



Spiritual songs, stories bring the world to a child's heart

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Here come the holidays, when doting grandparents, aunts or uncles don't want to arrive empty-handed for family gatherings. USA TODAY's spirituality and religion reporter **Cathy Lynn Grossman** rounds up stories and songs from all over the world, designed to charm a child from any culture.

•**Tour the world.** Let the little ones color their way to Africa² or bend themselves into mini-pretzels with songs to support relaxing yoga poses, or sway to the jazz classics. Putamayo World Music children's CDs, stickers and coloring books bring the sound and culture of the world to life.

FAITH & REASON: [In this gift book, even leaves pray: But to whom?](#)³ -

Sharing music "entertains, educates and inspires cultural curiosity" Putamayo says on its website. The music is tested with schoolchildren and families to highlight "child-friendly lyrics and rhythms by both renowned and undiscovered international artists." The company also contributes about 1% of sales to non-profit groups that support children, families, schools and other charities in the regions where the music originates.

Go for the newest releases, such as *Jazz Playground* with instrumental music from nine nations and songs in English, Portuguese, Japanese, French, Spanish and Dutch.

Or try the perennial best seller, upbeat, dance-y *World Playground*, or mellow out with the little ones with the lullabies on their *Dreamland* CD.

The *Rock & Roll Playground* CD got a rave from USA TODAY's reviewer who cited a Rosie Flores cut that's "a girl-power anthem for the preschool set."

The CDs with charming explanatory booklets to expand the history and cultures featured, cost about \$14.98. Putamayo's first coloring book, featuring the animals and instruments of Africa, is \$9.99.

•**Hear stories.** Meet "The Child who Swallowed the Sun" or "The Turtle who Just Couldn't Keep His Mouth Shut."

Stories to Light Our Way, traditional tales and original stories of generosity, respect, friendship and more are told by Ralph Singh at www.exploringspirituality.org/stories. You can download an individual story, the whole CD (\$12.97) and a study guide as well (\$10).

Singh, founder of Wisdom Thinkers Network, an Elbridge N.Y.-based nonprofit that seeks to nurture universal virtues, included stories he wrote such as "The Kingdom of How to Be Good: A story of changing yourself and the world," by drawing from his own Sikh faith.

Every story stars either a child or an animal and each draws on timeless values that may have been expressed in Christian, Hindu, Islamic, Jain, Jewish or Buddhist traditions. But the stories are all chosen, he says, to help people feel "affirmed in their own traditions and in the shared narrative of our world."

After the Sept. 11 2001 terrorist attacks, when he says four teens "torched our place of worship north of Syracuse, N.Y., thinking we were bin Laden supporters," the Sikh community responded with a public statement of forgiveness. Singh says he was inspired, in a world fractured by tension and cultural clashes, "to tell stories for all people who are all sharing the planet together. The idea is that stories cross all lines."

•**Touch the heart.** Nobel Peace Prize winner Archbishop Desmond Tutu⁴ battled apartheid in South Africa for painful decades before the racist system collapsed. Now, his voice for justice and forgiveness is carried on in his theological writings and collected sermons. But he is also addressing the future by nourishing the values of love and forgiveness among children.

His gentle, joyful children's book, *God's Dream*, shows them they can join in making this dream come true. The original book (\$18.50) is aimed at pre-schoolers, but a new board book (\$7.99) makes it accessible for any read-me-a-story moment with toddlers.

With co-author Douglas Carlton Abrams and illustrator LeUyen Pham, children of all races and ethnicities can see themselves hand in hand, "sharing, loving, caring."

The essential message of peace and brotherhood is conveyed with lines such as: "God dreams that every one of us will see that we are all brothers and sisters — yes, even you and me — even if we have different mommies and daddies or live in different faraway lands."

•**Be mindful.** Can children grasp a Zen concept, the idea of being quietly present in every moment? Why not, thought Jon J. Muth⁵, prize-winning, best-selling children's book illustrator and author.

So one day, in his fictional world, the Caldecott-Medal winning picture book *Zen Shorts* (\$17.99) a parable-spouting panda named Stillwater floats into the lives of three children.

Stillwater's stories-within-a-story are adapted from Zen parables and puzzles that nudge children into new ways of thinking and looking at the world.

Muth has a one-page Zen primer for adults at the back of the book. It explains, among other basic Buddhist mindfulness concepts, the panda's name.

You can see the world reflected in a pool of still water but, "if the water is agitated, the moon is fragmented and scattered. It is harder to see the true moon. Our minds are like that. When our minds are agitated, we cannot see the true world."

But no child will need the primer to appreciate tales of generosity, forgiveness and letting go of anger.

One character finds quiet delight in realizing, "You never know what will happen next."
