else. I need to remember that I am special to the Divine, as is every single human being in this world.

I have come to believe that serving the children well, like every other kind of service, involves feeling connected to Someone greater than I. My primary way of doing this is to pray 5 times a day. Because of my diminished memory and focus loss, remembering the prescribed order of the prayers has been difficult. Arranging my schedule to accommodate those times has also been challenging, but it is crucial to my relationship with God. Without it, I would be lost. It keeps bringing me back to the Divine—to remember to put Him first, to ask for His forgiveness, to thank Him. It reminds me to make good choices and to pray for the people He puts in front of me. I see my prayer as a check-in-time to ask the Divine, “How am I with You, Lord?” It’s a renewing time that I look forward to.

When I decided to use my volunteer work as my practicum, I realized that I had barely touched on the idea of using prayer for the children. Suddenly it felt very important to give them the benefits of prayer. I now include them at least twice daily. In the morning I pray that I may serve as a vessel of Divine Mercy and Love and that the children be able to move lovingly and happily through their day. At night I say the *Light Prayer*\*\* for each child and teacher in the class (at end of essay). While saying the prayer I visualize each child and try to tune into what I believe to be that particular child’s innate essence. Throughout the day, if a child is having trouble, I try to remember to silently ask the Divine for specific and special help for him or her. For example, I often step in to console a child or stop an argument. When I do, I try to remember to ask the Divine to show me what’s best for the child/children involved. When what I’m doing is not working, I try to remember to ask again for Divine Help. Frequently a solution comes to mind. When it doesn’t, I turn to other teachers for help. I believe that help from other teachers ultimately comes from the Divine. It can be humbling for me but best for the children.

Last June I went on a five-day spiritual retreat. While there, I participated in an all-night prayer vigil where I prayed for the children and the teachers. The day I returned to Kids’ Place, the kids were full of love. I got many full body hugs, when they wrapped their arms around my waist and glommed onto my leg. There were zero skirmishes both inside and out on the playground. The teachers uncharacteristically remarked on how fluidly the day had unfolded. I can’t help but think it was a specially blessed day. I realized that working with the children as I do has helped me to integrate my work and prayer in a way I’d never been able to before.

Since I’ve begun to pray for the children regularly, I’ve noticed that I’m more focused. I’m finding it easier to ask the Divine for help in the moment a child may be having trouble. I’m also more sensitive to anyone who needs attention. The children are asking me for help more frequently. There seems to be a deepening of trust, and

my confidence in having something valuable to give the kids is growing. I believe that attending the retreat has had something to do with how I'm responding to them. I came away from the retreat realizing the importance of setting intentions and of relying on the Divine for guidance, of asking the Divine for inspiration while I'm working with the kids. When I anticipate a situation getting out of control, I ask the Divine for help. When a child needs support that I'm not sure how to give, I pray for guidance. Often when I'm comforting a child, I ask the Divine to give the child what he or she needs.

Integrating prayer with my work has changed my attitude toward it. Because I've asked the Divine to help the children and to use me as a vessel of His healing, I am more tuned into how I am serving them. I believe I am more engaged and, as a result, more effective.

My spiritual teacher, Sidi al Jamal, has asked us to take what we have been given out into the world. I'm not able to do what he has asked on a large scale, but I believe I can carry what the Divine has given me to my family, to my friends, to the children I volunteer with, and—I hope—to whomever He puts in front of me. I believe these are the people whose lives I can touch, one at a time; I believe it is my purpose to love and care for them as best I can. I am beginning to realize that there is so much mercy for all of us. I pray that I continue to take in that mercy and stop beating myself up for not being a perfect person. That person is an illusion that doesn't exist and serves no one.

Writing this essay has brought me closer to the Divine and helped me open more fully to His Presence in my life. It has helped me to touch the lives of children, one heart at a time, so that they feel good about themselves. It has helped me to value the time I spend with them and the time I spend praying for them; I am beginning to experience the mercy that flows through me and to value my true nature. It has allowed me the gift of talking with the Divine about anything that comes up in my life. I am grateful for the blessings that have come from this process.

### The Light Prayer

*Oh, Allah! Please put light in the heart of this person*

*And light in the soul of this person*

*And light in the spirit of this person*

*And light in the intellect of this person*

*Oh, Allah! Put light in the right side of this person*

*Put light on the left side of this person*

*And light in front of this person*

*And light behind this person*

*And light underneath the feet of this person*

*And light above the head of this person*

*Oh, Allah! Make this person all light*