

RESEARCH ARTICLE

One Storyteller's Transformation

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As I give thanks for the life and work of Jerome W. Berryman, I want to celebrate his telling the story of the Last Supper and the Eucharistic feast as a way of framing his profound impact on my life. Reflecting on Jerome's life and ministry provokes in me *eucharistia*, thanksgiving for the way I have been transformed.

Jesus took some bread and gave thanks to God for it. Then he broke it and said something like, "Whenever you break the bread like this and share it, I will be there."—Jerome W. Berryman

As I give thanks for the life and work of Jerome W. Berryman, I want to celebrate his telling the story of the Last Supper and the eucharistic feast as a way of framing his profound impact on my life. Reflecting on Jerome's life and ministry provokes in me *eucharistia*, thanksgiving for the way I have been transformed.

After all, it was his eucharistic gesture in telling "The Ark and the Flood" at my very first Godly Play experience in 1996 that broke open my heart and led to my current vocation. I had grown up in a church that was very sacrament-centered, at the expense of story. The Bible, the stories of Holy Scripture, did not belong to me but to the experts who had been to special schools and studied mysterious doctrines. They, the priests of the Roman Catholic Church, would read the Bible and explain it all to us. We (children and adults) were not trusted with the sacred word.

By the time I first met Jerome, sitting in a circle on the floor at St. Bartholomew's Church in Baltimore, I had found a new spiritual home in the Episcopal Church. But I had been there only a few years and was still growing into this new culture. I'd been invited by the rector of my parish, Epiphany Episcopal Church in Odenton, Md., to a workshop on something called "Godly Play." It still astonishes me that in the busy years of raising three teenagers with all their athletic and musical commitments, I had a free Saturday to attend what the Rev. Phebe McPherson called "a new way of doing Sunday school." I had been teaching even in my early parenting years, even in the Roman Catholic Church (with a Lutheran curriculum), to fill in the gaps in my biblical knowledge and to teach the youngest children. So I was intrigued by this thing that sounded like—I didn't know—performing drama? Inventing games? I wasn't quite sure.

But I happily went with Phebe and two young lay members and found myself changed. As I sat on the floor in a church basement and watched Jerome raise a wooden ark over his head in a eucharistic and baptismal gesture, something clicked, and disparate pieces of my lifelong religious experience fell into place.¹ When we were invited to answer simple “wondering” questions, I discovered something radically new. I was invited to respond, not just receive, not just recite preordained answers as in the catechism, but connect with my whole being. Suddenly, the stories that had belonged to the priests belonged to *me*, and I belonged to them. And I knew they were not mine to keep but to give away.

Over the next nearly 30 years, I have come to recognize the eucharistic framework that has shaped my adult life and vocation. *Taking* the gifts of Jerome's stories and the structure of Godly Play sessions, *giving thanks* for them, *breaking* open their meaning and mysteries in learning and contemplation, and *sharing* with the hundreds of children and adults in my ministry has been a blessing I embrace wholeheartedly.

Taking

I could never have imagined where that first experience would lead me. But after the story and wondering, as Jerome was packing up, the organizer, Kathleen Capcara, insisted that we look at the Godly Play rooms. I didn't see what difference the rooms could make—until I did see. Then she handed me the book *Teaching Godly Play: A Sunday Morning Handbook* (predecessor of the 2009 edition *Teaching Godly Play: Mentoring the Spiritual Development of Children*). I read it that very night, falling ever deeper into a realization that *this* was the path I'd been looking for all my life, not only for children but for my own spiritual growth. I had found a way that didn't talk down to children, didn't seek to control them, and, most importantly, didn't expect me to have all the answers but gave me the same freedom it gives the children to make meaning. The art of wondering captivated me, but so did the structure of each Godly Play session and the creativity that such structure invited.

So the next morning after church, I said to my rector, “We can't *not* do this, and I'm going to be your next [volunteer] Sunday school director.” (How wonderful that she had also attended that Saturday experience, and neither of us had to persuade the other.) Within a few months, with the help of parishioners who had caught the vision, we had built two Godly Play rooms and made or acquired the needed materials, albeit mostly humble and homemade.

¹ Jerome W. Berryman, “The Ark and the Flood,” in *The Complete Guide to Godly Play*, rev. and expanded ed., vol. 2, consulting eds. Cheryl Minor and Rosemary Beales (New York: Church Publishing, 2017), 75.

Learning the stories by heart became a spiritual exercise. I was riding the commuter train to my work in downtown Washington, D.C., every day, which gave me time and quiet space to read, reread, and learn those early stories. I found the words bubbling up at unexpected times when I most needed them (something my memorized catechism answers had never done). One morning, for instance, I woke up reluctant to go to work (don't we all have such days?) and then suddenly "heard" the words "God is in that place too" from Jerome's "Great Family" story.² The nature of my day changed. I went to my magazine job with a new awareness that, as the story says, "all of God is in every place."

Giving Thanks/Blessing

The classrooms we'd built were ready, and now we were ready for the children—one group of three to seven-year-olds and a second group that went up to middle school. It was like Christmas morning to give those children the great gift we'd been preparing, the great gift Jerome has given us. They taught me as much as I taught them, as we sat with the story in the center, "equally in need to enter them."³ I had always loved children and, being the sixth of seven sisters, babysat for nieces and nephews, gravitated to the youngest at any family gathering, and joyfully welcomed my own three babies. Now I found a new appreciation for children's way of knowing—not as something "cute" but as something to be handled with care and treated with respect. I delved into Jerome's *Godly Play: An Imaginative Approach to Religious Education* (1991) and Sofia Cavalletti's *Religious Potential of the Child* (1992) with fervor. My little corner of the cabinet, where I kept what my kids called "God books," expanded to include many other books on Scripture and child development. All the while, I was meeting week after week with my Sunday school group of three- to seven-year-olds and reveling in their company, and attending Jerome's workshops whenever he was nearby. Soon, I began to share my enthusiasm and growing insights with other communities and churches, since there was then no official training apparatus or credentialing.

I was ready when I received Jerome's letter. Out of the blue, it arrived the day my daughters and I moved into a new home during a tumultuous period of separation and divorce. What a boost it was to see that Jerome not only remembered me but saw me as someone to whom he could entrust his life's work. Naturally, I said yes to his invitation to join the second class of trainers in 2000. That training, at the School of Theology, University of the South at Sewanee, Tennessee, included Education for Ministry advisers, as a format and structure for training emerged. Twelve of us (Cheryl Minor was part of

² Jerome W. Berryman, "The Great Family," in *Complete Guide to Godly Play*, 2:85.

³ Jerome W. Berryman, *Teaching Godly Play* (New York: Church Publishing, 2009), 38.

this class) spent a week filling our hearts and minds not only with stories but also with prayer, attention, and quiet reflection, and we returned home full of plans to share the riches of Godly Play.

Widening my practice to adults as well as children, I consider part of the “giving thanks” that Godly Play has inspired in me. I’ve lost count of how many trainings I’ve offered, both in the format that has come to be called “Core” and the less-formal introductions and refreshers held locally. I have seen how hungry adults are, not only for a grounded way to offer Christian formation to children but also to feed their own souls. Each encounter—as I watch the light come on in the eyes of children and adults—deepens my awareness of the power of Jerome’s gift and my appreciation for the privilege of offering it to others. For this, I give thanks.

Breaking

Taking and giving thanks naturally led to breaking—and in this instance, it was my own life that broke open.

Sitting in the circle with children, learning the stories by heart (using handouts from Godly Play workshops early on and the famous “orange book” [*Young Children and Worship*]), doing my own reflection, and engaging in regular worship drew me to want to go deeper. I needed to know how all those stories connected—to each other and to the religion I had absorbed in childhood and in church. Enter Education for Ministry (EfM), the four-year lay program produced by the Sewanee. Every Monday evening, I left my job as a magazine editor in downtown Washington, D.C., and walked two blocks to St. John’s Episcopal Church at Lafayette Square. From 6:30 to 9:30, with a group of eight other women that first year (more diverse as time went on), I found nourishment in study, theological reflection (TR), worship, and friendship, always with ample nourishment for our bodies as well. To my delight, my colleagues in EfM readily accepted the Godly Play stories I presented or used to frame contributions such as my spiritual autobiography.

Conversations and TRs with this group helped me recognize the powerful shift that was happening in the rest of my life. I began to see my ministry—recognizing it *was* a ministry, with children and families in my small church—in a new light, as my consciousness of the needs of adults as well as children grew. I took on increasing roles in the parish, serving on the vestry, the stewardship committee, and other groups not directly related to children’s formation. I helped bring into being a children’s center that eventually housed private day care during the week and gave us enhanced space for church school. I took an interest in pastoral needs, offering a listening heart and writing to people who were ill, for instance.

In all this activity, I remained deeply influenced by the Godly Play habits of deep listening, respect for personal autonomy, and reverence for the hearts of the people I worked and played with. All of this was preparing the soil for a seed that would soon drop.

By Labor Day 1999, I was feeling restless—still loving my work in journalism but wondering if something more awaited me. Just before that weekend, I heard a rumor at work that should have been cause for celebration, but instead set my mind into turmoil.

Someone had suggested that I become the next managing editor of the magazine, a promotion and professional accomplishment that, under other circumstances, would have thrilled me. But something inside told me that this prestigious role in a financial publication was not what I'd been looking for, not what God had in mind for me. With the help of trusted advisers, I began the journey toward ordination.

Managing discernment and divorce simultaneously was, to say the least, difficult, but in August 2002, I entered Virginia Theological Seminary as a postulant for holy orders in the Diocese of Maryland. Children remained at the heart of my life and ministry as I worked in the seminary's child care center, the Butterfly House, and chose to do my twelve-week Clinical Pastoral Education training at Children's Medical Center in Dallas (which I had read about in the first volume of the newly published *Complete Guide to Godly Play*). I used Godly Play in many classes and chapel presentations as I deepened my academic study, along with the usual load of seminary classes. It was only natural, when the time for ordination finally came, that I would invite Jerome to be my ordination preacher, and I was immensely honored when he agreed.

I honor Jerome not only for the way he changed my one small life but for the "mustard seed" he planted and the lush shrub with branches enough for thousands to find shade and homes.

Sharing/Giving

My ordination was not an end, of course, but a new beginning. For three years, I served as an associate rector in a Maryland parish, handling all the "firsts" one would expect and continuing to conduct Godly Play training. Then I received a surprising phone call that changed everything.

My friend and field-education supervisor, the Rev. Oran Warder, knew I was looking for a change. In my mind, I was ready to be a rector and had lots of feelers out for a new parish job. Oran, however, asked me if I would be interested in a school chaplain position. "It's not what I'm looking for," I (naively) said, "but I'll consider it." I had resisted being pigeonholed in

children's ministry, seeking a broader landscape. But I agreed to check it out. I would only want to work there, I knew, if I were able to teach Godly Play, which the school at that time wasn't using.

As I revised my résumé with a slant toward children, I saw how much of what I had done—including Godly Play teaching and training, my own parenting, and my pediatric hospital CPE experience—applied to this new call. When I drove onto the lower-school campus of St. Stephen's and St. Agnes in Alexandria, Va., I was struck immediately by its natural beauty. ("Please, God, let me work here," I prayed.) And when I presented "The Exodus" (*Complete Guide*, vol. 2, lesson 8) to a group of second graders and the parable of the good Samaritan (*Complete Guide*, vol. 3, lesson 10) to a fifth-grade class, I saw how they received this gift and how the administrators observing us caught the vision. I knew I had found my next mission field.

As I argued with God about devoting myself to such an affluent population, I understood that the children in this preparatory school would be leaders in whatever field they chose, and I would do my best to see that they were grounded, faith-centered leaders. Though the children in this Episcopal school were largely Christian, I knew that Godly Play is spacious enough to nurture children of any faith, or none.

Happily converting the religion room to the style of Godly Play that summer, I began to greet children, a class at a time, usually fifteen to eighteen students, who came to me once a week in the same way they rotated through Spanish, art, science, and PE. We also met weekly in chapel—all 400 children and fifty or so adults—and Godly Play informed the brief homilies and style of worship I offered there.

It seemed natural, now that I was living close to Virginia Seminary again, that I would enroll in the Doctor of Ministry (D.Min.) program to pursue a degree in educational leadership. The three-year program, with summer residencies and lots of work in between, was to culminate in a published thesis based on an action-research project. We were warned not to come in with a plan of what our projects would be, but to remain open to the possibilities that would emerge in our classes, case studies, and the annotated bibliographies we were building. Of course, I already knew that my product would have *something* to do with Godly Play, as I wanted to contribute to the body of work that had meant so much to me. Originally, I had a notion that I would gather children from my Christian school and some from the nearby synagogue around the stories that we have in common, toward discovering whether we are in fact people "divided by a common text."⁴

4 Gustav Niebuhr, *Beyond Tolerance: Searching for Interfaith Understanding in America* (New York: Viking, 2008).

But it was children, of course, who corrected that vision and led me to realize that before my students could engage with those of another faith, they first had to secure their own religious identities. A third grader, one year, after hearing the story “The Ark and the Tent,” commented about the altar for sacrifice in the story, excitedly calling out “human sacrifice.”⁵ When I pointed out that the Jewish and Christian people have never practiced human sacrifice, another child asked poignantly, “How do you know if you’re Jewish or Christian?”

For three years, I had been teaching and leading worship from an unabashedly Christian perspective. My school, which bore the names of two Christian saints, was clearly a Christian school. Yet I knew from children’s remarks in class that many of them didn’t belong to congregations or attend church regularly. In fact, our school *was* the community of faith for many of our families. But this child’s question crystallized a concern that had been building in me for some time: that many children are spiritually unrooted, unclear about their religious identity, and unable to draw on the language of faith that has sustained earlier generations.

The Jewish students in my classes knew they were Jewish. But most of those whose families claim Christianity do not know they’re Christian in the same way they know they’re Italian or Democrats or Red Sox fans. Those identities are spoken about at home, often with enthusiasm. But it’s possible for a child to participate regularly in a congregation and not connect that experience with the word “Christian” or what it means to be one. (Consider how infrequently that word is used in worship, in much preaching, or in announcements about the life of the congregation.) Besides, it is not primarily in churches or in school that children discover who and whose they are. First and foremost, children are formed in their own household, through their parents or primary caregivers. And if parents are not conveying the most basic language of religious identity, I suspect there is little dialogue at all about religion or its companion, spirituality.

The distinction between those words is important in a culture where many adults consider themselves “spiritual but not religious”—open to the personal experience of a higher power but averse to public expression of such experience through tradition, creed, and ritual.

I sought for my students an approach that is both spiritual *and* religious. Their encounters with and questions about the divine, their struggles with right and wrong, and their attraction to the natural world need not be subsumed into a fuzzy “spiritual” blur but could be integrated into a solid religious framework. That framework for Christian children is the language, tradition, and practice of the church, but not a rigid orthodoxy that leaves no

5 Jerome W. Berryman, “The Ark and the Tent,” in *Complete Guide to Godly Play*, 2:115.

room for questioning or personal experience—what might be called “religious but not spiritual.” In Jerome’s words, children need “religious language” that gives form to their authentic experience while helping them recognize that the “church God”⁶ is also the God of power they have encountered without being able to name: “Religious language helps us come closer to God and the whole network of self, others, nature, and God.”⁷

I knew that their one hour a week (class and chapel combined) was not enough to allow these children to “enter adolescence with an inner working model of the classical Christian language system” that would sustain them all their lives.”⁸ I knew I needed a way to playfully engage parents in their children’s religious formation. “To rely on the institution of the church for giving our children religion, but not to discuss matters of church and of daily faith and life throughout the week, teaches our children to disconnect religion from the rest of life rather than allow Christianity to become a way of life.”⁹

I am grateful to Jerome for giving me a way to help parents and children engage together in their faith. For six Tuesday evenings in 2011, eleven parents of third graders gathered to hear stories, learn about children’s spirituality, and share new practices that they were undertaking at home. They also found a safe forum for raising their own questions, concerns, and insights in a mentoring environment, and for deepening friendships at a spiritual level. They ended the project with increased confidence (a barrier to many at the beginning) and comfort in talking with their children about matters of the spirit. To my regret, the short project span dictated by the D.Min. protocol didn’t allow me to extend the study, and when I asked follow-up questions a year later, I didn’t find the same level of energy among the parents.

However, my thesis included a suggestion to translate the research syllabus into a Sunday-morning or weekday-evening format. I was fortunate to offer the Sunday morning format at St. Paul’s, my former field-ed site, where I was still active as a priest associate. So Jerome’s influence extended not only to the many children and families in my school population but also to those in my parish, as it has now to families around the world. His influence has also gone home to many households (<https://www.godlyplayfoundation.org/everyday-godly-play>).

My students were thrilled when Jerome visited, and they got to meet “the man who made Godly Play.” As we were close to Virginia Seminary, we used the occasion of his receiving an honorary doctorate to have him visit a few

⁶ Berryman, *Teaching Godly Play*, 17.

⁷ Jerome W. Berryman, *Godly Play: An Imaginative Approach to Religious Education* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1995), 148.

⁸ Berryman, *Teaching Godly Play*, 21.

⁹ David Gortner, *Transforming Evangelism* (New York: Church Publishing, 2008), 58.

classes, and his delight in sitting with a new generation of children enchanted me. He was curious, as always, about the classroom I'd built, and we chatted and laughed together ("God laughs and plays," he was fond of saying) with Cheryl Minor after the children had gone on to their next class.

Without Jerome's influence, I would never have been able to offer 400 children a year, for twelve years, the great gift I myself have received. Indeed, I would never have been able to hold the position I held, which required priestly ordination—a transformation I also attribute to his teaching and friendship.

Giving to a wider circle

Alongside parish and school ministry, I responded to the pull Godly Play continued to have on me. Besides the trainings I conducted, alone or with a partner, I took part in or helped organize gatherings of U.S. trainers, by this time about 50 women and men.

In my trainings, it had always seemed discordant that while everything else in our training format was an echo of Montessori-like stories and structure, the way we'd been teaching about what we called the "theology of childhood" reverted to a didactic style. In conversation with Jerome, I set out to develop a presentation on children's spirituality that used concrete, visual images to express the concepts he had written about in chapter 1 of *Teaching Godly Play* (2009) and in *Godly Play* (1991). He challenged me to think beyond the overused image of a heart to contain the objects I'd collected, and he agreed when I suggested something like a large open vase or pot to suggest, as my script says, that "children do not come to us as empty vessels, for us to fill with information" but have their own experiences of God and need the religious language we can give them.

In my presentation, objects tumble out of this container as I teach about what children need and what they offer. The objects form a circle laid out around a gold underlay. Foil confetti in the shape of books, crosses, and doves (for the "church God") and a scattering of seeds for the "God of power with no name" become mixed together. Other objects represent a Native storyteller and a picture of Helen Keller and Annie Sullivan at the moment Helen received the gift of language ("They called her miracle worker.") Then come small toys to symbolize different aspects of play: It is pleasurable (a small ball), done for its own sake and not for any extrinsic purpose (a skipping stone), it is voluntary (a ceramic cat), and it requires deep concentration (bubble, because when concentration is broken, the play is over).¹⁰ Because play links to the creative process, problem-solving, language learning, and social roles, these too are represented visually (for example, crayons for creativity and

¹⁰ Catherine Gavey, *Play* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), 32.

an acorn for nature). A row of birthday candles reminds us that we honor children not because they are tomorrow's leaders but because they are today's children.

Because the language of story and play is the kind of religious language we need to encounter the existential limits of life, four brown strips in the shape of a sheepfold are placed at the center of the circle. Each strip represents one of those limits described by Jerome.¹¹ To represent aloneness, a single wooden person; for the quest for and threat of freedom, a silk butterfly; for the search for meaning, a felt question mark; and finally, for the inevitability of death, a small hourglass.

And here is the crux of the presentation: In the center of that "sheepfold," I place a small, gold, heart-shaped box filled with the sayings of Jesus about children.¹² One of the adults in the training circle reads aloud one of the sayings, and we wonder together. Each time I place that box in the center, I am struck anew that Jesus chose to accept those human limitations to become one of us—something that I'm sure I would not have understood so clearly were it not for Jerome and his teaching.

Other trainers have their own image-driven ways to convey these teachings, and it's wonderful to see their variations. Jerome has given us each gifts, but also the common gift of community with one another.

Trainer gatherings have been life-giving celebrations of the work we are doing and of the deeper work of learning more about the method, theology, and pedagogy of Godly Play. We have met in places as far-flung as Kansas, Louisiana, and Newfoundland, and we have bonded ever more deeply with one another and with the diverse folks who have come to North American conferences, including practitioners and trainers. Jerome has indirectly given me some of my best lifelong friends through this community.

Our work is always collaborative, and in particular, I remember being part of a small team that designed the Advanced Training format. For instance, thanks to my experience with case studies in my D.Min. program, I suggested weaving a simplified case-study format into Advanced Training to allow for reflection, not problem-solving, based on a situation experienced by one of the members. It's been a journey, seeing how these disparate strands of my experience come together with others in our common work. Work has continued outside these gatherings, of course.

¹¹ Berryman, *Teaching Godly Play*, 67–68.

¹² Jerome W. Berryman, *Children and the Theologians: Clearing the Way for Grace* (New York: Church Publishing, 2009), 12–20.

One of my greatest honors was to serve as a consulting editor for the revised and expanded versions of volumes 2–4, 6, and 8 of the *Complete Guide to Godly Play*. I had always kept in touch with Jerome, even after he stopped traveling. But it was a great joy (and big work) to work directly with him and Cheryl in a venture that combined my publishing background, theological education, and wide experience with children in chaplaincy greatest memory of those Friday Zoom sessions and semi-annual trips to Denver is *laughter*. Amid theological challenges, differences of opinion, debate over word choices, and a few misunderstandings, there was always laughter. What I take away most from those sessions was Jerome's generosity in listening with respect and curiosity, even when he disagreed—a trait that, perhaps, fueled his entire ministry with children and those who love children.

The Circle Has No End

"For every ending, there is a beginning, and for every beginning, there is an ending."¹³ Or is it the other way around? No matter, it's a circle.

I love that moment in "The Circle of the Church Year" (Jerome's lesson on how the church year works) when the straight line of golden ribbon becomes a circle, with no end. Each time I present that lesson, the insight is as fresh for me as it is for the three-year-olds or the ninety-three-year-olds seeing it for the first time.

It's as new, and as profound as life, death, and resurrection—the mystery we enact in every Eucharist, which Jerome now knows in a new way. Wherever he is now in his risen life, he is somehow still with us. I give profound thanks to him and for the legacy he has bequeathed to us.

With deep love, I commit to continuing to carry on that work "with gladness and singleness of heart" until we meet again.¹⁴

Onward!

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¹³ Jerome W. Berryman, "The Circle of the Church Year," in *Complete Guide to Godly Play*, 2:27.

¹⁴ Eucharistic Prayer A, in *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Publishing, 1979), 365.

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