

Don't overbook your child's summer

By JIM RYAN

Thirteenth Sunday
in Ordinary Time
Mark 5:21-43
June 30, 1991

It's summertime, but the living ain't easy for the hurried child.

We're not talking about the so-called "spoiled" child of the 40's and 50's who was encouraged to live as if the summer never ended; we're talking about the child who is encouraged to fill the summer with activities and lessons that can be added to his or her curriculum vitae.

TWO KINDS OF SUMMER TIME

1. Empty Time. Must be filled with adult-approved lessons, courses and summer camps. Time is structured. No different from the school year: lessons are learned, tests are taken, and students pass or fail, succeed or not.

2. Freed Time. Not the same as free time. Adults may have free time. Children can only have freed time. This is when children are overlooked by the adults in their lives. When overlooked, they are freed from all of the structured times that adults impose on them. Freed time may be boring or magical, but it is the time that is necessary for children to become human beings, according to Iona and Peter Opie, or to become religious beings, according to David Heller.

Freed time may result in activities, songs, games or fantasies, that aren't adult-approved. These activities aren't intended for adult eyes or ears. They are the secret and private curriculum that children engage in, and according to the Opies, what "...children learn from each other is more real, more immediately serviceable, and more



Religion and Reality
by Jim Ryan

vastly entertaining to them than anything which they learn from adults." They may even discover God.

TWO IDEAS OF CHILDHOOD

1. The Child as Miniature Adult. This child is ignored; no special allowances are made for him or her. She is swept along in life with everyone else, wears cast-offs, and plays and works alongside adults.

2. The Child as Center of the Universe. This child is coddled and cared for. Special allowances abound. The focus of the family is the child's development and success. All of the parent's hopes rest on her.

We seem to have combined both of the ideas of childhood in our day. On the one hand, as David Elkind writes, "we dress our children in miniature adult costumes (often with designer labels), we expose them to gratuitous sex and violence, and we expect them to cope with an increasingly bewildering social environment." On the other hand, we sign them up for child-designed programmes intended to enhance their development and successful entry into adult life.

The June issue of Harper's has

two interesting pieces on children and childhood. The first, by Tom Englehart, "Reading May Be Harmful To Your Kids," complains about the state of children's book publishing. He writes that children's books have become a consumer product teaching children to become consumers. He concludes, "...children's book publishing only creates more adults scripting 'choose-your-own adventures' that limit what choices children are likely to make in the privacy of their imaginations. The saddest thing about this phenomenon is simply that children, buying these books, have no way of knowing that they are being shortchanged by grown-ups; for where children are deepest, least reachable, most unnerving, is exactly where this world of books is becoming shallower, more obvious, more expectable, and yet in weighing more heavily on the young."

The second piece is a short story by Charis W. Conn, entitled "Octopus." The story is one of self-discovery. A young girl of ten goes to a summer fair with her younger brother and a girl friend, and learns something about life. What she learns is dark and mysterious.

Interestingly enough, what enables her learning is parents who leave her alone.

On the way to the fair, they pass the religious school that her friend Miriam attends. The school makes her friend wholesome and pleasant. She prefers Miriam when she is "...wonderfully warped and resourceful and essentially naughty..."

The message seems to be, if you love your child, don't overbook their summer.

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WEEK THREE:
The Cellar—The Village Shoppe—North Star Dry Cleaners—Victoria Lane—Pictures & Presents—Target Food Stores—My Generation—Carpet Barn—The McGibbon Hotel—Elizabeth's Fashions.

WEEK FOUR:
The McGibbon Hotel—Elizabeth's Fashions—Victoria Lane—Pictures & Presents—North Star Dry Cleaners—The Village Shoppe—Target Food Stores—The Cellar—My Generation—Carpet Barn.