

**The Spoken Quality of Godly Play**  
**Jerome W. Berryman**  
**London, 8<sup>th</sup> Godly Play Lecture, April 11, 2015**

Let's begin by noticing what happens to the words I speak, as soon as they are spoken. Where do they go?

What is the context for the words? We need some hooks to hang them on, don't we? Is the term "context" the right word? There is no text to be observed. It is the speaker who provides the environment for what the words say.

You have been evaluating me as I invited you to participate in what I am saying. You are deciding whether to join in this language game on the basis of judgments about me based on nonverbal cues. In oral communication you watch, as you listen. All your senses are alert to the speaker as well as the words. How does the speaker signal what is intended? What genre do the words fall into? By what authority does the speaker, speak? Your intuition is busy, using shortcuts or heuristics as they are formally called, to see what weight to give the words I am speaking.

The experience of reading is quite different. Your judgment about the writer depends only on the eyes focusing on words. The context develops as the words march in lines across the surface of an electronic screen or paper --- as well as the surface of stone, papyrus, or parchment in ancient times. The words, blessedly, remain in place after being written. You can return to them when you please. They stay put, so you have more than your memory to rely on when you reflect on them.

In between the spoken word and the written text there is an intermediate kind of communication. Most people in Jesus' time preferred face-to-face communication. When messages were written and received, like the letters of Paul or the Gospel of Mark,

they were read out loud. People needed to hear the words, more than to see them. This was not just because literacy was infrequent. Even people who could read and write needed to evaluate the reader because that was how the environment for the reading was set, like in primary oral communication. This face-to-face preference played a role in establishing the authority of bishops by the laying on of hands. People needed a physical chain of trust and respect to provide a personal environment for what was said or read out loud.

Written communication is orderly and limited by the pages that bind it together. It can tolerate abstraction, because the words do not vanish in the wind. Oral communication involves storytelling. It is diffusive and multi-directional. Spoken words, flowing out of Jesus sayings and parables, including the experience of his parables of action, “preceded the gospel, entered into it, bypassed it, and continued long after its composition,” as Werner Kelber astutely observed.<sup>1</sup>

What I would like to say in this lecture is that Godly Play has helped restore the spoken nature of Jesus’ communication. This in turn has helped change the kind of consciousness children have when they “speak Christian” and has contributed to their ability to know the Parable-Maker in the parable.

When the parables shifted from spoken to written communication they lost some of their spontaneous and playful nature. Their ability to stimulate thinking declined, as they were turned into allegories and example stories by the authors of the gospels. When Jesus was present his demeanor provided the challenge to the imagination and the

---

<sup>1</sup> Werner H. Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul, and Q* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983) 184.

psychological support to “enter,” “receive,” or “be born” into the kingdom.<sup>2</sup> When he told parables it was more like scattering of seeds than constructing a narrative about his life, death, and resurrection. Jesus’ scattering of parables about the kingdom of God made his story parabolic. The one who told parables became a parable.<sup>3</sup>

The text does not say Jesus told parables playfully. Even if they said he was playful we might still be suspicious, not as historians but as players. Many people invite us to play with words, but their ability to play is missing. What we need to see if Jesus is playing is the nonverbal signal for play to be sure that the inviting words match their intent. This is because some people break trust and destroy the game. They use the language of play as a deception and manipulate trusting players for their own advantage. Unfortunately, the only way we can know for sure what Jesus intended was to know him. We need to know if we invited him to come play he would come. We will come back to this question later when we meet a group of children as they interpret “The Parable of the Leaven.”

We need to hear the sound of Jesus’ voice, see a twinkle in his eye, and absorb his gestures. Did he shrug his shoulders? Did he dance? Was there laughter? Did he weep? Even if he were misheard or what he said incorrectly recorded, even if his words were edited to fit the gospel writer’s views or the needs of their audience --- there is still, even after so many centuries, something inherently playful about parables, especially when we think about them in terms of their original telling rather than thinking about them as confined in the narrative of the gospels.

---

<sup>2</sup> The three verbs, which connect becoming like a child to the kingdom show some of the fluidity of the oral tradition and its shaping of the gospels. The gospel writers use the verbs “enter” (Matthew 18: 2), “receive” (Mark 10: 15; Luke 18: 17), and “born” (“from above” John 3: 3; “born of water and the Spirit” John 3: 6) to describe what the child shows about kingdom entry.

We will do three things to test these ideas. First, let's reconstruct a hearing "The Parable of the Leaven," as if we were living in the first century. Secondly, we need to say a few words about children and theological language. This will prepare us to take the third step, which is the major part of this lecture. The third step is to listen to and reflect on children interpreting "The Parable of the Leaven." We will ask how today's children used the parable to cope with the anxiety caused by their existential limits by meeting the Parable-Maker in the parable.

### **Reconstructing a Hearing of "The Parable of the Leaven"**

Let's pretend for a moment that we were present when Jesus told what we call "The Parable of the Leaven." Of course, it had no title then, which is important, because the title already begins to shape our interpretation. There was also no shelf of printed commentaries to frame our analysis of the text and no text. The parable was heard, not read, so there was only the presence of the Parable-Maker and the situation to provide the environment for interpreting its some twenty-five words. As soon as the words were spoken they disappeared in the wind except for what could be remembered, which was something like this in the English NRSV translation: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until the mixture was leavened (Matthew 13: 33)." This translation obscured the fact that in the Greek the woman "hid" the leaven in the mixture.

This translation also has nothing to say about how negatively "leaven" was thought about in Jesus' time. Until about 1800 the general connotation for "leaven" in English was negative, like in Jesus' time. This was true even though early Christian interpreters had given "leaven" a somewhat positive sense at least since Clement of

---

<sup>3</sup> Kelber, 220.

Alexandria in the second century.<sup>4</sup> Long before Clement or Jesus, however, “leaven” was considered a symbol for evil and corruption in the Near East. This made sense. In those days leaven was made from decaying, rotting bread that emits a fetid smell. It was not what we think of today as “sourdough starter,” which might be found fresh, dried, or powdered in boxes and bags.

The Jews specifically excluded leaven from offerings to God. “No grain offering that you bring to the Lord shall be made with leaven, for you must not turn any leaven or honey into smoke as an offering by fire to the Lord (Leviticus 2: 11).” Leaven was also forbidden for the Passover. “Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread; on the first day you shall remove leaven from your houses, for whoever eats leavened bread from the first day until the seventh day shall be cut off from Israel (Exodus 12: 15).”

In the New Testament the negative view of leaven continued. “Watch out, and beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees (Matthew 16: 6; Luke 12: 1).” Jesus was speaking in metaphor, but the disciples took him literally, so he challenged them, “How can you fail to perceive that I was not talking about bread? ... Then they understood that he had not told them to beware of the yeast of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees (Matthew 16: 11-12).”

Paul also used the term “leaven” in a metaphorical and negative way. “Your boasting is not a good thing. Do you not know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch

---

<sup>4</sup> Clement of Alexandria succeeded Pantaeus in 190 AD to lead the theological school of Alexandria. He was the teacher of Origen. In Alexandria there was an attempt to harmonize Christian theology with Greek philosophy. Alexandrian exegesis preferred mystical and allegorical approaches to scripture in contrast to the historical and literal view used in Antioch.

Clement interpreted the Parable of the Leaven to mean that the soul “is saved by obedience, through the spiritual power hidden in it by faith; or because the power of the word which is given to us, being strong and powerful, draws to itself secretly and invisibly everyone who receives it, and keeps it within itself, and brings his whole system into unity.” Quoted in Warren S. Kissinger, *The Parables of Jesus: A History of Interpretation and Bibliography* (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1979) 9-10.

of dough? Clean out the old yeast so that you may be a new batch, as you really are unleavened. For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed. Therefore, let us celebrate the festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth (I Corinthians 5:6-8). Paul apparently did not need to explain to *his* audience that he was speaking in metaphor.

Bernard Brandon Scott suggested that a modern aphorism closest to the ancient view of leaven is “One rotten apple spoils the barrel.”<sup>5</sup> There is, indeed, something inevitable and pervasively powerful about leaven. If you take a piece of unleavened bread, which is considered clean and pure, and store it in a damp, dark place it will become moldy. Putrefied bread will change the whole batch. All it takes is time.

If we had heard Jesus tell this parable for the first time we might have been puzzled. What did he intend by this stream of negative references about the positive kingdom? The leaven was not the only shock. He also made a woman the key person in his parable. Women, like leaven, swell up when they are pregnant. Once pregnancy begins it is usually inevitable until birth, which was messy, noisy, and painful. Women were also considered as negative symbols because of being unclean due to their monthly menses.

There was another question the first hearers of the parable might have asked. What did this woman do? She hid the leaven in the dough. Why didn't she knead the dough out in the open as the family made the bread together? It almost sounds like she was intent on secretly spoiling the lot. This would have been a disaster if the bread were intended for the Passover. All who ate the leavened bread would be cut off from Israel.

---

<sup>5</sup> Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989) 321-329.

Did Jesus intend to shake them up and get them thinking or would the shock stop thinking? Being among the first hearers of this parable would have been stimulating --- to say the least!

There is more. Those who first heard the parable would have understood immediately what scholars have discovered over the centuries by research. The “three measures” amounted to about fifty pounds of flour, which would make enough bread for about a hundred people! Some would have wondered why so much and others probably remembered “three measures of fine meal” Sarah used to make cakes for the three visitors who prophesied the birth of Isaac. She and Abraham laughed and named their child “Laughter” (Genesis 18: 6).<sup>6</sup> Was laughter implied in Jesus parable? Was he truly playing with words to give birth to new ideas about the kingdom?

It is possible that Jesus’ demeanor turned the parable’s string of negative images into something positive. His presence may have embodied the mysterious but positive and irresistible force of the kingdom, but could he have turned the cultural prejudice against leaven into something positive with a smile and a shrug of the shoulders? We don’t know.

What we do know is that Jesus hid his parable about leaven in the unformed and invisible dough of the kingdom to do its fermenting work --- perhaps, taking centuries. He also hid powerful meaning in the child, who like the leaven, could show us how to enter, receive and be born into the kingdom!

### **A Few Words about Children and the Language of Theology**

---

<sup>6</sup> See also Judges 6: 19 and I Samuel 1:24, which were also celebrations.

Children are good at sensing God without words, because they have not built up layers of language over time. While adults need to dissolve these encrustations on the experience of God's presence children don't. They don't even trust language like adults do. While children still trust their senses and intuition more than words, adults sometimes confuse language with what it points to.

Still, children sometimes talk what we think of as "nonsense" about God. They stretch ordinary language as far as possible to catch some of what they have experienced. When adults do this we call it poetry. When children do this we think they have developmental problems.

The physician, and poet Henry Vaughn (1621-1695) wrote:

I saw eternity the other night  
Like a great Ring of pure and endless light,  
All calm, as it was bright,  
And round beneath it, Time in hours, days, years  
Driv'n by the spheres  
Like a vast shadow mov'd, In which the world  
And all her train were hurl'd.

Vaughn stretched language thin, to the edge of its intelligibility, so the immensity of God's presence could seep through the thinness of the membrane. Vaughn also subverted language to speak of God. He spoke of "dazzling darkness" and other such nonsense. Such awkwardness challenges ordinary logic to frustrate our language habits and leave gaps for God to shine through:

There is in God (some say)  
A deep, but dazzling darkness; As men here  
Say it is late and dusky, because they  
See not all clear  
O for that night! Where I in him  
Might live invisible and dim.



People, including children, stretch and subvert the normal use of language to talk about God because they understand that when we turn God into a person, place, or thing, like an average noun, we block the relationship. When we turn God's ineffable presence into an object, among other objects, rather than receiving it as it is, we obscure God's presence. We sometimes grow lazy when we use theological language and talk like we can get outside of our relationship with God and see the Creator from the "outside," like a table, as we walk around it. This is impossible because God comes to meet us from beyond, beside, *and* within --- all at once, all the time. Knowing God can only take place *within* the classical relationship with the Holy Trinity, because there is no place to stand outside of it to know God.

Young children don't make the adult mistake of misplaced concreteness (reification) when they talk about God, because they can't. They have not yet fully objectified the world with language, so they can't talk *about* God until adults teach them how, even with the best of intentions. Instead children participate silently in their open awareness of God, absorbing God's presence with greater power than most adults can. They are mystical theologians who need how to continue using their bodies to know God. Their natural ability to contemplate and wonder needs to be kept alive as their reason and ability "to speak science" develops.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> The knowing of God by contemplative silence has a long history among Christians. It was in the air during Jesus' lifetime. Philo of Alexandria (20 BCE – 40 CE), an older contemporary of Jesus, was influenced by Greek philosophy as well as his Jewish heritage in which silent knowing had been practiced since the sixth century before the Christian era. The Jews hid God's name behind the letters JHWH and said "Lord" instead of the name of the Holy One to protect the expansiveness of the experience of the Divine that had made Moses' face glow. The Jews had already discovered with difficulty that the experience of God's silence did not necessarily mean the misery of God's withdrawal. By the time of Philo and Jesus a blend of Jewish thought with the philosophical speculation of the Greeks about the *Logos* combined to create a mystical theology that would influence Christians and Jews and then after the seventh century Muslim mystics.

## Out of the Mouths of Children

But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the amazing things that he did, and heard the children crying out in the temple, “Hosanna to the Son of David,” they became angry and said to him, “Do you hear what these are saying?” Jesus said to them, “Yes; have you never read,

‘Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies  
You have prepared praise for yourself.’” (Matthew 21:15-16)

What if we could hear the children “crying out” in the temple today? What if we could reduce the inequality of power between children and adults, so that children could speak without having their voices inhibited or distorted to meet adult needs? What if children could learn how to “speak Christian” fluently so they could express *their own wonder and creativity* in an appropriate way, like the children in the temple did, when they called Jesus the “Son of David.” Those children knew what to chant, because they had a sense of Jesus’ presence and the kind of language to articulate what they knew. What if we could actually hear children today speak about the kingdom by interpreting one of the Matthew’s kingdom parables? I think there is a way to do that and I would like to describe it.

The theological conversations that follow took place in 1995, using an abbreviated version of Godly Play.<sup>8</sup> The study involved 216 children, who were 5-12 years of age, at an Episcopal Day School in suburban Houston. During the study I did parables with each

---

Diarmaid MacCulloch suggested that Philo discovered that both silence and speech have their own virtue when communicating *with* and *about* the Divine. “Reason might recognize that, in some circumstances where it would be possible to speak, that moment was nevertheless not appropriate.” (Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Silence*, 27-28). The Jewish Sabbath developed in part as a weekly observance of silence. They expected that at the end of time ultimate silence would return. In the meantime we usually babble mindlessly like Jesus’ disciples, arguing on the way to Capernaum, and those who, perhaps, thousands of years before Christ tried to build the Tower of Babel “with its top in the heavens,” to become equal to God through a misuse of theological language (Genesis 11: 1-9).

<sup>8</sup> Jerome W. Berryman, *Teaching Godly Play: How To Mentor the Spiritual Development of Children* (Denver, CO: Morehouse Education Resources, 2009) 129-140. The eight volumes of *The Complete Guide To Godly Play* (Denver, CO: Morehouse Education Resources 2002-2012), describe the spiral curriculum, including an overview of the foundational literature for Godly Play as well as a detailed overview of the spiral.

class in the school on a weekly basis. These groups averaged 16.9 children. I was the school chaplain.

Six parables were used in the whole study,<sup>9</sup> but what follows involves only the shortest, “The Leaven,”<sup>10</sup> a parable in Matthew’s collection of kingdom parables. Let’s begin by imagining a group of about 16 children moving into the chapel of the school from their classes and forming a circle on the floor.

### **The Conversation Begins: Wondering about the Basic Metaphor**

When the children were settled in the circle, I brought out a gold box with the artifacts for the parable inside and placed it in the middle of the group. This made the parable the common property of everyone. We began by wondering about parables in general by talking about the golden box.

To invite the children to begin wondering about parables I said such things as, “Look, the box is the color gold. There must be something very important inside. It looks like a present. Parables are gifts. They were given to you before you were born. Oh, there’s a lid. I wonder what could be inside.”

An eight year old responded by saying, “Well, when you said, before we even opened the box, if we try, maybe it will be open, but it’s just closed right now. Well, that reminds me of the time where the classroom door was closed and everybody was sitting out there for about fifteen minutes. Finally, someone tried the doorknob and it opened.”

---

<sup>9</sup> This presentation of “The Parable of the Leaven (Matthew 13:33; Luke 13: 20-21)” was made to the boys and girls, who met weekly during the school year for 30 minutes. A total of 89 parable sessions were involved in the whole study, which resulted in about 44 hours and 30 minutes of audio recordings, which were transcribed for study. The space was in the chapel was not a classical Godly Play room, but this awkward setting showed the flexibility of the approach.

<sup>10</sup> More information about the presentation of the Parable of the Leaven may be found in Volume 3 of *The Complete Guide To Godly Play* (Berryman 2002, 109-114). This Volume includes a discussion about the

“It’s like you have to find your own way in,” another child added.

I took the felt cloth (the “underlay”) from the box and smoothed it out on the floor. “I wonder what this could *really* be?” The underlay for The Leaven is a tan, curved triangle about three feet by three feet. It helps children begin “to enter” the key metaphor of the parable.<sup>11</sup> The careful, quiet smoothing out of the underlay had a calming effect on the group and invested the parable with my love and respect. The children leaned in.

A group of five-year-olds said the underlay looked like a “golden pot” and “a triangle with God coming out of it.” If you were to read the whole transcript you might chuckle at some of the responses and dismiss them as uninteresting or unprofitable to reflect on, but I took them all very seriously to show the children that they were in a safe place and that everything they said would be taken seriously, even their silliest and most obstreperous comments. As they become more trusting and confident, the silliness calmed down, but the divergent thinking expanded and grew more playfully serious. This showed that the creative process and their existential issues had been engaged. The laughter of delight that erupted from time to time showed that they were beginning to make important discoveries.<sup>12</sup>

---

general approach to parables in Godly Play and includes the lessons that synthesize all of Jesus’ parables in the New Testament (Berryman 2002, 77-152).

<sup>11</sup> The inspiration for language about “being in parables” comes from Dominic Crossan’s, *In Parables: the Challenge of the Historical Jesus* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press, 1992). This book was originally published 1973 by Harper & Row and was part of a line of books that began with *Dark Interval* and included *Cliffs of Fall* and *Finding Is the First Act*, which were influential for the development of Godly Play’s approach to Jesus’ parables.

<sup>12</sup> Jerome W. Berryman, “Laughter, Power, and Motivation in Religious Education” in *Religious Education*, Vol. 93, No. 3 (Summer, 1998), pp. 358-378. This article may also be found in Jerome W. Berryman, edited by Brendan Hyde, *The Search for a Theology of Childhood: Essays by Jerome W. Berryman from 1978-2009* (Ballarat VIC, Australia: Mondotti Press (An Imprint of Connor Court Publishing, 2013) 207-230.

The typists who made the transcripts of these theological conversations all commented on how much laughter there was in the tape recordings. It was infectious. They said they couldn't help but laugh out loud, as they typed. Just before the children tired of wondering about the underlay the parable itself was presented.

### **The Presentation of the Parable**

I slowly took the "pieces" of the parable out of the gold box and placed them mindfully on the underlay. The woman and a table for mixing the dough were put in the center. As the parable was told, three measures of flour were placed on the table. A little golden triangle, symbolizing the leaven, was taken out of its mysterious, ornamented container and "hid" it in the mixture.

When the children asked what the leaven, represented by the triangle, was I responded by asking them what *they* thought. I asked, "I know it's a little, golden triangle, but what could that *really* be?" The children bubbled over with ideas going in all directions without a consensus, so when the energy died down I said, "It's what makes the mixture swell up and get big, but that's not all --- is it." This neither interpreted the leaven nor went outside the parable's metaphor to "explain" it.<sup>13</sup> The door was left open for the children to continue making more discoveries about it and its relation to the parable.

---

<sup>13</sup> Discussing things such as things as baking bread or buying leaven in a store distracts the children from the core of the parable. This also injects the language of history or science into the parabolic language and makes it harder for the children to be "in parables."

There are some practical matters about child development that the experienced storyteller listens for to prevent misunderstandings. Children in early or middle childhood might mistake the term "leaven" for "eleven" or "flour" for "flower." With older children there are more complex questions one needs to be sensitive to. Why was this about a women? How many parables did Jesus tell about women? Why was the leaven "hidden" in the mixture? What does "leavening all over" really mean? All ages of children seem to enjoy the sound of saying "kingdom of heaven" and "leaven" as they play with their connotations.

The Godly Play curriculum for the parables includes all of them. Six guiding parables are in gold boxes and involve all ages of children by using all their senses. As children grow older they begin to become interested in a more abstract set of materials designed primarily for late childhood. They reflect on all the parables as a whole, which are printed on gold cards. There is also a set of question cards to guide their play.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Third Step in the Conversation: Wondering Together about the Parable**

When the children were ready, I slowly told the parable, dwelling in each word. When I finished, I sat back, took a deep breath, and invited the children to wonder together about what the parable's "pieces" could *really* be --- the woman, the table, the three measures of flour, the mixture, and the leaven.

A ten-year-old wondered, "So maybe the big thing (the underlay) is the leaven." Another child said, pointing to the underlay, "Maybe that's a giant leaven and it gets stuck in the bread and the woman gets stuck in the leaven, and that means the woman gets stuck in the bread. And they cook it in this giant oven and the whole kingdom of heaven is able to eat it." She continued, "The whole people in the kingdom of heaven eat it all. Except the thing is...there's only some crumbs ...like candles on earth, so they all drop 'em down..."

---

<sup>14</sup> Older children, who are not trying to avoid sensorial involvement, are invited to work with a complete set of Jesus' parables printed on gold cards. The gold cards are kept in a big basket sitting on the parable shelves below the six gold boxes. When the basket is brought to the circle to present the parable cards, the cards are scattered from the basket inside the circle, like the Sower scattering seeds from "The Parable of the Sower."

Another set of cards is then presented then to the children to guide their use of the parable cards. These cards are also gold, but they have questions printed on them. How many parables are in the Gospel of John? What is the longest parable? What is the shortest? What do the parables make when they are all together? Do they fit together like a puzzle? The goal is for the older children to understand in a practical way who the genre of parables functions as a whole by thinking about them in a more abstract way. This knowing of the mind by reason only makes significant meaning for children if they are well grounded in the parables by their knowing of the body by the senses and their knowing of the spirit by contemplation.

“How big is it gonna get,” another child asked.

A third child responded, “Too big.”

I reflected the conversation back to the children, “So the kingdom of heaven is ... too big?” They continued, “Yeah, ‘cause if you have all those people’s souls up there, they’ve gotta have a lot of room. More people are growing and have more space.”

Enthusiasm began to build. Another child said, “Maybe once every year God has someone make a leaven and maybe the leaven somehow has some kind of magical thing in it, like ... the leaven. (The child pointed at the little golden triangle on the underlay.) Yeah, sort of... like power. Has power in it, something magical, some kind of power...”

More children joined in. “Maybe the leaven is the people and it’s like God puts all the people in the bread and it rises and rises and rises.” Someone else said, “The leaven is the people and makes heaven rise and rise.” Another child chimed in, “It could be something that has, like loaves of bread that are really, really big. But they’re hollow. And so maybe they’re hollow inside, but ...keeps growing ‘cause the...” This child’s reasoning was stretched beyond the point it could be sustained.

I gently probed, “The bread is creation and the leaven is...?” There was a long pause. A child finally finished my sentence by saying, “Maybe Jesus’ body.” At first I discounted this. It sounded borrowed, a thoughtless cliché, but the child’s face was so full of delight and discovery that my skepticism collapsed. Whether the words were borrowed or freshly minted they had become the child’s own in that moment.

### **A Final Step To The Conversation: A Soft Closure**

A normal Godly Play session has five parts --- being welcomed and settled into the circle, offering the presentation and wondering about it, leaving the circle to make an art response, returning to the circle for the feast and prayers, and the going out from the

room with affirmation. I used an abbreviated version in the school setting because of time constraints. This abridgement left out the art response and feast, so after the wondering we went immediately to a soft closure and the formal good-by.

The reason for a “*soft closure*” is to help the children be aware that the process can begin again whenever they like. It also respects their desire to continue wondering in that moment. Finally, a soft closure recognizes the oddness of religious language, which Ian T. Ramsey identified in the 1950s. It includes a “discernment,” which is “not exhausted” by objects in space and time. There is always something more, something invisible that gives life “depth” when using this language, which is “odd” when compared to the language of science.

There is another important feature about this kind of language game. It requires committing to its appropriate use, “which is not bigotry or fanaticism” but merely following the rules of the game.<sup>15</sup> God’s presence cannot be discovered without assuming that it is there, because you need to know what you are looking for to find it. Like most games, the game of Christian language, needs to be shown to learn how to play it. Talking about it is not enough. As the children go out of the Godly Play room, you know when the game has been well played. The children continue wondering as they go out the door.

Once the children were gone, the room became quiet. This gives us time to reflect a bit on two details about what happened. What does it mean for the children to have used the parable to engage their existential limits to cope with anxiety? The second thing

---

<sup>15</sup> Ian T. Ramsey, *Religious Language: An Empirical Placing of Theological Phrases*, (London: SCM Press, 1957) 15, 47.



is to ask if the children met God in the parable and if so, how. We will turn to these matters in the next two sections.

### **Existential Limits and Existential Anxiety**

We need to discuss what is meant by “existential limits” and “existential anxiety” a bit before listening again to the children as they play deeply with “The Parable of the Leaven.” The talk about existential matters in Christian circles began with Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) and Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973) among. Kierkegaard wrote in *The Concept of Anxiety* that people who claim to never have known anxiety about existential matters may exist, but the reason they have no anxiety is because they are “very spiritless,” unless they have passed *through* “the school of possibility” to get to that state.<sup>16</sup> This is because there is no finite evasion that allows for escape from such concerns. Marcel reminded us in *Creative Fidelity* (1964) that there is no “tower” one can climb up to look over the existential boundary to see what is on “the other side.”<sup>17</sup> It is this blindness that causes our anxiety about life and death.

Children, of course, have never heard of Kierkegaard or Marcel and they would not be interested if they had. The same is true of the psychiatrist Irving Yalom (born 1931), who noticed four ultimate concerns continuously appearing in his clinical practice. They were death, aloneness, the need for meaning, and the threat of freedom. Yalom was impatient with and avoided the “impenetrable deep-sounding language” used by

---

<sup>16</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980) 157-158.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted and further discussed in Jerome W. Berryman, *The Spiritual Guidance of Children: Montessori, Godly Play, and the Future* (New York, NY: Morehouse Publishing, 2013) 109.

philosophers and he realized that everyone at some point has existential concerns, so he wanted to help.<sup>18</sup>

Mick Cooper surveyed the whole field of existential therapies in 2003 and located Yalom in a chapter called “The American Existential-Humanistic Approach: Overcoming a Resistance to Life.” He crisply defined Yalom’s work as primarily “a therapeutic approach informed by existential concerns.”<sup>19</sup> The center of his practice was classically psychiatric in orientation, but he was open to including existential concerns as part of his diagnosis and treatment. Yalom is now Professor Emeritus of Psychiatry at Stanford University School of Medicine, where he began teaching in 1963.

Both existential philosophy and existential therapy are foundational for Godly Play. The educational method came from Maria Montessori (1870-1952). Her method was combined with the ancient tradition of *lectio divina*, which involves using one’s senses, reason, and contemplative silence to dwell in scripture.<sup>20</sup>

Adults sometimes doubt that children have existential concerns. The chaplains and play therapists in Houston’s Texas Medical Center didn’t have to be convinced when I worked there from 1974-1984. They were the first to realize how Godly Play could help children deal with their anxiety about death, the threat of freedom, their fundamental

---

<sup>18</sup> Irving Yalom, *Existential Psychotherapy* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1980) 16.

<sup>19</sup> Mick Cooper, *Existential Therapies* (London: Sage Publications, 2003) 89.

<sup>20</sup> This kind of intensive reading was and is done out loud so that the words can be “chewed,” as the monks described the process. Four steps developed. They are reading, meditation on the text, prayer, and contemplation of God’s presence (*lectio, meditatio, oratio, contemplatio*). The tradition of formal reflection on the text goes back at least to Origin in the third century and was established in the monastic setting in the sixth century by St. Benedict. The explicit four-step process was developed by the Carthusian monk, Guigo II in the twelfth century.

aloneness, and the need for meaning.<sup>21</sup> Still, we are all anxious at some point, so what is the difference between ordinary and existential anxiety?

The poet, Christian Wiman, seriously ill with cancer, wrote in 2013 about two kinds of anxiety. He said there is “a distinction to be made between the anxiety of *daily* existence, which we talk about endlessly, and the anxiety of existence, which we rarely mention at all. The former fritters us into dithering distracted creatures. The latter attests to --- and, if attended to discloses --- our souls.”

Ordinary and existential anxiety may be different but they are also connected. Our trivial, frittering, daily anxieties stimulate the larger kind of anxiety generated by the limits to our being and knowing, which hovers in the background. When this is realized

---

<sup>21</sup> Our existential limits form a metaphorical “box” that “boxes us in.” There are four sides, each confronting us with a fence of paradoxes.

One of our limiting paradoxes is death. We are born to die, so we push ourselves to be active in order to defy death. Even though we feel more alive when we are active, we also must rest. Resting is the opposing term of the paradox. It scares us, because repose reminds us of death. This intimate danger causes us to become active again, only to rest once more. Existential anxiety comes from this continuing yes-no, off-on oscillation. Each paradox stimulates the other three.

A second limiting paradox is the threat of freedom. We are relatively free, but our wish to be grounded clashes with the groundlessness experienced in freedom. We move towards freedom until we experience its lack of form and then move away, seeking safety in human structures. These structures then close in on us and feel confining. Groundlessness becomes attractive once more, thus, forming another existential oscillation. We shuttle back and forth between a search for structure and freedom from it. This is how freedom becomes a paradoxical threat rather than the pure openness to choose that is prized in theory. Our freedom also includes our own death. There is no structure that can ultimately present that.

The third limit is found in the gap between us and what is not-us. Our fundamental aloneness is built into our existence. This conclusion is reasonable we realize that we cannot sustain life alone. Aloneness is self-conflicting even at the cellular level, but it is also psychologically, socially and spiritually paradoxical. We wish for contact, for protection, and to be part of a larger whole, but when we move towards inclusion, we recoil, because we don't want to be swallowed up by some larger system or person and disappear. This in turn drives us back to seek inclusion and the paradox lives on.

Finally, we are creatures who need meaningful certainty for safety and yet we are suspicious of it, because we know that we created it. If we are the fallible and changing source of meaning, then how can we count on the meaning we make to be certain? Despite this nagging doubt, we search for certainty, even absolute certainty, to escape the paradox of meaning, but such certainty is impossible. The flight toward certainty results in the flight away from it. At either extreme the creative process withers, so personal meaning dies and we enter into another paradoxical oscillation between the need for meaning and the mistrust of it.

and faced, then we can acquire a lightness, a rightness, and a meaning to our lives that is otherwise impossible. Wiman wrote, “So long as anxiety is merely something to be alleviated, it is not life, or we are not alive enough to experience it as such.”<sup>22</sup>

In the same year as Wiman’s book Scott Stossel examined relevant theories, salient therapies, and his personal anxiety-ridden life. He asked, “whether anxiety is a medical disease or a spiritual problem, a problem of the body or a problem of the mind.” He realized that such questions have a long history, dating “back to the clashes between Hippocrates and Plato and their followers,”<sup>23</sup> but he was not primarily interested in history. It was his own pain, like the pain of the poet Wiman that pushed him to try to understand anxiety. He concluded that we need all available theory, therapy, spiritual practice, and narrative to make anxiety livable. This is as true for children as it is for adults.

The need to live anxiety and not just analyze it is why Strossel refused to reduce his personal experience of anxiety to deficiencies in serotonin and dopamine or to the excess activity in the amygdala and basal ganglia. He feared that such talk contributes to “trudging along pointlessly toward death in a cold, mechanical, and indifferent universe.” This is why he encouraged us to consider that religion, philosophy, and medicine *are all needed* to cope with anxiety. Despite their differences in method and language, all three approaches may be talking about the same thing and share a desire to alleviate its pain and debilitating effects.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013) 94.

<sup>23</sup> Scott Stossel, *My Age of Anxiety: Fear, Hope, Dread, and the Search for Peace of Mind* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 53.

<sup>24</sup> Stossel, 55.

With these matters in mind let us rejoin the children. They were working with “The Parable of the Leaven” and were beginning to feel comfortable enough to express something more about their existential anxiety, which is different at different ages.

The five-year-olds did not refer directly to any of the four existential limits --- death, the need for meaning, aloneness, and death. They didn’t use ultimate language, or evoke paradoxes, which appear when language is pushed to its limits. They used what words they had to probe their boundaries in an ambiguous way. This is why watching their body language was more important than what they said. Children about six years of age, however, began to use explicit, existential references in response to “The Parable of the Leaven.”

A girl in middle childhood, about 6-9 years of age, told how her mother was pushing her in her stroller when they were both hit by a car. Her mother was hospitalized, which made the event even more a matter of ultimate concern. Death, the threat of freedom, aloneness, and the need for meaning were all stimulated by this awful event, but she was able to feel and express these overwhelming memories indirectly, as she worked with the parable in a circle of trusted and respectful Godly-Players.

Another child in middle childhood told with wide eyes how a glass shelf broke. It cut her mother, who bled. The memory still made her anxious. She twisted her hands and pulled on strands of hair as she spoke. She told how she had been afraid that her mother would die. She desperately wanted to help her mother, but she was too little and helpless, which made her sadder and more scared.

Another group of children, also in middle childhood, wondered who the woman in the parable was. Several said at once that it was “Jesus’ mother.” One boy said, “Remember that lady who had a little bit of bread?” There was also that man, who said,

‘If you give me that little bit of bread and then you shall have plenty and then it overflowed.’ (This was probably the child’s vague memory of Elijah being fed by the widow at Zarephath as told in I Kings 17:8-24.)

New ideas hurried around the circle about the woman. They were probing and disjointed at first but all tinged with ultimacy: “Bloody Mary,” “God’s wife,” “God’s sister,” “God’s baby that grew up.” Then a child said, “Maybe it’s one of us.” This opened a new doorway, deepening the involvement of each one there.

A child, looking around the circle, said, “The woman, maybe it’s one of the girls.” Another said, “Maybe it’s me.” Still another, “Maybe it’s you.” Someone said, “It has to have very long hair.” The woman had turned into an “it,” as if she were not an ordinary woman at all! She had become some kind of powerful force. This renewed attention to the woman seemed to reach beyond the parable to creativity itself, the mothering in their lives and the “mothering” of them by the Parable-Maker, who created the parable that was the means for their wondering. It is this Ultimate Source that helps quiet anxiety about our limits, but how does that work? Let’s turn to that question now.

### **Discovering the Parable-Maker in the Parable**

A group of children about ten years old approached God’s presence in the parable by wondering indirectly about what the bread and leaven might really be. A rapid-fire conversation crackled like electricity in the room.

“So it’s a huge piece of bread...”

“And you can just take pieces off and when you take that piece off it’ll grow back again.”

“Maybe Jesus. He’s making bread for all the poor people.”

Pointing to the leaven, a child said, “It looks like a little man.”

“I think it’s like... God is the bread and it’s sort of swelling and swelling and people can eat off it but then it just keeps on growing on and on and...”

“Maybe it’s holy.”

“Maybe it’s the bread that the apostles ate before Jesus died.”

“The person was baking bread for the Last Supper.”

“How could we have it today?” The child pointed to the pieces representing the mixture and the leaven.

“The bread could be communion bread.”

“But more powerful... You don’t even have to bake it. What did you see? Like there’s everlasting love there...could be everlasting bread... And maybe the everlasting bread makes you remember the everlasting love.”

“Maybe the everlasting bread and the everlasting love are brothers, or something.”

I asked, “When you start talking about ‘everlasting things,’ is that a different way to talk?”

“I know, ‘cause nothing ever lasts.” The child looked worried.

Another child said, “Cause there’s not anything we know about that lasts forever.”

“God does,” someone said.

“And Jesus.”

“Except God,” the child concluded, who had said that “nothing ever lasts.”

The language about “huge bread,” “God,” “Jesus,” “everlasting bread,” eating and growing again, “Last Supper,” and other less explicit but still ultimate references blended God’s presence with the leavened bread. The bread is creative. It can be eaten and yet “grow back again.” It is holy and blends past, present, and future. The distance between the children and the first century environment for telling the parable collapsed at the

beginning of the wondering. Wondering became wondering. It made the parable timeless and about eternity, as evidenced by the children's talk about "everlasting." It was in this fluidity of time that the children in the circle encountered the Parable-Maker through the parable in a relationship that, as they said, involved them in "everlasting love." They now realized that it was "there" no matter what happened in their lives.

Here we must proceed with caution. Some interpreters think that it is impossible to meet the author in the text, because the text takes on a life of its own after it leaves the author's hand. The interpreter, therefore, stands between the text and the interpretation and the author, who is on the far side of the text, becomes irrelevant! This approach to interpretation contrasts dramatically with the oral tradition, where the storyteller provides the environment for the telling and is indispensable. The gospels are a hybrid. Jesus' speech shaped the written text.

The influence of Jesus' spoken language on the gospels has been of special interest to Werner Kelber. His *The Oral and the Written Gospel* pushed back against the textual preference of biblical scholars, because in Jesus' time people much preferred the auditory and visual experience of the speaker over decoding images on surfaces, even if they could read.

Kelber wrote, "Synoptic oral traditions preceded the gospel, entered into it, bypassed it, and continued long after its composition."<sup>25</sup> An intermediate step after writing was reading out loud from texts such as Paul's letters or reciting Mark's gospel. The primary influence of the spoken voice on the gospels carries with it "the diffusive,

---

<sup>25</sup> Werner H. Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul, and Q* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983) 184.



multidirectional nature of oral speech.” The spoken word does not proclaim words for interpretation. It offers words “as an act of inviting participation.”<sup>26</sup>

Even in written texts, however, one can find traces of the author. The novels of Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald have styles as different as the two authors themselves. The text takes on a life of its own, but it can’t escape its author’s uniqueness, which is why we read novels, remember poetry, listen to music and look at paintings. We find some creators are more “true” to life than others. The author is the “big bang” of literary creation.

Joachim Jeremias (1900-1979) affirmed the presence of the Parable-Maker in the text. He was the author of *The Parables of Jesus* and lived in Jerusalem, as he grew up for eight years. He later became Professor of New Testament at the University of Gottingen from 1935-1968 and wrote, memorably, that “We stand right before Jesus when reading his parables.”<sup>27</sup>

A very different kind of interpreter, James Breech, also felt the presence of the Parable-Maker in the parable. He taught for fifteen years in the humanities at York University in Toronto. His *The Silence of Jesus* argued that the “voice” felt in the parables is one of unspoken love, which the parables show but do not name. This unspoken love is “a mode of being which is grounded in the superabundant power which engenders or fathers-forth all that is counter, original, spare, strange; and if love is a concept that refers to the capacity to engage voluntarily with the freedom of the actual

---

<sup>26</sup> Kelber, xvi.

<sup>27</sup> Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, second revised edition (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1972) 12.

other, then it can be said that Jesus was . . . the most loving and least sentimental man one could imagine”<sup>28</sup>

The author of the parable, then, is both present in and hidden by the text. The children, we have been following, engaged the Parable-Maker in the game of hide and seek in the garden of his parable. Their puzzled faces, frowns of concentration, the twisting of doubtful strands of hair, and their expressive feet, wiggling with frustration as well as fun showed this. When their laughter rang out and insights emerged there were smiles all around the circle, because the children had sensed the ultimate reality in which they could flourish, despite the limits to their being and knowing.

### **Conclusion**

Children are creative theologians, who live more in an oral than textual culture. They are just learning to read and write and challenge adults to become more aware and to value spoken, personal communication more. Just by being who they are, children challenge what Walter J. Ong S.J., author of *Orality and Literacy* (1982) called the “chirographic bias” of Western adults.

The silent child set in the midst of the disciple’s noise taught by being. The children in the market place taught by going beyond what adults could imagine, despite being relegated to an example story that uncharacteristically for Jesus belittled children. The children interpreting “The Parable of the Leaven” taught by their exuberance and laughter, as they played their way toward the presence of the Parable-Maker.

---

<sup>28</sup> James Breech, *The Silence of Jesus: The Authentic Voice of the Historical Man* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1983) 222