

Like a child

By [Glenn Mitchell](#)

September 14, 2009

*“These little ones taking milk are like those on their way to the Kingdom.”*

*—Logion 22, the Gospel of Thomas*

Earlier this summer I led a retreat on contemplative spiritual practices for a group of pastors in upstate New York. In the opening session I discovered that one of the participants, the only one not ordained, was Samantha, a seven-month-old baby. I must confess that I was a little rattled by what felt like an additional challenge to the usual getting-up-to-speed with 15 new faces and the flow of the retreat. I wondered whether Samantha’s crying and fussing would be distracting to our quiet, our seeking of a contemplative space.

Long before the end of the retreat it was clear to me, and I think to all the participants, that Samantha was the greatest contemplative among us. In each session there she was, gazing with those big, dark eyes, holding steady with what was right in front of her. She was always ready to lock her gaze on another participant, drinking in the other’s presence, beaming out with pleasure in the looking, in the sharing. She is “fresh from God,” as the Celts would say.

Those of us who have been in this world for decades struggle to remember this. We go on spiritual retreats to find our way back home to God and to ourselves. We struggle on the way with all the usual suspects of ego states: our need to get it right in thought and word and deed, our longing to be enough, our posturing for position, our eagerness to be noticed. Samantha was clearly at home in her own skin and in her world. She knew when she was hungry and when she was tired; she cried out when she needed to. But she was present in it all, gazing out in what seemed like love and speaking in tongues foreign to our ears but somehow resonate with what she knew, in her immediate way of knowing.

As I spent time with Samantha, that spirit of immediacy kept calling to me. There I was in a leadership role while my own barriers to presence were actively engaged--in my concerns about how things were going for the participants, thoughts of what needed to be added or taken away from my plan for the day, preoccupations about the flow of the teaching and attachment to my own perspectives.

On the afternoon of the first day we were entering a block of individual retreat time, and I had set participants up to spend some of the time outside. Just as we began, the heavens opened and the rain came down. Many of the participants headed for their rooms, but as I looked at Samantha looking at me I knew what I had to do. I took off my shoes and my socks, removed my watch and wallet, and walked outside.

It was a gentle, warm rain, the kind of rain I loved to walk barefoot in as a child. Now as an adult, what do I fear in getting soaked? Why do I dash through the few rains I get “caught” in? Is there anything in my life that can’t be made better by the saturation of a summer rain? As I walked the grounds my eyes opened, my skin came alive and something asleep in me came awake. I saw everything with Samantha eyes—every flower, every drop-covered quivering leaf, every flash of bird wing overhead.

*Additional lectionary columns by Mitchell appear in the September 8 issue of the Century—click [here](#) to subscribe.*