



# The invitation: holiness, Scripture and the practice of Godly Play

Sue North-Coombes

SUE NORTH-COOMBES, a former teacher, is a trainer with Godly Play UK. Based at a Godly Play room in Ottershaw, Surrey, she facilitates training for schools, churches and in other settings.

sue@north-coombes.co.uk  
Surrey, UK

*Godly Play is a different way of being with children and introducing them to Scripture and the language of the Christian people. More akin to spiritual guidance than religious education, it assumes an innate spirituality in the child. Based on Montessori principles, the process works through a simple, structured creation of a child-centred 'sacred space'. The session itself, involving sharing a story, wondering, response time and feast together, allows participants the freedom to respond as they will. This article similarly shares a story, wonders about it and then allows the reader to be drawn into the experience of a Godly Play session.*

GODLY PLAY • MONTESSORI • JEROME BERRYMAN • SACRED SPACE •  
WONDERING • TEACHER BURNOUT • CRYSTAL CASTLE

I was seven years old. The knock came at the back door, as it came most days, and when my mother answered it a voice could be heard, asking the same question it always asked: 'Can Susan and Peter come out to play?' I remember it so well, one memory encapsulating so many. We would scramble for our shoes, my little brother and I, and go joyfully out to join the group of children from neighbouring houses and play. We 'played out' whatever the season, whatever the weather, until it was dark and time for tea. At weekends this play time was sometimes extended to long days out – often with older children leading and safeguarding the group to more adventurous places further afield. Always coming home by dark.

We had no plan. Play simply evolved. Sometimes we just 'hung' around. We had a jennel between the houses, a covered passageway, and rainy days saw us in there just watching. Hot days I remember the smell of melting tarmac on the pavements and on the 'blue hill' as we called it – in adult view just a short, wide walkway up to the main road and church opposite our house. The 'big tree' marked a distance along our play road where we would try riding our bikes or just run to with each other. I cannot now remember what we played at or with but we were not bored. We learned about each other and tried out the world; we felt the sunshine, rain, wind and snow; we lived the seasons and time seemed timeless.

When groups of adults are asked to describe a really happy childhood memory, even perhaps out of an unhappy past – be it a favourite toy or game, a place, a time, a special person – and then to find words that describe how they felt in those times, it brings out words like 'happy, free, full of wonder, timeless, loved, carefree, safe ...'. With each shared memory and these words we are transported back out of adulthood, to remember what it was like to be a child and to play. Might this be spirituality – that hard-to-capture, indescribable thing? I am going to propose that these words that expressed how we felt and what we were experiencing back then, might also describe 'spirituality' – that 'awareness of the sacred quality to life experiences'<sup>1</sup> both good and bad. If so then children, far from being the empty vessels we might have thought them to be and needing to be filled up with religious knowledge and practice to become spiritual, are in fact *innately* spiritual from the beginning. Might we not have been aware back then of our spirituality and 'God' but just simply lacking the words or knowledge to give meaning to it or even to want or need to?

Jesus said something too about needing to *become* like a child to enter the kingdom of heaven. Does this mean that perhaps we were in touch with our

spirituality then in a way that has been lost, or just crushed a little, in the growing up and cares of adulthood? Can children actually bring *us* something – do we need to learn how to play again? More importantly, if children are innately spiritual we need to consider what they really need from adults; what will nurture and not crush this ‘knowing’ of God; what will give them the language and tools they need to give meaning to it and help it to grow and deepen?

So I come to the essence of this article, something called ‘Godly Play’, which you may or may not already be familiar with, but where for me a true understanding of holiness and Scripture finally began.

Godly Play itself started in 1960, some 56 years ago now when a man, Jerome Berryman, was in his middle year at Princeton Theological Seminary and wondered about the lack of any real training in children’s spirituality. This wondering began for him a journey that led him to study in Europe the methods of the great educationalist Maria Montessori and to spend time with Sofia Cavalletti and her ‘Catechesis of the Good Shepherd’. Over the subsequent 20 or so years he and his wife began to explore what children really *needed*. They developed a different way of being with children, more spiritual guides than teachers, with mutual blessing – and a different way of sharing Scripture that helped children become familiar with the language of the Christian people, people of God. The Montessori training influenced the visual storytelling, the natural materials used for the story pieces, the open wondering and the free response time.

Its resultant name ‘Godly Play’ gives a clue to perhaps its most important element – play. Play and story are the main ways children learn. Perhaps it might be useful then to pause and consider what we mean by *play*. For most of us it immediately signals something for younger children – something we could still enjoy but which for adults has been labelled as ‘time wasting’ and therefore only to be indulged in with guilt. Yet Stuart Brown in his book about play states that his research has found that

remembering what play is all about and making it part of our daily lives are probably the most important factors in being a fulfilled human being. The ability to play is critical not only to being happy, but also to sustaining social relationships and being a creative, innovative person.<sup>2</sup>

Play, then, is proposed as not *just* being about learning but is also essential for all ages.

I am talking here of course about the play we knew as children, and it has certain distinguishing characteristics. Free play cannot be forced – you can only invite people to play and allow them to come willingly or not. It has no predetermined aim or purpose. It is done just for the sheer pleasure of doing it – like skimming stones across a pond. Such play can go in any direction; it is fun and enjoyable and may even be subversive! Jerome Berryman once said that a Godly Play room should be full of laughter. It can be creative and in being so may lead to problem-solving. It allows you to ‘try on’ other roles and explore them. It is the same for both adults and children – it may just take different forms and directions. So we come back to Godly Play – developed with children but actually for all ages and run in exactly the same way whatever the group of people gathered together. There may be some adjustments needed to cater for those of greater age or limited abilities or dementia – but the time together holds the same essential elements and play is at the centre of it.

The *Godly* part? At its simplest it is an invitation – an invitation from God. ‘Do you want to come and play and spend time with me and see where it leads? Come – just as you are.’

I have been accepting this invitation and sharing with children and adults in many different situations these last ten years – taking off my shoes instead of putting them on, but going increasingly as joyfully in to play as I did once go joyfully out. Before this I was like the prodigal son who has been welcomed home and forgiven but still hangs around down the road unable to believe it is really true. No matter how much I longed to go in and enjoy the party I just never could. I still felt I needed to earn my place by working in the fields. I didn’t really *know* the Father. Thankfully he knew me and ten years ago he called me in from the fields and began to show me just how very much he really loved me.

Our children were grown, I was teaching part time in a private school and we were in an era in our church of very few children and even fewer adults willing to teach them. I remember praying for direction. I loved teaching but not the paraphernalia that went with it, whether as a lecturer or with primary children. I had done both! I loved children but we Sunday school leaders were burned out and despite great programme materials our enthusiasm was gone. Even our own four children left church as soon as they were allowed to choose at age 14 and, apart from links in the youth group, they have never been back. I

was very, very low. Then someone told me about Godly Play. Even as they briefly described it I was tingling, sensing something special. Understanding only the minimal basics, I rushed to try it with a group of Year 4 girls in their Religious Education lesson. They intuitively responded to it and did not even want to leave when the dinner bell went – something previously unheard of, particularly in RE! Thus my own journey with this Godly Play began. It has led me to where I am now as a trainer with Godly Play UK, working in a different way with children in schools and training teachers in how we might best nurture children's spirituality. I have a fully equipped Montessori Godly Play room, created out of a broken-down outside wooden classroom behind our church. Children come there, and adults come too.

In the beginning I thought I was embarking upon something new for the children but I had no idea how very much it was also meant for me. I can only describe the journey I now find myself on as like walking inside Dr Who's Tardis – the further you walk in, the bigger and better and more awe-inspiring it gets, and I am more and more silenced by it. St Teresa of Avila described it much more profoundly than I ever could in her book *The Interior Castle*. She wrote (and I quote Jerome Berryman's story script) that 'coming closer to God is like entering a huge castle made out of very clear crystal in which there are many rooms. Each room has an inner door, which opens to the next room, until you come to the centre of the castle. It is so light there that all you can see is God.'<sup>3</sup>

But what is Godly Play? It might be helpful at this point to try to describe what a Godly Play session might be like if you visited this room yourself, particularly if you have never heard of it before. Our outside room is set beside a wood and behind our village church. You enter via a little porch tacked on to it and a 'doorkeeper' is waiting there to greet you and welcome you warmly. You are invited to take off your shoes if you would like to and given the chance to get ready to go in – to children I describe it as 'finding the quiet place inside yourselves'. It's a letting go of all that is running around in your mind, a readying to be open to this time that is just for you. When you are asked if you are ready to go in it's a true invitation – you may not feel ready. You may want to sit inside the door and see first. Children seem to understand quite intuitively what you mean. One nine-year-old boy at a school I visited, where no one had experienced Godly Play before, refused to come and join in our circle despite the best efforts of his exasperated teacher at the door. When I asked him what was wrong for him, he explained that he still felt 'jumpy' inside and wasn't ready. He sat quietly by the doorkeeper for a while then later came and joined us in the circle. He had known exactly what getting ready meant.

As you enter the room you see a circle of cushions on the floor ahead of you, or small chairs if you prefer, and a 'storyteller' – sitting ready to welcome you and help you find the place most comfortable for you. There are shelves all around the room to waist height, with a lower focal shelf directly behind the storyteller. They are full of stories in open baskets, although some are intriguingly in gold closed boxes on a shelf of their own. All the materials in the room are made of wood and natural products, beautiful to touch and handle. The space feels warm and inviting. It evokes messages of care, order, accessibility, mystery ... holiness?

It soon becomes apparent looking at the focal shelf that this is a Christ-centred room. In the middle of this shelf is *The Holy Family* story, seemingly a Nativity group but with an additional simple wooden figure with outstretched arms representing the risen Jesus, and a Christ child with open arms in the manger. To the left of this group is a white circle of felt with a candle on it, Jesus the Light of the World, and to the right a green circle with sheep in a fold and a figure of a shepherd carrying a sheep on his shoulders, Jesus the Good Shepherd. To the left of the focal shelves are the Christmas shelves; to the right are the Easter shelves.

Around the rest of the room the tops of the shelves carry the big stories about the People of God in a very loose timeline: beginning on your left from *Creation*, through *The Flood and the Ark*, the beginnings of *The Great Family*, *The Exodus*, *The Ten Best Ways*, *The Ark and the Tent*, *The Ark and the Temple*, and finishing with *The Exile and Return*, just before the Christmas shelves and the Advent materials. On the Easter shelves, *The Faces of Easter* tells the story through the weeks of Lent of Jesus' journey from his birth to his death and resurrection. Beyond, on your right, comes *Jesus and the Twelve*, then through others to *The Mystery of Pentecost* and *Paul's Discovery*. There are twelve *Saints* stories and then finally those six gold boxes containing *The Parables*. On lower shelves are more baskets of stories telling of individual lives that fit into the 'big picture' ones: liturgical action stories, extension materials, and books.

Across the back of the room are shelves filled with as many art, craft and construction materials as can be accommodated, with trays, boards and mats to put them on – all in open pots and containers and inviting use. There is not a broken felt pen or piece of old crayon in sight. Finally come the shelves containing cleaning implements to help clear up at the end of a session.

I have described all this to give a feel of how Scripture is presented in this place. It is there laid out around you whenever you visit. You can only briefly take it in

at first but you will be told that everything in the room is for you to touch and work with whenever you need to. Not everyone will have such a room, and Godly Play at its very simplest needs only a story, a storyteller, a warm welcome and a circle of people to happen, with perhaps some simple response materials. A sacred space has come into being. However, as story materials are built up they take their same places around the circle so they can always be found in the same places to work with. Sitting there, surrounded each time by these well-known stories, hearing them told and learning the language that links them all together, the whole great plan of love and redemption flows as one coherent picture that can be understood by the very youngest and simplest and oldest alike. The Greatest Story is laid out in a way that all can see and access.

After building the circle a little more, perhaps with name sharing, the storyteller collects a story from the shelves, inviting everyone to watch where it comes from in case you need it later. The story is then told on the floor, a visual presentation and in the oral tradition, a mutual entering in and a sharing of this story together. At the end the storyteller sits back and a time of wondering together about it begins. There are wondering questions, but there is no coercion, no eye contact invitation to speak, and silence does not have to be filled. All contributions are equally valued and reflected back, even the awkward ones! There are no right or wrong answers, simply an open invitation. There is space and time – time to be, time to be you. It is here, surrounded by the whole, hearing a part, and in the time and space given, that spiritual nurture happens and God can speak. There is no ‘teaching point’ to distract from what has spoken to you and no teacher to tell you what to think. Wondering can be quiet and reflective, even silent at times, but it can equally become more noisy, fun and even argumentative as different thoughts are shared. It can go in any direction – but then it is play.

Once the story has been packed away and returned to its place it is explained that there is now a time just for you to use however you need to. You can sit and reflect, read, write, take down a story and work with it (there is an enticing desert bag of sand for some of the stories) or choose a tray and fill it with creative things – no one is going to come and watch you and there is no show and tell at the end. Each of you is asked in turn if you know what you want to do but with no pressure and the doorkeeper is there to help. The storyteller stays in the circle and response begins. This work is more about process than product and if work is brought by children to show, the responses to it are interested open ones. They soon realise that this is a place where they can truly enter into play – and themselves.



Time calls a gentle halt, you can store your work for another time if you are coming back, and everyone puts back what has been taken out and clears away his or her own things.

The session ends in the circle again with the sharing of a simple 'feast' together. The doorkeeper directs as napkins, pieces of fruit or a biscuit and a simple drink are served to one another. The Christ candle might be brought to the circle and lit and the invitation is given for anyone to pray. It may be simple thanks or it may turn into a prayer time. Then the feast is shared and it is a time of news sharing and talking together about anything that we want to. The time ends with a blessing and thank you for coming. You leave, put on your shoes and go out into the world again.

I don't burn out in this place. I don't teach the children or try to make them spiritual – we learn from each other and the only Teacher in the room. This space, wherever it is or whatever group I share it with, has become my crystal castle, and I am going through the rooms towards that centre where there is only the light. Some of the children I have on Sundays have been with me from the beginning and are just turning into teenagers, and they keep coming; some older ones stayed on to help as they became adults, so I guess it is the same for them. We are led deeper and deeper in as we 'waste time' with God, and Scripture has become the language and the song that gives the meaning to it all.

One of the holiest times I have ever experienced was recently in that room with just three children aged five, seven and nine. The youngest, Poppy, had never been there before. It grew from our lying around wondering about *The Good Shepherd* parable. It ended with nearly every story in the room having been brought into the middle to create a picture of heaven that we will none of us ever forget. It suddenly made sense that this is what all these stories were really about. Poppy was then seen to be setting out a group of the little wooden figures of the People of God. She said they were all on a journey to this beautiful place. None of us wanted to leave and we couldn't put it away. I guess we all lost some of our fears about death that day and gained a vision of the kingdom – it felt a very holy place and we all hugged each other as we left. I can still feel moved to tears at the memory of it.

Godly Play is at its simplest an invitation but it isn't a new one. The same invitation is there for all in Revelation: 'Behold, I stand at the door and knock' (Revelation 3:20, AV).



## Notes

1. Rebecca Nye, *Children's Spirituality: What It Is and Why It Matters*, London: Church House Publishing, 2009. One of three proposed definitions of children's spirituality.
2. Stuart Brown, *Play*, New York: Avery, 2009, Chapter One, 'The Promise of Play'.
3. Jerome W. Berryman, 2008, *The Complete Guide to Godly Play, Volume 7*, Denver, CO: Morehouse Education Resources, 2008. From the story script for Teresa of Avila saint's story.

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