



Faith Without Words: On Infant Faith Formation

Jeanne Choy Tate

Awareness of how we first formed our faith as infants re-connects us as adults with faith at its source.

Faith forms first without words. Faith lives in our bodies before it is named. In our wordy Western culture, adult faith too often drowns in words. The tsunami of doctrine that confronts us easily overwhelms its source.

By contrast, an infant's whole body is their mind. Long before words give names to faith, it speaks its message in the tender touch of caregiving—in the loving glance, in a reassuring response to cries, in the anticipation of daily routine. Awareness of how we first formed our faith as infants re-connects us as adults with faith at its source.

Faith is formed through acts of caregiving.

You, the infant, are born into a family story. This story welcomes you to a place of belonging. It holds you as special and unique. If you are born in a family of faith, the story of faith embraces you as well. Knowing the support of a community larger than themselves and trusting God's faithful presence, your parents carry this faith in their bodies as they cradle the newborn you.

Even the most tentative new parent comes bearing a melody of body rhythms. You, the infant, lean into that heartbeat and still your breathing on the rhythm of their breath. In their sheltering arms, your body learns to sing a song of harmony.

Jeanne Choy Tate is the author of *Something Greater: Culture, Family and Community as Living Story* (WipfandStock 2013). As a bilingual/bicultural early childhood educator in San Francisco's Chinatown and Presbyterian lay pastor, she discovered the interdependent values of Chinese culture to be, in many ways, closer to the values of early biblical communities than modern individualism. In an M.A. with Robert Bellah and a Ph.D. at the Graduate Theological Union, she explored how infants and young children are invited to share in a heritage of culture and faith. Visit her Facebook page: www.facebook.com/JeanneChoyTate.author.

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As their eyes light up with pleasure in your presence, you know a love for simply being who you are. In daily acts of bathing, toileting, clothing, feeding—you experience the comforting order of ritual. In the security of a parent’s reassuring presence, you learn to trust that life is good—“I will be provided for!”

Faith is formed in sacred time and place.

A newborn’s unpredictable rhythms wreak havoc on a parent’s spiritual life, a disruption that continues through much of childhood. Faith in families is more often nurtured in small daily practices than in quiet contemplation. Even as an infant, you sensed when time and space was set apart from ordinary tasks and claimed as sacred.

Grace at meals, taking a tiny moment for gratitude, lays the day’s experiences open to blessing and invites the presence of something greater into family life. This may be all a family

needs to open a portal to the world of faith. Lighting a candle and holding hands can deepen time together. A special chair, a picture on the wall, a shelf for nature’s gifts—can also claim a space as holy.

If family time expands in prayers or Bible tales or song, the awe in tone of voice, the reverent pose, conveys to the infant you the wonder that adults too find in sacred presence. Long before words are needed, you feel an invitation to share in this source of strength and meaning.

Faith is formed at play in creation.

Faith forms in time alone. The dance of sunbeams on your crib, the curl of sand between your toes, the velvet touch of flower—all beckon you to be at play in God’s creation.

The world around seems oh-so-much-larger than tiny infant you . . . and yet creation holds you safe in its embrace of beauty.



Something Greater: Culture, Family, and Community as Living Story

Jeanne Choy Tate (Wipf and Stock, 2013)

Will the next generation still honor the values of caring for others and contributing to community life? The psychology of individualism that underlies American life is no longer adequate to guide a future filled with diversity. America's children may have wings to soar into the future, but they lack roots connecting them to a shared heritage. *Something Greater* explores the impact of individualism on American child-rearing practices, and its inability to deal with diversity while sustaining life together in families and communities. By contrasting the intergenerational values of biblical and Chinese communities and current infant research with her own experiences in San Francisco's Chinatown, the author reveals how the living stories of heritage that lie at the heart of human development speak to a deep American hunger for shared values and connectedness in family and community.