Education for Peace
Integrative Curriculum Series
Volume 3

The MYSTERIOUS CASE of the IWs

A Story to Help Children Cope with Death



Written by H.B. Danesh, M.D.
Illustrated by Katia Breton

EFP Press

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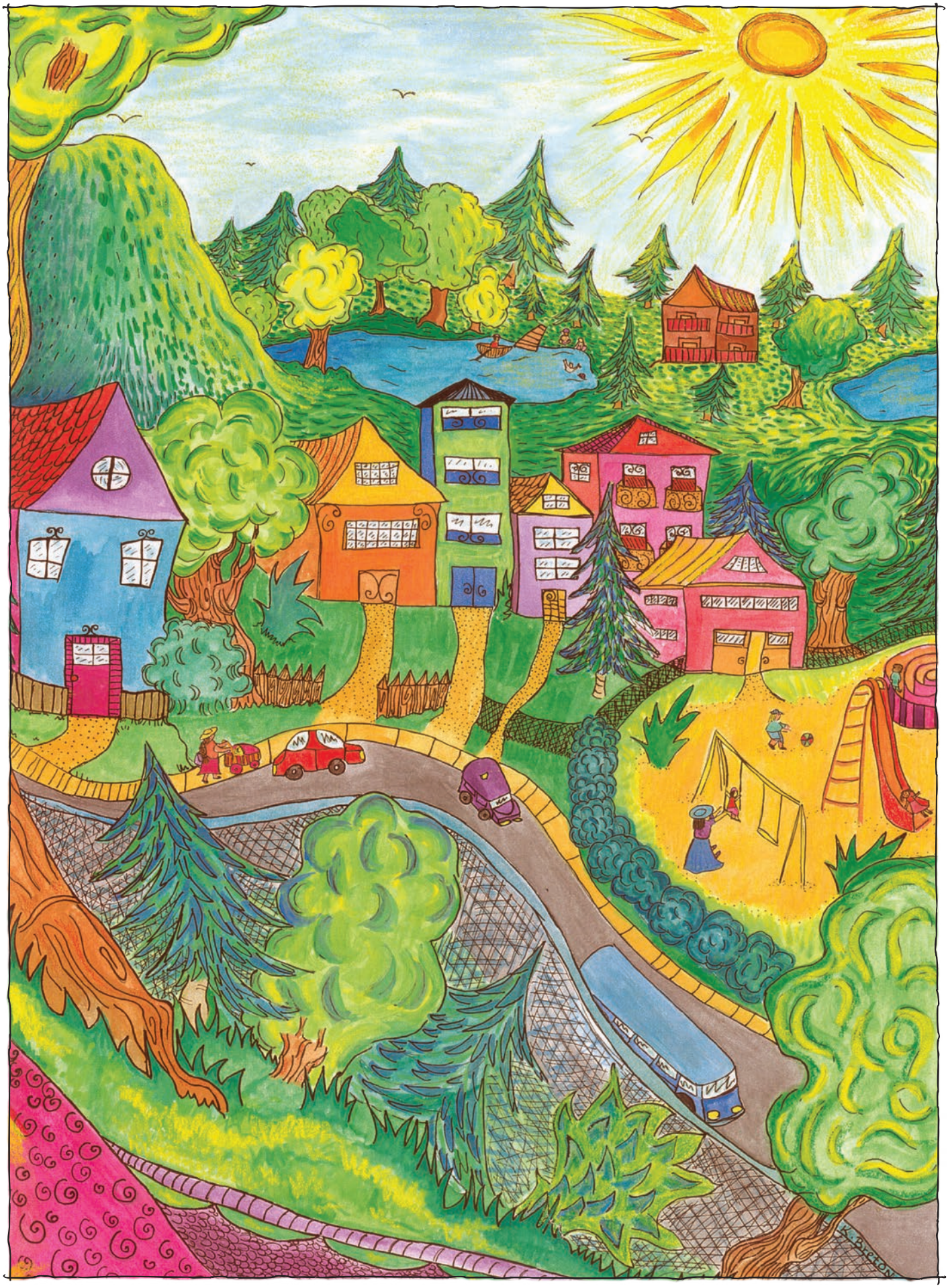
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To all those dear ones who died young

I owe a deep debt of gratitude to the courageous, wise, and long-suffering children, parents, siblings, families, and friends facing untimely death whom I have had the privilege to counsel and with whom I have shared this story.







On a Sunday afternoon, John, Sasha, and Mina were walking by the lakeside with their parents. John was 13, Sasha 9, and Mina 6.

Mina was thoughtful.

What are you thinking about, my dear? her father asked.
About death! Mina answered.

What about death? Sasha asked.
Like what happens when people die, Mina said sadly.

Like who? John asked.
Like Indira's father, replied Mina.

Indira was Mina's best friend whose father had recently died. They were all very sad about it. But Mina was the saddest.

For a while they walked in silence, thinking.

Mom, tell us about the IWs, Sasha pleaded.
Yes, tell us about the IWs, Mina and John joined in.

Very well, let's find a nice place to sit, mother said, *and then I'll tell you about the mysterious case of the IWs.*


K. Breton

This story is about the mother's womb.
Mother's womb is our first home.
It is warm and cozy, dark and rosy.

Now let us imagine that there were very tiny, very smart, very cute creatures living in the womb.
We call them the IWs—the Inhabitants of the Womb.

The IWs enjoyed living in the womb, floating around, playing hide and seek, having lots of fun.

IWs also talked a lot about all kinds of interesting things.



One day, a younger IW noticed that the Older IW was sad.
What's the matter, Older IW? the younger one asked.

I am sad, very sad, said the Older IW.

But why? all IWs asked in unison.

Have you seen the Little Baby who has been growing in the womb? asked the Older IW.

Yes, of course, we all have seen the Little Baby, they all said.

Well, the Little Baby is going to die, said the Older IW.

The Little Baby is going to die? they asked in horror.

Yes, and that's why I am so sad, said the Older IW.


K. Breton



The IWs loved the Little Baby very much. Every day they would count the fingers and toes of the Little Baby. They would make sure that the eyes and the ears were growing in the right place. They would check all over the Baby to be certain that everything was all right.

Because they all loved the Little Baby so much, when they heard that it was going to die, they all became very, very sad and very, very puzzled.

They were silent for a while.

I don't understand. What do you mean the Little Baby is going to die? asked a confused and angry IW.

Well, slowly began the Older IW, *we've seen this before. Usually these babies—they are called human beings, you know—come here in a very tiny form. At first, you can't even see them easily. But they grow quickly, and soon they become big and beautiful. They develop all kinds of things, and after a while they die. Suddenly they are gone. It is most mysterious!*



But I've heard there is a life-after-the-womb, said another IW.

What do you know about life-after-the-womb? asked a skinny IW who loved to argue.
Have you seen the world-after-the-womb? he asked.
Has anybody come back to tell you about it?
Answer me, the skinny IW demanded.

No, I haven't seen the world-after-the-womb, and NO, no one has come back to tell me about it. But still, I'm quite sure that there is a life-after-the-womb, said the other IWs all in one breath.



A quiet, thoughtful IW joined the discussion.

Certainly, there must be a life-after-the-womb. Otherwise, this whole thing doesn't make sense. Consider the case of the Little Baby. In the beginning the Little Baby was very little. Then it started to get bigger. Now, it has this big head. It has eyes, ears, nose, legs, arms, all these things.

Now, I'd like to ask you a question, said the quiet IW.

Why do you think the Little Baby grew all these organs and parts of the body? It didn't need them for life in the womb. Here, the Little Baby doesn't need to walk, or use its hands, or to see, or to smell. We even don't know what this big head is for.

The quiet IW was silent for a while and then continued, *I think the Little Baby grew these things because it would need them in the world-after-the-womb.*

This is make-believe, a fantasy, said a skeptical IW.
Let us face it. The Little Baby is going to die.

You do not want this to be the end of Little Baby's life, so you are imagining a world-after-the-womb.

In fact, there is no world-after-the-womb, and there is nowhere for the Little Baby to go.

You must face it!

The Little Baby is going to die and become nothing, NOTHING! the skeptical IW shouted.



Another IW, old and wise, coughed a little and said,
There must be a world-after-the-womb because without it the life of the Little Baby is unfinished.

All life has a purpose. And the Little Baby's life has a purpose.

The Little Baby must be able to fulfill the purpose of its life. It must have a chance to use its feet and eyes and ears and nose and mouth and hands, and its big brain.

Oh! There is so much for it to do. I am certain that there is life-after-the-womb for the Little Baby.

Yes, I am certain!

Other IWs nodded in agreement.
Yes, there must be a life-after-the-womb,
they said in a chorus.

And they went to do other things.





Soon after the IWs had finished discussing the fate of the Little Baby, a big storm began. The sides of the womb heaved, and huge waves came roaring and crashing toward them. All the IWs were frightened and clung tightly together. The storm seemed to last an eternity. They were in the midst of a strong "WOMB-QUAKE."

Hours later, when the storm had, finally, subsided and the womb was again quiet, the IWs discovered that the Little Baby was gone.

Little Baby is dead, the IWs said sadly.

Was the Little Baby dead? mother asked. *What do you think?*

Well, yes and no, said father.
Yes, so far as the IWs were concerned. For them the Little Baby was dead. They never again will see the Little Baby. They will not hear from it, and the Little Baby will not go back to the womb, even if it could.

But—and this is a BIG BUT—mother said,
We all know that as soon as the Little Baby died from the womb, it was born in this world, just as you and I were.

There was, after all, a life-after-the-womb, John said.



Yes, John, there was a life-after-the-womb, said mother, and she continued, *You and Sasha and Mina also started your life as a tiny egg inside my womb. That egg grew and developed. At one time you were like a tiny fish and floated happily around mother's womb. Little by little, you grew arms and legs and eyes and your lungs and heart, and big brain and everything else.*

Now, we may ask, why did you develop all these things? It was dark in the womb and you didn't need eyes. In the womb you didn't walk and didn't need feet. In the womb you didn't breathe and didn't need lungs. In fact, most of the things you developed when you were in the mother's womb, you didn't need there. Then, why did you grow all your organs and parts of your body?



I am sure you know why, said mother.

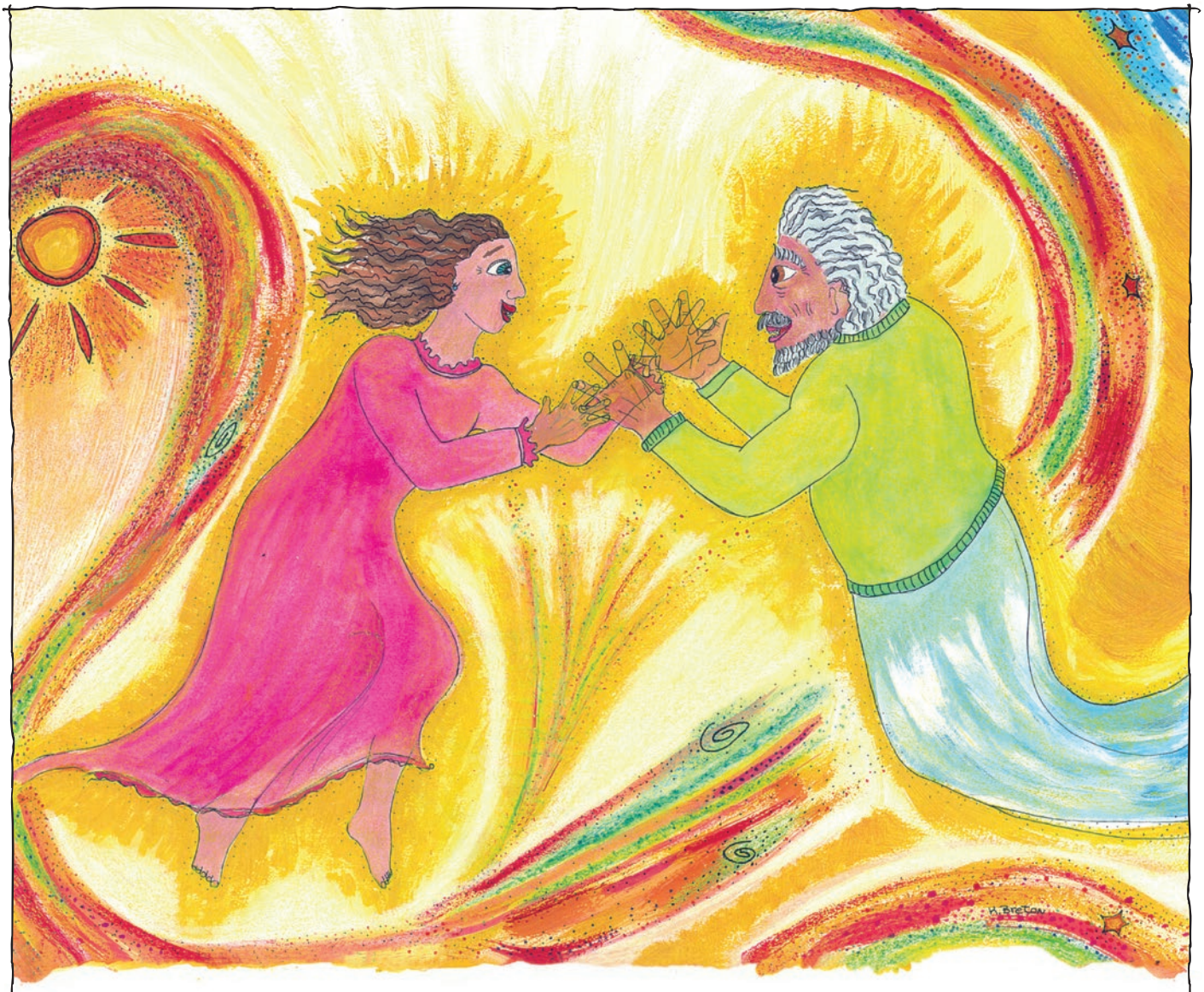
You developed many parts and organs of your body in preparation for your life in this world. For nine months you grew and grew in my womb, until at last you were ready to face the outside world. You didn't know about this world, about your father or your mother or anybody or anything in this world.

But I knew you before you were born. I could feel you move around inside my body. Sasha always nudged me in the ribs, and John was an acrobat, and you, Mina, had sharp little elbows!



It was a wonderful moment when you were born into this world and when I actually saw you wiggling those little legs and arms, taking your first breath, and screaming your head off.

Your father held you in his arms and gazed into your eyes. *"WELCOME TO THE WORLD,"* he said.



So, you died from the world of the womb and were born into this world. But you still had lots of growing and changing to do. And you learned how to use those arms and legs and ears and eyes and that big brain of yours in ways the IWs could never have imagined back there in the womb.

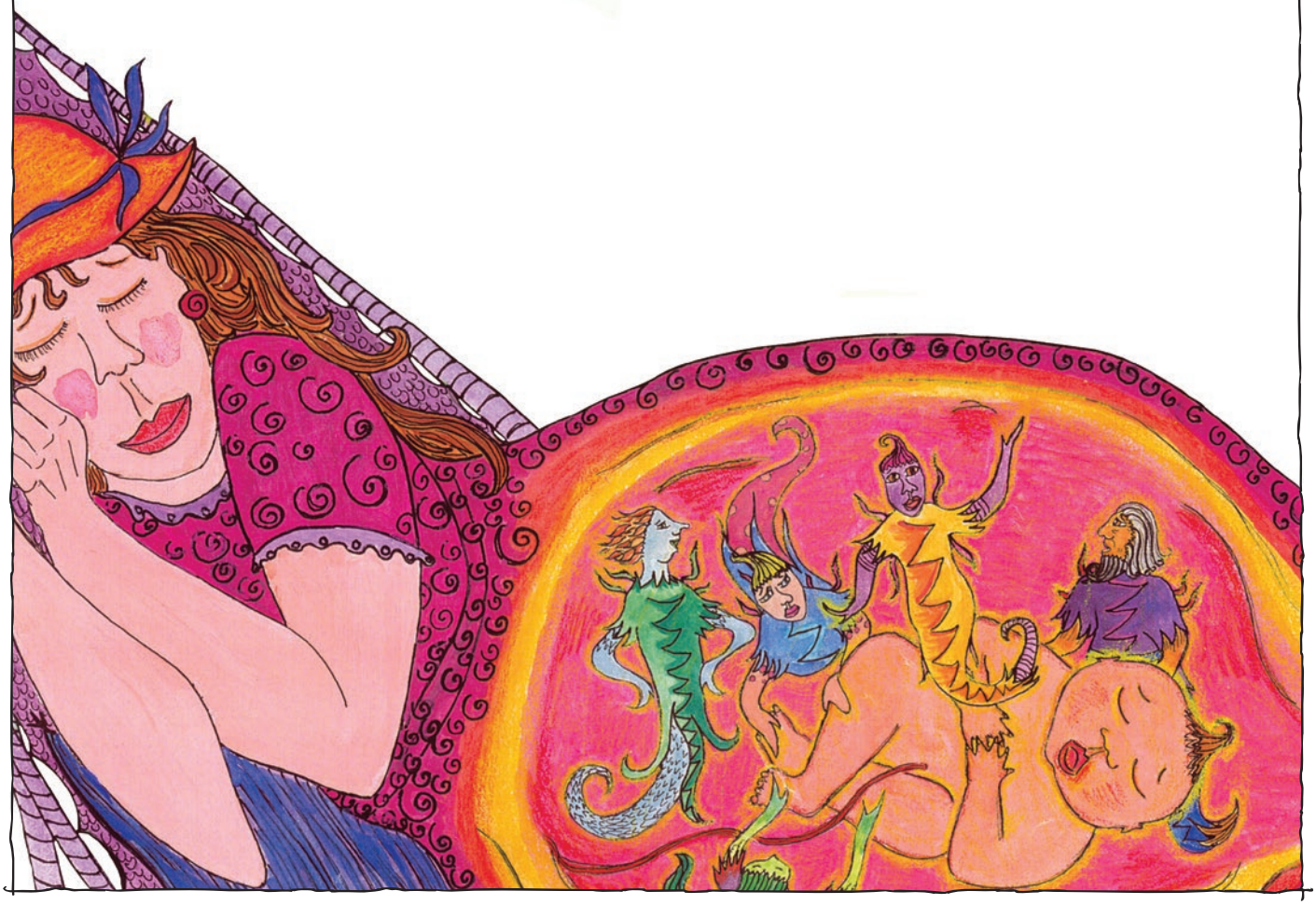
And now, I'll tell you, so listen very carefully, said the mother to Mina, Sasha, and John, *THIS IS IMPORTANT.*

In the womb we basically accomplish two things: we live a good and happy life in the womb, and at the same time we get ready for life in this world. The same is true for life in this world. You see, we are also another type of IWs. We are—

THE INHABITANTS OF THE WORLD!

Sasha was very thoughtful and finally asked,
What is life really like after we die then?

Well, that's a tricky one, mother said.
If you had asked me is there a life after this life, I would say, yes, there is a life after this life. But when you ask what is life like after we die, I have to answer that I don't know.
How much did any of us know about this life when we were in our mother's womb? NOTHING!
The same I think is true about this earthly life and the next life, mother added.



John, who seemed not to have listened, suddenly turned to his father and said, *I think life in the womb and in this world is the same. Don't you think so?*

This time father entered the discussion.
I agree, John, life in the womb and this world is the same except for two big differences:
In this life we have a lot of control over our lives.
We can decide how to live.
We can do the right thing or the wrong thing.
We can be kind or unkind, helpful or unhelpful, truthful or untruthful.
It is our choice.

In the womb we didn't have a choice.
In the womb we didn't have control.
We couldn't say, "I want three eyes and five legs," or "I want purple teeth or blue teeth."
It wasn't up to us.
We had no choice.

But in this life we have choices to make.
So, whatever we do with our lives in this life depends, to a very large degree, on us.
It is true that in some respects we do not have a choice, such as the kind of family we come from, the fact that we need to sleep, the fact that we get hungry, and the fact that we all eventually must face illness and death.
But how we react to these things is pretty much up to us.



Dad, you said there are two differences between this life and the life in the womb, what is the other difference? John asked.

The second difference between this life and life in the womb is also very important, father answered.
You see, in the womb we grew mainly in a physical way, and for this we needed about nine months.
But in this world we grow both physically and spiritually.
When we grow physically we become bigger, and then we stop our physical growth.
When we grow spiritually we become loving, kind, truthful, wise, helpful, just, unifying, knowledgeable, and things like these.
These things are spiritual qualities, and we can develop them at any age, both slowly and quickly.
So, a ten-year-old child can sometimes be far more loving, caring, and just than a fifty-year-old person.

Once again, there was silence. But this time it was a good silence. They were thinking. Death wasn't the end. Death was birth into a new life. Probably, even a nicer life, in the same way that life in this world is much nicer than life in the womb.

So, Indira's dad was born into a new life, said Mina thoughtfully. *I will tell Indira that. I'm sure she'll be very happy to know this.*

Do that, it is a good idea, said her mother.

I now understand why the Little Baby grew all those organs and parts of the body, said Sasha.

Why? asked John.

The Little Baby was getting ready for this world, so it was growing everything it needed here in this life, said Sasha.

That's just right, Sasha, father said.

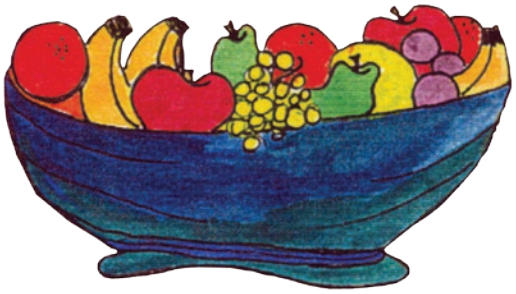
I thought of something else, John said.
In the womb we grow physically to get ready for this physical world. In the same way in this life we have to grow spiritually, because the next life is not physical, it is spiritual.

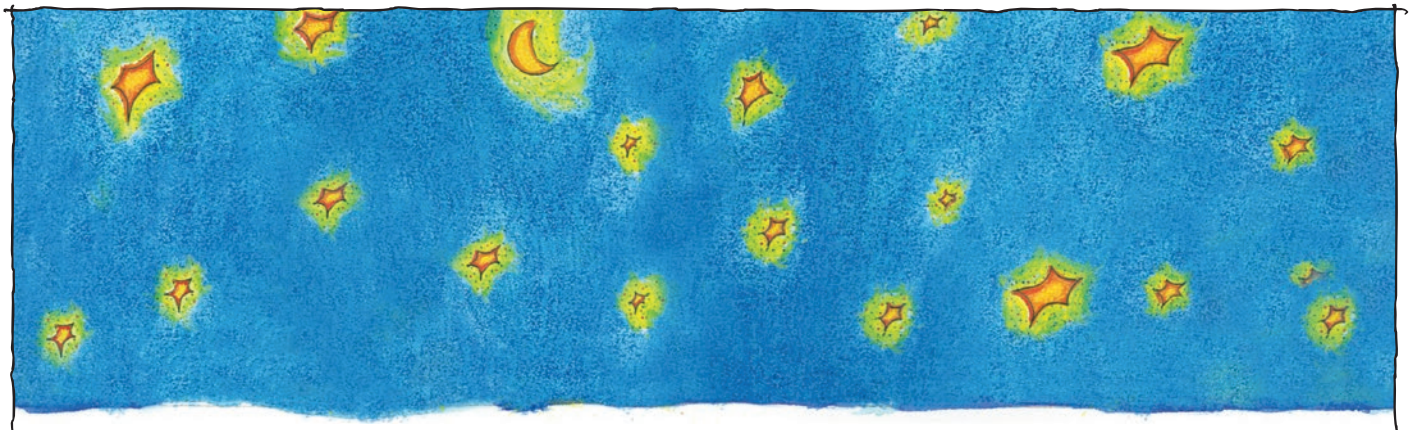
Exactly, mother said.

What did you say spiritual growth means? Sasha asked.

It means to be loving, honest, helpful, wise, and unifying, John answered.

You mean to be all these things with your brother and sister also? Sasha asked mischievously.
That's hard, she giggled.





Later that night when little Mina was asleep and Sasha was working on her science project about television with her mother, John turned to his father and said, *Dad, I'm very afraid of dying and being buried under the ground or cremated. This is not the same as being born from the womb.*

You are right, his father said. *Dying is not exactly like being born from the womb and, yes, dying is very frightening.*

I remember, father continued, *how afraid and sad I was when one of my classmates died in a car accident. He was my best friend. On the day of the funeral we all went to the cemetery and watched his coffin being put in the ground.*

Father was quiet and thoughtful for a while. He then said, *That night I cried and cried and was afraid to fall asleep. I was afraid that if I fell asleep I would not wake up, that I would die.*

It must have been very hard, John said.

It was, said father. *The day after the funeral I went to school. Everyone was sad, students, teachers, staff, even Timothy, the class clown.*

EVERYONE!



We had a very good teacher. Her name was Miss Ruha. She had lived a long life, traveled many countries, and knew all kinds of interesting things about life. And when you asked her where she was from, she would say everywhere was her home.

That morning she had brought with her a drum. She said an aboriginal elder who was her dear friend gave it to her as a gift and told her about its significance.

We sat in a circle, and she began to beat the drum.

This is the beat of life, the heartbeat, Miss Ruha said.
When we are in the womb, we hear this beat all the time.
The heartbeat of our mothers.
That is why music of all cultures has some kind of a heartbeat.

She beat the drum, at first slowly, then faster and faster,
and then slowly. And suddenly there was silence.

Miss Ruha then said, *I know you are all very sad about the death of Zhong. We all loved him so much and we still love him. And I am sure you do not understand what death is and what life is and why we have to die, especially when we are young and it is not our fault either.*

Now, you all know about the Mysterious Case of the IWs, said Miss Ruha.
You know that we die from the world of the womb and at the same time we are born into this world.
And you know that we die from this world and at the same time we are born into a completely different world.
And you also know that dying is a sad, sad event, but dying is also a happy event.
Dying is like going to a totally new place where everything is new—the language, the customs, the way of life—and where you are a newcomer and everyone is a stranger. This is frightening but also exciting. You learn new things, experience new things, make new friends, and go new places. Everything is new.


K. Breton

But, there is more to life than going from one place to another, Miss Ruha said in a hushed voice.
I will tell you a secret that I heard from my very wise and very old grandparents. They told me that they knew for a certainty that when we are in the womb of our mothers a very precious gift is put inside our body. So when we are born to this world, this precious gift can grow in the same way our bodies grew when we were in the womb. And when we die, this precious gift is set free!!

None of us knew what Miss Ruha was talking about.

I didn't know what the precious gift inside of me was. None of us knew. Actually, there were a few kids who knew something about this precious gift, but they couldn't explain it, father continued.

I remember one student said that this precious gift was our mind. Another thought it was our soul. A third one was wondering if this precious thing was what made us hungry so that we could stay alive. Some of us thought it must be our ability to talk or to see or to hear. Everyone had some idea. But no one was sure.

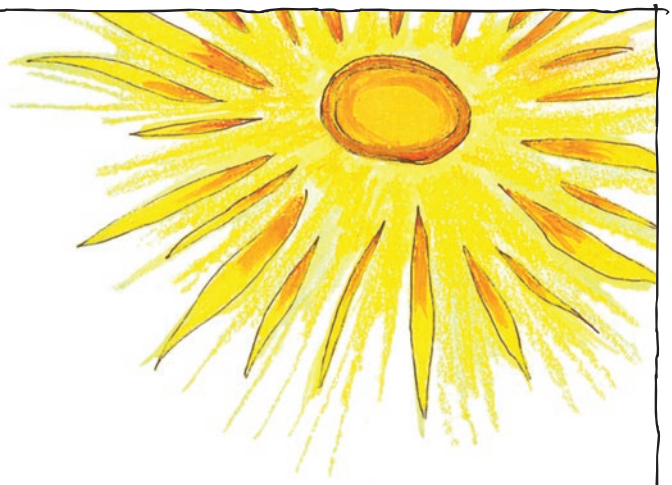
Miss Ruha told us that we were all correct. She said this precious gift is what makes you, you. It has different names like soul, spirit, self, mind, and other names. But they are all about what makes a person a person.

Now, let me ask you a question, said Miss Ruha.
Who was Zhong?
We all know that after the accident Zhong lived for a few weeks.
We know that he had lost one of his eyes.
That one of his legs had to be amputated.
That one of his kidneys had been ruptured and had to be taken out.
We know that the accident had made his face different.
He didn't look the same as before.
But still Zhong was Zhong.
The things he said, the courage he showed, the way he was polite and kind to everyone, all the marvelous qualities he had—all these qualities were what truly made him the person he was. Zhong clearly was not his legs or eyes or kidneys. What was special about Zhong was not his body but his character—his personhood or selfhood and the way this person used his body. That was Zhong.

Now, what is your real self? asked Miss Ruha.
Think about all those things that make you, you—your thoughts, your love, your talents, things you do, and the way you do them. These are unique to you. You use different parts of your body to express yourself. Your body is the tool of your real self.







Father continued, *Now, the class was silent.*
I was trying to understand my real self.
I was thinking about my feelings and thoughts and relationships.
I liked the idea of thinking about myself this way.
For the first time I realized that it didn't matter that I was short and had big ears.
What mattered was the kind of thoughts I had. The way that I was kind or happy or fair mattered most.
The fact that I was a loving person and liked to help others was very important.
The fact that I was honest and not prejudiced was far more important than how I looked or what kind of clothes I wore.
These were the things that mattered.

I was lost in my thoughts when suddenly I heard Miss Ruha's drum. She banged at it quietly and helped us to come out of our thoughts.



Now, said Miss Ruha, *this is the most important thing I want you to understand. Yesterday, when we put the body of Zhong into his grave, we did not bury Zhong's real self. Zhong's real self was that precious gift inside his body and since the body was no longer able to keep the gift inside it, the gift flew away like a bird from its cage.*

Then the class ended, father said.

John was puzzled.
Where did the bird go?
Where did the real Zhong go? he wondered.

Notes for Parents, Caregivers, and Teachers

"Are you going to die?" a five-year-old asked me.
"Yes, but I don't know when," I answered.
"My mom is dying soon," she said.

In my professional life as a physician I worked with many dying people, both old and young. While older people were usually fearful and controlled and often kept many of their deep thoughts and feelings to themselves, children and teenagers were much more forthcoming and open. They wanted to know why people died and what happened to them when they died. They asked if after their death they would be aware of this world. They wanted to know if there was a life after death and, if not, what was the purpose of their short life. They also asked me if I was afraid to die. And afraid I was. And I did not know the answers to many of their questions.

So, I began to think about these matters, to read about death and dying, to carefully observe those patients of mine who were facing death, and to find ways of understanding death better. Over subsequent years I worked with many people facing their own deaths or the death of their loved ones. They taught me many lessons. They took away some of my fears and gave me insights into mysteries of life and death.

On many occasions distraught parents asked me to help them to prepare their children to face either their own death or the death of someone close to them. In my research I had come across an analogy that compared life and death in this world to life in the womb and our subsequent rebirth. This analogy had a sound basis, both empirically and philosophically, and I introduced it into my practice as a significant adjunct to the psychological help that I offered my patients.

Use of analogies to understand different concepts is an ancient and extremely valuable practice. Through analogies we reach different layers of insight and make complicated matters much easier to understand. I have shared this analogy with many people, in different parts of the world, both in clinical and educational settings, with much positive response.

A unique aspect of the IWs [Inhabitants of the Womb] analogy is that it does not rely upon similarities between the death of human beings and the death of animals or plants. Using the example of animals or plants to help children to understand human death neither solves its mysteries nor decreases its trauma. In fact, such comparisons may even add to the fears and confusion of children. When our pets die, we can replace them with another pet; and when a plant dies we can grow another plant. However, we cannot do the same with humans. People are not replaceable.

We must help children to understand, to the best of their ability, the reality and finality of death and its relationship with life. Children as young as four (and sometimes even younger) are aware of death. They need help to understand death in the context of life and its continuity. Older children and youth also need our help to better understand the reality and purpose of death and its relationship with life.

We need to understand the relationship between life and death not only when we face death but also under all conditions. Individuals and societies that avoid dealing with death become preoccupied with death in an unhealthy and excessive manner, become indifferent to life, and become fascinated with violence. They also become more violent.

The Mysterious Case of the IWs is written for both parents and children, caregivers and patients, and teachers and students. It deals with issues of life and death in a realistic, hopeful, and meaningful manner. Parents, caregivers, and teachers are invited to study the text themselves first and then share *The Mysterious Case of the IWs* as it is presented here, or in a simpler or more comprehensive manner, according to the age, level of maturity, and unique circumstances of those involved.

H.B. Danesh
Victoria, Canada
March 2012

Suggested Readings

The following statement, on which the analogy of the IWs is based, is by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, one of the three central figures of the Bahá'í Faith:

> As to thy question regarding discoveries made by the soul after it hath put off its human form: certainly, that world is a world of perceptions and discoveries, for the interposed veil will be lifted away and the human spirit will gaze upon souls that are above, below, and on a par with itself. It is similar to the condition of a human being in the womb, where his eyes are veiled, and all things are hidden away from him. Once he is born out of the uterine world and entereth this life, he findeth it, with relation to that of the womb, to be a place of perceptions and discoveries, and he observeth all things through his outer eye. In the same way, once he hath departed this life, he will behold, in that world whatsoever was hidden from him here: but there he will look upon and comprehend all things with his inner eye. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1982, pp. 170–71)

For more perspectives on issues of death and dying, see, for example:

Ulrika Kreicberg et al., "Talking about Death with Children Who Have Severe Malignant Disease," *The New England Journal of Medicine* 351.12 (September 16, 2004): 1175–86.

Tyler Volk, *What is Death?* New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2002.

C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, New York: HarperCollins, 1989.

D. J. Enright, ed., *The Oxford Book of Death*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Joyce A. Shriner, "Young Children's Understanding of Death"; available at http://ohioline.osu.edu/hyg-fact/5000/5165.html (accessed 11 March 2012).

Acknowledgments

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About the Author

Dr. H. B. Danesh is the founder and president of the International Education for Peace Institute (Canada); visiting faculty member at the World Peace Academy, University of Basel (Switzerland); and the former president of Landegg International University, Switzerland. He is a retired professor of peace education and psychiatry and author of 12 books and many articles on issues of peace education, conflict-free conflict resolution, marriage and family, the psychology of spirituality, and the causes and prevention of violence. Half of his 30 years of psychiatric practice was mainly devoted to helping individuals, families, and communities facing issues of death and loss.

About the Illustrator

Katia Breton began her artistic career as a dancer with Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal. After dancing, she returned to her first love, the visual arts. Her work includes illustrations for children's books and magazines, greeting cards, school agendas, dance programs, and children's puzzles. She also has had several exhibitions of her paintings in the greater Montreal area. Through her art, Katia explores the diversity and richness of the human experience, searching for the links between the material and the spiritual forces within each and every one of us.

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The Mysterious Case of the IWs

On a Sunday afternoon, John, Sasha, and Mina were walking by the lakeside with their parents. John was 13, Sasha 9, and Mina 6.

Mina was thoughtful.

What are you thinking about my dear? her father asked.
About death! Mina answered.

What about death? Sasha asked.
Like what happens when people die, Mina said sadly.

Like who? John asked.
Like Indira's father, replied Mina.

Indira was Mina's best friend whose father had recently died. They were all very sad about it. But Mina was the saddest.

For a while they walked in silence, thinking...

The Mysterious Case of the IWs is about one of the most challenging facts of life—death. Death is a multilayered and puzzling event faced by everyone. It happens to the young and old, weak and strong, healthy and afflicted. The book, although written in a language suitable for young readers, is also for parents and children, teachers and students, caregivers and patients, and all individuals searching for answers to this final mystery of life. The story can be read to young children, discussed with older ones, presented in classrooms, studied in groups, and portrayed in dramatic and multimedia formats.

Dr. H. B. Danesh is a psychiatrist, thanatologist, and educator. He is the founder and president of the International Education for Peace Institute and has taught on issues of peace education, conflict resolution, and psychiatry at universities in Austria, Canada, Switzerland, and the United States. He is the creator of the Education for Peace Program and the main author of its multivolume curriculum.



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