

Story, Wondering and Play
Encouraging spiritual growth with all ages

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Story, wondering and play are key parts of Godly Play¹ - a carefully designed process of Christian nurture for children. Having become familiar with Godly Play through previous ministry experience, it was noticeable how often story, wondering and play were mentioned in the Spiritual Direct Formation Programme. I decided to use my Special Interest Project to investigate the parallels further and to wonder about principles that encourage spiritual growth with ALL ages.

Godly Play is best understood by experiencing it, and since it may not be familiar to all readers, I begin by describing my first Godly Play session. It was an hour long and included welcome, story, wondering, play, prayer, feast and blessing.

My first experience of Godly Play



The door person welcomed me and indicated the semi-circle of cushions. The storyteller was already seated and smiled as the twelve of us each found a place. After a brief welcome, the storyteller asked 'Are you ready for the story?' and when we indicated we were she took a box from the nearby shelf and placed it beside her.

Then her gaze moved purposefully to the tray of sand in front. With slow backward and forward motions, her hands smoothed the sand and she began... 'The desert is a dangerous place....' Over the next 15 minutes simple objects were taken from the box, firmly placed or moved along the sand to tell the sacred story 'The Great Family.' Starting with Abram and Sarai we watched their journey from leaving Ur up until Isaac and Rebecca's marriage and their children. It was full of promises and uncertainties, sorrows and joys.

Finally, the storyteller let a handful of sand trickle through her fingers saying: 'Now you are part of that great family which has become as many as the stars of the sky and the grains of sand in the desert.'²

¹The 20 min video 'What is Godly Play – in Germany?' is highly recommended for readers unfamiliar with Godly Play. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=py6vzls_NcM

The best starting places are the official Godly Play Foundation www.godlyplayfoundation.org and its YouTube channel <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCTFi5xLBbZ6OmANYKiDI03Q>

² Each Godly Play script is written in full with actions to be learnt off by heart. The storyteller does not look at the children but fully enters into the story with them as they tell the story. All the Godly Play scripts can be found in The Complete Guide to Godly Play Vol 1-8 by Jerome Berryman



There was a profound silence as she sat back and we looked together at the whole story laid out on the sand.

Unhurriedly, the storyteller raised her eyes, smiled and gently invited us to spend some time wondering about the story, God and ourselves:

- *I wonder which part of the story you like best?*
- *I wonder which part of the story is the most important?*
- *I wonder where you are in the story or which part of the story is about you?*
- *I wonder if there is any part of this story we could leave out and still have all the story we need?*



The four questions³ were asked with plenty of space in between to allow time for all who wanted to share. The story teller listened and accepted each response with a nod or repeating a few words.

I shared that I liked the words and action 'Abraham came close to God and God came close to Abraham.'⁴ Smiling the storyteller made the gesture again by covering Abraham's figure with one hand, followed by the other.

As our wondering finally sank into silence, she packed up the story, returning it to the shelf, before inviting us into the response activity time. There was a quiet hush as people moved silently to the craft table, selected materials, and found a space to work. I decided to make a fold out card with a blue path that represented my journey with God. I noted some times of uncertainty and pain but I also saw how God had been with me always, just like Abraham. While I was still adding some brightly coloured 'promises' to my card the storyteller signaled: 'It's time to gather again. There's no need to hurry. We have all the time we need.' I folded my card away for safe keeping⁵ and went back to my cushion, where we were served some crackers and juice. We were invited to offer some words of prayer, or just say 'thank you or amen' before we ate and talked in a relaxed way with each other. When it was

³ Each kind of presentation has its own type of wondering questions. These classic four questions can be used after many Biblical stories. They are carefully arranged to move participants from general to deeper responses.

⁴ Later I learnt that this is one of the repeating phrases in a number of Godly Play stories. Each time it reinforces God's desire for relationship- with Abraham, Moses, Joseph, Jesus, Paul...ourselves.

⁵ I still have it in my big journal scrapbook!

time to leave, the storyteller invited us one by one to hold her hands as she blessed us: 'It has been a pleasure to have you here today.' I left the room, my heart full of love, my head full of questions.

That was in July 2013 at a national training event for children's ministry leaders. It was intentional that we experienced a whole Godly Play session first before the Q&A session which followed. There were 'aha' moments for myself and others. Many of the current programmes or curriculums were based on an instructional model of children learning about God. Recent research around children's faith development showed the importance of children experiencing God for themselves within the faith community. Here was a practical example of what this might look like! We discussed practicalities of setting up a full Godly Play classroom and wondered how some of the contemplative principles of Godly Play could be introduced almost immediately into some contexts. Over the next six years, I read and researched more about Godly Play. I shared some of the sacred stories, parables and liturgical actions with groups of children and preteens at church, a school lunchtime kids club, an intergenerational community service and most often at training events for children's ministry leaders. I observed how, although initially designed for young children, this approach to Biblical story, wondering and creative response was enthusiastically welcomed by all ages. Adult leaders were often surprised at how deeply they experienced God too during this invitational approach to story, wondering and playful response. So how did Godly Play come about and what are its key principles?

History of Godly Play and Founder

Godly Play was developed in the 1970s by Jerome Berryman⁶ as a practical outcome of his extensive quest to understand and nurture children's spirituality. As a young priest and teacher, he resonated with Maria Montessori's approach to religious education. He also studied the work of two others who built on her foundation, which he developed even further. Thus, Berryman calls Godly Play the 'fourth generation response.'⁷ While there are differences across these educators, a common belief is that children are inherently spiritual and nurturing this from a young age is crucial. Even very young children can experience God for themselves when they are given opportunities within a safe environment, using the language they understand best- namely play.

Berryman's theology of childhood⁸ underpins the practice of Godly Play. His contribution is one stream in a swelling river of research, books, conferences and practices about nurturing children's spirituality. While further exploration of this

⁶ Episcopal priest, teacher and hospital chaplain, now Senior Fellow at the Centre for the Theology of Childhood (Godly Play Foundation) Author of numerous books including the Complete Guide to Godly Play Vol 1-8

⁷ In chapters 2 and 3 of 'The Spiritual Guidance of Children' Berryman details the influences and developments in children's spirituality of Maria Montessori (1870-1952), E.M Standing (1887- 1967) and Sofia Cavalletti (1917-2011) Berryman (1937- still active!) launched Godly Play in 1974.

⁸ Berryman, Jerome. W, *The Complete Guide to Godly Play Vol 1* (New York: Morehouse Publishing,2006) Toward a Theology of Childhood Chapter 7

broader topic is beyond the scope of this essay, it is important to note a common theme amongst researchers. Childhood experiences and understanding of God, self and others will influence later faith development. Therefore, care must be taken in how children are nurtured for a lifetime of healthy spiritual growth.

This is clearly stated in the mission statement⁹ of the Godly Play Foundation which offers research, training and support worldwide. While there are over 50 countries now using Godly Play, New Zealand is 'still in its infancy' with approximately 100 people having completed the 3-day Core Training since Sept 2015.¹⁰ Since Godly Play is 'a dynamic, spiritual practice'¹¹ training is essential before establishing either a full classroom, or offering it in other settings such as intergenerational services, kindergartens, schools, rest homes and Sunday children's programmes.

Key differences between Godly Play and Spiritual Direction

- a. The context of Godly Play is usually a group of children with two adults whereas a spiritual direction session is more often just between two adults. However, there are similarities to how a director may structure a session with a group at a contemplative retreat.
- b. The story in Godly Play is thoroughly prepared and shared by the storyteller. In contrast, a directee brings their own 'story' (life experience) without any prior knowledge or preparation by the director.
- c. The format of sharing in spiritual direction is most commonly verbal communication between 'mature persons.'¹² A course textbook specifically states that 'the only prerequisite is that those being directed have affective¹³ experiences of God that they notice and can TALK about with a director.'¹⁴ Godly Play understands that children are still developing their cognitive skills and language so it carefully combines verbal and non-verbal ways of

⁹ 'The quality of children's spirituality and its formation is key to adult health and ethical living. The goal is for children to enter adolescence with an inner-working model of the Christian language system that will continue to be of use as a means of maturing spiritually all one's life. The Godly Play method originated and remains principally focused on children, however, our mission includes growing its use among adults. Faith practice is a life long journey'.
Godly Play Foundation retrieved from <https://www.godlyplayfoundation.org/the-foundation/mission-vision>

¹⁰ Information from the GP NZ facilitator in a zoom chat, August 2022

¹¹ www.godlyplayfoundation.org

¹² Barry, William and William Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2009) p. xiii

¹³ Underlying feelings, emotions or mood

¹⁴ Barry, William and William Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2009) p. xiv

communicating. Specific learning of 'Christian as a second language'¹⁵ is activated by play and creative response in a stimulating physical environment.

Although these are some of the differences, there are many more similarities.

Religious Experience and spiritual nurture

People of all ages have religious experiences. Dr David Hay's research with adults¹⁶ in the UK is well-known. In 2006, he and Dr Rebecca Nye¹⁷ shared the ground-breaking results of three years research into children's religious experiences.¹⁸ Working with a director's religious experience is the central focus of Christian spiritual direction.¹⁹ The director helps the director notice God's activity in their lives, to explore, listen and respond with the aim of a deeper relationship with God.

Likewise, Godly Play provides opportunities for all to 'explore the mystery of God's presence in their lives, to hear God's invitation for spiritual experience, to examine existential limits and make authentic and creative responses to God.'²⁰

The ways of doing this may look different but the aim is the same. In her later book, Nye²¹ offers an extremely helpful checklist for nurturing children's spirituality. Using the acronym S.P.I.R.I.T. (Space, Process, Imagination, Relationship, Intimacy, Trust).²² she gives examples from Godly Play that 'tick all the boxes.'²³ This checklist began to change the way I thought about, practiced and trained others in children's ministry over the following years. Then during spiritual direction training I noticed how relevant and applicable the SAME six criteria were for nurturing adult spirituality too. Let's look at each of them in turn.

¹⁵ Berryman, Jerome. W, *The Spiritual Guidance of Children* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2013) p. 4

¹⁶ The study was written up in Hay's book 'Religious Experience Today: Studying the Facts' (UK: Mowbray, 1990)

¹⁷ Rebecca Nye is a consultant and lecturer in children's spirituality.

¹⁸ Hay, David. With Rebecca Nye *The Spirit of the Child: Revised Edition*. United Kingdom, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2006.

¹⁹ Workshop 2 in the Spiritual Directors Formation Programme 'Working with Religious Experience.'

²⁰ Vision statement *The Godly Play Foundation* retrieved from <https://www.godlyplayfoundation.org/>

²¹ Nye, Rebecca. *Children's Spirituality: What it is and why it matters*. (London, Church House Publishing, 2009)

²² Nye, Rebecca. *Children's Spirituality: What it is and why it matters*. (London, Church House Publishing, 2009) Chapter 4, Nurturing children's spirituality: Six criteria for ensuring spiritual foundations

²³ Nye is a lead trainer of Godly Play and was responsible for bringing the initiative to the UK, Germany and Finland.

Space

Nye describes three kinds of space- physical, emotional and auditory.²⁴

Physical space

The Godly Play classroom is carefully designed around the Christian church year. Everything is arranged to visually and silently communicate God's big story so as the children enter the room they become part of it. Every word and action of the door person and storyteller reinforces that this space has been prepared 'with all the time that you need' to meet with God. A sacred story is shared, wondered about and responded to.

The parallels to Spiritual direction are obvious. Preparing the physical space and getting oneself ready are just two examples of hospitality which Margaret Guenther²⁵ devotes a whole chapter to. The director first pays attention to their own inner order so that everything can focus on the guest. Creating a welcoming, physical space 'tells' the directee that the director is ready to unhurriedly listen to the story they choose to bring. 'The director's task is to help connect the individual's story to 'THE story' and there-by help the directee to recognise and claim their identity in Christ.'²⁶

Emotional space allows room for all kinds of feelings and ideas to be expressed in a confidential setting in both spiritual direction and Godly Play.

Auditory space allows room for silence and attentive listening.²⁷ Nye suggests waiting seven seconds after asking a question and uses the principle 'talk less, listen more.'²⁸ Similarly in spiritual direction we are reminded to WAIT= Why Am I Talking?!

Hospitality is evident in the welcome, the feast and blessing parts of Godly Play. Guenther describes important ways a director can assure the directee of God's love and forgiveness.²⁹ In both examples, the 'hosts' represent the wider Christian community by sharing some common faith practices.

This understanding of space/hospitality helps me prepare for a direction session. As well as spending time on 'inner order' I thoughtfully choose symbols from the current season of the church year as a small part of God's big story. (E.g. Easter-

²⁴ Nye, Rebecca. *Children's Spirituality: What it is and why it matters*. (London, Church House Publishing, 2009) p.42-45

²⁵ Guenther, Margaret, *Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction*, (Massachusetts: Cowley, 1992) Chapter 1 'Spiritual Direction as Hospitality.'

²⁶ Ibid p.31

²⁷ 'Listening is a form of spiritual hospitality where the true listener has no inner need to make their own presence known but pays full attention to the other welcoming them into our very beings.'

Nouwen, Henri. 'Listening as spiritual hospitality' Retrieved from SGM course handout for Workshop 10 Deepening our Work <https://www.sgm.org.nz/workshop-10-deepening-our-work>

²⁸ Nye, Rebecca, *Children's Spirituality: What it is and why it matters*. (London, Church House Publishing, 2009) p, 45

²⁹ Guenther, Margaret, *Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction*, (Massachusetts: Cowley, 1992) p.30

a white cloth, cross and yellow flowers; Pentecost – a red cloth, small white dove in pottery hands; Season of Creation – a green cloth and native flora and fauna.) Setting up the physical space is an enjoyable ritual that helps me to be ready to enter ‘holy ground’ with my directee. Sometimes the directee does not comment or even seem to notice the set-up but the non-verbal story is present. It reminds ME that I am part of the community of faith as I offer this ministry.

One Godly Play practitioner and minister I spoke with agreed that hospitality is an apt description of what happens in her context. (Leading regular Godly Play style intergenerational services.) She describes herself as ‘holding the space’ as she gives careful thought to the physical space and the ways people enter, through the telling of the story and wondering together to the kinds of follow up activities offered. People of different ages often share stories with her afterwards of how ‘they came close to God and God came close to them.’

Process

Spiritual life is often likened to a journey. It is more about the process than a product or end result. The creative time in Godly Play is for the child to choose - no prepared worksheets or colouring to take home! In spiritual direction we learn to listen attentively, honouring the present moment without trying to ‘get the directee somewhere’ with our own ideas or advice.

Imagination

Using imagination and creativity in art, music, literature and drama have been powerful tools for centuries, helping Christians explore and deepen their relationship with God. Jesus was a master storyteller using images and drama to help people understand and respond. And children are experts at imagining! Close observation and relationships with them can help adults to be more in touch with their own child-likeness. Godly Play uses imagination and play to open up children’s hearts, minds and language to respond to God. Spiritual Growth Ministries encourages directors to use imagination and creativity. The website has an excellent variety of ‘Spiritual Direction and Creativity’ resources.³⁰

Relationship

The primary relationship in spiritual direction and Godly Play is between the individual and God. At all times the director and storyteller/doorperson speak and act to encourage that relationship to deepen. In spiritual direction we take care that our non-verbal communication (attentive listening and body language) AND our verbal communication encourages the directee to talk about their prayer and relationship with God. In Godly Play, the spoken language is carefully worded to consistently reinforce the unspoken ‘language’ of the room and a genuine invitation to play/ respond to God’s love and grace.

Intimacy

Our spiritual journey is a deeply personal one. When a person expresses a desire to come closer to God, it takes time and must be guarded with careful and consistent words and actions. This has been stressed throughout our training and is also true

³⁰ ‘Special Interest projects related to Spiritual Direction and Creativity’ retrieved from <https://www.sgm.org.nz/spiritual-direction-blog/spiritual-direction-creativity>

for working with children. 'Creating a sense of safe, intimate time and space is a long-term project – slow to achieve and quickly broken.'³¹

Trust

The emphasis in both a spiritual direction and a Godly Play session is on the process, not results. For the director and story-teller, it involves learning to trust the Holy Spirit who is 'the real director.' We constantly ask 'How am I trusting God and the work God is doing with my directee (or children)? Practicing being a 'non-anxious presence' and understanding that 'it is not all up to me' helps clarify our role. We are fellow pilgrims and companions rather than 'experts who advise and answer questions'³² While spiritual directors can slip into advice giving, I suggest that it is an even stronger temptation amongst children's ministry leaders. There has been a strong emphasis that the leaders' role IS to teach knowledge about God, the Bible and prayer etc. Religious education models have reinforced this since the creation of the Sunday School movement in the late 19th century.³³ Nye suggests it could help to redefine the role of a 'teacher or leader' with terms like 'spiritual mentor, guide or director.'³⁴ The language we use is important. I am grateful that Godly Play introduced me to the language of 'wondering' which is also used in spiritual direction.

Wondering

In training we have been encouraged to be 'wonderers.'³⁵ We take time to wonder with our directees, inviting them to do the work of discovery for themselves. Guenther suggests that direction is a place where wondering with open questions helps directees to explore - not to get 'right answers, only clearer vision and ever deeper questions.'³⁶

At the beginning of spiritual direction training I really wanted to be given a list of good questions. You know – the ones that always 'work' and would show how clever I was! Learning that there are no such questions has been a journey of trust marked by: careful listening to the directee's story, wondering together, silence and NOT offering my great advice!

³¹ Nye, Rebecca, *Children's Spirituality: What it is and why it matters*. (London, Church House Publishing, 2009) p.54

³² Barry, William and William Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2009) p. 145

³³ Berryman and Nye both describe the history of Sunday School, followed by an emphasis on educational faith development models. Some of the consequences of these approaches are spurring on the wave of research and alternative ways to nurture children's spirituality today.

³⁴ Nye, Rebecca, *Children's Spirituality: What it is and why it matters*. (London, Church House Publishing, 2009) p.83

³⁵ Barry, William and William Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2009) p131

³⁶ Guenther, Margaret, *Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction*, (Massachusetts: Cowley, 1992) p.68

Likewise, in Godly Play, the storyteller supports the children's process of wondering which comes out of their own lives and participation in the lesson. 'Let God be there. Allow this powerful language to do its work.'³⁷

In both Godly Play and direction, we respond with minimal encouragers, repeating a word, phrase or making a body movement.

I often start reflecting with a directee now by saying 'I wonder....' It immediately softens the statement or question which follows, allowing space to explore different ideas without the assumption that there MUST be a 'right' answer.

Perhaps wondering together is a good example of 'playful orthodoxy'?³⁸ Berryman coined this 'oxymoron' explaining that 'orthodoxy stands for closure and playful nods towards openness. Together children can venture out and return'³⁹ as they learn to make meaning of life, God, themselves and others.

Finally, wondering involves waiting. Godly Play storytellers and spiritual directors are like midwives, trusting in the slow work of God.⁴⁰ Training helps them understand the process and to wait... 'intervening only when necessary and helpful.'⁴¹ Waiting, wondering AND celebrating the 'aha' moments, the 'small births'⁴² that happen along the way are joys in the nurturing work of spiritual direction and Godly Play.

Relevance and Application to Spiritual Direction

Clearly there are many parallels between Godly Play and Spiritual Direction. They are both invitational, contemplative approaches that help children and adults deepen their relationship with God.

I wonder if there is something in your life at the moment that especially responds to Godly Play?

Here are a few suggestions (not answers!)

- If you are working in a ministry that includes children, read some children's spirituality resources.⁴³ Consider doing the 3-day Core Training⁴⁴ – another tool to add to your spiritual director's kete!

³⁷ Berryman, Jerome. W, *The Complete Guide to Godly Play Vol 1* (New York: Morehouse Publishing,2006) p.56

³⁸Berryman, Jerome. W, *The Spiritual Guidance of Children* (New York: Morehouse Publishing,2013) p.4

³⁹ Ibid. p.4

⁴⁰ Ibid. p.95

⁴¹ Ibid. p.95

⁴² Ibid. p.105

⁴³ To begin with I would highly recommend Rebecca Nye's "Children's Spirituality: what it is and why it matters"

⁴⁴ Information on Core training from the GP NZ Facebook. The contact person (as at Feb 2023) is Elke Keeling keelingelke@gmail.com. Elke welcomes all enquiries about Godly Play and Core training 021623540

- If you work with teens, older people with dementia, children experiencing trauma of illness or separation, hospital chaplaincy you may find the Godly Play approach helpful too.⁴⁵
- Encourage your directees who are parents, teachers, children's ministry leaders to really stop and observe their children at play, to join in and wonder together. Start with 'I wonder....' then wait...and really listen to children's responses without offering advice or correction! A spiritual conversation could happen! Your directee may bring a 'story' to direction for further exploration.
- Look at the space where you offer spiritual direction. How can it help to 'tell' God's big story of welcome and grace even more? Is it free of unnecessary clutter? Where and what will be the visual focus for the directee and myself? What symbols, objects and colours might I use to reinforce God's welcome and grace? The rhythms of the church liturgical year? A sense of being part of the wider faith community?
- Ask your directee to share their earliest childhood memory of a religious experience or sense of God.⁴⁶ Spend time exploring it creatively with playdough, drawing, collage, Lego...what colours, sounds, smells, memories are associated with the experience? What might God be saying now?
- Jesus' invitation to each of us on the spiritual journey is to 'become like a child.' I wonder what your next step is in exploring this and relating to the child within?

*May the child within you not forget how to play.
May your eyes sparkle with curiosity
and your heart be always open to wonder and surprise. ⁴⁷*

⁴⁵ See examples of using Godly Play with other groups and individuals at www.godlyplayfoundation.org

⁴⁶ 'Research has found that childhood often provides the most crucial spiritual impressions of all, the ones that could shape (or distort) all the experience of later life.' Nye, Rebecca, *Children's Spirituality: What it is and why it matters*. (London, Church House Publishing, 2009) p.11

⁴⁷ From 'Blessing Time' by Rev Andrew Norton (2013) retrieved from <https://andrewnorton.co.nz/2013/09/13/blessing-time/>

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Photo of *The Great Family* story props - used with permission from GP NZ facilitator

Photo of *Hand trickling sand* retrieved from Google images
<https://www.alamy.com/stock-photo/sand-trickling-through-hand.html>