

RESEARCH ARTICLE

From Wonder to With: A Journey to, with and Beyond Jerome W. Berryman

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When reading the parable of the talents it's common to reflect on the anxiety of the third slave and the intemperate way he's punished. But the parable is surely encouraging the reader to take the abundant gifts of God (perhaps Jesus, or the Holy Spirit) and go forth and multiply them. Given the privilege of 25 years friendship with Jerome Berryman, I'd like to position him as the master in the parable and myself as one of the slaves – seeking to honour him by putting his priceless insights and illuminating methods to work in new contexts. The essay describes my journey to Jerome, with Jerome, and beyond Jerome.

In the conclusion to *Children and the Theologians*, Jerome Berryman recalls the words of a mother whose daughter had seen him walk by on his way to the sacristy before the worship service. The mother told him, "Our daughter said, 'There goes the man who is always glad to see me.'"¹ Jerome was always glad to see me—and made me feel God is always glad to see me. He did the same for countless others. That is his legacy.

When reading the parable of the talents, it's common to reflect on the anxiety of the third slave and the intemperate way he's punished. But the parable is surely encouraging the reader to take the abundant gifts of God (perhaps Jesus, or the Holy Spirit) and go forth and multiply them.² Given the privilege of 25 years of friendship with Jerome Berryman, I'd like to position him as the master in the parable and myself as one of the slaves—seeking to honor him by putting his priceless insights and illuminating methods to work in new contexts. In this regard I have a story to tell, and it comes in three parts.

The Journey to Jerome

I arrived at seminary aged 23 with three understandings of the theological task competing for my attention and jostling in significant tension with one another. One was cerebral ideas, worked into careful arguments with extensive evidence and set forth with satisfying prose, no little irony, and an

¹ Jerome W. Berryman, *Children and the Theologians: Clearing the Way for Grace* (New York: Morehouse 2009), 255.

² The parable is found in Matthew 25:14–30, with a slightly different version in [Luke 19:11–27](#). My own understanding of the parable can be found in Samuel Wells, *How to Preach: Times, Seasons, Texts, and Contexts* (Norwich, UK: Canterbury 2023), 224–28.

unswerving pursuit of truth. This was a form of understanding in which I'd excelled at school, that had taken me to Oxford, and that I'd hoped would lead me into wisdom and understanding. That had proved not to be the case. For me Oxford was a bewildering experience of not quite working out how to offer the tutors what they were looking for, not quite establishing where to find what I was most searching for, not quite discovering where to put my energy, trust, faith, love.

A second strand I began to explore under the guidance of Neville Black in Liverpool in the year after I left Oxford.³ With colleagues he had developed innovative ways to bypass the written word, inspired by the insight "Never underestimate my intelligence; never overestimate my knowledge." In training events, courses, and seminars I became gradually proficient in what he called "learning without books." Gradually I began to realize there was a whole hinterland of discourse lying behind this, with luminaries such as Paulo Freire prominent in enabling people to understand their context, their experience, and their perceptions and to gather those insights together to form movements of solidarity and transformation.⁴ But mostly it was as simple as providing a group with a series of photographs and asking them to describe what resonated with each of them. I discovered that I didn't have to concentrate on creating clever prompts; the important part was creating an environment where the responses were cherished.

The third strand was more personal. One reason Oxford was so unsatisfactory was because I'd lost a parent during the year prior to beginning my studies there. I couldn't find anyone at university who encompassed the emotional experience I was going through. The head and the heart seemed detached from one another. There was plenty of creativity—in music, drama, and sport—but none of this touched the depths of what life can mean and entail. The truth was that my bereavement was a long time coming. Illness began during my early childhood; my Christian faith was inextricably entwined with this story of tragedy, sickness, and eventual loss.

My experience of seminary was a much more fulfilling one. I was in a more holistic culture, where body and mind weren't alien to heart and soul. The constant impulse to experience the truth of God catalyzed the integration of learning and experience. Meanwhile the desire to communicate that truth to others, out of conviction or the need to fulfill course requirements, meant my pedagogical exposure in Liverpool and my personal story had a role to play. And best of all, while the intellectual quest had run aground at Oxford, it resurfaced in Edinburgh. It has never stopped since.

3 For a vivid account of Neville Black's ministry, see *40 Years of Ministry in Liverpool* (available from the author at nevilleblack55@me.com).

4 See Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (London: Penguin 2017).

When I moved to my first ministry appointment, I relished the chance to integrate the theological with the kinetic in ways that stuck in the mind and the soul. This was less about performance than participation. What fascinated me were things everyone could do but that left a mark on the memory. On one occasion a great circle of forty people stood with children facing clockwise, alternating with adults facing counterclockwise. Each child washed the feet of the adult in front of them, shuffled through the adult's legs, and then stood as the new adult facing them knelt and washed their feet. The sequence followed around the whole circle. On another occasion, a fortnight before Easter (then known as Passion Sunday), each congregation member was invited to take away three nails and keep them about their person for the next two weeks before bringing them back and placing them in the font on Easter morning.

Some years later I found myself in Norwich in a community with a small congregation, half of whom were children, unrelated to the adults. It was a context where no adult had the energy or confidence to withdraw the children from worship for specific child-focused worship or formation. Thus every morning service was for all ages. I didn't feel daunted, but delighted in the opportunity. After six years as a curate, I finally had my first incumbency—my opportunity to explore, discover, and be formed. The good news was it was a church building only six years old and a tiny congregation of maybe eight adults and ten children. So I could do anything I liked. The bad news was there was a history of hostility toward the congregation and vandalism of the building. So work with children and young people wasn't just about growth; it was about survival.

It was clear what the template should be. The consensus was that you needed to keep children occupied in mind and body, outdoing their attention deficit and alienation with even greater hyperactivity of your own. Accordingly, I went to a training event on how to run a holiday club. It must have been good because 200 people were there. The leader performed many action songs and described constant activities and was exhausting to watch. One person asked, "What do you do if a child asks you a question to which you don't know the answer?" The leader replied, "Yes, that can be a problem. Best to put someone like the vicar in a quiet spot so you can send the child to them to sort it out." It was a moment of revelation for me. I realized three things. First, it had not crossed the leader's mind that a child could have an experience of God that hadn't been mediated by an adult. Second, this whole frenetic approach to working with children and young people was rooted in anxiety that they would become bored and uncooperative, so the method was to keep a step ahead of them and never let them reflect. Third, the theological assumption of all this was that God was fundamentally boring, so the youth leader had to be more interesting than God, in case anyone stumbled upon the secret.

No one in my congregation was up for taking the children out of worship for a conventional Sunday school, so I'd already started having all-age worship every week, moving away from the written word to an approach that used visual and tangible elements with memorized chants and prayers. This was a neighborhood where, though most could read, few did so by choice, and where, though before the days of widespread diagnosis of neurodiversity, attention span was never to be taken for granted. I started to experiment with worship activities that enabled the congregation to engage with their hearts and bodies, rather than just their minds. At All Saints, before the service started I asked people to share with a neighbor the person who had always been their hero. When discussing Dives and Lazarus, the members of the congregation created a great gulf and improvised ways that the gulf increased and became unbridgeable. At Easter the whole congregation was surrounded by a huge roll of unfurled paper and together burst out of the "tomb" and discussed what it felt like to be confined and then be set free.

But sometimes, in fact more often than not, I found the best space for engaging the senses and the imagination was the floor at the heart of the semi-circle of chairs the congregation members occupied. On one occasion each congregation member was given three triangles, on which were written, respectively, Present, Past, and Future. We discussed how the Lord's Prayer contains three petitions: one about the present ("Give us" one about the Past ("Forgive us"), and one about the future ("Deliver us"). They were invited to assess which prayer, for them, was the hardest and most needed, and which was the easiest. Then in three-dimensional form they arranged their triangles on the floor, so that when all had finished it was possible to see whether this community was most preoccupied with receiving forgiveness, finding eternal life, or meeting basic needs—the past, the future, or the present (or, as I suggested, faith, hope, or love). At Epiphany, on a large sheet of paper I drew a triangle that joined together Jerusalem, the place of danger; Egypt, the place of escape; and Nazareth, the place of nurture. Before discussing where Jesus's life—and Christianity as a whole—belonged in that triangle, I invited participants to locate themselves somewhere within that triangle according to what they felt the new year was going to have in store.

What I was discovering was what Jerome Berryman describes in his account of children as a means of grace. Jerome's understanding of grace is not so much about approval, mercy, and pardon as about charm and loveliness and the ability to form relationships in ways that transcend awkwardness. It is about art and beauty more than about law and punishment. Grace is fundamentally constructive creativity.⁵ That was what was revealing itself in Norwich, but until I met Jerome I had no name for it or sense of its significance. In 1998 a visitor from Minnesota, Mary Ellen Ashcroft, a

⁵ Berryman, *Children and the Theologians* 232–37.

college professor and at that time a seminarian herself, visited the community, observed what was taking place, and inquired whether I was familiar with the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd and the work of Sofia Cavalletti. I wasn't. But as quickly as I could, I became so. I read *The Religious Potential of the Child* at one sitting, and realized that the epicenter of Cavalletti's calling—the child's question "How can I find God for myself?"—exactly mirrored the point at which my own three wrestlings converged.⁶ I wanted to discover how this impoverished, despised, and forsaken neighborhood could find God for itself. And to do so I wanted to employ my doctoral studies in theology, my fascination with nonwritten forms of liturgical and pedagogical interaction, and the profound experience of loss that viscerally bonded me with the deprivations of this community.

At this point, through the kindness of Rebecca Nye, I was invited to join the original cohort of twenty practitioners who met for three days with Jerome Berryman when he came to Cambridge in 2000, and to train together in the paths that led to wondering.⁷ Those sessions are still imprinted on my imagination. Just the sound the children of God made as they plodded their way across the desert was enough to catapult me into the land of wondering—from which I have never returned. As one member of my present community has said, wonderings began to exercise a muscle I didn't know I had. Or as Cheryl Minor has told me, Jerome liked to say heaven is not a place where our doubts are turned into certainty but where we rest content in ceaseless wonder.

The Journey with Jerome

After the training session Jerome came to Norwich to the workshop in the parish next to mine, where he struck a deal for the production of all Godly Play materials in the UK thereafter. He came to my home and we talked at length. Then began my twenty-five-year tussle with Jerome about a sentence that begins, "I wonder." As we became friends, I began to chide Jerome that what he was inviting us into was something significantly different from the land of questions. Questions seek answers; they create opposition, not necessarily hostile but nonetheless a standoff between two parties—the one that wants to know, and the one that strives or is expected to supply that knowledge. Questions don't require right answers, but that is their tendency. If respondents can't answer, they have nothing to say. By contrast, a wondering is an invitation to a different form of discourse. This is not a tennis-court exchange of question and answer, but a door opened into a garden of wonder. Questions solve problems. Wonderings invite us into

⁶ Sofia Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child: Experiencing Scripture and Liturgy with Young Children*, trans. Patricia M. Coulter and Julie M. Coulter (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1992), 174.

⁷ For Rebecca Nye's work, see especially her *Children's Spirituality: What It Is and Why It Matters* (London: Church House Publishing, 2009).

mysteries. A wondering is a statement, and thus isn't followed by a question, as if it were an inquiry; rather, the statement is exploratory, fertile, generative, not closed or demanding. When you say, "I wonder . . .," it's as much an invitation to oneself as to one's companion. Jerome knew all this but still liked putting question marks at the end.

After the training in Cambridge and Jerome's visit, things changed on two fronts. Godly Play became the standard form of interaction for perhaps 25 minutes of the 50-minute worship service at my little church each Sunday morning. And with others I set about establishing a charity called Body, Mind, and Spirit that housed all the materials in the back room of the church and made it an arena for local children to give their imaginations the opportunity to discover, explore, and wonder. Meanwhile wondering had entered my personal discernment and reflection. The four wonderings from the Old Testament narratives became my staple examen: *I wonder which part you liked the best; I wonder which was the most important part; I wonder which part was really about you; I wonder which part we could have done without and still had all we needed.* Wondering had become my second nature.

I cannot adequately describe the transformation this style of work had on my relationship with the children of my parish and their participation in the life of that little church. One boy had the most intense case of ADHD I've ever encountered. He was often almost completely out of control. He more or less ruined my first child's baptism by continually disrupting the service. On one occasion he went outside the kids' club and climbed to the very top of the church tower. When he descended, I took him by the arm and marched him to his parents' house 150 yards away. An hour later I got a visit from a police officer who told me I was within my rights to get him off the premises but not to go any further, and I was lucky to escape without a caution.

One Sunday morning I was kneeling on the floor with a felt underlay representing Bethany and figures representing the unnamed woman, Jesus, the disciples, Simon the leper, Simon's house, and an alabaster jar broken open with the oil poured over Jesus's head. The boy from across the road entered the church, but I kept my eyes fixed on the scene before me. He sat down, uncharacteristically still, drawn in, until the moment I said, "I wonder what it's like to know someone you deeply care about is going to die and there's nothing you can do about it." Then he responded, still looking at the scene and not turning his head to one side or other, "I know. It's like when my uncle was ill. It went on and on and the doctors couldn't do anything. My dad went mental. He was so out of it he wasn't even there when my uncle died. And then when he came back, he went even more mental." There was silence around the whole church. For the first time, everyone had an insight into this boy's life. And what he'd desperately been trying to say for

the previous three years began to be heard. I'm not going to say his whole demeanor changed. But now it was possible to hold his gaze, and there were the beginnings of mutual respect.

By the time I moved to Cambridge in 2005 Godly Play had become part of the way I assumed parish ministry was done. Once a month the church I served had an all-age service, the centerpiece of which was invariably a Godly Play presentation followed by wondering. One innovation that had become part of my practice was that as the wondering was concluded, I would make the return of the elements to the box a form of devotional reflection or intercession. Hence, "Here's Abraham: We ponder what it means to hear your voice and respond, and we hold before you those who live in the Holy Land today"; "Here's the desert: We offer to you all who are far from home, and we recognize those parts of our story that don't easily fit back in a box."

By this time, after several years of working with Godly Play—or at least the presentations, which I confess I improvised rather than sticking to the published scripts, and the wonderings (I never looked deeply into the response activities)—I realized I was a bit of an outlier in the Godly Play community because I almost always worked with both adults and children together. In fact, my least successful presentation ever was at a seminary where the children of the community had frequent Godly Play sessions and were very familiar with the genre. When I stepped forward to lead a presentation and wonderings for the weekly community Eucharist, the children shot forward and surrounded the presentation area. Both they and the whole community assumed that the presentation and the wondering were for them alone. But that had never been my practice, and in all other settings before and since when there have been both adults and children, the children have remained in their seats beside their parents or other adult caregivers. It has been for everyone together. But on this occasion, there was nothing I could do to stop the children dominating. In significant ways it was a prophetic challenge to the way church is usually experienced, and I realized that Jerome may well have loved it, but I felt it diminished the session hugely for both children and adults.

By contrast, the most memorable Godly Play session was in my little church in Norwich with around fifteen adults and ten children present. This time the story was that of the good shepherd. I pulled out a green underlay to represent verdant pastures. I arranged a sheepfold with interlocking logs. I set out still waters. And I arranged stones to indicate the valley of the shadow of death. I wondered where people felt safe. Several children couldn't name such a place. I wondered where people found refreshing waters. I wondered what it was like to walk through the valley of the shadow. Then finally I turned to the sheep. Observing that they were made out of different kinds and colors of wood, I cherished each one of them by holding it in the palm of my hand for a few seconds.

Then I said, “I wonder what difference it makes that the sheep are different colors.” Quick as a flash, a child responded, “The differences don’t matter. We should treat them all the same.” She’d clearly been on the right awareness course at primary school. But I wasn’t satisfied with that attempt to close the conversation down. I wanted to stay in a playful place, not of certain social management but of profound exploration of the gift of diversity. So I went on: “I wonder what makes them all the same.” There was a long pause. The girl who previously responded had nothing to say. Neither did the assembled adults. Eventually, a six-year-old girl tentatively raised her hand. She was unsure, so she waited for an invitation to contribute, which I gave. I wondered if she knew what makes them all the same. She responded, “They all have the same shepherd.” It was one of my most treasured moments in ministry. We’d heard the voice of diversity awareness. We’d heard the silence of a congregation that didn’t have language to articulate its worthy instincts. And then we heard the voice of the gospel. Karl Barth would have beamed. It was his life’s work in a single sentence: “They all have the same shepherd.” I didn’t celebrate the response in the group, because I believed—and still believe—there are no right and wrong answers. But as a theologian as well as a Godly Play practitioner, I found that particular response unforgettable.

I left England in 2005, five years after my first encounter with Jerome. Those five years as a Godly Play practitioner, refining and developing the strands I described that I took into my seminary training, had taught me two things. They taught me about play. I learned that play is where, rather than looking for the shortest, most direct route to complete a task, sometimes meandering and detouring and curling your finger around a ringlet are the ways we truly enjoy one another and the world, and celebrate the effervescent glory of creation and our lives. But they also taught me about God. I learned that God doesn’t have a plan for our lives and that our lives are not best thought of as a linear progression from A to B with God as coach or fixer. Instead, we are made to wonder, to dwell, and to explore. God doesn’t seek to fix us or regard us as damaged artifacts to be mended; instead, in Christ, God enters the mystery of existence and wonders and plays and discovers and opens the gates of heaven that we may wonder and play and discover with the Father and the Holy Spirit forever. Might those two things change everything about life and faith? I wonder.

When I became dean of Duke University Chapel, I was no longer a congregational pastor—but I did have a large congregation. It wasn’t long before I’d persuaded the children’s team to invest in Godly Play training, materials, and practices. For the first time, I was in a community with weekly fifty-minute Godly Play sessions, albeit with children only. But my real work was with undergraduates, seminarians, and the wider community of a complex and in some ways troubled city. For the first time I started to use Godly Play methods with adults only—no children present—in all three contexts. Ellen Davis invited me to present the Exodus and Exile to

her Old Testament class. It was an extraordinary experience in a large lecture theater with 170 seminary students all suspending disbelief and entering the process, then stepping back and examining it first theologically then pedagogically and liturgically. I came back perhaps five times. Fifteen years later I still get messages from clergy saying that was their favorite class in their seminary career. Meanwhile I trained colleagues to use the same process in equipping undergraduate pastoral scholars to ponder their mission and ministry discoveries. Whether Mary and Martha or the woman who washed Jesus's feet, there was plenty to explore and discover. And most rewarding of all, as I sought opportunities to make relationships of respect and dignity between the Chapel congregation and some of the more disadvantaged, largely African American Baptist churches in the city, it transpired that Godly Play was the most fruitful means of meeting together in a place of wonder and mutual enrichment.

Jerome wanted to come and see, so one Good Shepherd Sunday weekend I invited him to preach at Duke Chapel. I was startled to find that his style of preaching was to lead a Godly Play session, just without the figures and underlay. While he was with us, he led training events for us and others in the city who were versed in his work. And I had a chance to see firsthand his disarming gifts for holding children in the palm of his hand. For most of my seven years in the US, ours was an intellectual correspondence; he would send me things he'd written, and I'd either give informal feedback or write formal book reviews. Rather appropriately, one account of one of his books, *Children and the Theologians*, has made it into a session in the course: "Being with Child."⁸

The Journey beyond Jerome

When I moved to London in 2012, I recognized I had to let go of having a decisive influence on the children's catechesis program and be content to offer adult-only Godly Play presentations a few times a year. But the practice of wondering started to catch on. It began during the lectio divina sessions that followed the informal Wednesday evening Eucharist and spread to many other parish gatherings, not just the reflective and devotional ones but also those assigned to strategy and governance. I had to persuade people this was not "Sam's thing"—that I'd taken it (minus the question marks) from Jerome, and it really belonged in a much richer setting involving welcome, storytelling, responding, and a feast. But the practice had become sufficiently established in the community by the time a crucial development took place in late 2019.

⁸ See Samuel Wells, *Being With: Courses for Living* (Norwich, UK: Canterbury, 2025) 96–98.

My colleague Sally Hitchiner challenged me to find a way to make my theological perspective accessible to new Christians through an inquirers' course. Together we planned how that might go, and the first group met in January 2020. The first thing I brought from Jerome was a sense that the session was the message; the 90-minute period we spent together each week wasn't a chance to hear, discover, discuss, and explore a message—it actually was the message. In my three days of training with Jerome in Cambridge in 2000, while I vividly remembered Abraham crossing the desert, what I most cherished was the feeling of being in the circle together and seeing a whole new world of wonder opening in an atmosphere of cherishing and tenderness. So that was the starting point for the inquirers' group. What I was starting to feel for, but took another three years fully to articulate, was a distinctive theological principle: God's means and God's ends are identical. In doctrinal terms this most obviously means that God cannot demonstrate a primordial desire to be with us come what may by concocting an elaborate soteriological plan involving sacrifice, substitution, and satisfaction; God cannot deviate from a fundamental disposition to be with us in the forms the Holy Spirit shapes as its fruits in us. But if one is seeking to communicate how God is with us, the most appropriate way is to refine our practice of being with each other. So just as children in Godly Play come to imagine church and heaven as like a Godly Play session, when participants in this course got to session 4 and inevitably asked, "This church you talk about—what is it like?" The simple response is "It's like our last four weeks together in this group."

Then I made an adaptation from Jerome's practice. I recalled a series of Bible studies at a clergy conference led by N.T. Wright in Newcastle—when I was a new curate and before he was famous. What he did that I'd never seen before was to structure the conference with the small group times *before* rather than after his addresses. So the approach wasn't "I say revelatory things and in your groups you apply them to your lives." It was "You ponder together some important things, and I spend some time addressing how this passage from Ephesians transforms those things." Thirty years later I still recalled this as an unusual, provocative, and rewarding structure. But in adopting that structure, I began to articulate a second foundational theological principle: The Holy Spirit has been at work in your life since your life began. That principle sat alongside a much older guide articulated by Thomas Aquinas: "Grace does not destroy nature, but perfects it."⁹ Together with the structure adopted by Wright at that conference, these two principles gave me a way to harness Jerome's practice of wondering in a new way. I located the wonderings ahead of the story. And I so worded the wonderings as to elicit material germane to the story.

⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans Laurence Shapcote (Lander, WY: Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012), I, q. 1, art. 8.

Thus the story that shapes the first session of the Being With Core Course, as we now call it, is centrally about freedom.¹⁰ You are searching for freedom, but you experience life as beset by bitterness and guilt about things that happened years ago and intense anxiety about what lies ahead, especially your mortality. What Christianity offers is forgiveness, which releases you from the prison of the past, and eternal life, which dismantles fear of the future. Only in the strength of these two freedoms can you truly experience the gift of today—the “present” of the present tense. Faith about the past and hope for the future are the conditions for love in the present. The wonderings for this session (there are always four) begin with “I wonder if you’ve known what it feels like to be set free.” This is followed by “I wonder if you’ve known what it feels like to be in prison.” The kinds of things people share in response to these wonderings—within ten minutes of meeting each other and with no idea what will follow—must be experienced to be believed: “I strapped the children into the car and drove away, and after years of a violent childhood and years more of a repressive marriage, for the first time I was free”; “I walked out of my cell into the open air and after the hell of two years in prison, I could see the sky and know I was free”; “After a lifetime of clinical anxiety, finally I had in my hands some medication that gave me confidence to get through the day. I was free like never before.” The last two wonderings are in a similar vein: “I wonder what it’s like to know there’s something in the past that you don’t need to worry about anymore”: “I wonder what it would be like to know the future isn’t going to hurt you.”

Setting aside the location of the wonderings before the story, and the limitation of wonderings to four, all from the host, the conduct of wonderings owes a great deal to Jerome’s practice. To turn to an analogy, Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s 1565 painting *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery* depicts Jesus on the steps of the Temple in Jerusalem writing, “May the one who is without sin cast the first stone.”¹¹ What’s striking about the artist’s portrayal of this intense confrontation is the way Jesus half-kneels and creates a space between him, the woman, and the baying mob. He writes in the dust in much the same way as the storyteller unfurls the underlay in Godly Play. That is a space of wondering, in which hearts and minds can be changed and the imagination is set free from assumptions and expectations; in short, it is where the Holy Spirit can get to work. Thus, the wonderings in the Being With Course fill such a space. They scramble hierarchy; no one can assert that it’s in an early manuscript of Ecclesiastes that the vital key to the Old Testament is to be found, or that if you use the best translation of Mark 10:45 you arrive at the most appropriate account of the atonement. Instead

10 Samuel Wells, *Being With: The Core Course: Exploring Life and Faith Together*, rev. and expanded ed. of *Being With: A Course Exploring Christian Faith and Life: Leaders’ Guide* (Norwich, UK: Canterbury, 2025).

11 The story is recorded in John 8:1–11. In the Low Countries the sixteenth century was a period of brutal intolerance inflicted on those who took unfashionable political and religious stances. This painting is often perceived as a plea for understanding rather than violent objection.

they say, “A person I trusted said the secret of my father’s imprisonment ceased to be his on his death and became mine. Since he died, I’ve felt I’ve been given permission to talk about it, and the big secret that hung over my childhood and youth has finally been let go.” The point is not trying to get to right and avoid the shame of wrong, still less to attain cleverness and withstand foolishness, but to identify the true and real.

But the wonderings in Being With reach a place seldom found in Godly Play, and for good reasons. As I explained at the beginning, my early theological searchings were looking for intellectual validity, noncerebral resonance, and emotional engagement with my early experience of loss. Godly Play proved a real hit in my Norwich parish in the second strand, and that discovery inspired me to employ it, with almost universal success in countless adult and adult/child settings in the twenty years since. But children are not able to draw on as lengthy a backstory as adults, and, mercifully, in most cases their experience of profound suffering is limited. The wonderings in Being With take people (or people take them) into extraordinary degrees of disclosure of things “I’ve never told my partner.” Part of the secret of wonderings in Godly Play is that not everyone has to speak and no one is permitted to comment on what another participant has said. There’s no “fixing,” advice-giving, or “That happened to me too” comparison. There’s just a thank you from the host.

Another learning from Jerome is the integral importance of the welcome. This is not an icebreaker or a warmup or an idle polite killing of time until the group has fully assembled. Around 18 months after Sally and I had begun leading courses, I arrived at the formulation that expressed the best way to spend the first ten minutes of each session. The host asks, “What’s been the heart of your week?” Unlike a wondering, which ends with a full stop and invites, but doesn’t require, a response, this is a question. A question ends with a question mark and invites an answer. In a Being With session this is the only time everyone in the room is required to speak. But their answers may be anything from solemn (“I think I’ve seen my brother for the last time”) to apparently trivial (“I tried a new recipe for curry and I loved it”). The point is that by ten minutes into the session, all can be confident that no one is carrying something huge they haven’t disclosed, and all have offered something into the “shared pot” of memories, dreams, and reflections. In training Being With hosts and storytellers, great emphasis is placed on this difference between a question, and a wondering.

The last and among the most significant adopt-and-adapt transfers from Godly Play to Being With comes in the story. I adopted the names and roles of Host and Storyteller from Jerome’s nomenclature. But the story owes much more to the work on improvisation in the theater that I was pursuing at the same time as I stumbled upon Godly Play and met Jerome. In my book *Improvisation* I describe two key motifs of those who practice improvisation

in the theater.¹² The first is overaccepting. On receiving what's known as an *offer* (anything another actor says or does), the actor can (a) accept, by simply proceeding in the same vein, such as answering the question; (b) block, by resisting the premise of the other actor's words or gestures, such as refusing to fall dead when shot; or (c) overaccept, by fitting the other actor's prompt into a much larger context or narrative ("Go to hell"—"I think I will, and I'm going to make it way more exciting than heaven so people will be queuing up to join me"). The second is reincorporation. An actor reincorporates by drawing back into the story elements discarded earlier in the narrative, as a children's story will do as it nears its conclusion.

While I have prepared and published scripts for every Being With session, both for the Core Course and for ten further courses, the key to telling the story is for the storyteller to employ both these techniques in reading the story. The storyteller overaccepts by incorporating into the story elements of what's been shared during the wondering and the welcome. The story reincorporates by cherishing the tender, vulnerable, and unresolved parts of what's been shared and sensitively inserting a gentle reference to them into an appropriate location in the story. The effect is extraordinary. Again, the key is that the means and the ends are identical. What the participants brought into the course as tentative, hidden, suppressed, and perhaps shameful memories or desires are now given back not just to them but to the whole group as revelation: This is the gospel at work before people's very eyes; it is their gospel—the story that transforms and redeems their own story and the stories of those they've quickly come to care about. It's a remarkable act of the Holy Spirit—almost a miracle.

The last section of each session is again outside the realm of Godly Play. It's a twenty-five-minute discussion time in which adults can step out of the role of wondering and simply scrutinize, challenge, reflect, or inquire. It's usually a break from the intensity and a time for laughter, disagreement, or queries about the process.

Beyond the sessions themselves, my chief learning from Jerome has been the approach and delivery of the training. For Godly Play, as for Being With, to become a host or storyteller is a process of moral formation. Just as in Godly Play, the first session of the training (which invariably takes place online) is simply the first session of the Core Course. We learn by participating and reflecting on being a participant. The two further training sessions explore why we do what we do. I would never have arrived at this model without Jerome's example.

12 Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018).

The original and central principle of Being With is that God created the universe to be with us in Christ. It's a notion that's taken me 20 years to articulate and one that I'm still striving fully to elucidate. But the Being With Course is the most apt experiential form in which this central theological conviction has taken shape, and it has now been experienced by many thousands of people. As one participant said on the very day I'm writing this, "I feel seen like never before in my life." This is a true experience of being with—theologically, interpersonally, experientially, transformationally. The course brings together a great swathe of my theological reflection and publications. But the central themes are those derived from improvisation and Godly Play. Without Jerome Berryman, there would be no Being With Course, at least in the form it is today, and it would at best be missing its most important ingredient, which is the commitment that the form and the content—the theological convictions and the way of encountering them—are more or less identical.

In short, it's not just I who owes a boundless debt to Jerome; it's the thousands of people who have come to or been renewed in a living faith through his influence on this course and all that's derived from it. It's quite a legacy—a thing of wonder.

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