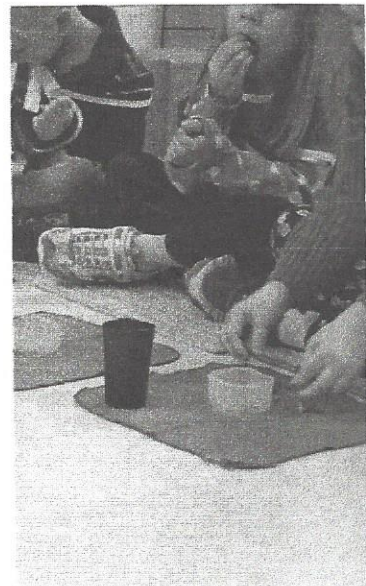


The Spirituality of the Child

The subject of children's spirituality and a related theology of childhood is a growing realm in the Christian community. Even though it has been developing since the time of Christ, attention to children's spirituality has had periods of dormancy in history. The attention to children's spirituality is growing in academic thought and practice. Jerome Berryman and his work of Godly Play has been pioneering this work. Godly Play seeks to nurture the deepest part of children's hearts and help them become aware of the mystery of God's presence in their life. This happens many ways, but some of the key themes you will find in Godly Play are:

- Children have equal access to relationship with God. Their faith is not molded or formed by parents or other adults, but by God. This gift of faith is nurtured by the caring adults in their lives throughout a lifetime of meaningful interaction.
- Nurturing faith involves sharing and passing along a "religious language." This language helps connect the community as the body of Christ AND helps one make meaning of the "existential limits" of being human.
- Learning religious language happens best in multi-sensory process of discovery. The lessons of Godly Play reflect the mystery of our relationship with God—and therefore are not the same as teaching math, science or history.
- All children are especially attuned to story and play. (Play is related to love, flow and contemplation in that it is pleasurable, done for its own sake, is absorbing and must be voluntary)
- When the child's community is modeled on a deep respect for all children, it becomes a learning culture of ethics and peace.
- Godly Play is centered around the mystery and celebration of the Christ who welcomes children and invites us to do likewise to know God and enter into God's Kingdom.



SPIRIT

What do children need?

SPACE *Physical, emotional, auditory* space and boundaries help children distinguish how they are valued and model how they will value others.

PROCESS, not product, engages us in the life-long journey of living as a *spirited* human being. When process is valued, children learn to find a deep satisfaction in the activity of engagement instead of making something to please others.

IMAGINATION Seeking to know God, by its very nature is an imaginative act. God is not a formula already solved by others to memorize, but a unfurling riddle to be discovered by each person who draws a breath.

RELATIONSHIP, or our relativity to one another is a cornerstone of religious language and the blessing of the space between everyone regardless of age, ability, appearance...we exist in a communion of saints.

INTIMACY is the sense of "coming closer" to things. It is about the cathedral bringing the sky closer or the hole in the sand bringing the ocean to a manageable scale. It is not about "power-over" but "vulnerability-with."

TRUST is comfortable with knowing and not-knowing. We seek to find greater ways to trust God, trust the child, and trust in our faith.

123 Getting Started

Many adults today call themselves “spiritual,” but they quickly assure themselves and others that this does not mean that they are “religious.” Why not? What makes organized religion seem so irrelevant to their spiritual quest?

If we listen carefully to children and/or our own memories of childhood, we may faintly hear the beginning of an answer. The distinction is implicit in childhood. Some children already sense a difference between a nameless Power that they experience and the “Church God.”

This book is the result of a lifetime of being puzzled by the distinction between God and the Church God. It is an effort to see if more can be done during childhood to bring the language and practice of the church together with the child’s experience of the living God and the adult’s quest to recover that kind of knowledge in an adult but childlike way.

God and the “Church God”

The distinction between God and the Church God became clear when I read Edward Robinson’s *Original Vision*. It was published in 1977 by what was then called The Religious Experience Research Unit at Manchester College, Oxford. Sir Alistair Hardy, a distinguished English biologist, had asked people to write to the Unit if they had “felt that their lives had in any way been affected by some power beyond themselves.” Some 15 percent of the 4,000 first responses were about experiences going back, sometimes over fifty years, to things that had happened during childhood.

One of the chapters in *The Original Vision* was called "Church God." It was a study of the responses having to do with the experience of God, or the lack of that experience, in churches. Both positive and negative experiences were included. The distinction, however, was much broader than that one chapter. It ran through all the accounts, because many more experiences were located outside of church than within its language and practice.

In my own life I remember being about five years old and staying with my grandmother. I cried out in the night, "I don't want to die!" Her presence in the dark helped put me in touch with a larger presence, the Power without a name, that enabled me to relax and go to sleep.

About the same time, I came home from Sunday school and proudly announced that "He eats carrots for me." I vaguely understood this was something about Jesus. I hated carrots and Jesus did hard things for people. Then I was told that I had made a mistake. The sentence I was supposed to have memorized was, "He careth for me." That was not understandable or impressive, so I lost interest.

One Easter, probably when I was in the first grade, I remember standing in the family garden with aunts, uncles, cousins, Grandmother, Mom, Dad, and some friends. We were looking at little rows of green sprouts coming up through the warming Kansas soil. I can still smell the earth, feel the stirring of warm spring winds, see the new growth, and feel the family around me. An intuition, barely formed in words, rooted itself in my memory. This awareness was something like what we had been talking and singing about in church that morning. I never told anyone about this until now. There never seemed to be the right time or place to put it into words.

When I was in the fourth grade, something happened that kept the door open for a connection between the nameless Power and the Church God. Two friends and I were very disruptive in the choir during church. The choirmaster brought the choir back after church and sat us all down.

"You boys don't have any right to destroy this. I come here to find God in the scriptures and in the singing. Your noise and disrespect stopped me from doing that this morning. You owe me and all of us an apology."

I am not sure about the words, but I can still see the traces of tears on the choirmaster's cheeks. I had thought that church didn't really matter to anyone. It seemed to be something that people just did. Now I was not so sure. The door remained open, and it still does.

The Church God is one we are told about. We are told that this God is powerful. We are told how to think and feel about this God. We are given a "mask of God" to know.

God's mask is important. We can be overwhelmed by the limitlessness of God. On the other hand, when God is given a mask to "protect" children we make a mistake. The children already know the terror in the night and joy beyond words. They cry out already to the God who has no name. A mask held in place by being polite, being quiet,

never asking questions, and always saying the right words can block the experience of God.

This book is about a way that children can learn the art of how to use religious language to know God and find direction in their lives while they are still young. This book is about a possible answer to the question: "How do we teach children that God and the Church God can be the same?"

Godly Play: A Way of Religious Education

My 1991 book *Godly Play* provided an introduction to the approach to religious education that I like to use with children (and adults). I first began to work on this with full awareness and intention in 1972 when I graduated from the Center for Advanced Montessori Studies in Bergamo, Italy. I was already trained in theology and law by that time.

The goal of Godly Play is to teach children the art of using the language of the Christian tradition to encounter God and find direction for their lives. There are six objectives that help to meet that goal.

1. To model how to wonder in religious education, so children can "enter" religious language rather than merely repeating it or talking about it.
2. To show children how to create meaning with the language of the Christian tradition and how this can involve them in the experience of the Creator.
3. To show children how to choose their own work, so they can confront their own existential limits and depth issues rather than work on other kinds of problems dictated by others, including adults.
4. To organize the educational time to follow the pattern of worship that the Christian tradition has found to be the best way to be with God in community.
5. To show children how to work together as a community by supporting and respecting each other and one another's quest.
6. To organize the educational space so that the whole system of Christian language is present in the room, so children can literally walk into that language domain when they enter the room and can begin to make connections among its various parts as they work with the lesson of the day and their responses in art or other lessons.

The activity of the teachers might be organized around two triangles formed from these objectives. One triangle is the "spoken lesson" and the other one is the "unspoken lesson." The spoken lesson involves the storyteller in wonder, the creative process, and the willingness to allow his or her existential limits into consciousness. Existential limits