

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Sitting with Children in Wonder: Glimpses and Hints

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This article reflects on the phrase sitting with children in wonder, which describes the distinctive approach of Jerome Berryman and the Godly Play method. By exploring each word—sitting, with, children, in, and wonder—the author considers the theological, relational, and pedagogical attitudes that shape meaningful engagement with children’s spirituality. Drawing on poetry, theology, Montessori thought, and personal experience as a Godly Play practitioner and trainer, the article suggests that accompanying children requires humility, attentive presence, relational solidarity, and openness to mystery. Rather than offering a definitive theory, the reflection invites practitioners to cultivate spaces where children’s spiritual lives can unfold through shared presence, curiosity, and wonder.

Sitting with children in wonder. These five words were part of the funeral address that was given for Jerome Berryman in 2024, when Bishop Robert O’Neill used them to describe Berryman’s unique work.

These five words with their simple rhythm have stayed with me since that funeral, and almost every day I say them to myself. Recently, I’ve been swimming several times a week, and as my body is propelled through the water, I bathe myself in this simple refrain: *Sitting with children in wonder.*

For me, each word has a deep resonance. Each word mysteriously echoes with theology and spirituality. Each word reverberates with its neighbors. They seem intimately connected.

Recently, I’ve noticed the structure. *Sitting* is the present participle of the verb, indicating a continuous action. The two prepositions, *with* and *in*, are extremely short words often said quickly and ignored, but both are profound, signifying relationship and connection. *Children*, the collective noun, sits right in the center, and the neighboring noun, *wonder*, used adverbially, gives a clue to how we, as adults, might accompany children in their spiritual quest.

Before you carry on reading, I suggest you take some time to repeat this mantra slowly and deliberately. Give space between each word. Don’t rush it. Take time to let each word wash over you, refresh you, and perhaps challenge you. These five words hang in the air as I sit with groups of children in Godly Play sessions. For me, they are at the heart of Godly Play practice, theory, and training.

In this article, I'll begin by wondering about each word, drawing on insights from poetry, theology, and the theory and practice of the Godly Play method as developed by Jerome Berryman. I'm not a professional academic or professional theologian. I am essentially a practitioner and trainer who has been inspired, enthused, and enthralled by the many aspects of Godly Play.

Like many others, I vividly remember my first encounter with Jerome Berryman, the founder of Godly Play. It was nearly thirty years ago. A group of Church of England diocesan advisers had been invited to meet him in London. It was his use of the word *mystery* that affected me deeply, the last part of the script for the lesson he called "The Faces of Easter."¹ That invitation into a mystery led me into the regular practice of sitting with children in wonder and, for the past twenty-five years, of working as a Godly Play trainer, encouraging adults in this process of wonder-full sitting. Mystery implies that things can't necessarily be neatly wrapped up; there is always more to discover. Mystery involves searching, questioning, and curiosity.

So that is where I will begin. What might be the mystery of *sitting with children in wonder*?

What I'm offering cannot be the last word on the subject or the definitive proclamation. It is the beginning of my own wondering process, and in one sense, I am reluctant to share it because this is my wondering, not yours. So I am very aware of my own bias, and I proceed with caution. There is a sense in which you don't really need to read any further. This is an invitation for you to make your own journey, to travel along with this mysterious pentologue for yourselves.

But if you choose to ignore my advice, then this is what I'm wondering about:

SITTING

. . . to sit empty
in the sun
receiving fire
that is the way
to mend
an extraordinary world.
—Phyllis Webb

¹ Jerome W. Berryman, "The Faces of Easter" in *The Complete Guide to Godly Play*, vol. 4, rev. and expanded ed. (New York: Church Publishing, 2018), 33–82. This seven-part lesson tells the story of Jesus's birth, work, death, and resurrection. It is typically told during the season of Lent as a preparation for the celebration of Easter.

Phyllis Webb was a twentieth-century Canadian poet and broadcaster who was influenced by Eastern contemplative practice. Her short poem “Sitting” (excerpted above) highlights the importance of emptying, stillness, and waiting, which enables reflection on the external world.² Sitting is understood as an important and foundational activity that can have cosmic, curative, and therapeutic effects. It stands in contrast to the cries I often heard in my own childhood. “Don’t just sit there, do something! Stop wasting your time.”

Sitting is very much part of Godly Play. The most obvious connection is that the session is usually delivered with people sitting on the floor. Adults sitting on the floor with children is not the usual situation. Katharine Terrell’s study of the role of teachers in British schools observes that many adult-child transactions take place with adults occupying the higher levels and children the lower levels. The popular model for teaching is that adults usually use vertical space for power, control, and observation.³

In *Teaching Godly Play: How to Mentor the Spiritual Development of Children*, Berryman explores these power dynamics in the game he calls “Children in the Land of the Giants.”⁴ The game involves adults working in pairs, with one person standing on a chair while the other stands on the floor. The height difference often engenders a higher, finger-wagging character with a submissive, lower figure. The suggestion is that sitting on the floor reorganizes the usual power dynamics, signaling equality and readiness to be alongside one another. But does it?

Sitting can also be about control, manipulation, and power. Ancient kings and judges sat to pass judgment. In the Gospels, the teachers of the law sat with Jesus, but their ultimate intent was to trap him and plot his death. One of my roles some years ago was as a diocesan adviser for children’s work. The youth officer and I would often offer training together for parishes. Most of the time, we both sat on the floor, suggesting an alternative to top-down training methods. Going home in the car afterward, we often discussed whether it really was an alternative, as both of us were displaying a great deal of coercive power.

So *sitting*, I suggest, is not just to be understood literally but is an attitude, a way of being. If you can’t literally sit on the floor during a Godly Play experience due to physical needs and are sitting around a table or some other setting, or if you are sitting on the floor, what might be some characteristics of this sitting attitude?

² Phyllis Webb, “Sitting,” in *Selected Poems: The Vision Tree* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1982).

³ Katherine Terrell, *Verticality, Power, and Surveillance in the Classroom* (Sheffield: Sheffield University Research Archive, 2020), https://shura.shu.ac.uk/Terrell_VeracityPowerSurveillance.

⁴ Jerome W. Berryman, *Teaching Godly Play: How to Mentor the Spiritual Development of Children*, rev. and expanded ed. (Atlanta: Morehouse Education Resources, 2009), 34.

In volume 1 of *The Complete Guide to Godly Play*, Berryman refers to the influence of Maria Montessori and of how her theory and practice are foundational to Godly Play.⁵ E. M. Standing, Montessori's close colleague, is also given importance as someone who brought her thinking and practice to the English-speaking world. E. M. Standing reflects on Montessori's principles and sees them as crucial for a reorientation of attitudes toward children:

The first essential is that the teacher should go through an inner, spiritual preparation. . . . This is the most difficult part of her training, without which all the rest is of no avail. She must learn how to purify her heart and render it burning with charity towards the child. There are two sins, in particular, which tend to distort our true vision of the child. They are pride and anger. Hence humility and patience—their opposites—are the virtues needed. . . . No real progress in educational reform is possible, says Montessori, until this attitude on the part of the adult has been changed.⁶

The words “*inner spiritual preparation*” can carry connotations of a self-obsessed search for inner truth and purpose, and the sins of pride and anger can engender a negative, self-deprecating sense of shame and self-denigration. In the opening chapters of *The Absorbent Mind*, Maria Montessori maintains that it is more than this. *Spiritual* change includes not only an inner change but also outward practical, social, pedagogical, and political reform. As a pediatrician, Montessori's empirical observation of the child was the first step to discovering “the laws of life.”⁷ But this discovery cannot remain merely an interior knowledge and must move from the inner world into the world of action. She uses the word *revolution* to describe what is needed and compares it to Karl Marx's.⁸ This is a revolution that needs to proceed with care and nonviolence:

It is a revolution that we are preaching when we speak about education. It is a revolution inasmuch as everything we know today will be changed. Indeed, I consider it the last revolution. It will be a non-violent revolution because if the slightest violence is offered to the child, then his psychic construction will be faulty.⁹

5 Jerome W. Berryman, *The Complete Guide to Godly Play*, vol. 1 (Denver: Living the Good News, 2002).

6 E. M. Standing, *Maria Montessori: Her Life and Work* (New York: Plume, 1957), 278–279.

7 Maria Montessori, *The Absorbent Mind* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967), 15.

8 For the classic modern articulation of revolution as the overthrow of existing class structures, see Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (London, 1848).

9 Montessori, *Absorbent Mind*, 23.

At the beginning of the millennium, I had a diocesan responsibility for a project that wanted to chronicle the lives of the English rural communities of Herefordshire and South Shropshire bordering Wales. It involved open-ended interviews with adults, children, and young people. We asked, “As we begin this new millennium, what is life like for you here and now?” Many of the interviews with children were conducted in small groups of three or four, mostly in the area’s small rural schools.

The conversations were rich and creative, with children very willing to talk about their lives and their hopes for the future. During the process, I was feeling pleased with myself about really listening to children, and this became my downfall. One day, during one of these group conversations, I noticed that I was becoming increasingly annoyed with the group. The conversation seemed very disparate, and I judged it chaotic. They weren’t giving me the same quality of conversation as other groups, and I left the school annoyed and irritable.

Going home in the car, I calmed down and asked myself, “Why were you getting annoyed? What was it about that conversation that angered you?” Arriving home, I examined the transcript of the conversation and realized that hidden among what I had classed as chaos was a real treasure. My annoyance and my anger had stopped me from listening. My pride in thinking I was good at listening to children had stopped me from being present.

To counter the vices, E.M. Standing suggests in the earlier quote that we look at the virtues, specifically humility and patience.¹⁰ Humility has its origins in the Latin word *humus*, meaning “dark, organic material of the soil.” So sitting, I suggest, is a downward movement to the ground, a movement that shifts the dynamics of power. James Keenan, a Jesuit, has written extensively about the virtue of humility, linking it intimately to vulnerability:

Humility is not about self-deprecation but an unabashed self-understanding of what it really means for one to act in conscience. A real grace in doubting ourselves and our opinions ... an ability to understand the precarity of another’s situation.¹¹

For Keenan, this is an ethical issue. It involves moving to a place of vulnerability and is a recognition of something deeply relational. It is a movement from thinking about *me* to being aware of *you*, which then becomes *us*.

¹⁰ Standing, *Maria Montessori*, 278–279.

¹¹ James Keenan, “Linking Human Dignity, Vulnerability, and Virtue Ethics,” *International Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society*, July 2020, 56–73.

Sitting also includes patience, with its connotations of stillness and calmness. There are resonances of remaining rather than moving around, a sitting attitude that creates a waiting, an ability to respond to whatever experience might happen. Montessori sees this movement as the main work for the adult:

Once the teacher has made this act of humility, she will no longer look upon herself as someone whose duty is to mold the growing personalities in her charge by the force of her own. Rather she must regard herself as one that serves.¹²

I admit that I don't find this easy. It is always a work in progress. But I think this is where I must start and then keep processing. So I wonder how you start this work of sitting.

Where do you see it at work, and what might help or hinder it?

Sitting WITH

Sitting with you in any setting is so lovely
it is still so new to me like each new morning
watching each wonder cross your face
and I a new arrival to joy
happily caught in that wonder.
—Christy Brown

Christy Brown was a twentieth-century Irish writer and painter, and is known for his autobiography *My Left Foot*, which was made into a film starring Daniel Day-Lewis. Brown had cerebral palsy and wrote and painted with his left foot—hence the title of the autobiography. This is the first verse of the poem, and at its heart it has this slippery, nuanced word *with*.¹³ In English, this word is a preposition, a small word that connects, expresses relationships, and binds and links people and objects. “Sitting with” in this poem engenders newness, joy, and wonder.

Sitting with is a key moment in the novel *Unless* by Carol Shields. It tells the story of a young woman who has experienced a deep trauma, who has left the family home and sits in silence on the street. Her mother eventually discovers that the teenage sisters go to visit every Saturday.

“She doesn't really talk to us,” Natalie says. “At first, we sat about ten feet away from her. We didn't want to freak her out, as if she isn't already. Now we sit right next to her. Natalie sits on one side, and I sit on the other.”¹⁴

¹² Standing, *Maria Montessori*, 279.

¹³ Christy Brown, “Sitting By,” in *Come Softly to My Wake* (London: Martin Secker & Warburg, 1971).

¹⁴ Carol Shields, *Unless* (New York: Fourth Estate, 2003), 106.

The New Testament has numerous examples of “with-ness.” In Greek, there are different words that can be used to translate the English word *with*. The most common is ἐν, which can be translated as “with,” but it can also mean “in,” “on,” “at,” or “by.” The translation will depend upon the context.

Another Greek word, σύν, also means “with,” and it carries connotations of close union, intimacy, deep identification, and shared experience, and so is not just about proximity. It has connotations with the English words *sympathy*, *synergy*, and *synthesis*. It is also used as a prefix to a verb signifying a co-experience and cooperation with another. The Letter to the Romans 6:6 claims that we are with Christ in his crucifixion; in Colossians 2:6, we are raised with Christ; and in Ephesians 2:6, we are seated with Christ’s glory.

Σύν, not ἐν, is specifically used in many Gospel accounts. Mary goes to be *with* Elizabeth to share their pregnancies (Luke 1:56). The angel that appeared to the shepherds is suddenly *with* a great heavenly host (Luke 2:13). At the Transfiguration, Jesus appears *with* Moses and Elijah (Mark 9:4). In the passion account, Jesus is crucified *with* criminals (Luke 23:32–33).

These stories and many others proclaim a *with* that is more than proximity. This understanding of *with* is about a shared presence, a unity in encounter, a fellowship, and a sense of communal solidarity.

British priest and theologian Sam Wells, currently the rector of St. Martin-in-the-Fields in London, sees the word *with* as deeply theological. At the heart of the Christian faith is God’s commitment to “be with” us. Jesus was *with* us for thirty years in Nazareth. He was *with* us for three years in Galilee and Judea. The call to discipleship is to be called to be *with* Jesus. This theology is incarnational and is explored in Wells’s book *Incarnational Mission: Being with the World*.¹⁵ In a recent podcast, Wells echoes Carol Shields’s language of *sitting with*:

The heart is sitting beside someone as they look down into the well of the intractable part of their lives, whether that’s external circumstances or things about themselves that they are facing up to and staying with, even when there is nothing to say. . . . It’s not about fixing things.¹⁶

When I heard this, I thought, “This is what I do when I sit *with* a group of children in Godly Play.” It also echoes Jerome Berryman’s reflections on the existential limits of our lives and on how both verbal and nonverbal forms of language help us respond to those limits and make meaning of them.¹⁷

¹⁵ Samuel Wells, *Incarnational Mission: Being with the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2018).

¹⁶ Kate Bowler, “Sam Wells: Being With,” *Everything Happens with Kate Bowler* (podcast), 2024, <https://katebowler.com/podcasts/being-with>.

¹⁷ See Jerome W. Berryman, *Godly Play: An Imaginative Approach to Religious Education* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1995). Berryman writes about the existential limits of aloneness, freedom, questions of meaning, and death as being universal for children and adults alike.

The idea of “with-ness” is inextricably bound to the language of closeness used in many Godly Play sacred stories.¹⁸ Mutual closeness is seen as crucial to the divine/human covenantal relationship and is at the heart of Jesus’s very nature and mission. This with-ness has a transformative effect. It is a creative process of bringing new things into being, is therapeutic and healing, and offers new possibilities for the future. In Berryman’s lesson “The Faces of Easter V,” there is an image of Jesus touching the eyes of a blind person. The storyteller says, “When Jesus came close to people, they changed. They could see things they had never seen before. They could do things they had never done before. They became well*.*”¹⁹

Sitting beside, being *with*, implies and enables relational mutuality. It moves me from seeing people as objects, beings that need to be done to, and it shifts group dynamics so that people do not see themselves as objects of training or education but as subjects taking responsibility for their own lives and learning. This movement from object to subject is central to the theory, theology, and politics of liberation theology.

Relational mutuality is also explored by the American theologian David Jensen in his book *Graced Vulnerability*, and he links it to the concept of difference*.* There is a sense of intimacy in the Old Testament covenantal relationship between God and Israel, a covenant of with-ness and communion, but it is also a covenant where “God chooses to relate to people who are not God.”²⁰

Mutual respect was important to Maria Montessori. It included a process of discernment of knowing whether to intervene or not. She reminds us of how difficult it is to manage:

To distinguish at a glance which is creative from one which is unimportant is not always easy. . . . For strange as it may seem—even the mere fact that a child becomes aware that he is being looked at—may stop his work altogether.²¹

I’ve noticed this several times while leading Godly Play sessions. On one occasion, during response time, I was quietly scanning the room and noticed a five-year-old child collecting items from the shelves and making many playful connections. I was internally making assumptions about the

¹⁸ See Jerome W. Berryman, “The Great Family,” in *The Complete Guide to Godly Play*, vol. 2, rev. and expanded ed. (New York: Church Publishing, 2017). In this lesson the storyteller says, “And God came so close to Abram and Abram came so close to God that he knew what God wanted him to do” (90).

¹⁹ Berryman, *Complete Guide to Godly Play*, vol. 4, 16.

²⁰ David Jensen, *Graced Vulnerability: A Theology of Childhood* (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 2005), 16.

²¹ Standing, *Maria Montessori*, 290.

connections, which was my work, not his, when suddenly our eyes met. He immediately stopped playing and packed everything away. That gaze, I think, broke the relationship of *with*.

Sitting with CHILDREN

There Was a Child Went Forth

There was a child went forth every day,
And the first object he look'd upon, that object he became,
And that object became part of him, for the day or a certain
part of the day,
Or for many years or stretching cycles of years.

...

These became part of the child who went forth everyday
And who now goes and will always go forth every day.

—Walt Whitman

Walt Whitman's poem "There Was a Child Went Forth" is rich in its imagery.²² Between the first and last lines of the poem, Whitman lists the objects and people, the events, and the environments that a child might experience. These range from the early lilacs, the mare's foal, the trees and plants of the surrounding environment, the people of his community, shadows, aureola, and mist, and much more. The list is specific to Whitman and may differ significantly for a twenty-first-century child. Whatever the experience, for Whitman, the child is certainly not an empty vessel, but one rich in embodied experience. He stands with Berryman's high view of childhood and with Rebecca Nye and others who explore the nature of innate childhood spirituality.²³

In his book *Children and the Theologians*, Berryman reminds us that childhood is a multifaceted concept with attitudes ranging from ambivalence, ambiguity, and indifference to understanding children as gifts of God and a means of grace.²⁴ Any romantic or idealized views of children distort the intricate reality of their lives. What is called for is a nuanced approach, one that can break stereotypical images, one that can see grace and blessing being expressed by a rich variety of children. This article cannot do justice to that variety and the far-reaching implications of the word *children*. So I have chosen three categories: competent children, challenging children, and concealing children. There are many more, but these three groupings offer examples from my Godly Play practice. You will, of course, have your own.

22 Walt Whitman, "There Was a Child Went Forth," in *Everyman's Poetry* (London: J. M. Dent Orion Publishing Group, 1996).

23 See David Hay and R. Nye, *The Spirit of the Child*, rev. ed. (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2006); and Rebecca Nye, *Children's Spirituality: What It Is and Why It Matters* (London: Church House Publishing, 2009).

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

The Competent Child

I use the word “*competent*” not in the sense that a child might have an IQ score off the scale or display behavior beyond their years. I use it to mean that the child displays competence appropriate to their age and ability. A baby in their “baby-ness” is competent, as are children of all abilities and ages. It starts with a deep belief that spirituality is naturally part of everyone’s childhood and that with support, children can take charge of their own learning, however great or small. This is at the heart of the Godly Play process and is key to Montessori principles and practice. In E. M. Standing’s biography of Montessori, a plea is made for a change in methods of training adults:

Such training is based on the assumption that the teacher is the more active partner, the children the more passive. One of the first practical lessons to be learnt by the prospective Montessori directress is the necessity of reversing this process.

But the ideal, as well as the practice, is that—as time goes on—the child should become the ever more active partner and the teacher the more passive. . . . “Work” must be done by the child himself. No one, not even the best and most sympathetic teacher, can do it for him.²⁵

An example from my own work with children involves a six-year-old boy. He had just a few months of experience with Godly Play when I noticed he regularly liked working with the Christ light, the bowl of sand, and the box of candles. Almost every week, he took the Christ light, lit it himself, looked around the room, and lit a candle for each person present, carefully placing each candle in the sand. He told me that each candle represents a blessing for each person. After a while, he took the snuffer and slowly adjusted the light on each candle, particularly watching the smoke rise. After changing the Christ light, he returned everything to its place. I later discovered that he had introduced this to the rest of his family and that it was now a daily family practice.

How might you celebrate competent children?

The Challenging Child

It is often easy to highlight examples from children who conform and are compliant, but as David Jensen reminds us, many of the world’s children live in situations of precarity and vulnerability.²⁶ Graham Adams, a British theologian, has recently challenged the patriarchal, white, middle-class,

²⁵ Standing, *Maria Montessori*, 281.

²⁶ Jensen, *Graced Vulnerability*.

omnipotent, and adult metaphors used to describe the mystery of God. He explores what God might look like if we used a child as the metaphor, but a child who is small, weak, curious, and subversive.²⁷

On many occasions, I have been challenged by children whom I have labeled subversive.

Twenty years ago, a seven-year-old girl offered a real challenge to the group during the presentation of the Holy Family.²⁸ She appeared bored with the whole session, and I had begun to label her as badly behaved. There was real energy in the group with the last wondering, “I wonder which of the Holy Family you could leave out and still have everything you need.” Some suggested the shepherds, but that was countered with, “It would exclude the poor of the world.” Others suggested the Magi, but one child thought that this would leave the world’s mystery out. The girl then said in a very dismissive, challenging voice, “Go on, do it,” pointing at the Christ child. There was shock and horror from the group. I must admit I wondered where the conversation was going. I made a negative judgment that the girl was being very subversive, but I tried to control it, gently picked up the figure, and held it in my hand, saying, “You think this could be taken away.” Again, in what appeared to be a dismissive voice, she said, “Yeah, take him away. Just look at them! All they are doing is just looking at him.” “Oh,” I said. The girl replied, “Yeah, if we took him away, they would stop looking down and start looking up. Then they would have to look at one another.” I gasped inwardly and was silent. Then she said, “‘Cause when anybody really looks at another person, then Jesus is there, isn’t he?”

How might you celebrate challenging children?

The Concealing Child

I find it easy to give significance to what children do and say, and I can make assumptions about what might be going on, but much of the time the work is hidden from me and known only to the children themselves, sometimes consciously and sometimes unconsciously. The work, the significance is concealed from me, and I find myself having to be in a place of trust, trust that I don’t need to know what is happening. The idea of the concealing child gives importance to the fact that not everything can be or must be expressed in verbal language, that sometimes, according to St. Paul, “there are sighs too deep for words” (Romans 8:26).

²⁷ Graham Adams, *God the Child: Small, Weak, and Curious Subversions* (London: SCM Press, 2024).

²⁸ Jerome W. Berryman, “The Holy Family,” in *Complete Guide to Godly Play*, vol. 2, 55.

There is a sense that the Godly Play session is covered with a “cloud of unknowing”. The medieval text on spirituality titled *The Cloud of Unknowing* suggests that this place of unknowing is where God is revealed. The concealing child may signify, may be an icon or a sign of the mysterious presence of God—a child who is, rather than what he or she does.

How might you celebrate the concealing child?

Sitting with Children IN

O current of power permeating all
in the heights upon the earth and
in all deeps:
you bind and gather
all people together.
—Hildegard of Bingen

The two-letter word *in* accompanies me during my swimming sessions. I have a sense of being held, being buoyed up, and being surrounded, and I am also aware of the fragility of death and life. Swimming becomes a way of praying as I am immersed and enveloped. I am profoundly *in* the water.

This two-letter preposition doesn’t just talk of location but of relationship, union, inclusion, and participation with its associations of interconnectedness and communion, such as that expressed by Hildegard of Bingen in the poem quoted above.²⁹ Many children become involved in the process of creating dens, covering chairs with blankets or towels, maybe fashioning sticks and logs to create a space that can be crawled into. Some like digging giant holes on the beach, covering them with beach towels, or sitting in them with an umbrella. It is somewhere to crawl *into*, somewhere for protection and security.

The nonviolent revolution mentioned in the earlier quotation by Maria Montessori and the sometimes fragility of children’s spirituality imply the need for places of safety and asylum. *In* then has associations with shelter, suggestions of sanctuary.

A recurring theme in much of Jerome Berryman’s work is the challenge and ability to travel into the world of childhood. As part of the group-forming process at the beginning of a Core Training, individuals might be asked to recall a moment of play as a child, some activity that absorbed them, that gave them energy.³⁰ At first, people are a little hesitant to remember, but very soon one or two stories give birth to a multitude of others. As people

29 Saint Hildegard of Bingen, “O ignis Spiritus Paradisi,” in *Symphonia: A Critical Edition of the “Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum,”* trans. Barbara Newman (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 148–149; the ability to enter

30 The Core Training is the basic course for those new to Godly Play. It provides the skills needed to lead a session.

recount their play with dolls, reading, making dens, climbing trees, sometimes dangerous play, and much more, real energy seems to pervade the room. *In* seems to be crucial to the experience. The theme of being absorbed in the activity is common. The stories are *in* the tellers, in much the same way as Walt Whitman's childhood stories are in him.

Later in the course, people are invited to give their story a title and to abstract a key theme or quality from the narrative. Terms such as *challenge*, *exploration*, *creativity*, *absorption*, *living on the edge*, and many others are not only abstractions but perhaps come close to the primal feelings of the experience that existed before the actual process of attaching a narrative to it. There is then a sense of incarnation, literally an in-the-flesh embodiment of the experience.

Berryman suggests that if we, as adults, can be in and aware of our own primal childhood playful experiences, then we are more likely to be attuned to the tentative and mysterious moments revealed by children.³¹

The Godly Play method then offers another invitation to take these experiences into the world of religious language. This world is multilayered and includes the physical space, the quality of relationships that might operate within that space, the actual verbal and nonverbal language used, and the way that language is offered. The concept of threshold is important, and I suggest that it does not just refer to the physical entry into the space but to many different threshold moments throughout the process. How might we support children in getting in, and what helps and hinders at each moment? It also implies a state of commitment, loyalty, and devotion from us as adults to understanding and being *in* this process as well.

Berryman employs the allegory of swimming in a river to explore what it might mean to be in the creative process.³² This involves a flexibility of open response to the interplay of the varying deep currents of chaos and rigidity, of tragedy and comedy, of laughter and tears. The ability to steer between these currents without being overwhelmed is vital, a matter of life and death. How we swim in the water is crucial.

So, to use the allegory of swimming, what Godly Play lessons might adults need to support the "swimming" experience of children?

³¹ Jerome W. Berryman, *Becoming Like a Child: The Curiosity of Maturity Beyond the Norm* (New York: Church Publishing, 2017), 67–71.

³² Berryman, *Becoming Like a Child*, 171–178.

Sitting with Children in WONDER

I wonder as I wander, out under the sky,
 how Jesus the savior did come for to die
 for poor ordinary people like you and like I;
 I wonder as I wander, out under the sky.
 —John Jacob Niles

American composer John Jacob Niles was a collector of folk music. In 1933 he met a poorly dressed, unwashed Annie Morgan who sang three lines of a song. Niles took the lines and created the well-known carol “I Wonder as I Wander” (quoted above).³³ I love the similarity of sound when the English words *wander* and *wonder* are sung or spoken; sometimes it is hard to distinguish which is which. There are the rather negative aspects of aimlessly wandering that lead to “lostness,” but to me, the juxtaposition of the two words suggests a whole-body experience. There is the physicality of meandering, roaming, and mooching, added to the reflective quality of pondering, of being astonished and awestruck.

Montessori principles hold that a sense of wonder is a prerequisite for adults working alongside children. Maria Montessori is quoted as saying, “You yourselves must be filled with wonder; and when you have acquired that you are prepared.”³⁴

If the penta-logue (the phrase “Sitting with children in wonder”) is arranged in a line, the word *wonder* appears at the end, but maybe that is where we should begin. Perhaps the words should be arranged as a circle like the blocks of the Church Year material, so that beginnings and endings are completely entwined.³⁵

Somebody once asked me, “When you are about to go into the room to be with the children, what is going through your mind?” I thought for a while and said, “Well, I guess most of the time I wonder what is going to happen during the session.”

When we talk about the Godly Play method, we often refer to “wondering questions”, which are sometimes limited to the part of the process that follows storytelling. In a Godly Play session, the storyteller typically shares a story and then poses a series of “wondering questions.”

- I wonder what part of the story you liked the best?
- I wonder what part was most important?

³³ John Jacob Niles, “I Wonder as I Wander,” in *The Ballad Book of John Jacob Niles* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961).

³⁴ Standing, *Maria Montessori*, 287.

³⁵ Jerome W. Berryman, “The Circle of the Church Year,” in *Complete Guide to Godly Play*, vol. 2, 27.

- I wonder what part was about you or what part you were in?
- I wonder if we could leave any of the story out and still have all that we need?

In the first place, the placing of the words *wondering* and *question* together doesn't seem right to me. Questions imply answers—not necessarily correct answers, but statements that seem to finish part of a process. Wondering, as I have already implied, is something quite different. When I ask or write, “I wonder what you like about . . .,” a question mark seems not to be an appropriate punctuation symbol.

Relegating wondering to the process after storytelling seems to be so limiting. Berryman says, for example:

The key of the spoken lesson is the teacher as storyteller. The goal of storytelling is to engage wonder, the creative process, and the awareness of our existential limits as human beings in both speaker and listener.³⁶

It is not just one part of the process but part of the whole; wondering is present in the many thresholds, in story, in response, in feasting and ending. It pervades the whole Godly Play session and becomes the air we breathe and—to use my swimming analogy—the water in which we bathe. Wonder is how religious language is not *just talked about* but entered, becoming more than mere *repetition*.³⁷

Wonder has connections to vulnerability. It calls for openness: being open to what might happen, to the possibility of surprise and the unexpected, to subjecting oneself to something new. It is the difficult and sometimes painful lesson of letting go of control.

In 1937 British poet Dylan Thomas claimed that wonder “is the aim and the end.” The poem “Being but Men” contrasts men and children climbing trees. Unlike the men who bump into trees, the children keep going and thrust their heads above the branches. Writes Thomas,

That, then, is loveliness, we said,
Children in wonder watching the stars
Is the aim and the end.³⁸

³⁶ Berryman, *Godly Play*, 62.

³⁷ Berryman, *Godly Play*, 60.

³⁸ Dylan Thomas, “Being but Men,” in *The Collected Works: The Centenary Edition* (London: Orion, 2014).

In a collection of essays called *Tremendous Trifles*, G. K. Chesterton tells the story of Peter and Paul. Paul wishes he were a giant so that he could travel the world in giant steps. The wish is granted, and the journey takes mere seconds. As a result, he hardly notices where he has been. Peter wishes to be only half an inch high, and as he journeys, he is amazed by every blade of grass, every flower and stone. His adventure is continuous and never ends.

Chesterton reminds us that wonder is not just about the extraordinary or interesting things children might say or do.

- It is incarnational wonder,
- wonder at the everyday moment.
- It is wonder in response to what might seem insignificant,
- to what is often regarded as inconsequential.
- When the ordinary takes on other dimensions,
- then the ordinary becomes EXTRA-ordinary.

I will sit still and let the marvels and adventures settle on me like flies. There are plenty of them I assure you. The world will never starve for the want of wonders; but only for the want of wonder.³⁹

A Challenge

The more I've written and reflected on this penta-logue, the more I've wanted to include. The Delete button has been hit numerous times, and countless words have been consigned to the mystery of the cloud. This is only the beginning, and I think there are many challenges that the five words *sitting with children in wonder* pose to our practice and thinking. Here are just two: The first concerns our own practice of Godly Play. How might these five words inform and challenge our own day-to-day experience of Godly Play, of sitting with children in wonder, and where might be the safe, creative places for honest self-reflective practice?

The second concerns those of us who are Godly Play trainers. I've shared glimpses of my wondering with these five words, and they seem to me to be at the core of what training should be. Are we doing this already? Is there anything that needs to be changed? What would training look like if these five words were central, and how would we deliver it?

³⁹ G. K. Chesterton, *Tremendous Trifles* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1909).

I am rapidly approaching my eightieth year, and the end of my earthly Godly Playing is very much in sight. The challenge, then, is not only for me but also for the next generations inspired by Jerome Berryman's legacy.

I wonder how we might grow into this *sitting with children in wonder*.

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