

RESEARCH ARTICLE

An exploration of the 'is-ness' of silence in the work of Jerome W. Berryman.

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Keywords: silence, contemplative silence, Berryman, Godly Play, children's spirituality

<https://doi.org/10.65045/001c.158980>

Journal of Childhood and Religion

Vol. Special Issue, 2026

In his seminal article on silence, Jerome Berryman (1999) posed the question, “How can we show the “is-ness” of silence, since symbolic referencing does not clearly convey its meaning?” This article explores the consideration of silence in Jerome Berryman’s writing; mining various sources where he addressed the theme at both a theoretical level and pedagogically. It begins with an exploration of his understanding of silence and highlights the importance which he attributed to silence. Then it moves more specifically into how silence is engendered in Godly Play® with particular attention paid to the space (Godly Play® room) and the Storyteller. The article concludes by critically assessing the contribution of Jerome Berryman’s work on silence to the broader field of Childhood Studies.

I first encountered Godly Play and the work of Jerome Berryman while pursuing postgraduate studies in religious education (RE) over twenty years ago. Having recently moved from teaching in a primary school to lecturing in a college of education, where I prepared student teachers to teach RE in Catholic schools, I was eager to go beyond studying these approaches solely from an academic perspective and to assimilate them into my practice. However, Godly Play did not have a presence in Ireland at that time, and it wasn’t until 2011 that I experienced my first Godly Play story when Rebecca Nye presented the story of the Great Family at a conference.¹ I can still remember the moment when Rebecca closed her presentation of the story by taking a fistful of sand and slowly saying the words “And now, we are all part of this Great Family, which has become as many as the stars in the sky and the grains of sand in the desert,” as the sand slid from her palm.² The slow, shimmering fall of grains was accompanied by utter silence. I was raptured! I subsequently completed Godly Play core training and later became a Godly Play trainer in 2015.

1 Jerome W. Berryman, “The Great Family,” in *The Complete Guide to Godly Play*, vol. 2, rev. and expanded ed. (New York: Church Publishing, 2017), 85.

2 Berryman, “Great Family,” 93.

Regrettably, I never had the privilege of meeting Jerome Berryman properly, apart from a very fleeting encounter in 2015, which I shall recount at the conclusion of this article. Nonetheless, his work has had a profound influence on my practice and research as a religious educator. Choosing which aspect of his work to focus on for this article was difficult. In the end, the decision came down to a contest between two—his concept of Playful Orthodoxy,³ or the role of silence within the Godly Play room. As so often happens, silence, in its quiet, mischievous way, won out!

The Meaning of Silence in Berryman's Work

The most extensive treatment of silence in Berryman's writing is found in his 1999 article "Silence Is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Teaching Silence and the Future of Mankind." That article was addressed to an audience of religious educators. Berryman asserted that such educators should take more responsibility for the teaching of silence in their daily tasks, due to its special importance. This importance emanates from the connection between silence and the creation of existential meaning, together with the vital role of silence in the creative process. According to Berryman, the human species is at risk without both deep meaning and the creative process.⁴

Elsewhere, Berryman writes of the difficulty of speaking of silence because of its wordless nature.⁵ He points to the ambiguity of the words used to convey its meaning and says that "no single term seems to exhaust the meaning of silence."⁶ In the background notes to the Godly Play lesson "Making Silence," the related terms of *quiet*, *silence*, and *stillness* are explored.⁷ The notes suggest that *quiet* might represent the larger category, with the other two being specific kinds of quiet. *Stillness* comes from inner calm. *Silence* itself comes from making no sound, and it is imposed from outside.⁸ The notes move on to address two further modes of quiet: (1) when there is nothing to say and (2) when there is too much to say, and one falls quiet due to the overwhelming nature of a particular phenomenon.⁹ This delineation of the various kinds of quiet was also presented in Berryman's focused article

3 Jerome W. Berryman, "Playful Orthodoxy: Reconnecting Religion and Creativity by Education," *Sewanee Theological Review* 48, no. 4 (2005): 437–454.

4 Jerome W. Berryman, "Silence Is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Teaching Silence and the Future of Mankind," *Religious Education* 94, no. 3 (1999): 257, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0034408990940302>.

5 Berryman, *Silence*, illustrated by Lois Kilberg (New York: Church Publishing, 2020).

6 Berryman, "Silence Is Stranger Than It Used to Be," 262.

7 Jerome W. Berryman, "Making Silence," in *The Complete Guide to Godly Play*, vol. 3, rev. and expanded ed. (New York: Church Publishing, 2017).

8 Berryman, "Making Silence," 213.

9 Berryman, "Making Silence," 214.

on silence; however, in that earlier piece, he plays with semantics to a greater extent, moving between verbs, adverbs and imperative usages to convey the meaning of silence.¹⁰

Although no taxonomy of silence can be exhaustive,¹¹ it can be helpful to engage with those who seek to capture the essence of the “is-ness” of silence.¹² In his attempt to arrive at a meaningful exposition of the various types of silence, Cristóbal Pacheco wrestles with terms that are akin to Berryman’s ones.¹³ He speaks of stillness, silence, and contemplation as a “trilogy of encounter.” Stillness is approached as a form of withdrawal that opens a space for attunement to one’s bodily and affective life.¹⁴ Like Berryman, Pacheco views stillness as a threshold to inner clarity and existential insight.¹⁵ Silence is perceived as a rich and multifaceted phenomenon that spans the psychological, spiritual, philosophical, and communicative dimensions of human experience. According to Pacheco, far from being a neutral void, silence can serve as a liminal space—a threshold that allows the emergence of presence, receptivity, and transformation.¹⁶ Finally, contemplation is framed as a sustained direction of attention/self-inquiry that cultivates openness and insight.¹⁷ It offers a mode of engaging with the ineffable, often pointing toward inner transformation, wisdom, and connection to the sacred.¹⁸

Brendan Hyde, Karen-Marie Yust, and Chiharu Ota consider the same three terms as Berryman: silence, stillness, and quiet.¹⁹ They conclude that all three words are needed, “since no one single word captures all that reflects the essence of silence.”²⁰ In a special edition of the *Godly Play UK Magazine*, Sue Price also offers interpretations of silence that were uncovered during her research with severely disabled children. In her interactions with the children, she discovered that they used silence in three different ways, which she classifies as the following: active silence, relational silence, silence of

¹⁰ Berryman, “Silence Is Stranger Than It Used to Be,” 257.

¹¹ Spyros Spyrou, “Researching Children’s Silences: Exploring the Fullness of Voice in Childhood Research,” *Childhood* 23, no. 1 (2016): 12, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568215571618>.

¹² Berryman, “Silence Is Stranger Than It Used to Be,” 264.

¹³ Cristóbal Pacheco, “Stillness, Silence, and Contemplation: A Trilogy of Encounter,” *Human Arenas*, May 24, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42087-025-00503-z>.

¹⁴ Pacheco, “Stillness, Silence and Contemplation,” 1.

¹⁵ Pacheco, 4.

¹⁶ Pacheco, 6.

¹⁷ Pacheco, 1.

¹⁸ Pacheco, 8.

¹⁹ Brendan Hyde, Karen-Marie Yust, and Chiharu Ota, “Silence, Agency and Spiritual Development,” *International Journal of Children’s Spirituality* 15, no. 2 (2010): 97–99, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1364436X.2010.497640>

²⁰ Hyde, Yust, and Ota, “Silence, Agency and Spiritual Development,” 94.

engagement with self.²¹ The table below captures the characteristics of each type of silence observed during Price's original research, along with examples from her experience as a Godly Play practitioner that apply to Godly Play.

Table 1. Categories of silence in the work of Sue Price²²

Type of silence	Examples from Price's original research	Godly Play examples
Silence of engagement with self	A silence of disengagement with those around oneself by withdrawing into oneself or sometimes simply falling asleep.	Children absorbed and taking in a story without engaging with anyone else ("The children are touching the mystery through silence"). ²³
Active silence	A silence of "doing"—a companionable silence in which both adult and child (or children together) are involved in the same activity (e.g., looking at a book, creating a picture, or playing a game initiated by the child).	Two children working with the same materials but without words.
Relational silence	A silence of "being" in which neither the child nor the adult are doing anything. They are simply sitting together, being present to one another.	Contented silence at the Feast time ("Out of the silence of engaging with themselves, the children move to awareness of each other"). ²⁴

Regardless of his own battle with words, Berryman uses the term *silence* most frequently, and in his later writing, he employs *contemplative silence* as a descriptor for the specific form of silence/stillness engendered in Godly Play. This type of silence isn't enforced. He says:

We can force children to be silent, but it is stillness (from within) that children need if they are going to learn anything well. We can't fill a cup that is already full of noise. The ability to contemplate creates the space for filling and it is the foundation for wonder which opens the creative process, which in turn gives us life.²⁵

Furthermore, Berryman asserts the importance of providing children with ways (most notably through narrative and play) to discover silence and to become acquainted with silence so they can approach "*The Silence, the Source of life*."²⁶ His understanding of "the Silence" and "the Source" is rooted in Terrien's theology of the elusive presence²⁷ and also has resonances in

21 Sue Price, "Hearing the Language of Silence," *Godly Play UK Magazine*, special issue "Silence," no. 9 (Autumn 2021): 5–9, <https://www.godlyplay.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Godly-Play-Magazine-9-September-2021-2.pdf>.

22 Price, 5–9.

23 Price, "Hearing the Language of Silence," 7.

24 Price, 8.

25 Berryman, "Making Silence," 214.

26 Berryman, "Silence Is Stranger Than It Used to Be," 271.

27 Samuel L. Terrien, *The Elusive Presence: Toward a New Biblical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978).

apophatic theology.²⁸ Silence as a space of encounter with the transcendent is echoed in the experience of the prophet Elijah at Horeb, often cited in the literature.²⁹ Fleeing Jezebel's threat, Elijah seeks refuge on Mount Horeb and spends the night in a cave. There he first hears the word of God, calling him to the mouth of the cave so that he can not only *hear* God's voice but also *encounter* God's presence. A series of overwhelming natural events follows—a powerful wind, an earthquake, and a raging fire—but God is not found in this tumultuous sequence. Instead, by “dramatic antithesis,”³⁰ it is in the ensuing stillness that Elijah hears the “still, small voice” and recognizes the divine.

In his own descriptions of contemplative silence, Berryman attempts to express what is beyond language, since symbolic referencing does not convey its meaning.³¹ He frequently uses mystical, poetic, and seemingly paradoxical language to reflect the inherent ineffability of silence of this nature. Silence is not an absence but a presence, and if we learn to listen for silence and value it, we can hear it.³² In the Godly Play method, Berryman conceptualizes silence as a language itself alongside the language of sacred stories, liturgy, and parables, which are the components of the Christian language system.³³ The language of silence (a) helps children to become aware of the elusive presence of God, (b) enables children to hear the small, still voice, (c) supports the creative process and an ability to contemplate the lesson, and (d) gives us the opportunity to experience silence and become comfortable with it.³⁴ Berryman affirms children's capacity for silence by referring to the Gospel story in which Jesus took a child in his arms and said, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me” (Mark 9:33–37).³⁵ He juxtaposes the silence of the child in this passage with the “noisy, wordy, clueless disciples” who had been arguing about who was the greatest. The child's silence, according to Berryman, reveals God's presence, whereas “noise blatantly obscures silence.”³⁶

28 “Apophatic Theology,” in *Encyclopædia Britannica*, accessed February 12, 2026, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/apophatic-theology> (defining apophatic theology as an approach to God by negation and the limits of language).

29 Colum Kenny, *The Power of Silence: Silent Communication in Daily Life* (London: Karnac, 2011), and Samuel L. Terrien, *The Elusive Presence: Toward a New Biblical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978).

30 Terrien, *Elusive Presence*, 232.

31 Berryman, “Silence Is Stranger Than It Used to Be,” 264.

32 Berryman, “Making Silence,” 79.

33 Jerome W. Berryman, *Teaching Godly Play: How to Mentor the Spiritual Development of Children*, rev. and expanded ed. (New York: Church Publishing, 2009), chapter 1, where Berryman explains that the Christian language system “has the functions of identity making (sacred story), stimulating exploration of Christian meaning (parable), making redemption available to the community (liturgical action) and opening the way to experience the presence of the mystery of God directly (contemplative silence).”

34 Jerome W. Berryman, *The Complete Guide to Godly Play*, vol. 2 (New York: Church Publishing, 2002), 12.

35 Jerome W. Berryman, *Becoming Like a Child: The Curiosity of Maturity beyond the Norm* (New York: Church Publishing, 2017).

36 Berryman, *Becoming Like a Child*, 79.

Unsurprisingly for children, it is challenging to verbally articulate the nature of contemplative silence. In the conversation recounted below, we hear children “stretching the bits of language” they possess to approximate that which is beyond language.³⁷ However, it is clear from the encounter that they have the capacity to sense contemplative silence, to view it as different in form from other silences, and to value it. What follows is a conversation with some children who had experienced Godly Play sessions I had led over the course of a year.³⁸ The routine was that I would withdraw the children from their classroom at a specific time each week and bring them to another available room. At the conclusion of a year, I conducted focus groups. During one such focus group, when I asked the children what their experience of Godly Play was like, one child (Eugene) responded, “It was real quiet and real relaxing.” I noticed many nods from the other children in the group, so I probed further with my questions. I began by reminding them that when I had collected them from their classroom that very morning, their class was in complete silence, engrossed in a writing exercise.

Cora: So the quiet and the silence [with Godly Play]—you really liked that. But when I walked into your room, you were all quiet and still too.

Fiona: That’s ‘cause we were all concentrating to get our final draft done.

Cora: Oh, OK. And would that be the same quietness now as you were describing there?

All: No!

Cora: So what’s different about it?

Luke: You’re getting told a story [in Godly Play]. That’s just quiet [in the class].

Eugene: It just makes you calm.

Cora: You’re saying that’s different quiet from Godly Play quiet.

Luke: Godly Play is more relaxing than that [writing in the classroom]. That’s just quiet.

Cora: It makes you calmer?

Eugene: It’s (*pause*) . . . It’s calming (*pause*). It’s hard to explain.

³⁷ Berryman, *Becoming Like a Child*, 80.

³⁸ C. O’Farrell, *An Exploration of Children’s Experiences of a Process Which Provides Opportunities for Spiritual Expression and Development* (PhD diss., Dublin City University, 2018), <https://doras.dcu.ie/21364>.

Luke: This is calming 'cause we were getting told a story. In there, we were all working.

Cora: So you're working over there, and when you're doing Godly Play you don't think it's work.

Fiona: It is work, but it's more relaxing.

Luke: We were writing. That's work. Work's so annoying!

Cora: And do you get a chance to have that quiet at any other times?

Lulu: Yeah, on Monday when we are getting read a story, *Charlotte's Web*.

Cora: So is the quiet when you're listening to *Charlotte's Web* the same as the quiet when you're doing Godly Play?

All: Yeah, sort of.

Luke: Well, it's not really quiet because people are interrupting the whole time and asking, "What does this mean? What does that mean?"

Cora: So was that different from your experience of Godly Play then?

Eugene: Yeah.

Cora: What was different?

Eugene: Everybody's talking [in class], and nobody's talking at the Godly Play. Most of the time when it's real quiet, everybody starts talking then. That's what I mean.

Cora: There was some talking in Godly Play too, though, wasn't there? Because when you were playing together, there used to be a bit of talking, wasn't there? There used to be three or four of you at the sand, and there'd be a bit of talking going on there, wouldn't there?

Fiona: Yeah. Not too much. Not as much as like . . .

Eugene: People'd be saying, "That sand feels looooooovely!"

Cora: So it's the feeling as well?

Fiona: The relaxing and the calm.

Eugene: You just have to sit there and watch!

This encounter fascinated me at the time and continues to fascinate me. The way the children distinguished between different kinds of silence is remarkable. Their desire for the type of silence offered by Godly Play was palpable. The encounter above is instructive for storytellers who may have an overly romanticized view of silence as being present only in a state of great stillness and entranced contemplation, and that if this isn't happening, they have failed in their roles. Such had been my original perception, but relational and active silence³⁹ were clearly evident in the children's descriptions above, and Berryman's exposition of *quiet* as an overarching frame for understanding silence is also helpful here.

Godly Play Space and the Godly Play Pedagogy

In *The Sign of Jonas*, Thomas Merton says that people need to be provided with places where they can go to be quiet, in order to relax minds and hearts in the presence of God.⁴⁰ The Godly Play room offers such a space for children. Berryman describes it as a "space infused with the contemplative silence of the classical Christian tradition."⁴¹ In an email reproduced in a blog post, Berryman notes that contemplative "silence is woven among the materials which do not speak."⁴² Elsewhere, he says that there isn't even a designated "prayer corner" in a Godly Play room. Instead, contemplative silence permeates everything that is done, which prepares children for "spirituality without walls."⁴³

Each Godly Play session is punctuated with silence, and the pedagogy supports this—from the entering, to the presentation, the wondering, the art and material responses, the feast, and the saying goodbye.⁴⁴ Every opportunity for silence is seized, from carrying materials from the shelves to the circle and replacing them when finished, to the spaces between the words in the presentation, to the slow, deliberate rituals when children arrive and when they depart. The whole process, including the laughter and tears, is infused with contemplation.⁴⁵

39 Price, "Hearing the Language of Silence," 5–9. <https://www.godlyplay.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Godly-Play-Magazine-9-September-2021-2.pdf>.

40 Cited in Robert Cardinal Sarah and Nicolas Diat, *The Power of Silence: Against the Dictatorship of Noise* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2017), 32.

41 Jerome W. Berryman, *The Spiritual Guidance of Children: Montessori, Godly Play, and the Future* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2013), 21.

42 Sheila, "On the Language of Silence in Godly Play," *Explore and Express: Thoughts about Children's Spirituality, Godly Play, and Art Education*, August 11, 2011, <https://exploreandexpress-sheila.blogspot.com/2011/08/on-language-of-silence-in-godly-play.html>.

43 Berryman, *Spiritual Guidance of Children*, 181.

44 Berryman, "Making Silence," 214.

45 Berryman, *Spiritual Guidance of Children*, 181.

Elsewhere, Berryman writes that “contemplative silence is present when the children are concentrating. . . . It is in the children who can speak but choose not to. It is in the awareness, even when speaking, that there is more about God’s presence than can be said.”⁴⁶

Furthermore, sometimes the Storyteller walks around the room touching the materials in the room and saying, “Here are the sacred stories. Here are the parables. Here are the liturgical action materials. But where are the silence materials?” This question is left hanging in the air, but it is not forgotten.⁴⁷ Berryman says that to satisfy their curiosity, when the children begin to talk about this, it is time for a focused lesson, “Making Silence,” which entered the Godly Play canon in 2017. This lesson introduces the formal practice of “making silence” to children of all ages and is reminiscent of Montessori’s Silence Exercise.⁴⁸ Children learn to find the silence they need and to sense when silence comes close to them.

The Storyteller

In his consideration of Godly Play through the lens of affordance theory,⁴⁹ Brendan Hyde refers to storytellers as “affordances.”⁵⁰ While he does not specifically cite silence as an affordance, his framework supports interpreting the Storyteller as an affordance for contemplative silence. Despite children’s capacity for silence, Berryman nonetheless emphasizes the need to teach children silence, and the best way to do so is to show it. He insists that in the teaching of silence, “*who* is communicating, is more important than what is said.”⁵¹ The great narrative of the Christian people needs to be told in a way that is soaked in silence, and the Storyteller needs to disappear so as not to distract the participating listener from the depth of the stories.⁵²

In his seminal article on silence, Berryman proceeds to expand on the qualities of an effective communicator in engendering silence.⁵³ In doing so, he draws on Paul Ricoeur’s concept of the “second naïveté,” which was adopted by James Fowler to define his fifth stage of faith development, “Conjunctive Faith.”⁵⁴ According to Berryman, the second naïveté is the point at which adults regain sensitivity to the kinds of knowing that people possess before

⁴⁶ Sheila, “On the Language of Silence in Godly Play.”

⁴⁷ Berryman, “Making Silence,” 214.

⁴⁸ Maria Montessori, *The Secret of Childhood*, trans. Barbara Carter (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2004), 129.

⁴⁹ James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979), 127. Gibson defines “affordances” as the action possibilities that the environment offers to an organism, relative to its capabilities.

⁵⁰ Brendan Hyde, “Action Possibilities Enhancing the Spiritual Wellbeing of Young Children: Applying Affordance Theory to the Godly Play Room,” *Religions* 13, no. 12 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13121202>.

⁵¹ Berryman, “Silence Is Stranger Than It Used to Be,” 264.

⁵² Berryman, “Silence Is Stranger Than It Used to Be,” 271.

⁵³ Berryman, “Silence Is Stranger Than It Used to Be.”

⁵⁴ James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981).

language.⁵⁵ Explaining this concept in the context of Godly Play and silence, he refers to the two great gates into our humanity: the gate of relationships discovered in infancy, and the gate of language passed through around a child's second year.⁵⁶ Both of these gates constitute the first naïveté. Godly Play nurtures this first naïveté without precluding later critical reflection. In particular, the practice of shared silence teaches children how to hold a story rather than resolve it. Godly Play thus functions as a hermeneutical space in which children engage with sacred stories without the pressure of explanation or doctrinal closure. In late adolescence or early adulthood, when they enter the critical stage (Fowler's stage 4: "Individuative-Reflective Faith"), the memory of having encountered stories in silence, as open, living symbols, provides the imaginative and spiritual resources necessary for preparing the ground for a mature, postcritical faith and reentering the story through the third gate—namely, the second naïveté.

Berryman asserts that those who have entered the second naïveté are especially qualified to teach silence. For them, silence as a way of knowing and being steps into the foreground; symbolic referencing steps back; words lose their linking power in favor of unspoken connections with life.⁵⁷ Some might interpret this as a precondition for becoming a Storyteller in Godly Play. Only those in the second naïveté may apply! However, this interpretation is inaccurate and does a great disservice to the "reciprocal influence" proposed by Maria Montessori and endorsed by Berryman.⁵⁸ This reciprocal influence points to the mutual growth that occurs between adults and children, which is readily tangible in the learning environment of a Godly Play session. Such reciprocity was especially evident to me in working with the children during my studies, when I was able to listen to their narratives rather than rely on my own interpretations. It was in that space that I first paid proper attention to silence and its various manifestations. Most of my Godly Play practice as a Storyteller has been with adults, and that context has also offered mutual blessings regarding silence. As a Godly Play Trainer, I have been privileged to experience contemplative silence during preparation programs, taster sessions, and conferences, which has formed me and deepened my understanding of Scripture, liturgy, the cosmos, and what it means to be a human being.

My experience of offering Godly Play sessions to my students as part of their teacher education degrees has also revealed valuable insights into silence and the role of the Storyteller in fostering it. Each year, I work with approximately 400 first-year undergraduate students in groups of thirty, offering them an

55 Berryman, "Silence Is Stranger Than It Used to Be," 264.

56 Jerome W. Berryman, *Godly Play: An Imaginative Approach to Religious Education* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), 144–145.

57 Berryman, "Silence Is Stranger Than It Used to Be," 266.

58 Jerome W. Berryman, "Montessori and Religious Education," *Religious Education* 75, no. 3 (1980): 294–307, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0034408800750308>.

experience of Godly Play. A second experience is offered to them in the second year of their studies, which I also facilitate. By this stage, I have encountered thousands of pre-service teachers seated in a circle in a Godly Play room.⁵⁹ Due to time constraints, the session format includes only the presentation of a story and engagement with the wondering questions. This is followed by a debrief of the experience and a discussion of the principles of Godly Play, which they may choose to incorporate into their teaching of RE (e.g., crossing the threshold, being welcomed, building the circle). From the outset, they are invited to enter the story, not primarily with their future roles as teachers on their minds or with how children might respond to the pedagogy, but rather with openness to their own personal experience. They are assured, too, that no one will be compelled to speak. As I present the story, speaking slowly, incorporating its gestures and allowing pauses for internal wondering, I am always conscious of their sustained engagement through their silence. When I pose the wondering questions, however, I am also invariably greeted with silence at this point. In most sessions, there is no response from anyone to the wondering prompts and very little evidence on the faces of the students that there is comfort for them in this silence. Colleagues have also described this withholding of voice among students. Indeed, Lipari captures this phenomenon in her description of gathering her students in a circle to reflect on their immediate experience of a walk in nature, including walking the path of an outdoor labyrinth:

All was quiet. The students gazed at the floor. . . . because I didn't want to direct this listening space in any way, I reminded the class that there was no specific question to answer, but a general open query for them to reflect on their labyrinth experience or anything else on their mind. In past years, students would be anxious to share their reflections and would do so quite readily, remarking on the metaphor of the labyrinth walk for their own journey toward mindfulness. Moreover, between, say, 1998 to 2007, students would be chomping at the bit to have such an open forum for class discussion and would have gleefully run with the ball in any of many well-worn directions—connecting mindfulness to the behavior of the campus police, the school's drinking policy, the crummy food, the sexist climate, or the school's hidden curriculum of busyness. But no one spoke a word. I searched the group with my eyes, and was met by a few bashful stares. No one wanted to step into the space, take the floor, and hold the

59 The Mater Dei Centre for Catholic Education at Dublin City University houses a Godly Play room.

ground. Thrown by this response, after about 10 minutes or so I asked them whether something was holding them back. “Is this contemplative silence or self-censorship?” I asked them.⁶⁰

Lipari’s question merits further consideration, but in the context of this discussion of silence and the role of Storyteller in Godly Play, it is sufficient to reinforce Berryman’s call to offer ways for children (and indeed adults) to experience silence and to become comfortable with it.⁶¹ This requires the Storyteller to embody the methodology that creates the space for silence. When silence is sensed in the room—regardless of how comfortable, uncomfortable, recognizable, or otherwise it feels—the Storyteller can trust that, in the silence, there is Presence, which will nourish not only the participants but the Storyteller as well.

The Contribution of Berryman’s Work on Silence to the Broader Field of Childhood Studies

Jerome Berryman’s scholarship and the development of Godly Play have had a sustained influence on how theorists in the domain of children’s spirituality conceptualize the spiritual lives of young children and the pedagogical environments that support them. His emphasis on narrative, play, the prepared environment, and silence has been taken up by leading researchers in the field.⁶² None of these comprehensively addresses the language of silence, but all refer to silence to some extent in their work.

Seeking to ascertain Berryman’s contribution to the overall field of childhood studies⁶³ is more challenging, however, as his work, along with others’ efforts in this domain, has traditionally resided at the margins of the broader paradigm.⁶⁴ While an interdisciplinary thrust became a hallmark of childhood studies, one discipline that seemed to lack engagement with others was childhood spirituality. Boyatzis found that there was a serious neglect of the area, and he called on researchers to rectify the imbalance between the place of religion in human development and the attention it receives in

⁶⁰ Lisbeth Lipari, “Rotten with Perfection: Reflections on Contemplative Pedagogy in a Neoliberal Age,” *Contemplative Ways of Knowing in Higher Education* 49, no. 1 (2014): 35.

⁶¹ Berryman, *Complete Guide to Godly Play*, 12.

⁶² R. Nye, *Children’s Spirituality: What It Is and Why It Matters* (London: Church House Publishing, 2009); B. Hyde, *Children and Spirituality: Searching for Meaning and Connectedness* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publications, 2008); J. Mata-McMahon and P. Escarfuller, *Children’s Spirituality in Early Childhood Education: Theory to Practice* (London: Routledge, 2023).

⁶³ Childhood studies emerged in the late 1980s as a challenge to the dominance of developmental psychology, which had tended to position children primarily in terms of *becoming* rather than *being* (Woodhead 2009). The “new sociology of childhood” reoriented attention toward children’s present-tense experiences and agency, and conceptualized children as social actors and childhood as a social, cultural, and political category in its own right (Qvortrup 2009). A major catalyst within this new academic field was Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which asserts the right of children to express their views and to have those views taken seriously.

⁶⁴ Montessori is an exception in this regard. Her legacy is great in the field of secular education, even though her writing is at times overtly religious and Carnes (2015) argues that, ironically, she receives scant attention from scholars of religion.

social science scholarship.⁶⁵ King also pointed to the fact that even within the vast literature, which was specifically focused on spirituality itself, studies on children's spirituality were less numerous and were often not even listed in classic, core texts,⁶⁶ in spite of the fact that much international research had been conducted into children's spirituality at that time (e.g., Hay and Nye, Hart, and Hyde).⁶⁷

In this early orientation of childhood studies, the voice of the child emerged as a dominant driver of research, and the field foregrounded social, relational, and discursive accounts of the child, prioritizing agency and voice. Such an ontology tended to overlook questions of interiority and transcendence. Meaning that is held silently or experienced inwardly is difficult to account for within a framework that equates agency with speech and verbal expression.⁶⁸ Spyrou emerged as a prominent critic of the dominance afforded to voice in research with children.⁶⁹ He called for silence to be taken seriously, rather than overlooked or seen as a lack of voice. He argued that silence calls for interpretation. Although Spyrou was drawing attention to silence, his understanding was quite different from that of Berryman's, as he wasn't accepting silence as complete in itself but rather something that needed to be understood and analyzed.

In recent years, an ontological turn has emerged within childhood studies, broadening the field beyond its earlier focus on voice and agency to include relational presence, embodiment, affect, wonder, and interior forms of meaning-making, including silence.⁷⁰ Drawing on posthumanist and new materialist perspectives, this turn creates fresh possibilities for recognizing spirituality as a substantive dimension of children's lived experience, opening the door to more serious engagement with scholarship concerning children's spirituality in an interdisciplinary context. In this regard, it's encouraging to note that the chosen place of publication of a recent systematic review and qualitative synthesis of the literature pertaining to the experience and expression of spirituality in childhood is in the *Journal for the Study of Spirituality*.⁷¹ This contrasts with the majority of the journal articles referenced in the review and synthesis itself. Most of those articles appear

65 C. Boyatzis, "Religious and Spiritual Development: An Introduction," *Review of Religious Research* 44, no. 3 (2003): 213–219.

66 Ursula King, "The Spiritual Potential of Childhood: Awakening to the Fullness of Life," *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 18, no. 1 (2013): 4.

67 D. Hay and R. Nye, *The Spirit of the Child*, rev. ed. (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2006); B. Hyde, *Children and Spirituality: Searching for Meaning and Connectedness* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2008); Tobin H. Hart, *The Secret Spiritual World of Children* (Maui: Inner Ocean, 2003).

68 O'Farrell, *Exploration of Children's Experiences*.

69 Spyrou, "Researching Children's Silences."

70 Alison M.-C. Li, Janet S. Gaffney, Adrienne N. Sansom, and Jacoba Matapo, "Re-defining Silence in Unvoiced Dialogues in Storying-Play: The Sound of Affects," *Journal of Childhood, Education & Society* 4, no. 1 (2023): 41–55, <https://doi.org/10.37291/2717638X.202341233>.

71 C. Robinson, B. Hyde, C. Forlin, and M. Best, "The Experience and Expression of Spirituality in Childhood: A Systematic Review and Qualitative Synthesis of the Literature," *Journal for the Study of Spirituality* (2025): 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/20440243.2025.2475058>.

in more discipline-focused journals. Publication in journals such as this one, with a broader audience, offers scope for more meaningful and extensive conceptual and interdisciplinary dialogue between the broader field of childhood studies and the place of scholarship of childhood spirituality within that domain.

Berryman's understanding of silence as relational and generative, in which children encounter presence, meaning, and being, resonates strongly with posthumanist approaches that decenter cognition and representation in favor of embodiment, affect, and relational emergence. While there are undoubtedly differences and tensions (e.g., Berryman's openness to encounter with a transcendent God misaligns with conceptions of immanence proposed by new materialism), there are also opportunities for generous sharing. Most notably from the perspective of nurturing spirituality, Berryman's pedagogical cues for the engendering of and engagement with silence offer much scope for professional learning to preserve deep meaning and the creative process serving Mata-McMahon's call for relevant tools for educators to nurture spirituality effectively in the classroom.⁷²

Conclusion

Children value the space for silence, which is fundamental to their development, both for creating existential meaning and for its role in the creative process. Berryman's work is an invitation to take silence seriously as part of children's lived experience. His canon on silence, spanning decades, merits serious attention beyond its current scope and is invaluable to theorists and practitioners alike. The application of his understanding of silence to the development of Godly Play and the special place it affords silence is a gift to practitioners unsure how to hold the space of silence. Berryman's contribution deserves far more visibility within the interdisciplinary study of childhood, and the ontological turn in childhood studies offers new possibilities for such engagement.

Mar Fhocal Scoir (A Parting Word)

At the outset of this article, I spoke of having been in Jerome Berryman's presence just once in my lifetime. It was at a gathering of Godly Play trainers in London in 2015. I traveled over from Dublin on an early morning flight just to sit at the master's feet and then returned home that evening for a prior commitment. Jerome was clearly a man who had passed through the third gate into the second naivete; his sense of joy was infectious, and his humility belied his brilliance. Overall, though, what struck me was his mischievous

⁷² J. Mata-McMahon and P. Escarfuller, *Children's Spirituality in Early Childhood Education: Theory to Practice* (London: Routledge, 2023), 130.

nature. At one point, he smiled and said, "You know, sometimes people accuse me of being a heretic!" Then he paused momentarily and held silence before saying, "Isn't that wonderful!"

Submitted: November 28, 2025 EDT. Accepted: February 02, 2026 EDT. Published: May 01, 2026 EDT.



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