

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Jerome W. Berryman and the Deep Well

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The Parable of the Deep Well has become a metaphor for the call to continue to work of Godly Play® founder, Jerome W. Berryman, in the wake of his death in 2024.

From an email exchange I had with Jerome Berryman, about a month before his death.

On Jun 21, 2024, at 9:06 AM, Sally Thomas millvalleysally@gmail.com wrote:

Dear Jerome,

I send you my love from Maine and want to share a wondering experience that overcame me in the sharing of a parable here recently.

Perhaps it was an epiphany, but I felt you present in the form of the person who takes his time walking through the desert in the Parable of the Deep Well. You know the person—he pays attention, he notices, he stops, he doesn't rush. Then the golden threads became ideas about how children know and encounter God, and the threads were also all of us that you have touched whether through direct experience or story or patience for what may unfold. The threads were also thresholds and stillness and laughter. It was rich!

As you, the person in the desert, were tying together these myriad threads, the knots were square knots but not pulled taut. You left them well-connected but easy to untie. Later, after you'd walked away and left the assembled strand—which would have been longer and broader if I had had more threads—people crossed the desert, slowed down, and stopped. They took some threads they had in their pockets or could pull from their clothes because they wanted to be part of this golden strand. Because you had left the knots easy to untie, some did so, and they added strands that were different thicknesses and used different knots (some tight, some loose.) Others just added theirs to the end of the original strand. All of them went on their way too.

What about the cool, clear, refreshing water? It was, as it always had been, available to all. A choice.

With love and such a grateful heart,

Sally

On Jun 21, 2024, at 12:13 PM, The Rev. Jerome Berryman jeromewberryman@gmail.com replied:

Thank you, Sally.

You mean a lot to me. Be well, dear friend.

Onward!

There it is. My last exchange with Jerome Berryman—that remarkable, creative, honest, silly, pithy yet verbose prophet whose respect for children guided his life and work and called so many of us to discern how God was calling to us if we listened deeply to the wisdom of children and to one another. I was in my mid-thirties in 1997 when that happened. A wife, a mother to two little girls, and a dedicated oncology nurse practitioner in Boston, I was lost in the busyness of so many plates spinning that I rarely had the time or good sense to look “Godward.” And then there was that moment, which you probably have had yourself if you are reading this, that stopped-in-your-tracks response to hearing your first story, wondering together with others in the circle, and then reflecting independently while you had some unexpected quiet time for response work. “What’s happening right now?” I thought. “Am I at a Sunday school workshop for volunteers?” I could not identify that God was calling to me, for I did not have the language yet. Ironical! The work of Godly Play is to offer the gift of religious language, and I did not have any yet. But I was stopped in my tracks and felt tears rise when our storyteller, Jerome Berryman himself, asked the question of twenty-five or so adults gathered in a suburban parish hall, “I wonder if you have ever been lost?” Then those tears were unleashed when he asked a few minutes later, “And I wonder if you have ever been found?” In those few minutes, everything changed for me.

Interesting, isn’t it, that we all have our Godly Play origin story—that moment when we knew we were being called toward the warmth and work of Godly Play, to this (seemingly) countercultural way of ministering to children of God, regardless of age. And in doing the work of ministry and the somersault into wonder that inevitably follows, we distilled that the Holy One was beckoning us into a deeper relationship.¹ It was both an invitation and a divine yoke to listen deeply, to wonder more, and to make silence and spaciousness for God and ourselves. In Godly Play, we find a sense of ease that is not always easy!

We all have a unique Godly Play origin story that often echoes those of others in our various circles. But thirty years later, that first experience of mine has now taken a backseat to many subsequent chapters of my expanding faith,

¹ Jerome W. Berryman, *Teaching Godly Play: How to Mentor the Spiritual Development of Children* (Denver: Morehouse Education Resources, 2009), 67–8.

which was birthed in Godly Play®. All those layers of awareness and wisdom have been gifted to me by children, yes, but also alongside so may adult companions that my early story has aged and frayed a bit, making the parish hall of thirty years ago feel way less important than the “aha” about Jerome and the Parable of the Deep Well that began to take root in me about a year before his death. Maybe it was a vision or a bit of insight, but in playing with this extended wondering about the deep well, I was doing what all who come to Godly Play do—making meaning. My fresh understanding about Jerome at that deep well was important to me, but would Jerome, by then in the care of hospice, appreciate knowing what was coming up for me? Imagine how many people were having similar insights!

After a great deal of prayer and some forthright discernment with my dear friend and colleague, Nancy St. John, I sent the email. In the end, I simply had to share. Maybe it was an understated “thank you” for inviting me into this grand circle that changed my focus and my vocation. The circle situates all God’s children in the center and calls us to continually create physical and emotional spaces that speak the Godly Play language of welcome and wonder as we each are invited again and again to participate in God’s redemptive story. Or maybe it was hoping that I was one of those golden threads and appreciating how Jerome had shown me how to pause, drink deeply, and “knot” with all of you in the desert.

And so, I hope you will join me in shared wondering:

- I wonder how your Godly Play origin story and all the chapters since then are inviting you to walk toward that deep well and drink deeply of the cool, refreshing water you encounter there?
- I wonder where you are in the network of golden threads, or where you would like to be?
- I wonder where the knots are tight for you? Loose? Untied?
- I wonder where you will go or what you will do when you are ready to leave this well in the desert?

Many blessings on whatever shape your story takes. I hope our paths cross and we might wonder together. As Jerome’s email valediction was both a promise and a call to continue our shared work, I will close now. “Onward!”

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Berryman, Jerome W. *Teaching Godly Play: How to Mentor the Spiritual Development of Children*. Morehouse Education Resources, 2009.