

EDITORIAL

Creating Creating in Others: The Enduring Legacy of Jerome W. Berryman

Heather Ingersoll, Ph.D.¹

¹ Godly Play Foundation

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This article provides an overview of the impact of Jerome Berryman as a scholar, practitioner, writer, and friend, as reflected in the assorted articles in this Festschrift. It explores the legacy of Berryman through the lens of one who *created creating in others* through his writing, speaking, and presence. This legacy of *creating creating in others* is explored through the themes of the agency of children, academic discourse, contemplative practice, and personal transformation.

In the final years of his life, Jerome Berryman worked diligently on what he considered the culmination of his life's work: writing a book articulating his theology of childhood. As was characteristic of Jerome, even after decades of study and amassing as much knowledge as he could from a wide variety of disciplines, he spent those final years reading voraciously, always searching for deeper meaning and understanding. He drew on theology, psychology, philosophy, education, neuroscience, and childhood studies in an ongoing creative process, never landing on anything beyond a soft closure. In these years, he also became increasingly committed to understanding the conditions from which narcissism emerges.

From the outside, Berryman's growing interest in narcissism may appear to coincide with a wider cultural conversation, accelerated by the addition of narcissistic personality disorder into the DSM in the 1980s.¹ However, a careful reading of the many iterations of his manuscripts reveals that this study of narcissism lay at the very heart of his theology of childhood. Berryman wrote, "To become real, we need to be like children, playing in the flow of God's creative power. This is the opposite of self-absorption, for play is never done alone."²

¹ Narcissistic Personality Disorder was first officially introduced in Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III) in 1980.

² Jerome W. Berryman. "Playing in the Flow of God's Creative Power: A Theology of Childhood," in *Let the Children Lead: Exploring Children's Spirituality Today*, ed. Elizabeth DeGaynor (Alexandria, VA: VTS Press, 2023), 20.

Berryman believed our authentic selves are made in the image of the Creator. He wrote that as bearers of that image, “we are fundamentally created creatures who create. But what do we create?” His answer was both simplistic and yet profoundly consequential: “We create creating in others, as God created creating in us.”³

In an unpublished manuscript he elaborated: “Creating is the appropriate use of God’s image to stimulate the imagination of other living beings to awaken the image of the Creator in them, so they too can create as they were meant to do.”⁴

An entire volume could be dedicated to exploring the theological and hermeneutical implications of this vision of the *Imago Dei*. Yet this Festschrift is not intended to stimulate a theological discourse but to encapsulate the work and legacy of Jerome Berryman as reflected in its assorted articles. They could all, as I read them, be summed up into a single conviction that defined Jerome’s life and work, and ultimately his way of being in relationship: He created creating in others.

I remember him telling me that after publishing a book or article, he was rarely interested in discussing it, in defending or explaining his ideas. What mattered most to him was hearing of the ways in which his work sparked the imagination, wonder, and creativity of the persons who encountered it. As attested by many of the recollections shared in this volume of personal connections with Jerome, he was interested not in agreement but in generative dialogue. He delighted in stimulating others to create, explore, wonder, and discover.

This Festschrift is a small snippet in the tapestry of ways Berryman’s work—whether it was his writing, his speaking, or simply his presence—inspired and continues to inspire creating in others, and who in turn create creating in others in a kind of exponential passing on of ourselves as images of the Creator.

One cannot, of course, talk about the tapestry of his legacy without mentioning children. I will begin by exploring the central component of his life and work—the way we think about and relate to children—as reflected in the articles in this volume. This examination, grounded in the main thesis that our purpose is to create in others, frames the organization and emphasis of the collected articles.

3 Berryman. “Playing in the Flow,” 16.

4 Jerome W. Berryman, “The Genesis of Language,” unpublished manuscript.

Agency of Children

Jerome Berryman's work challenged generations of educators, priests, theologians, religious educators, and scholars to view children as fully human and deeply spiritual. As Jensen writes,

My first appreciation of Berryman's work, therefore, was that it highlighted children's agency. Here, at last, was an understanding of children that valued children not primarily for who they might become, but simply for who they are. And who they are, in part, are agents and meaning makers blessed by God.

Each essay speaks to the innumerable ways Berryman's work highlighted children as capable and competent spiritual beings. Bunge and Privett speak to the extended exploration of children's spirituality inspired by Berryman's work. Bunge credits this influence, noting his "respect for children and pathways for faith leaders on how to respect them," which supported her development of a theology of childhood that includes six perspectives on children. "Together, these six perspectives help us respect and appreciate children's complexity and full humanity, thereby promoting mutually rewarding and flourishing adult-child relationships." As a result, Bunge developed a multifaceted approach to a theology of childhood that affirms the complexity, dignity, capacity, and full humanity of children.

Similarly, in his reflections on the phrase "sitting in wonder with children," taken from Bishop Rob O'Neill's eulogy of Berryman, Privett shares how this framing of Berryman's work invited him to radically reimagine the idea of wonder alongside children in which the child becomes not merely a recipient but a companion and sometimes guide in the communal work of attending to God's presence by "sitting" "with" "in" "wonder."

Beyond his influence on our view of children, Berryman's legacy is seen in three key ways in these articles: academic discourse, contemplative practice, and personal transformation.

Academic Discourse

Several articles document Berryman's impact across multiple disciplines. O'Farrell, for example, expands on the role of silence in children's spirituality as inspired by Berryman, arguing that his work deserves far more recognition within the interdisciplinary study of childhood. Mercer traces Berryman's long-standing contributions to the Religious Education Association, including the six articles published in the journal *Religious Education*. She cites both the critiques and the affirmations of his ideas, as well as the role the articles played in shaping the focus on children's spirituality within the REA community.

These essays reveal that Berryman's contributions reached well beyond the development of Godly Play. His emphasis on narrative, play, silence, sacred space, and children's spirituality has impacted multiple fields of inquiry. Scholars continue to build upon his insights, while bringing them into dialogue with contemporary discourse concerning childhood, religious formation, and spirituality.

Other contributions demonstrate the use of Berryman's interpretation of biblical stories to generate theological reflections. Simson explores the Christological dimension of this thought, especially as it relates to how the Godly Play scripts reflect a particular understanding of Jesus' life and death. Minor expounds on Berryman's original seminary paper in which he explores direct perspectives of the divine and how encounters with God happen in immediate and transformative ways. These essays hark back to another reality of Berryman's work: It was never simply pedagogical or biblical in nature; it was rooted in a theological conviction that humans, and especially children, are capable of directly perceiving the divine and participating in God's ongoing creative activity.

Contemplative Practice

The generative quality of Berryman's legacy is perhaps most evident in the emergence of contemplative practices inspired by his work. For Berryman, it wasn't enough to pontificate about the theological realities of human beings or to understand childhood spirituality; he searched diligently for a way for our faith communities and organizations to allow children to lean into making meaning of, and delighting in, their direct encounters with the divine. This of course, inspired the development of Godly Play, the most widely experienced part of his legacy. Godly Play is practiced in over 70 countries, with over 200 trainers in the method worldwide and thousands of children experiencing it every week in churches, hospitals, schools, homes, and community centers.

Several articles describe how encountering Godly Play led the authors to explore new contemplative practices, particularly including storytelling and wondering. Schweiker and Ulfat explore how Godly Play became a catalyst for interfaith dialogue and the development of Muslim stories using the Godly Play method. This reflects Berryman's belief that grounding in one's faith and language system enables deeper interfaith engagement, or as he often referred to such interactions, "from depth to depth."

Additionally, Sutton-Adams highlights the unique benefits of Godly Play for chaplains searching for a "middle way." While Godly Play is used primarily in churches and schools worldwide, Berryman began experimenting with what would become Godly Play (originally called "theological play") with children and adolescents while he served as a chaplain at the Texas Medical Center in Houston. Most of the empirical research on Godly Play focuses on

the approach as an intervention in clinical settings. Sutton-Adams describes Berryman's work with Godly Play in a clinical setting as a middle way: It offers sufficient empirical research on its benefits for children to satisfy the growing need for "evidence-based" practice, while still leaving space for mystery and openness as children make meaning of their existential limits.

Allen's work on building practices for intergenerational ministry highlights how the Godly Play environment naturally embodies an intergenerational ecclesiology. The methodology lends itself to spaces where children and adults are invited into mutual participation, and respect for children goes beyond an educational strategy to an ecclesial practice.

After decades of using Godly Play with children and adults in worship and church settings, Wells used all he learned from that experience to develop "Being With," a wonder- and narrative-based approach to supporting adults' deepening and understanding of their faith.

Yust describes a practice inspired by Jerome's work with children that includes one-on-one conversations between children and adults, in which children are invited into playful, wonder-based conversations about life and faith to foster a deeper connection with God.

Personal Transformation

Each of the articles in this volume reflects encounters with Jerome in which he embodied his life's work. To read Berryman was one thing; to experience his playfulness, wit, and wonder certainly animated what was written on a page in new and invigorating ways. Each article includes a personal anecdote that highlights the multitude of ways Berryman embodied his work through his ways of being with people, especially children.

Thomas recounts her more than thirty years of wonder, insight, and spiritual deepening sparked by Berryman and Godly Play. Reflecting on their final email exchange, she describes Berryman as a remarkable, creative, honest, and playful prophet whose respect for children shaped both his life and his work.

Beales recalls reluctantly attending her first Godly Play gathering, led by Berryman, only to encounter a transformative reality. She describes how, during a significant transition in her life, things came together for her at that gathering. She writes, "I discovered something radically new. I was invited to respond, not just receive, not just recite pre-ordained 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."

Even brief anecdotes in the articles reveal Berryman's playful spirit and his unique capacity to awaken wonder. Mercer recalls an encounter with Berryman and her young son sparked by her son's comment about Santa.

After the conversation, when her son had left, Berryman responded, “Isn’t it amazing to listen to a child making sense of the world?” In that simple sentence one glimpses the essence of Berryman’s legacy. Through scholarship, casual conversation, lectures, book and article publications, training and teaching, he spent his life helping others notice what was already there—the creativity, wisdom, unique encounters with God, spirituality, and propensity to wonder that are present in children and in all of us.

Together the essays in this Festschrift reveal a legacy that cannot be measured by publications, programs, or institutions. Berryman’s enduring contribution lies in the wonder, imagination, and creativity he awakened. He inspired scholars to ask new questions, challenged church leaders to notice the youngest in their communities, invited practitioners to create sacred spaces for children, developed communities and people who learned to honor children’s voices, and helped us all rediscover the deeply human practice of wonder.

He created creating in others.

In the wake of his many scholarly, practical, and individual contributions, he left people whose imaginations were awakened. Even those who disagreed with or criticized his work would be hard-pressed to leave an encounter with Berryman without being inspired to create something. Through these encounters, the work continues as a living invitation to wonder, to create, to notice the voices and the lives of the youngest in our midst, and to ultimately create and create creating in others.

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