



FONS VITAE

Dear Parents and Teachers,

How do Ghazali's stories relate meaningfully to your child's life?

Fons Vitae thought it would be helpful for many of you – who are so very busy – to have a clear overview of some of the most useful aspects of the Ghazali Children's Project.

1. *Character Development and Ghazali Stories*

This discussion demonstrates how the *Revival of the Religious Sciences* adapted for children provides, in a step-by-step way, the concepts which make life truly meaningful, as well as a relevant, complete, and orderly methodology for the realization of virtuous character.

2. *Addressing the Needs and Opportunities of Islamic Weekend and Other Schools: Issues and Recommendations*

This shows how a variety of educational concerns and needs expressed by parents and Islamic school teachers are addressed specifically by the Ghazali Children's Project.

3. A small selection of relevant notes from children, parents, and teachers, which you will enjoy.

Endless blessings,

The Ghazali Project Team

How Ghazali's Stories can be Used as a Tool to Contribute to the Formation of Good Character.

Fons Vitae has taken on the challenge, with the generous support of the John Templeton Foundation and the international Muslim community, of bringing out a selection of volumes from al-Ghazali's (1055-1111) spiritual classic, *The Revival of the Religious Sciences*, or *Ihya*, in a format useful for Islamic schools and families. The aim of the Ghazali Children's Project's booksets and workbooks, interactive website, and curricula is to support solid and *actual* character transformation and virtue development needed by both children and their mentors.

The *Ihya*, widely considered in the Muslim world to be second only to the Quran, provides, in a step-by-step way, the concepts which make life truly meaningful as well as a relevant, complete, and orderly methodology for the realization of virtuous character.

Teacher training and empowerment can be made easier and greatly enhanced by using this Ghazali Children's Project, in which the foundational metaphysical, ethical, and spiritual teachings for Character Development have been simplified and essentialized for educating the young. (We offer these ongoing publications as a useful contribution for Islamic schooling that addresses some of the acknowledged problematic issues and needs.)

Virtues are ultimately based on trust in God, the wise and loving Creator. Either everything is meaningful, or nothing is meaningful – it's not that meaning is just haphazardly sprinkled about. In the great faith traditions, God is recognized as omniscient. People are given lives with both trials and blessings, which are opportunities for developing such virtues as contentment, patience, and gratitude, etc. This foundational tenet is made crystal clear by Ghazali in his systematic exposition of character perfection.

Storytelling as a Teaching Methodology

The presentation of Imam al-Ghazali's profound and reassuring exposition of the nature and purpose of human life is presented in the Ghazali Children's Booksets and curricula in a format long appreciated in Islamic literature – many stories within stories within more stories. In this

Series, these tales are centered around a group of inquiring children in a small town, as well as on the daily life and members of one extended family in particular.

Everyone is familiar with the captivating tales of the 1001 Arabian Nights. One of the great spiritual examples of this form of literature is *The Conference of the Birds*, written by twelfth century poet Farid ud-Din Attar. The Hoopoe, or King Bird, mentions to a company of assembled birds that the feather of the *Simurgh* (a revelation from God) has fallen in China, and therefore it is incumbent upon the birds that they travel to the site of this Revelation. Although the birds agreed in unison that this is the most urgent of all undertakings, on the day of departure – each bird arrives and gives an excuse why he cannot go (I don't believe in the feather, I am too busy, my family needs me, etc.). The book is composed of the stories that the Hoopoe tells each bird, which explain the profound misunderstanding preventing that bird from going. The peacock, for example, has too much pride to go. Imagine that every reason a person can give for not seeking the return to God by attempting a virtuous life is made clear in the stories the Hoopoe conveys. In the end, only five birds go. When they reach the gate of the Simurgh, they cry out, "O, it is we, the bedraggled five birds, who have come to You, O God." God replies, "You may not enter." For a few moments, the birds reconsider, then knock again on the gate to paradise, and when God asks, "Who is there?" they answer in unison, "It is You, O God." Their virtuous characters are reflected in their having realized humility, their innate, pure Selves.

Humility can be compared to the string on which the beads of all other virtues are strung and depend. Remove humility from any of them and you are left with nothing. It is this "spiritual poverty" that is the goal of every religious tradition. It is the underlying teaching of Imam al-Ghazali and the virtuous and exemplary state of being he realized, which is made clear in his life's story.

Getting on Board with Children Seeking Answers, Travelling *With* Them in Their Search
The Need for a Teacher, Living Exemplars, a Sense of Self-Worth, and Clear Purpose

In both Ghazali's life, which the children learn about in the Ghazali Children's Project, and in the stories of Haj Abdullah, the importance of seeking and finding meaning becomes clear.

Ghazali was a seeker after ultimate Truth and didn't give up until he reached the answer, "Be humble and serve. All else is vanity." This Children's Series opens with a group of children filled with questions and needing answers. They yearn for the *meaning* behind the religious rites they are asked to perform, the "whys" behind the prohibitions and requirements. After they have found a place in a forgotten garden where they can meet to discuss these worrisome issues, they realize the need for a teacher. The beautiful, calm, elderly, patient Haj Abdullah – the village elder who is often found sitting in the park surrounded by birds – agrees to meet with them. He answers their questions by passing on Ghazali's key teachings in the form of metaphors and stories, which, of course, is the way we *really* learn. But children also need to learn by living examples. Haj Abdullah *exemplifies* the many qualities which are needed for good character and a beautiful comportment. He is present, gentle, generous. He is also depicted throughout the Series as the respected elder in different guises; he could be a child's teacher or grandfather. Haj Abdullah is "Everyman."

The stories which transmit Imam al-Ghazali's teachings intend to help a child to identify with his or her True Self (whether that be called the "Christ nature," the "Buddha nature," the "fitrah," etc.), and not make the false, disheartening identification with his or her lower, egoic tendencies. Instead, these tendencies are to be *used as opportunities* for the purification of the self. Children not only need a clear sense of *who* they are – a sense of self-worth, dignity, and nobility – but they need to see themselves as members of an orderly and loving creation. Children need to see life's circumstances as opportunities to regain and maintain their pure, innate, and noble character. Throughout all of these Ghazali booksets, the children in the stories mention continuously what *fun* they are having using all the difficulties in their daily lives as opportunities to *polish their hearts*. The purpose and process of life's journey must be conveyed to them in a positive way that engages their delight, enthusiasm, and imagination.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF STORIES

The renowned mythologist, Joseph Campbell, commented, "Don't ask if the story is true, but ask what is the truth *behind* the story?" Does it matter whether Job was an historical personage? The lesson from the account of his patience provides us with a truth of eternal and universal value.

The Two Worlds and Polishing the Heart

In order for a person to even see why character development and virtue are of value, these must be shown to exist, as well as be *relevant*, within a meaningful, coherent worldview. In Ghazali's *Book of Knowledge*, he begins by setting the stage for a meaningful universe and a person's place in it. In an orderly step-by-step way, he builds up this cosmology and establishes the nobility of man's innate nature. Ghazali's stories give children something to work with, the "whys" behind the religious doctrine and methodology they are asked to believe and practice.

In the Series' format, an exemplary elder, Haj Abdullah, tells the young people stories which present the teachings of Ghazali in a captivating way. He begins by explaining that there are two kinds of learning – one practical and the other, the Real and Special knowledge. When the children inquire what this special learning is, he explains that it has to do with the "polishing of one's Heart." There are, in fact, two hearts: the physical one, which pumps blood, and the higher, spiritual one, which relates to one's fitrah, or primordial, noble, innate, True Self. He explains that the reason this Heart must be polished of any dust which tarnishes it (i.e. the vices) is that there are Two Worlds: this brief, temporary one filled with suffering and trials, and the Eternal one, or Paradise. He tells them Ghazali's story of the early Medinan, Hasan al-Basri, who stated that goodness in *this* world is knowledge, and goodness in the Next is Paradise. The children immediately ask, "But *how* do we get there?" Ghazali's story of the overturned boat goes on to illustrate how one reaches this final goal. He compares the life of the body to a boat filled with possessions. When at last the boat turns over (i.e. the body dies) and all of its contents sink to the bottom of the sea, what *can* you take with you?

"If you were in a boat that tipped over and then sank, all your toys would float away and sink to the bottom of the sea. The things we have in this world – our clothes, toys, games, even our bodies, get old and never last. But if we have a beautiful, shining, spiritual heart, it will last forever."

This story makes the point that the only thing that survives bodily death is the *state* of the Heart. Ghazali's metaphor of the pure, golden Heart as one's True Self and the needs and reason for polishing it – as *central* to life's journey, has proven to be an entirely useful metaphor in helping children consciously observe and correct themselves. One wonders how one could engage a child in self-reflection without such a brilliant symbolic image.

Ghazali then goes on to build up the concept of a spiritual universe while repeatedly reinforcing the primary need for virtuous character. The Quran and Hadith are his main source texts.

Teaching by Example

He underscores the urgency of teaching by example. Even children teach by how they act. Ghazali mentions a hadith related by the Prophet S which says that “Truly God's angels and those of His Heavens and His earth, even to the ant in its hill, and the fish in the sea, all ask God to bless the one who teaches people the path to goodness.”

The children are further encouraged by being told, “If you learn good things and teach by doing these things, the angels will befriend you and stroke you with their wings.” An appealing image!

Our Time on Earth

Story of the Seed Bed

When Haj Abdullah tells the children the Story of the Seed Bed, they are better able to understand that the world is a place where people, like plants, have been given a time and a chance to grow – and polish their hearts. The children know that plants require soil, sun, and water to do well and discuss the conditions which *they* need to grow into beautiful beings.

The Innate, Noble Nature of Human Beings and Scripture

Ghazali makes it clear that the innate nature of a child has special qualities. He refers to this as *Dhat al Tifl*, which is the essence a child receives from God at birth, which has the ability to know what is possible or not, and this essence directs the human soul toward faith in God. The

children in the story talk about how much *fun* it will be to guard this special nature, like defending a castle. In sub-stories, the parents and grandparents join in by telling the children stories that explain how the Quran was revealed and how the system of hadith, with its *isnad*, or chain of authority, came to be. Ghazali's presentation of the scriptural basis for the faith gives meaning to the journey the children are on, and helps them understand the "whys."

The Process of Conscious Self-Correction

The Journey We Are On

In the story, the family takes the children on a camping trip. The parents take the opportunity to compare these travels to the journey to the Next World. Sitting around the campfire, another story within a story is told.

"Imagine you have two wolves inside your head whispering good and bad ideas to you. You can *watch* these thoughts and ideas. If you do what the naughty wolf suggests, you will be feeding him and he will grow stronger and more powerful, but if you do not do what he suggests, he will starve and wither away." (Cherokee Tale)

Stories like this give children ways of identifying and dealing with temptations and processing good counsel.

Righteous Behavior

In a further sub-story, the children are having a conversation with their parents at home. Father tells them inspiring stories about the exemplary lives of the four great Imams of Islam – teachers of the Heart. He tells the children that Imam Shafi'i did good deeds, but always in secret. When in a discussion, he always wanted the *other* to be right. He always wanted the best for everyone, no matter who. People appreciated Imam Malik so greatly that they brought gifts to his home, but he immediately gave them to those in need. Imam Malik also had such profound respect for learning and teaching that, before doing so, he always performed his ablutions and perfected his appearance. He explained that this was because what we learn is like *light*, and we want to be at our very best when we receive God's light. If he didn't know an answer to a question, this great

man was not shy to say, “I don’t know.” Once, Imam Abu Hanifa heard someone praising him for something he had not done. He was so embarrassed that he proceeded to take on performing that righteous act for the rest of his life. Such stories of exemplary people are perfect for children to re-enact in skits to help establish the virtue. Play-acting needs to be encouraged continually to help a virtue become a reflex.

Patience and Trust

One of Ghazali’s most famous stories is called ‘The Ant and the Pen.’ In it, the shortsighted ant believes that it is the nib of the pen which is writing the stream of letters on the piece of paper on which the ant is standing. He cannot see a higher cause for what is happening, just as people are not open to a greater plan in which they can trust God’s wisdom and foreknowledge. In order to make this Ghazali story more accessible to children, it was told in this way:

“The baby ants were thrilled that their parents were taking them to the ant zoo. When news came that the ant relatives would be visiting and the excursion was canceled, the baby ants complained, ‘But you *said* we were going!’ Their faces became moody and filled with gloom (as is the way with disappointed human children). After the ant relatives departed, the family heard on the ant radio that a lion had escaped that very same day at the zoo and wreaked much havoc and danger for the visitors. The parents explained to the baby ants that God had sent the relatives to protect them from going to the zoo that day.”

In the same vein, a further story, told in many traditions, was included to illustrate the same.

A boy loses his family’s only horse. When the neighbors run to tell the father, “We are so sad for you. You are poor and this was your only horse,” the father comments, “Maybe good, maybe bad.” The next day, when the boy goes looking for the lost horse, he comes across a herd of wild horses, brings them back, and puts them in a corral. The neighbors run joyfully to the father and say, “Now you are rich, all will be well.” The father comments, dispassionately, “Maybe good, maybe bad.” But when the son tries to break in one of these horses for himself to ride, he is very badly trampled. The neighbors again

return and cry out, “We are so sad for you that your only son is now crippled.” The father remains in a state of trust. The next day, the army comes into the village and takes away all the able-bodied young men to battle, where they will most likely meet their death.

The lesson is that even though we cannot know or understand Divine Providence, we must trust God and be patient in adversity. Children need to learn how to overcome disappointment and trials by being aware of and open to a higher Reasoning.

Ten Things That Can Harm Ourselves and Harm Others: Spiritual Opportunities!

At this point, with the metaphysical “stage” having been set and the purpose of “polishing the Heart” made clear, Ghazali lays out succinctly the ten vices which must be absolutely eliminated. He discusses in detail the nature of the vices which must be polished away so that the True, Innate, Noble, Real Self and virtuous character may shine radiantly.

In this children’s adaptation of the *Ihya*, the grandmother has all the children drawing heart images on pieces of paper. She then asks them to place different colored dots on their heart drawings which can represent the vices which are in most need of their attention. These are all then enumerated by the grandmother so that it is clear to the children what kind of “dust” might dirty their pure Hearts. First, **envy** is discussed. Imam al-Ghazali compares envy to fire, which burns up wood – he tells a story showing that, in the very same way, envy eats up one’s good deeds.

Grandmother said, “You have just learned what the word ‘envy’ means: wanting what *others* have instead of being very happy with the particular blessings that God chose for you. Our Prophet S told us that envy burns up good deeds and good things you have done. So if you feel envy arising inside you, look at it, and what do you say?”

Zainab offered, “I say, ‘No, envy, no! I love the special blessings and trials that God chose to especially give me and chose to give my friends because He knows best what we *really* need to work with in order to enter the Garden and come back to Him!’”

Grandmother goes on to mention the other nine reprehensible things which hurt the Heart, the ones that Imam al-Ghazali warns about; she wants the children to be aware of and on the lookout for **lying, pride, being a know-it-all, wasting time, backbiting, bragging, hypocrisy, prying and spying**, and finally, **arguing**. Ghazali goes into each of these dangers in great detail. When speaking of bragging, he includes “ugly truths” – that is when you tell something that is true about yourself, but your intention for doing so is to show off – one-upmanship.

One of the more subtle vices Ghazali writes about is that secretly we often *don't* want **the best for others**.

Grandfather says, “Sometimes you may be secretly happy if someone else fails. But this is such a terrible way to treat others. Don't you want to see them shine, too? So before you argue in order to win an argument, you must ask yourself, ‘Is this how I would want to be treated? Would I like this?’ Have you ever felt happy or glad because someone else failed at something? Or have you ever felt sad when someone else succeeded and did very well?”

The children in the story discover the meaning of **hypocrisy** for themselves. A neighboring man gives them a pious lecture on being kind to their struggling pet kitten, whom they have dressed up. They take this to heart and free their pet. But later they discover the so-called pious neighbor has a dog tied up in his backyard that has been left without food or water. He does not do what he recommends to others and only pretends to be righteous.

When the grandmother overhears two boys **arguing** loudly, trying to win out against one another, she notices that a neighbor peers over the fence and tells the boys the following story, related by Ghazali:

“The Prophet S tells us that Allah will build you a house in the Garden of Paradise if you give up quarreling and arguing, *especially* when you are in the wrong. And if you do this when you are in the *right*, God will build that house for you in the highest part of the

Heavenly Garden. In other words, never argue with anyone ever! If you feel like arguing, just let it go! Even if you are sure you are right about something.” Abdullah and Hisham were shocked.

“I guess Hisham and Abdullah never thought about arguing in that way before,” said Zainab. “They did not realize that they could *use* that chance to make their hearts brighter and shinier by just stopping their argument. We all get **opportunities** like that every day.”

Further examples are given which continue to emphasize the importance of *using* trials for the polishing of the Heart.

The Polished, Empty, Humble Heart is a Place in Which Angels Like to Stay

Grandfather explained, “Let’s imagine your Heart is like a house with angels living inside it, and you can feel their beautiful presence and guidance. Now, if you are, for example, **angry** and puffed up with **pride**, wanting what other people have instead of what God has chosen for you – all these bad feelings would be just like frightening, barking dogs and all the angels would flee from your scary Heart-home.”

“Oh,” said Bilal, “you mean that the specks and ugly dots of dust on our hearts, all the naughty thoughtless things we sometimes do, can be like barking dogs that scare away the angels?”

Grandfather Muhammad continued, “What you learn, True Knowledge, is not a question of how many new ideas and facts you are taught. It is light cast into the Heart. Children, the story Imam al-Ghazali tells about the barking dogs is only to give you an example, using something you can see in *this* world as a ‘metaphor’ for deeper meanings that will be clear in the Next World.”

Using Your Time Well

Ghazali tells the story of a brook of water that is intending to reach the Sea, but instead it dissipates itself with many distractions. There is not enough water left to achieve its Ultimate Goal and Destination. People have just so much time in their lives and must be careful not to waste it. Grandmother counsels:

“You don’t want to run out of time, so you have to set up a plan now. Your daily prayer helps order your day. This doesn’t mean you shouldn’t have fun and play, but you need to make certain that each day you are doing what you need to *be* your most beautiful self.”

Another such story Ghazali tells describes camels who are going on a journey. The first thing that they need is food, and then a map or a plan (i.e. Real Learning) for reaching their destination. Not long after they depart, the camels come across rocks in the desert which they consider too difficult to get over, so they give up. An analogy is drawn for people who plan to make a spiritual journey, but give up when they run into any obstruction. They don’t understand that difficulties are opportunities to polish the Heart. So, instead, like camels, people spend their **time** feeding and brushing themselves. Ghazali asks, “What is the *use* for spiritual knowledge if it is not *used*?”

Ibrahim added, “It’s like people who just spend all their time feeding and caring for themselves or their camels. If we aren’t busy polishing our hearts, we could even forget to make this amazing trip or journey in our bodies and hearts and we would lose our way and get lost forever. We wouldn’t even get to be our Real Selves. We need to be who we *already are*. We need to be who we really and truly are. We need to remember this and not ever forget!”

Gratitude and the Teacher

Ghazali tells the story of a ferocious lion that breaks out of its cage. He points out that if a person saves you from being hurt or maybe even killed, wouldn’t you thank the person who has saved your life? But, he asks, what about the teacher who passes on that special True Learning that saves us from wasting our lives? These teachers are not confined to the ones in school or even

your parents. They can be anyone who says or does something that reminds you to polish your Heart. The man being saved from the lion didn't care what kind of person was saving him, did he?

The Three Selves

One of Imam al-Ghazali's key teachings from the Quran is about the Three Selves. This is shared with the children by Grandmother. Understanding this inner "make-up" gives someone not only a tool for self-observation, but prevents one from misidentifying one's lower, egoic nature as one's True Self. Each person has (1) the lower, egoic nature, which incites one to act purely from self-interest. Then one has, what is called in Arabic, (2) the blaming soul, which like the conscience is the agent for (3) the True Self – or in this case, the Golden Heart. It is important not to identify with the lower, false self, but to understand that by observing and correcting it, one has been given an objective methodology for polishing the Heart, as it were.

The Prophetic Example, or Sunnah

People Copy One Another – Would You Like Everything That You Do Copied?

Ghazali concludes his *Book of Knowledge* with the Story of the Two Trees. One was tall and straight, as was its shadow. The other was crooked and bent, and everything that fell in its shadow was crooked and bent as well.

Omar paused and then said, "So when you go about in your daily life, sharing the good that you have learned, you are like the shadow of that tall great tree and then your shadow, what you are sharing, will be good too. But if you are naughty, like the crooked tree, others will copy that instead. Because they are copying your crooked self, what you leave behind is people following and copying a bad and ugly example."

Qasim added, "So *be* the good-hearted person that you would be happy if others copied. Wouldn't it make you sad to think that what you did made an ugly shadow? That the people who copied you turned out badly? You must be what you want all those around

you to be like. Don't ask others to do the right thing when you don't. Allah said, *Do you enjoin what is right upon others and forget yourselves?*" (Q 2:44)

Omar continued, "So, it is important and a great responsibility for each of us to be the right kind of person that others will copy and imitate. Haven't we learned how to do things by watching how other people do them? Imagine! Others are copying us, too! So we need to be at our very, very best all the time. It's an important idea, isn't it? And remember, God especially loves good teachers! Whales and ants pray for them, even!"

Stories in the *Book of Belief* and the *Book of the Mysteries of Purification*

The *Book of Belief* for Children is treated in a different kind of story format. It is not easy to present points of Islamic theological doctrine, such as Who and What and Where is God, what happens after death, and so on, in the form of imaginary tales. Instead, this material is presented during magical visits from al-Ghazali himself. One day, the children are doing their afternoon prayers and are, for some reason, particularly at peace and centered. They suddenly notice a door of light opening in the middle of the room. Al-Ghazali steps in and sits down with them, explaining that he has come to answer their deepest questions. In this way, two points are also made: that his teaching is timeless, and that the other world from which he has come to visit, is present.

In Volume 3, the *Book of the Mysteries of Purification*, however, a story element is key for our understanding that the inner purity of character and virtue is more important than outward cleanliness. Ghazali opens his work on performing ablutions with this tale: If you invited a king to your home and prepared for his visit by only polishing the front door while the inside remained full of rubbish, what would the king think (the king being God in this metaphor)?

In the accompanying adult companion volume, he puts it in this way:

"When a person completes the ablution, and is about to offer the prayer, he should bring to mind his outward purity, which is what people see, and so [he] should be shy [about] having intimate discourse with God most high without having purified his heart, which is what the Lord sees.

“He should know with certainty that the purification of the heart comes through repentance, ridding the soul of its vices, and reforming it with virtue. [He should know, too,] that a person who stops at outward purification alone is like someone who wants to invite a king to his home, then busies himself with decorating its front door while leaving the inside full of rubbish and debris. What anger and perdition such a man as this invites upon his soul! And God most high knows best.”

An idea suggested in the accompanying curriculum which could help children to personally experience this difference is as follows: children build a cardboard house, spray it with gold and decorate it, especially the front door. Then, they throw tin cans and trash inside of this home. Following this, they dress up as kings and queens and come to visit, being shocked at what they find within. By playacting this, the children explain that this story has further use and meaning beyond for performing their ablutions. Should they meet another child who has everything wonderful about her or him on the *outside*, but is the slightest bit *mean* on the inside, these are children whom they do not like. The inner character is what matters.

In the Children’s book adapted from Book 3, Haj Abdullah opens his gathering in the magical garden meeting place with the children by telling them the following story, which is later elaborated in detail with Ghazali’s explanations and teachings: In a tiny Muslim town somewhere, an old man with a cane approaches the knowledgeable village scholar, imploring that he explain “What is wudu?” The scholar tries to shoo him away, thinking it most unreasonable that a man of his age would not know how to do his ablutions. The old man refused to leave, so in the end, the scholar found it easier to simply demonstrate the procedure. When the old man is then asked to perform his corrected wudu, he gets everything wrong and out of order. The scholar throws him out in disgust, but asks his own doorkeeper to follow the man in order to determine how such ignorance could be possible. The doorkeeper returns and explains that the old man is none other than the local village holy man, or saint. The scholar then goes and kneels at his feet, asking “What is wudu?” The wise elder then explains that as one is rinsing one’s hands, for example, one asks God’s forgiveness for what one has *done*, and asks Him to help one *do* better. When rinsing one’s mouth, one expresses sorrow for what one has *said* that would be

displeasing to others, and asks God's help in only saying what is beautiful and correct. He goes on to explain how the same regret and request for guidance applies to the face, ears, head, feet, and so on. In both stories, Ghazali's teachings are clarified regarding the idea of the primacy of inner purity. The thrust of the entire *Book of the Mysteries of Purification* is that there is no point in being clean on the outside while remaining dirty within. The regular daily outer rituals of ablutions must be accompanied by an inner conscious taking account of one's actions and a sincere desire for a 180-degree turnaround, *tawbah*. The children in the story easily take note that their five times of daily ablutions are a blessed, built-in *opportunity* for self-observation and correction, for "polishing their Hearts."

The children took a deep breath. There was so much to learn. And this part was not easy. But they were all so deeply relieved to start being able to *understand* what life in this world was about. Many of their friends at school just played games and watched films because they didn't have any idea of what their lives were *for*. They could be doing *great*, and even fun, things with what simply happens day to day. Imagine if all children could learn to transform their problems and bad habits into pure, Shining Hearts! Imagine what the whole world would be like if everyone did this!

Addressing the Needs and Opportunities of Islamic Weekend and Other Schools

ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Teacher training and empowerment can be made easier and greatly enhanced by using this Ghazali Children's Project, in which the foundational metaphysical, ethical, and spiritual teachings for Character Development have been simplified and essentialized for educating the young. (We offer these ongoing publications as a useful contribution for Islamic schooling that addresses some of the acknowledged problematic issues and needs.)

Why would the renowned Islamic scholar and educator, Hamza Yusuf Hanson, co-Project Director for and initiator of the Ghazali Children's Project, say that often education at Islamic schools is "not working out?" What is *missing*? What are the key needs of children which must be addressed? Everyone needs to live with a worldview that is *meaningful*, a framework and cosmology that is not haphazard, but clear and coherent. Religious education must impart this in both doctrine and methodology.

In the *Children's Book of Knowledge*, key concepts have been made accessible for children. These have been transformed into narratives which are able to emphasize the importance of these themes and underscore their urgency. Among these, listed by Ghazali himself, are:

- Divisions of Knowledge, its importance and sacred sources.
- The brevity of human life, whose true purpose is to know and worship God and prepare to meet Him.
- The Two Worlds: The fleeting enjoyment of this world and the Eternal Peace in the Abode of Permanence.
- Human dependence on God, trust in His Will.
- The polishing of the Spiritual Heart: self-observation and correction, key virtues and harmful vices.
- The provisions and focus for life's journey, the importance of not wasting time.
- The quality of the true teacher and responsibility of the student: we are *all* teachers.
- Putting knowledge into practice.

In the *Book of Belief*, adapted for the young, Ghazali explains Who and What and Where is God – why we are created and what happens when we die, in such an understandable way that a child can find happiness and loving security.

The works of Imam al-Ghazali provide the kind of significant structure and trustworthy guidance that can help support even untrained teachers in the current system of Islamic schooling, while addressing a host of needs recently articulated by Islamic educators, listed below.

The Need for Meaning

When I worked in the Bosnian refugee camps and looked at what seemed to be a hopeless future for so many, I asked myself, “What could be the meaning of life that is universal – is the same for someone in prison or someone living a life of great ease? For something to be truly meaningful, it cannot be taken away by a stock market crash or a change of health or circumstance. What aspect of life can have meaning for everyone, no matter what their station?” I began to see that each one of us has an opportunity, moment by moment, for the perfection of character and the purification of ourselves from the lower, self-directed, egoic tendencies. No matter what one’s circumstance, one can treat any person encountered with respect, patience, empathy, generosity, humility, and kindness. The *opportunity* for developing virtuous comportment is continuously available to everyone, no matter the life situation. Ghazali explains that all we take with us at death is the state of our Heart – our state of Being

Most virtues are based on trust in God. Either everything is meaningful, or nothing is meaningful – it’s not that meaning is just haphazardly sprinkled about. In the great faith traditions, God is recognized as omniscient. People are given lives with both trials and blessings, which are opportunities for patience and gratitude, etc. This foundational tenet is made crystal clear by Ghazali in his systematic exposition of character perfection.

Contributions Offered and NEEDS Expressed by the Teachers

The Ghazali Children's Project envisions the **full participation of both parents and teachers as role models**. An educator mentioned, "We can't be what we cannot see." For this reason, our Pilot School system requests that the parents and teachers not only read all of the project materials, but that they also model the virtues themselves. If a mother finds herself arguing or backbiting, she can catch herself and objectively admit, before her children, with no embarrassment, that she is wrong. This further teaches them what must become the continuous practice of self-observation and self-correction.

A curriculum specialist and educator at Georgetown University urges us to refrain from speaking of teacher *training*, but instead speak of **empowering teachers**. The Ghazali Project aims through its curriculum and activities, as well as its interactive website, to empower teachers with extra tools for conveying deep foundational concepts and for strengthening virtuous character.

Another teacher points out how a **sense of belonging leads to responsibility**; she stresses the importance of relating what is being learned to current events and real life situations. She suggested the **importance of reenacting stories**, which is one of the key teaching methods advocated in the Ghazali pilot schools and curricula copiously illustrated on the ghazalichildren.org website with filmed skits sent in by children from the world over. An example of acting out a Ghazali story is as follows: In Ghazali's Book 3, *The Mysteries of Purification*, the Imam makes the point that your inner purity, your virtues and character, are more important than outward cleanliness. When a Muslim is doing his or her ritual ablutions, it is very easy to go through the motions of washing hands, mouth, face, ears, and so on, perfunctorily. Ghazali recommends that as one is rinsing one's hands, for example, one asks God's forgiveness for what one has *done*, and asks Him to help one *do* better. When rinsing one's mouth, one expresses sorrow for what one has *said* that would be displeasing, and asks God's help in only saying what is beautiful and correct, and so on. The story Imam al-Ghazali tells is the following: *If you invited a king to your home and prepared for his visit by only polishing the front door while the inside remained full of rubbish, what would the king think?*

In the accompanying adult companion volume, he puts it in this way:

“When a person completes the ablution, and is about to offer the prayer, he should bring to mind his outward purity, which is what people see, and so [he] should be shy [about] having intimate discourse with God most high without having purified his heart, which is what the Lord sees.

“He should know with certainty that the purification of the heart comes through repentance, ridding the soul of its vices, and reforming it with virtue. [He should know, too,] that a person who stops at outward purification alone is like someone who wants to invite a king to his home, then busies himself with decorating its front door while leaving the inside full of rubbish and debris. What anger and perdition such a man as this invites upon his soul! And God most high knows best.”

For a fun supportive activity, we have had children build a cardboard house, spray it with gold and decorate it, and then throw tin cans and trash inside. After this, they dressed up as kings and queens and came to visit, being shocked at what they found within. In playacting this, the children explain that if they meet another child who has everything wonderful about him on the outside, but is the slightest bit mean on the inside, these are children whom they do not like. This is an example of giving children activities by which a deeper understanding can be gained by **personal experience**. At the same time, the very prayers which are suggested to be used during ablutions provide an opportunity, five times a day, for a child or person to reflect on such reprehensible acts as listening to gossip (ears), etc. while simultaneously having the opportunity to resolve to instead listen to things which are beautiful and edifying.

Besides mentioning the importance of enabling children to **experience independent thinking rather than rote feedback**, she also spoke of the importance of **co-learning, rather than competitive learning**. One of the ten essential virtues Ghazali insists on in his *Book of Knowledge* is that we should *truly* want the best for others, and be joyful for their good news; this is easier said than done.

Another leader reminds us of one of the key Prophetic hadith traditions, which states that actions are judged by their intentions. Another of Ghazali's key teachings is the importance of **learning to act sincerely and avoiding the vice of hypocrisy**.

One of the activities in the curriculum, which supports the inward dimension of ablutions, deals with the rinsing of the face. Children often burden their families with moody, grumpy faces. In a suggested game, the children can all **enjoy themselves** by going around the room, making horrible, moody, unpleasant faces, but then this is followed with a contest about smiling. This is one tiny example of helping children experience the unpleasantness of what it's like to be around moody and ugly faces – what they are often putting their loved ones through. It is hoped that through the smiling aspect of the game, they might come to experience the pleasure of a smiling face and be able to repeat it often. **Lessons need to be made fun.**

More on the Importance of Providing Meaning The Primacy of Character Development in Islamic Education

Educators reiterate the importance of children being provided with *meanings*, for example, why *do* we pray? This is one of the strengths of the Ghazali Children's Project because Imam al-Ghazali's writings provide the deeper spiritual significance of every detail of the Islamic faith and human daily life. Also stressed is the **importance of social service for children**. A key component of the Ghazali curriculum is a regular monthly community service project for children of all ages. One teacher wisely suggested families be involved with such service.

Another concerned teacher emphasized the need to look at the *meaning* of education itself (the Latin root for the word is "educare," which means "to draw out that which is there," suggesting the innate, noble soul). He explains that the goal of education is to inculcate *adab*, a goodly inner disposition and character. He is sad that Revelation has been, in part, reduced to two things, one being the communication of what to do and not do, i.e. religious law... "Adab thus does not simply represent etiquettes or good manners, rather it signifies the proper comportment in every situation. In other words, it refers to the knowledge of how to carry oneself in front of God at all times and its practice. Adab therefore is the sum total of all knowledge related to moral

formation... **My point is not that learning Islamic law, theology and professional ethics is not important, rather that such learning missed the mark when it is separated from the holism of adab where adab refers to one's inner disposition and external actions. Thus, an "Islamic" education must set the attainment of adab as its end-goal and curricula must take into account the wider ontology this term refers to."**

He reiterated the concerns of all the participants: "As all of you know, Islamic weekend schools are often run by volunteers and most instructors have little formal education in teaching, curricular design and assessment, and human development. I would only add that many have little formal training in the Islamic tradition. This unfamiliarity poses challenges for identity and moral formation. **The version of Islam taught might be too simplistic, formulaic or rigid and thus not responsive to the needs of children today."**

The Iqra Book Foundation would concur that character development and *aklaq* should be the "key subject around which other subjects should rotate." It has also been said, "We feel that adab is more important to learn than historical parts that may be memorized and forgotten."

Self-Esteem – Nobility of Being

Teachers concur that it is important to envision a **better image of ourselves**; we need to transform "external regulation into internal regulations." Ghazali's transmission of the teachings on the Three Selves give children a conscious way to both observe and correct themselves, but to do so from a position of strength – that is, from having been able to identify with the innate Noble Self. From this stance, they can see non-virtuous action as "Beneath My Dignity" (a game on the website to reinforce higher self-esteem).

The Main Content Taught in Islamic Weekend Schools: Hadith, Quran, and Arabic; Problems with the Way in which These are Taught

The standard content of Weekend Islamic Schools includes Quran, Hadith, Arabic, and biographies of historical exemplary personages. It would seem that unless these important

subjects can relate in a *meaningful* way to a child's *own* personal inner life, and also be able to inspire his or her truly *wanting* to know these topics because they both appeal and *relate* in an *understandable* way to the child's reality, these scriptures and traditions will not easily be able to affect a child's perception of ultimate reality, his/her special place in it, and the subsequent development of a virtuous character which must be introduced early on as the child is being formed, rather than pasted on later with hope. The genius of Ghazali, however, is that he introduces Quranic and hadith passages *along with* his explication of developing a virtuous character in such a way that these passages are relevant and further clarify the process. He presents the importance of learning Arabic in the same way.

In every great faith tradition, the exemplary lives and characters of prophets and saints are held up as examples of how to be e.g. the imitation of Christ, realizing one's 'Buddha Nature' and in the case of Islam- the imitation of the Prophet S as is transmitted in the Hadith, one of which described him as "a walking Quran".

The outer Sunnah – what he said and did, how he prayed, walked and brushed his teeth, must be supported by conforming to the knowledge and practice of the *inner* Sunnah- i.e. a state of being and noble character. It is easy for a literalist's version of Islam, the letter of the law, to be taught. But it is the "Spirit" of the law which children (and adults) truly crave. If the Prophet S said that he came to teach character, *spirit* actualized and internalized – how can *that* be best achieved in Islamic Schools?

The Ghazali Children's Educational Package, with its textbooks, workbooks, curricula, and interactive website, can help improve the way that Islam is currently being taught – a way that Hamza Yusuf often says "is *not* working out." Ghazali's systematic approach to the spiritualization of character is a concrete method for realization of the inner Sunnah. Ghazali himself is regarded as "the proof of Islam."

According to Hamza Yusuf Hanson, what we have in Ghazali's *Ihya* is the Quran reconfigured in a systematic, step-by-step way that can be utilized and easily integrated into the development of good character, the primordial inner "Fitrah." To reiterate, Ghazali presents the relevant Quran

passages and Hadiths *along with* an explanation of what knowledge is, what the meaning of life is, who a human is and how one can, by understanding the Three Selves *consciously* from childhood, come to participate naturally in the self-observation and correction that perfects character.

In a “Hadith al-Qudsi,” God explains that He is a Treasure that wanted to be known, so He created the world and humankind. Furthermore, whoever knows himself knows his Lord. How *does* one, in fact, come to know oneself as one’s innate, divine, and noble nature? The answer is: by the process of character development, which Ghazali describes as the purifying away of all the dross and dust from the Spiritual Heart so that the Heart may reflect the Light of God. Each person is promised loss, which comes in the form of a package of tailor-made trials, intended for this purification, which then takes place through self-accountability and correction. Life’s trials are *not* to be seen as chaotic, unjust punishments, but are instead the merciful mechanics and opportunities of return to God’s presence. This important and universal concept is made clear to children through entertaining stories and fun activities. Children need a way to deal with, be edified by, and profit from their daily trials.

The Problem of Untrained Weekend School Teachers

The Ghazali Project can help address the complaint that most Islamic weekend school teachers are **under-trained volunteers**. The development of a satisfactory teacher empowerment program, which could realistically reach all schools, could be long in coming, but the immediate need could be, at least, eased.

We suggest that all a teacher would need to do is read the Project’s stories aloud, adjusting them to any age group, and then work along with the students to complete passed out workbook pages. The school curriculum, found in the back of each workbook, offers many engaging suggestions. Included, chapter by chapter, are related Quran and hadith passages which refer to the core teachings being studied. Discussion and contemplative time is key. Teachers can creatively adjust the entertaining, fun games and activities for any age group, coming up with more ideas of

their own. Fons Vitae hopes these are then shared on the Parent/Teacher forum of ghazalichildren.org.

There is great need for **families to participate** in order to reinforce the teachings continuously at home, as well as model the virtues themselves. Ghazali Pilot Schools, like Peace Terrace Academy in San Francisco, have addressed this essential need of family involvement as key to success. What is being offered is a system easily used by any teacher or family.

Inquiry-Led Instruction: an Idea Worth Exploring, Where Appropriate.

One cannot emphasize enough that **rather than simply be lectured to**, children should be encouraged to ask *all* the questions *they* want answered. This is another good way to involve them and to address their *actual* needs rather than just supply information. Learning often best takes place when one's questions, which relate directly to one's specific needs, are answered. Many state that there is a **need for innovative approaches in education**. [A New York Integration Specialist](#) says that although inquiry-led instruction is a relatively new style of teaching, and that "for many educators it can feel almost backward from what you're typically used to doing, the benefits far outweigh the initial challenge. If teachers let the students ask the questions and drive the instruction, their students will be more engaged and gain more out of the instruction."

Other Points of Interest: Learning by Teaching Others

A study has shown that 80% of what children learn comes from **personal experience**, and that 95% comes when they **teach others**. One of the key points al-Ghazali makes in his *Book of Knowledge* is that we are *all* teachers. We must ask ourselves, whenever we do anything, if it is something we would want copied. He mentions a hadith in which it is stated that the whales in the deep sea and the ants ask God to bless the good teacher, and the wings of angels stroke good teachers. Ghazali concludes his Book 1 (which is considered the summary of the entire 40

volumes in his magnum opus) with the metaphor of the two trees: the straight (virtuous) tree casts a straight shadow just as the crooked (low character) tree casts a crooked shadow. As children, in particular, “shadow” one another, this story regarding the importance of being a noble teacher, by words and example, is central.

One teacher sees people as “Meaning filters.” One processes information according to one’s own pre-existing model of reality, *so that* reality needs to be clear and meaningful – a further reason that the Islamic faith needs to be presented in a balanced, meaningful, and life-relevant way.

Conclusion

Although the Fons Vitae Ghazali Children’s Project does not address all the concerns and issues facing Islamic weekend and other schools, it does offer a host of solutions in the area of character development.

Letters from Parents, Teachers, and Students

Attached below are a number of letters from children, parents, and teachers which suggest the success of the Ghazali curriculum in addressing some of the needs expressed.

1. How a 3 year old takes on Ghazali's worldview as his own.
2. Excerpts from recent correspondence with the British headmaster of the Deenway Montessori School, whose school mission is cultivating noble character.
3. An 11 year-old girl finds meaning at last.
4. A second grade teacher from California discusses the impact of the project, including greater concern for animals.
5. A British Autism doctor uses the Ghazali Children's Project with Special Needs children.
6. A Detroit Saturday school joins in.
7. A Brazilian teacher makes headway with sharing.
8. A positive effect on a child with Asperger's Syndrome.
9. A Sri Lankan married to an American Muslim faces huge challenges with their children, but finds a solution in the GCP.
10. A German finds relief.
11. The Ghazali Project becomes a helpful tool for prison inmates.
12. Appreciation for a program that has a focus on children.

1. THE MAMANUSHKA BLOG

A Three Year-Old's Worldview

Is Your Heart Shining?



Some months ago, my adorable five year old nephew taught our children that if they share and do good things, their *hearts will be shining and full of light*. Our eldest was skeptical about this assertion as she wasn't sure it could be verified but my just turned three year old not only accepted this "fact" but held it close and built it into an all-encompassing new worldview.

So these days, whenever he offers me a sip of his water, he follows it with the grave observation that his heart is *now shining*. While watching two children fight in the supermarket I hear him remark that *their hearts are not shining*. When the flight attendant handed him half a cup of watery juice? *Thank you, now your heart is shining*. And right before bed comes the ultimate question, *Mama, when you turn the lights off, can you see how my heart is shining?*

*Am editing to add that the lovely lady from whom my nephew learned this phrase first pulled the concept from the excellent Ghazali Children's Project by Fons Vitae. Here is a short but charming video they made referencing "The Shining Heart."

2. DEENWAY MONTESSORI SCHOOLS

April 6, 2017

Dear Fons Vitae Team,

Asalaamualaykum. I wanted to congratulate you on the wonderful job you have done in interpreting the core teachings of the *ihya* for children. I am founder and headmaster of the Deenway Montessori School and Unicity College. Deenway is the only Islamic Montessori school in the UK catering for children from 3 years old to 11/12; and Unicity College is the

only Islamic Liberal Arts Secondary school in the UK (maybe the world?) catering for pupils up to 16 years old. We are also quite an innovative school in many other ways: we teach traditional sports such as archery and grappling/wrestling as part of our curriculum, we study the history of science alongside grammar, logic, rhetoric; we begin each day reciting the *Ratib-al-Shahir* of Imam al-Haddad and passages from the *dalail-khayrah* on Friday mornings; and our children are equally at ease reciting Shakespeare's soliloquies as they are singing traditional poetry in Arabic. My views on education and initial inspiration for what I am doing now has come directly from Shaykh Hamza Yusuf who has been a major influence in my life (despite the fact that I have only ever spent time with him in person on two occasions: once in Spain for a month; and once on an Umrah trip).

I am currently working on capturing our curriculum, pedagogy, methodology and experience in a way that it can be replicated/adapted by other educators. In the course of doing that I realised that our most important mission is to cultivate noble character in ourselves, our parents and our children (and in that order!). This reminded of the Ghazali project which I had heard about some years ago and so I was delighted to learn that the first book and workbook are already available. A friend lent me a copy which I have been looking at carefully. I wanted to email you to ask you a number of things:

First, I noticed mention somewhere of a pilot schools project. I would be honoured to have my school take part in this.

Second I wanted to know if you could supply us the books/workbooks at some sort of discounted rate (we are a not-for-profit and really struggle to make ends meet)?

Third, I would like to offer my services to help with the project. I am a writer and currently have a book on a Chinese martial art (Wing Chun) being considered for publication; as well as a second book on African Muslim Slaves and the Meaning of America for which I am looking for a publisher. My writing skills, familiarity with the *ihya*, and background in education may be of use to your project.

April 14, 2017

It would be my pleasure to meet with you when you are in London. However, July is the last term of the academic year and a busy time for us as we have our first ever students completing their studies with us up to secondary school level. We will be having our end of year assembly and graduation for them, as well as an overseas excursion *deo volente*. But I would be honored to meet you if I can (we are not far from London). Please let me know some dates and I will try to keep those days clear in my diary. **Come to think of it, perhaps we could make our end of year production around the theme of purifying the self and noble character. In which case we would be even more honored to host you at our assembly and production so you can see how our pupils respond to the Ghazali series for yourself?** Currently the proposed date is 27th July.

July 25, 2017

It was so nice to speak to you over the phone as you boarded your flight back home. I hope you had a safe and pleasant trip. It's a shame we couldn't speak in person. **This Friday is our End of Year Assembly and we have decided to present our primary school leavers with their own copies of The Book of Knowledge and Workbook in sha Allah.**

In sha Allah this weekend I will write up something about what I mentioned to you regarding the Lataif-al-Minan and our encounters with the family of Haggā Zakiyya. All thanks to your publication of that book.

Thank you for having someone post out pdfs for the other Ghazali Series books. I will in sha Allah be introducing the series to our parents during the Leaver's Assembly and talking about some of our plans for using the books from September. We will also encourage parents to order their own hardcopies.

3. A SPECIAL LOVE FOR LEARNING – Essay by an Eleven Year-Old, Mubashira

A Special Love for Learning

I always had a passion for learning and trying new things. I was always up for a challenge or an adventure. I dreamed of many ambitions: Law. Teaching. Herbal Medicine. Being a seamstress.

I also had many questions. Each answer lead me to another. I was always curious. Even as a little girl, I would never leave my family members in peace until I had a full explanation of what they were doing.

When I won the Love of Learning and Responsibility award in school I had even more questions. How was helping little kids and my friends being responsible? How was being in charge of cleaning the class responsible?

And what did Love of Learning mean? That you knew everything? No, I told myself, it doesn't. Because there is still so much out there in the world to know. What did “learning” really even mean anyways?

I pondered on these questions for a long time. I wasn't satisfied with the answers my father gave me. It was then that my mother told me to read the “Al Ghazali, Book of Knowledge”, that I started to understand what real learning really was. How you don't learn only physically but also spiritually. And how it helps not only physically, but also spiritually. And it wasn't until then that I finally got the answers I was looking for. Ghazali books are simple, yet they radiate a special, beautiful meaning. A meaning that is just the plain truth. A meaning that makes you smile and nod your head as if saying, now I understand.

When I read the words in the book: The world gives us a chance to have time to polish our hearts with good deeds, I leaned back in my chair. I understood. That was all I wanted. But I have never stopped asking questions and learning, and I never will. Because you can never know too much.

And with each question I asked and researched, the thread of my destiny unraveled, bit by bit.

4. SECOND GRADE TEACHER

Below is an excerpt from our class's first newsletter of the school year.

– Shannon Costa

"Moving on to a set of curriculum I eagerly look forward to teaching each week- *The Ghazali Children's Project* is a classroom favorite. The project consists of a set of children's books teaching the wonderful lessons of Imam Al-Ghazali. The main goal of the lessons is to strengthen character and to beautify and clean our hearts. The Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him said, "I have been sent to perfect good character." This hadith is the heart of the project. It begins by telling the incredible story of Imam Al-Ghazali and how he was able to humble himself before his life ended. The following lessons revolve around a group of children who ask an elderly man why we as Muslims, are told to do certain things. The elderly man tells the children about the two kinds of hearts we have, the physical and the spiritual.

My students want to understand more about their spiritual hearts and how to make them brilliant and clean. We make specific goals that if we work toward will strengthen our hearts, such as humility, being friendly to everyone, and obeying our parents. "

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In addition I can say the following about the impact on my students thus far. After beginning the curriculum I have witnessed sincere curiosity and an eagerness to ask deep questions about Islam and about God. Our resulting conversations often remind us of the short time we have here on Earth and of the importance of how our actions affect others and our spiritual hearts. We reflect on the immaterial aspects of self-development, such as having good manners, teaching others what we learn, being patient, not always having to be right.

When I'm outdoors watching the children play, I often hear them saying that they should recite Quran for the animals they see so that they want to stay and listen. I've also witnessed my



students notice insects and remind each other that God has created these creatures to do what they do, that they are just following the will of God by being. We, on the other hand are different, we have to make many choices in our lives, to do what we know is correct and to refrain from wrongdoing.

I believe the Ghazali Children's Project is an excellent way to bring the responsibility of character development into the hearts and minds of our youth. The explanations, stories, and activities are a beautiful way to teach what is true and real to our children. This curriculum provides a way to build strong foundations of universal Truths for our children to navigate a world that is increasingly relativistic.

#### **5. REACHING CHILDREN, AND ALSO THOSE WITH AUTISM – by British Doctor, Donia Fahim – excerpts.**

We desperately need a curriculum that will teach children to look beyond our differences, to look within their hearts and learn the essential practices needed to lead a spiritual life of truth, compassion and love...

How would my nephew learn to love and know God, to understand Islam in its true form and essence in the absence of the cultural and political overlays that so often are associated with Islam? How would he learn the important universal spiritual values that unite us and define our humanity? And more importantly how would he be able to discern truth from error and understand the essential practices that he needs to lead a life filled with faith, compassion and love for God, himself and fellow humans regardless of their gender, cultural or religious background?

I desperately began to seek resources, books and visual media that I could use to share with him and his parents, as he got older. What was available was limited and often-lacked scholarly authority paired with an understanding of our current times. I found a few stories explaining the celebrations, such as the feast after Ramadan and the stories of the great prophets,

but I couldn't find anything that would help him understand and more importantly practice Islam, know and love God, and develop a sound spiritual practice.

When I heard that Fons Vitae was going to produce the Al Ghazali books for children, I knew that the books, work books and web resources were just what we needed and that millions of children around the world as well as their parents would benefit from these resources for years to come. I now know that my nieces, nephew, godchildren and children of our future will be in good hands, now that Imam Al Ghazali's wisdom will be accessible to them.

Over the last few years I have utilised the Al Ghazali resources in my clinical work with children with autism and special needs, my work as a professor working with teachers and my favourite role as an Auntie and Godmother. I have witnessed the effect of the work you have done and how these young children have taken the words of Imam Al Ghazali to heart.

[A few examples]

[My godson had to give a speech and] was nervous and felt that he would be standing alone. I reassured him that he had practiced and done his best and he now needed to trust that God will take care of the rest and be with him. I was then pleasantly surprised when Sam gestured to his heart and said to me, "Auntie Donia, I know God is in here, I will be ok".

[I] had not realised the extent to which they had taken to heart and understood the lessons of generosity and polishing of the heart.

"The angels are with us and they will carry our prayers to God" said Lilia, "I don't see them said Oscar", Lilia profoundly added, "We see them with our heart, Oscar".

"Auntie Donia God is asking me to help them, he has given me toys so I can give them my toys and that is another way I can polish my heart". He learned this from the Book of Knowledge and its workbook.

Imam Al Ghazali clearly lays out the behavioural expectations and clearly explains the positive rewards that are gained from faith and doing good deeds

An evidence based clinical practice is to help children with ASD develop their social thinking, their ability to think about others and to take on the perspective of others, as well as their ability to self regulate their emotions and solve problems

[An 8 year-old patient, also hyperlexic] loved looking through the images and loved that Imam Al Ghazali is able to time travel and visit the children. This little boy was provided with a visual sequence for prayer and his mother told me that he enjoys joining her and her husband in prayer and will even ask to lead the prayer. She also shared that when she says to him, “Thank you for thinking of your brother, your heart is shining bright”, that he smiles with pride and that his ability to play and share with his younger brother has significantly improved.

## **6. DETROIT SATURDAY SCHOOL**

As-salamu 'alaykum wa rahmatullahi wa barakatahu,

I was informed about your Pilot School Program, by Eram Uddin from Michigan. The masjid I frequent, the Muslim Center of Detroit, has had a Saturday school for a few years now, alHamdulillah.. Unfortunately, in the last couple of years as teachers and students left the city, it has been a space where children ranging from 5 years old to 16 have all been in one classroom with one or two teachers present. Some children were engaged in learning, while others viewed the space as babysitting. No textbooks are shared, and it has been very much a lecture-style teaching approach.

A couple of months ago, a few of us were asked to help develop a curriculum for the school, set up the available classrooms, get books for the children, and have more teachers on board. The school currently has around 30-40 students, yet we are hoping to engage more of the parents to

show them the new changes we have planned when school starts next month. We are really looking to revamp it and make it an actual school this year, inshaAllah.

Personally, the publications of Fons Vitae have always left me impressed with their quality and great care to proper translation for the English-speaking world. For that, I am eternally grateful.

Please let me know what I need to do in order to ensure that the Muslim Center is able to participate in this Pilot School Program. With Detroit making a comeback, we want to make sure the Muslims are also a part of that narrative.

– Hazel L. Gomez

## **7. SUCCESS IN SHARING**

The Ghazali Children's Project has given my students new motivation to practice those "boring, old" commands that parents and teachers repeat like broken records such as, "share", "be kind", etc. One particular story that stands out to me was when I visited a 5 year old girl who was having trouble sharing with a younger toddler boy who had come to visit her. The older girl didn't want to include the toddler boy in her games because she thought he didn't know enough, and couldn't play well. She wanted all the attention from the teachers who had come to visit her. Instead of scolding her for not sharing, the teachers introduced her to the teachings of the Ghazali Children's Project. We encouraged her to see performing a good deed such as sharing her toys as a way to "make her heart shine!" She latched onto the idea easily, and with new motivation to share, she eagerly invited the toddler boy to play with her and showed much kindness to him. She pointed out many times to us, "Look, my heart is shining!"

– E. Laracuento

## **8. ASPBERGER'S SYNDROME**

Dear Gray and Janet,

Firstly, we would like to thank you all for the invitation to participate in this valuable project. My daughter Maryam has completed her entry for the Art competition. We watched the 'YouTube' video a few times and got into as deep of a conversation you could have with a 6 year old which was quite enlightening. I'm amazed at how quickly she grasped the concept.

Maryam was aware of how Allah is pleased with the good that we do and wants us to keep away from sinning as much as possible. What amazed her was the connection between the heart, her emotions, behaviors and knowing that how she behaves and acts on the outside effects, her directly in her heart.

My daughter, was recently diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome. She has trouble with regulating her emotional expressions and recognition of human characteristics along with navigating the concept of empathy. Engaging in this art project has enabled her to practically reflect on her emotions as well as have a practical tool that she can carry with her at school, throughout her day to help her navigate her actions towards others, especially those that result in upsetting her peers. Participating in this activity has encouraged her to be autonomous and reflect over her actions.

Maryam wanted to include the Mr. Men and Little Miss characters in this project as she is using the book series at school to assist her with understanding the character traits of human emotions and how to best describe them and relate to them. Independently, she was able to recognize which characteristics she believed could contribute to having a spiritually 'dirty' or a 'spiritually clean' heart.

My daughter has now told the class that if they do good deeds their hearts will be clean and can remove any ill action they may have committed beforehand. She no longer entirely relies on rewards such as star charts to regulate and assess her behavior which for me is a huge step forward and demonstrates a strong connection between using the spiritual tradition as a pedagogical tool to assist children with Asperger's in navigating emotional regulation and

fostering them to do so independently. I'm amazed at how the use of these materials, be it the video alone has the potential to speak to the hearts and minds of special needs children.

At the bottom of this email I have attached her art work. She completed a further writing activity to consolidate the concept. If you prefer I can make copies and post them into you.

I believe both the concept and the 'Ghazali children project' is revolutionary in supporting parents and teachers alike to foster moral and ethical autonomy in our children. I look forward to continuing this journey with you all.

– Jasmina Kid

## **9. SRI LANKAN WOMAN AND HER MANY TRIALS**

First of all God has answered my prayers through you guys & Shaikh Hamza Yusuf.

I was born & raised in highly spiritual culture of Sri Lanka. A beautiful culture & compassionate people. Got married 17 to American convert muslim, Someone who taught me dark side of this world. Trying to understand his struggles in life, I practically became psychologist. Now have gotten a clear understanding of life in school culture, abusive parenting, neglecting family, alcoholic father & toxic masculine culture.

Now we live in Groton, CT.

Therefore I have decided to pull my kids out of public school system as I see them being broken down systematically. I have been homeschooling my daughter who 7, now since Pre-K.

My boys are 9 & 11. We are starting officially homeschooling from January 2017 all three kids. One thing I'm mainly focusing on my boys is instilling a strong sense mind,body,soul connection. Strong sense of spiritual values. I would love to introduce Imaam AL Ghazzalis work, as how much it has helped me to overcome my burdens in life. Find center in my life. I'm not able afford to purchase the books at the moment. I would be immensely grateful to receive

pilot curriculum of AL Ghazzali books. My humble request for my children's future. Copy of pdf is great. I can possibly try to introduce it to our masjid Sunday school as well.

– A concerned mother, Samura Yoosef

## **10. A RELIEVED GERMAN**

Before beginning with my question, I would like to thank you from the bottom of my heart for your awe-inspiring work for the children.

I have been waiting a long time for literature for children teaching nourishing them with spiritual light and knowledge.

I am a student living in Germany. My deepest wish, is the publication of those books in the German language, so our German children can profit from this great source of knowledge. So would you allow us as a precisely chosen group mastering the German and the English language in sha Allah very well to translate them?

It would be an honor to work with Fons Vitae.

– Riem Khemiri

## **11. USE IN PRISONS**

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Rami Nsour, and I am the Founding Director of the Tayba Foundation. We are a registered 501(c)(3) non-profit organization offering education and social support to the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated here in the United States.

I would like to thank Fons Vitae for their generous donation of the PDFs of the Ghazali Children series and for giving us permission to print them as needed. When I met Virginia Gray Henry early in 2016 and told her about the education we do in prisons across the nation, she expressed to me her desire to help out in any way she could. I told her that what we have found with our students, is that the most profound changes occur when they study and implement the teachings of Islamic spirituality (tasawwuf).

She asked if our students in prison would benefit from the Ghazali Children's series and I said some of them definitely would. The reason for this is that they may not have completed their early education or have been out of touch with education for a long time. Reading and writing is a challenge they face, and when they read books written at a level expecting someone to have completed even only a high school level of reading, they find it difficult to understand the material. Therefore, having a very important subject, such as the works of Ghazali, presented at in a children's level of English, would not be intimidating to some of the prisoners we teach.

Additionally, for Fons Vitae to be so gracious and trusting of us as to entrust the PDFs of their series and give us permission to print as needed free of cost was a great honor. Our organization runs on a very limited budget and there is little funding in the way of providing education for prisoners. Without the donation of Fons Vitae, we would not have been able to provide our students access to the texts they have developed. The publication quality of Fons Vitae is of a high standard and there books have are not easily purchased by prisoners. To be able to print them for our students without having to buy them allows some of the poorest members of our society (prisoners) to access high quality education.

We are indebted to the graciousness of Fons Vitae.

## **12. STARTING YOUNG**

This looks better than "apt and appropriate". It's exactly what's needed. All the intellectualizing in the world with and for adults doesn't affect the heart. You have to start there and start young.

Jim Tompkins



