

# Associates of Godly Play UK

## The Magazine

Issue 13 September 2023



### At the threshold

Hello! Are you ready for another issue of our magazine?

I wonder what you are hoping to find in these pages. Recently I crossed a new threshold, when I was invited into a local primary school to share a Godly Play story for the first time with a Year 1 class. It was a little daunting: I didn't know the teacher or the children, and most of them had never experienced Godly Play. It isn't a church school – would the children be prepared to listen to a sacred story with open minds? Would they be ready to listen to each other? And would the teachers be

ready to sit quietly and allow the children to wonder, and to respond freely without worrying about learning outcomes? I knew that I was ready to tell the Creation story 'from my heart', as we like to say, but had I done enough to prepare the space, and the rest of the circle?

I needn't have worried, of course. The group sat quietly and attentively as I brought out the materials, and as I began to unroll the black felt scroll, there was a quiet gasp when a child whispered, 'It's so big!' Yes, indeed, there is always more in Creation and more of the Creator than we can possibly imagine. In Godly Play, we're taught to 'trust the process', to 'trust children', and God will be there.

May you also find what you need today.

*Eona Bell, Trainer*

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## Building the circle

September, as the start of a new academic year, always feels to me like a second January, as we look back on what was achieved 'last year' and plan for what we hope to do next. So, for the trainers and trustees of Godly Play in the UK, we need to start looking at what we can offer to the Godly Play community in 2024.

2023 has seen us running three-day core courses throughout the year, and although some courses had to be cancelled through lack of numbers, we feel that we probably did 'better than expected', which is very encouraging. We are all too aware, however, of the changes in people's expectations that developed through the experiences of the pandemic, and we are looking at ways to develop courses that a more diverse range of needs. With this in mind, we are ever thankful for the support of our Associates, whose gifts support this kind of experimentation and development.

Our March issue carried an article by Mine Yıldırım about Godly Play in cross-cultural settings, and it has been a delight to welcome Mine to our circle of trainers. She divides her time between London and Turkey and as scholar of human rights law, she founded the Freedom of Belief initiative in Turkey. As we welcomed a new trainer, we said goodbye to Liesl Baldwin who has moved to Germany. Liesl is a Salvation Army Officer and, with her husband, has moved to Leipzig to lead the work of the Salvation Army in the Germany, Lithuania and Poland Territory. Godly Play is well-established in Leipzig, and it is there, in the Lindenwerkstätten, that Godly Play materials are made in Germany, so we hope that she will not feel bereft of Godly Play connections!

This all serves to remind us of the international nature of Godly Play and our need, in the UK, to make sure that we are fit and prepared to serve the diverse communities that characterise our nation. With this in mind, this issue offers a second article about the US initiative, *Beloved me, Beloved we*, which is auditing Godly Play materials and the nature of the stories to maximise their capacity to be inclusive, and we shall follow these developments carefully.

# Starting the journey

By Shereece Tomlin



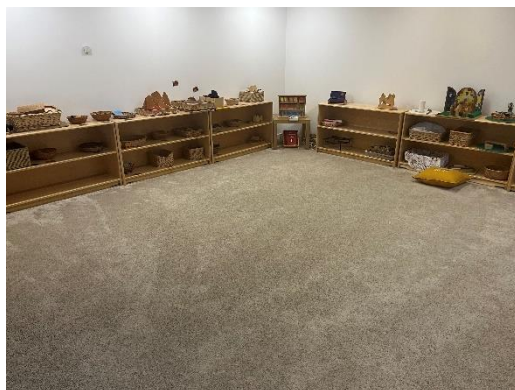
*Shereece Tomlin was a participant on the most recent three-day training that took place in Saint Jérôme Church of England Bilingual School in Harrow. Led by trainers Jeanny Wang and Mine Yildirim, the course took place across three separated days over the course of a couple of months.*

‘What is Godly Play?’ This is a question I asked when I arrived at Saint Jérôme Church of England Bilingual School and began my teacher training. As a previous Sunday school teacher, I had strong interest in how to deepen children’s understanding of Scripture and their Christian walk. It was at this early point in my teaching career that I had the opportunity to work for the Rev’d Daniel Norris, a headteacher and priest in the Church of England, who is passionate about children’s spirituality and deepening their understanding of Scripture. As an imaginative approach to

spirituality, drawing upon Montessori principles, Godly Play encapsulates this, supporting spiritual nurture through story, wondering and play.

I was asked by Daniel Norris to undertake the Godly Play training. This was a fantastic opportunity and I was eager to embark on this journey. The training consisted of three full days and was conducted by the highly professional trainers Jeanny Wang and Mine Yildirim. They ensured that each step of the training was completed sensitively and informatively. The first training session began with an introduction of each of the members of group. We had a tour of the fully equipped Godly Play room. It was remarkable to see that each part of the room is fully intentional, and all resources have their own position and purpose.

Each session was captivating and thought provoking, but most importantly provided a safe space for all trainees to be inquisitive and to share their thoughts. We looked into the rationale behind Godly Play, diving into the works of Jerome Berryman to understand its foundation. We also had our very own opportunity to tell a Godly Play story using the resources, asking ‘wondering questions’ and evaluating what we had heard during ‘response time’. It was at this point that I truly understood the importance of allowing children to delve into the stories of the Bible and question accordingly. This helps children have a deepened understanding and invites them to use complex language to support their thinking. The training provided us with a sense of peace, intertwined with a new desire to share the Godly Play experiences during sessions. As trainees, we described it as ‘simply the best experience ever’.



It has been a pleasure to complete my Godly Play training. I look forward to introducing the ‘wondering’ analogy not only into Godly Play sessions, but also further beyond, to the classroom and Collective Worship.

## Feature articles: a focus on training

### The Integrity of Godly Play Core Training

By Brenton Prigge



*Brenton is a Methodist Minister who was born in South Africa, spent 11 years in Australia, and moved to the United Kingdom in March 2020. Brenton has a passion for intergenerational ministry, with a particular focus on helping congregations to include children and young people into the life-long, all-of-life journey of discipleship. In his quest to find methodologies and practices that did not (at worst) ignore and devalue children or (at best) regard them as the ‘church of the future’, Brenton attended a three-day Godly Play Core*

*Training at Godly Play Australia’s Inaugural Conference in Australia in July 2011, and immediately fell head-over-heels in love with the ethos and practice of Godly Play. He has been an accredited trainer since 2015, and is a passionate advocate for Godly Play and anything else that values and nurtures the spirituality of children.*

Every time I am part of a three-day training, I see people ‘come alive’ to the experience. I believe it feeds a hunger that only makes people hunger for even more. And there is the sense, with many people, that this child-centred approach is feeding them in a way that they haven’t been fed since they were children. It is as though we adults, experiencing Godly Play, re-connect with a way of learning and being – or a way of being that helps us to be learning – that we have lost somewhere along the way.

I wonder: Why does Godly Play Training have that effect on people? Why is it that I have heard countless testimonies to the fact that teachers find they teach differently, preachers preach differently, Bible Study leaders change their way of being in the circle with their Bible study group, parents begin to play and use story and imagination differently, spiritual directors find themselves using new tools and skills, and generally Christians find their spiritual disciplines and practices deepen ... after they have been through Godly Play training? I wonder what your experience has been.

This is why I have to say I really struggle with the term ‘training’ for what we actually offer and experience in those three days of learning.

Training brings to mind repetitive actions for a set outcome – as in sports training, animal training or military training. My experience of Godly Play ‘training’ is not that at all.

I recently attended the only other training I have come across that is quite as experiential as Godly Play’s Core Training when I attended Play Therapy UK’s Summer School as part of my Therapeutic Play studies: fifteen intensive days of experiential learning. In many ways, the process of learning was quite similar to what we would experience in Godly Play training – experiential observation followed by reflection (a trainer demonstrated the process – notice what you notice) and then experiential action (have a go yourself) followed by more reflection, over and over again,



Godly Play trainers Cass Meurig and Diana Williams with participants on the recent training in Wales.



until it becomes a way of being, not just a thing we do. Or to put it another way, we are learning to be fully present to what we are doing so that both the way of doing and reflecting – wondering about it – together become integral to our way of being.

I think that is why so many Godly Play practitioners find that a Godly Play way of thinking and doing tends to permeate every other aspect of their life. It is a way of being.

I believe it has something to do with the fact that there is an integrity in what we are training people for and the way the training is done. Between the why and the how – and the what that encompasses all of that. Richard Rohr says of Francis of Assisi: ‘He basically repeated what all prophets say: that the message and the medium for the message have to be the same thing.’<sup>1</sup> I think that is precisely the reason Godly Play training is unique and profoundly effective. The way we teach seeks to be true to what we teach.



Trainer Susie Steele in the Godly Play circle at Greenbelt.  
Photo: Mark Kensett

In every moment of the three days of Core Training, everything that happens is in service of ‘the child’.<sup>2</sup> We know that Jerome Berryman developed the curriculum and method with a clear focus on the child, and a profound belief in the child’s innate spirituality and their own ability to make meaning and to ‘work’ through their play.<sup>3</sup>

So, when we gather in a circle during Godly Play Core training, and experience a Godly Play session, (almost) everything happens exactly the same as it would in a Godly Play circle with children. When we learn about the Spirituality of the Child, it is not done as a lecture with a PowerPoint presentation or in front of a whiteboard. It is done through story, wondering and response. There is integrity between *what* we teach/learn and *how* we teach/learn. It is that integrity that allows for the ‘content’ of Godly Play to be more than just information transmitted. It becomes a way of being together in the story, sitting together with the

wondering – both in the shared wondering, and in the stillness of our own hearts while being held in a safe space of that shared wonder – and then working out our response to the experience of the Divine in the story and the wonder.

What we experience during the three days of ‘training’ – whether we are ‘trainers’ or ‘trainees’ – offers the same process of story, wonder, work and feast that children may experience in a Godly Play circle. That is what makes this training quite unique.

For reflection: Are there parts of the training that are not quite there yet, in terms of holding integrity with the ethos and methodology of Godly Play, where the mode of ‘training’ does not quite match the content? How can we improve?

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<sup>1</sup> <https://email.cac.org/t/d-e-vtrdre-itjkjruhki-s/>

<sup>2</sup> When I speak of ‘the child’ in the singular, it is to try and convey that while we are obviously working with many, many children around the world, each one of them is unique, individual and important in their own right. They are not just part of a homogenous mass of ‘children’.

<sup>3</sup> It is significant to me, that my only other training I have come across that is similar to that of Godly Play was from another field where the practice is child-centred – Therapeutic Play.

# Developments in the Beloved Me, Beloved We initiative

*Heather Ingersoll in conversation with Gill Ambrose*

*Heather Ingersoll is Executive Director of the Godly Play Foundation in the USA. From her home in Portland, Oregon, she spoke on Zoom to Gill Ambrose, Chair of the Godly Play UK board of trustees.*

In Issue 11 (September 2022) of this magazine, Heather described for us the emergence of the inclusion initiative within Godly Play in the USA, *Beloved Me, Beloved We*. Its vision (in brief) is to inspire brave spaces where every child who comes close to Godly Play encounters a sense of their inherent worth and dignity and to foster inclusive communities that celebrate the diversity of God and God's creation. A year later, I caught up with Heather on Zoom, to hear about progress and to explore whether and how this development can support Godly Play UK.

Readers can explore for themselves, through a dedicated page on the Godly Play Foundation's website, some of the ways in which the initiative is developing. Have a look here:

[www.godlyplayfoundation.org/beloved-me-beloved-we-initiative](http://www.godlyplayfoundation.org/beloved-me-beloved-we-initiative)

And perhaps the simplest example of a concrete outcome is the new artwork for the Faces of Easter stories that are generally used in Lent

<https://store.godlyplayfoundation.org/collections/volume-4/products/gp406>

As we looked at the website together, Heather described to me how some of the proposals had been initiated. She said, 'we started with leadership.' In order to increase the diversity of the trainer body, the Foundation recruited a group of five people, diverse by Christian tradition, ethnicity and sexual orientation, to be trained together as trainers, with concurrent reflection and feedback on the training process and all that it entails. The presence of these newly trained people will henceforth contribute to the trainer group and facilitate more diverse thinking and planning.



The Godly Play Foundation has a small body of eight regular paid staff, some of whom work at Godly Play Resources, responsible for the materials, and some of whom support the development of Godly Play, its training and The Centre for the Theology of Childhood. People work remotely, spread across a huge country. Nevertheless, it was decided to undertake some training for these staff to increase awareness of the dominance of white culture and how it impacts all that we do. A consulting firm delivered this training, which was all delivered remotely.

The Foundation has established a *Beloved Me, Beloved We* Advisory Committee who meet monthly, advising on training, materials, and communication by highlighting bias and possible adaptations. Again, this is undertaken remotely

through online meetings. The Committee is drawn from communities and congregations right across the country.



For now, perhaps the most usable and practical aspect of this development for Godly Players in the UK is the availability of the Equity Audit Toolkits. [www.godlyplayfoundation.org/equity-audit-toolkits](http://www.godlyplayfoundation.org/equity-audit-toolkits) A grant from the Episcopal Church of the United States has enabled this work, and there was a determination to undertake it in a Godly Play way. The copyright of the texts of the published Godly Play stories is held by the publisher, but of course we know that Godly Play is much more than storytelling. The aim of the toolkits is therefore to help storytellers to

consider the way that they tailor the story and materials for their own particular context. Starting with the parables, the aim is ‘to audit our storytelling curricula and materials to identify what terms, phrases, art, and materials “bump” people from different perspectives out of the circle. The goal is to update the language and materials in all our 90 stories so that everyone can feel their belonging and worth in a Godly Play classroom.’

The toolkits offer:

- Adjustments to language in stories
- Ideas for increasing the diversity of representation in your classroom
- Ideas for adjustments to make to materials

Development resulted through telling the story and then wondering. It was found that wondering together is the key to identifying, and deliberating about, diversity issues. At present, work continues on the parables, and work on the core stories used in training will be the next step. In addition to the observations of the advisory committee, advice has been sought on some Old Testament texts from the founder of Torah Godly Play, Rabbi Dr Michael Shire.

As you will see from the website, the resulting Toolkits are readily available online for anyone to use. While this is currently just in English, the model will readily translate into other languages in which Godly Play stories are told, and Heather and I reflected briefly on what a global perspective would add to a process like this. Ironically, out of all the horror, misery and damage of the pandemic, one of the positive things that has emerged is an appreciation of the capacity we now have to work remotely with ease.

So how do we address all of this in the UK, and should we? Clearly, we can be grateful to the Foundation for the work they have begun, which is available to us as English speakers. The size and ethnic profile of the USA is very different from the UK, but wherever we live in England and Wales, we have to confront the evidence that inequalities impact the life of our nation profoundly. It would be good to hear from Godly Players around the UK about whether and how this plays out in your Godly Play communities. Meanwhile, our trainers and trustees will need to think about how we take this agenda forward. But we would love to hear news and views from you, our readers and subscribers.



# A Voice for the Child: The life and work of Janusz Korczak

By Peter Privett

*In recent issues we have examined the work of two educators whose practice and writings formed some of the foundations of Godly Play. Both were Italian women. In this issue we want to offer some insights into the work of a man, Polish and Jewish, whose practice and writings were both brave and visionary, and who is now remembered and celebrated by memorials in Warsaw, Treblinka and at Yad Vashem.*



Janusz Korczak was a world-famous paediatrician, educationalist and philosopher, who ran orphanages in Warsaw between the 1920s-40s. He devoted his life to the needs and the plight of children, regardless of nationality and religion. He was famous for his novels, his newspaper that advertised a telephone helpline for children and his weekly radio programme where 'The Old Doctor' gave advice and talks on the subject of childcare and children.

Korczak believed fervently that education was not about preparing a child for a future life. A child should be appreciated for who and what they are, not for what they might become. His orphanages were run on child-centred lines with a deep belief in, and concern for, children's rights. Children and young people were fully involved in the day-to-day decision making and running. Every week, Korczak would testify in Warsaw's juvenile courts, defending the abandoned street children who were often given long sentences. 'A delinquent child is still a child. That must not be forgotten for an instant... At times he realises with alarm his own separateness; his being different from others.' His experience of being a doctor in World War One and seeing the suffering of destitute children in Poland led him to proclaim, 'A spoon of castor oil is no cure for poverty and parentlessness.'

Janusz Korczak was a pseudonym and, in common with a significant number of others, he spent a considerable part of his life denying his Jewish roots and ancestry. However, as the persecution of Jewish people became evident, he declared his solidarity with his Jewish orphans by resuming his birth name of Henryk Goldszmit and in 1942, refused to abandon his Jewish orphans when they were taken to the death camps of Treblinka, even though he had numerous offers of freedom for himself. He and the children perished in the gas chambers.

'You will never understand children if you belittle their qualities.'

'A child with a vice feels it as a burden, but is at a loss what to do unless he has guidance ... he will make a few disastrous attempts at change, and after failing give up.'

'A child can read his parent's face as a farmer reads the sky to predict the weather.'

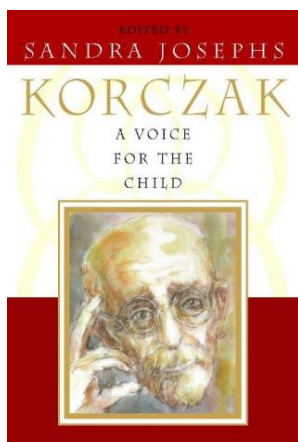
When asked what one should do in a world where there is great inhumanity, Korczak replied with an old rabbinical saying: 'Act more human.'

'First and foremost, you must realise that you, too, are a child whom you must first get to know to bring up and educate.'



# Taking your wondering further...

## Book reviews



*A Voice For the Child: The Inspirational Words of Janusz Korczak*, edited by Sandra Josephs, NSPCC/Thorsons, 1999

*Reviewed by Judy Yeomans*

In this little book, the editor, Sandra Josephs, sets out to offer readers, who she imagines are parents or others involved in the upbringing of children, simple inspiration, guidance and reassurance from the words of Janusz Korczak.

'Korczak had a belief in the innate goodness of children and their natural tendency to improve, given the opportunity and guidance to do so,' writes Josephs. Rather than waiting for adulthood and what children might become, his writings convey his appreciation of the child for who they are, respecting and understanding their way of thinking and being. And Korczak urges us to do the same, remarking that 'the market value of the very young is small. Only in the sight of God is the apple blossom worth as much as the apple [or] green shoots as much as a field of ripe corn.'

The final text for the rights of the child, as agreed in 1989 and set out as the Convention on the Rights of the Child is manifestly inspired by Korczak's writings in which he fiercely championed and popularised the rights of children.

An educator at heart, Korczak wanted to help adults to get in touch with the child within, to find the learning from the child. The quotations, taken from two of his books *How to Love a Child* and *Respect for the Child* evoke a man whose humility before the weakest in society elevates him to a position worthy of a wider readership. I read and re-read them, savouring their richness and they lead me to reflect again on the theology and pedagogy of Godly Play as disrupters of established ways of engaging with and directing children, particularly in church settings today. I offer a few here for you to ponder, perhaps with an invitation to 'Discuss!'

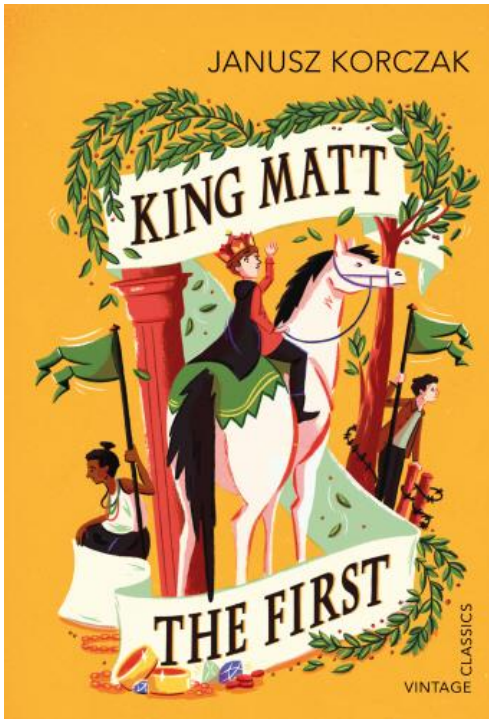
'If we are constantly astonished at the child's perceptiveness, it means we do not take them seriously.'

'The child's thinking is neither limited nor inferior to that of an adult. It is different. The child thinks with feelings and not with the intellect. That is why communication is so complicated and speaking with children is a difficult art.'

'In the world of feeling, children are much richer. They think with their emotions.'

'Be yourself and seek your own path. Know yourself before you get to know children.'

'Become aware of what you yourself are capable of before you attempt to outline the rights and responsibilities of children. First and foremost, you must realise that you too are a child, whom you are to get to know, to bring up and to educate.'



*King Matt the First* by Janusz Korczak,  
Vintage Children's Classics, 2015

*Reviewed by Gill Ambrose*

Korzczak was a prolific writer, and among his works were several books for children. *King Matt the First* is the story of a little boy, orphaned by the death of his father, the king, who is catapulted to the throne. As a small child, he is closely protected by the government ministers, who fear for his safety, the safety of the country, and of course, their own influence. But Matt inevitably finds ways to grow, first by sneaking out to play with his friend, Felek, and then, as his country goes to war, by secretly joining the soldiers in their campaign. On his return, he determines to be a real king and embarks on a series of adventures and reforms. And as a child, he embarks initially on improving the lives of children – schools with exciting playgrounds, a zoo with exotic

animals (which he himself travels to Africa to source!) and eventually a children's parliament. But despite all his heroism, his fascination with the idea of democracy, and his reforms, Matt is still inexperienced, and it all goes wrong. There is no happy ending. At 433 pages, this is a children's book of epic proportions, up with the middle books in the Harry Potter series. And it's a book of its time. Published in 1923, it would have been written in the years after Korzczak returned from his service as a doctor in the First World War. War, and what it does not achieve, pervades it, while the serious examination of democracy as a system abuts the final battle scene, which reads like a little boys' game, in a curious way. On reflection, I guess this reflects the nature of childhood, where we move with ease between make believe and profound awareness of the existential nature of being.

Such paradoxes are elsewhere present. Everything about the description of Africa and the book's African characters is characterised by what we would today see as colonialism, and yet the book's heroine is the African princess, Klu Klu, who is brave, loyal, skilled and resourceful. She addresses the misogyny of the boys in Matt's children's parliament with confidence and conviction, appalled at the treatment of girls in Matt's European kingdom.

On the whole, I didn't really enjoy the book, though I am glad I persisted to the end. I wonder why, and I would be interested to know what an avid young reader would make of it today? I rather think that one of the ways in which J K Rowling gets her readers hooked is her characterisation. The characters become your friends and you feel you know them intimately. Compared with this, Matt



and co. seem to me rather like cardboard cut-outs. Though, if, as seems possible, the book was written to be read aloud and serialised with Korzcak's orphanage children, maybe the reader's enthusiasm would overcome this. Or maybe I am just too far away from the world of the Warsaw of exactly a century ago to be able to identify with its children.

Published by Vintage Classics, *King Matt the First* comes with lots of background and support for the reader. There is an introductory essay in the form of a message from the award-winning American children's novelist, Esme Rajo Codell. Maybe her judgement should have the last word.



Memorial to Janusz Korczak at the Okopowa Street Jewish Cemetery in Warsaw

‘At the heart of this story is a child who is wholly alone, dealing, in turns, with conflicts that academics will recognise as Erikson's stages of psychosocial development: the need for autonomy and rebellion against over protection; the playacting of an adult role in order to determine where initiative is acceptable and what actions are not allowed; the pleasure of industriousness and the desire to persevere; and ultimately, the resolution of an identity built on outcomes of previous crises and relationships with others. The boy who begins the story merely wearing a crown ends it as a true king, a visionary leader who built his place in history not only through accolades but by failure and painful loss, a boy whose fate is determined not only by his choices, but by the choices of those who surround him. The ending of *King Matt the First* is jolting, like waking from a dream at the scariest part only to find that by some miracle you are still intact.

The fate of King Matt is particularly poignant when juxtaposed with the fate of the author and the children who inspired him, who were not offered a miracle. ... While he could not offer

rescue, he could offer comfort, and so, like a true father he stayed with them to the very last of all their breaths.’

I have certainly, through this book, and the research required to review it, enjoyed getting to know and admire Janusz Korzcak, and I commend him to you.

More information about Janusz Korzcak can be found in Bruno Bettelheim, *Recollections and Reflections*, Penguin, 1992: pp.191-206 ‘On Jews and Camps – Janusz Korzcak: A tale for our time’.

Wikipedia offers a comprehensive article about Korzcak:  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Janusz\\_Korzcak](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Janusz_Korzcak)



# The Feast

## In conversation ... Rebecca Nye and Gill Ambrose



*Rebecca is almost certainly known to all our readers as the person who discovered Godly Play and brought it from the USA to the UK. You can read that story on our website at [www.godlyplay.uk/about-us/our-history/](http://www.godlyplay.uk/about-us/our-history/). She trained with Jerome Berryman and set about developing Godly Play as a method available in Britain. Along with Peter Privett, she pioneered Godly Play training here, and oversaw its development and our work for over twenty years, including its institution as a charity, Godly Play UK, in 2007. Rebecca retired as a trainer in 2022 but remains an indispensable source of wisdom for us and for Godly Play globally. We are indebted to her for all that she has done. We met recently, and reflected on some of the things that really matter, where we find ourselves in 2023.*

**Gill:** At the beginning of our three-day trainings, we look at the fundamental presence of existential questions. Perhaps the pandemic made everyone more aware the precariousness of our life and living. Do you think this will persist?

**Rebecca:** When we examine aspects of children's spirituality in Godly Play training, we do explore how everyone's lives, even the very young, are framed by existential questioning about our identity, our sense of freedom, our search for meaning and uncertainty around 'ending'. It is interesting that, at first, this can baffle adults, because 'existential issues' sound like something rather high level or esoteric. But, as you said, this is about questions that are fundamentally present rather than acquired knowledge. In fact, I suspect that there's a special intensity to doing this existential 'work' in earliest childhood, when it is all new and unaided by words or borrowed answers. The pandemic may have given many adults the gift of time, and a greater a need (but not necessarily a greater desire), to pay more attention to our existential questions and elusive answers, and find a language and outlets for this. But perhaps many children were already quite sensitive to these things and maybe they were already relatively good at finding space and creative ways to address them, through play and story, in particular. It's often interesting to call to mind a particularly salient or favourite kind of childhood play, and wonder about which existential question(s) this might have been helping us with.

For many adults, the pandemic put a bright spotlight on the importance of close personal connections and on the value and responsibility of freedom. It also revealed the fragility of our belief that things 'make sense', and so many people confronted difficult endings to employment or long-held plans, as well as particularly harsh realities about end of life too. But even in ordinary times, I think these things are spotlighted and powerfully felt by children. They know that caring presence and responsiveness is crucial, and their need to exercise their will and make choices is bursting at the seams. In addition, children live with constant awareness of partial understanding/incomprehension, and their tenuous grip on time and how long things will 'last' is frequently unsettling. I certainly don't want to suggest that children were immune to the existential shock of the pandemic as there are piles of research documenting its burden on their psycho-social wellbeing, and it goes without saying that 'pandemic experiences' were not uniform, so generalisations are blunt. But perhaps what marked the adult experience was the (potential) stimulus to return to and rediscover the



existentiality and spirituality originally known instinctively as a child, its illumination as well as its darkness. Where that change happened, I wonder what this was like for the children in those adults' lives? I wonder what the children liked best about this? I wonder what they didn't like?



*Danaë clasped her child closely to her bosom from A Wonder Book Nathaniel Hawthorne Arthur Rackham, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons*

However, you asked specifically about the possible longer-term aftermath of the pandemic's existential wake-up call to the 'precariousness of life', and by implication, a lasting level of spiritual attentiveness. I'm not so sure about that. Collectively there seems to be a strong desire to bring the 'story' of the pandemic to a firm end. In public and social discourse, I think the energy lies more with 'moving on' rather than continuing to 'live into' the varied and complex encounters and insights it precipitated. Maybe this need for firm closure would be different if we weren't facing an onslaught of further existential threats such as the climate and economic crises and global political insecurity? Unfortunately, those realities often seem to be stoking inter-personal division rather than deeper intra-personal existential awareness, or, as I might call it, 'relational consciousness'. Arguably there has never been such a critical need to offer children (and others) protected time, safe space and coherent spiritual language: in

other words, a particular need for the finely tuned resources and vision that Godly Play provides to enable and encourage authentic response, meaning-making and finding 'ways to come through' life's precariousness.

**Gill:** We think of Godly Play as being formational. In an educational world that seems at present to be favouring 'knowing stuff', and a church environment where asking questions sometimes seems to be frowned upon, why is formation so important?

**Rebecca:** I took a long time to answer your first question, so I'll start with a short answer to this one! I think formation is important because it can operate at a deeper level than 'knowing stuff' or merely accepting prescribed answers unquestioningly. Formation does more than just move knowledge from one head to another. Paulo Freire, a great Brazilian philosopher of education, argued that teaching can too easily be conceived as depositing information rather like putting money in a bank, or pouring liquid into a vessel. But formation approaches things differently – it's a pedagogy where things are absorbed, not poured; and where there is hope that education has the power to transform, rather than simply seeking to inform or to teach learners just to perform what they know.

This is not some new-fangled, airy-fairy idea! Throughout history, and still today, the majority of our learning happens through formation. This occurs through meaningful participation in the context or culture that lives by particular practices – principles, rules, skills and values – lived experience in a living tradition. For example, in my childhood home, I learnt to speak and listen through formation, as well as absorbing internal working models of human relationships based on how my immediate family related to me. These experiences shaped me in long-lasting ways. Subsequent experiences in other families – my friends' families, my in-laws', and the family I made

with my husband and children, have continued to form me, and by participating in these contexts, I've affected the formation of others too.



Photo: Mark Stosberg

It could be tempting to see this kind of learning as quite *laissez-faire*, but formation is driven by deliberate intentions and coherence; it is not about leaving things to chance. Formation places value on practice – in two senses. First, it values learning through participation in ‘the real thing’, rather than learning concepts and rules in an abstract way to use ‘for real’ later on. Secondly, formation thrives on practice in the sense of doing something over and over until it becomes natural.

I hope all of this rings bells with the pedagogy of Godly Play! It certainly avoids a ‘banking’ model of depositing information into the ‘empty spaces’ in children’s heads. Instead, Godly Play distils and models some of the richest elements of Christian tradition, thought and action within an intentionally accessible, participatory time and space. Meaningful understanding and growth happen not because pre-determined teaching points are efficiently delivered, but by children absorbing what speaks to them through story, play and the repeated liturgical practice that underpins every Godly Play session.

My answer has come at this question mostly from the perspective of the psychology of education, because that’s what I know best. However, ‘formation’ (especially ‘spiritual formation’) can also be approached from a theological standpoint, and I think this can enrich Godly Players’ appreciation of why this is so important. In theological terms, spiritual formation is about real engagement with processes and practices that help us to become more Christ-like, realising the image of God in which we are each, uniquely, made. This can’t be achieved by ‘learning stuff’, or by avoiding our own questions and insights. A Christian perspective also perceives a central role for the Holy Spirit in spiritual formation, calling our attention to the characteristics of creativity, unpredictability and love which hover in the air wherever there is deep learning. Again, I think this chimes with what Godly Play tries to enable (e.g. imagination and play) and what it tries to avoid (e.g. judgement and fear). I wonder what else resonates here. And I wonder how careless or damaging formation can be addressed, both in Christian contexts and in children’s lives generally.

**Gill:** What do you like doing best?

**Rebecca:** Oh goodness – I thought I’d answered the hard questions! That’s not easy to pin down. I’ve always got an enormous amount from observing or interacting with young children and babies. I think I love doing that because it pushes all my buttons at once – it’s emotional, it’s intellectual and it always has a layer of the unknowable. I’ve also come to realise that I like teaching as well as learning. I’ve been in academia all of my career because I love learning, but through my Open University work I’ve come to realise that I like teaching too, especially the opportunities to facilitate and witness some incredible student journeys. I also get a buzz from helping people to think clearly and critically – and love being impressed when students end up doing that better than me! Last, but definitely not least, I love classical and choral music. In fact, I left school with an ambition to be a professional viola player, but I was ambushed by psychology ... this year I’ve finally got back into playing and joined an orchestra. Apart from the musical enjoyment, it’s fascinating connecting ‘who I am’ with ‘who I was’ more than 35 years ago!

## Bite-sized news

### 'Making Materials' Workshop

*Jo Cahill describes a day in Rugby in May*



When I saw the 'Making Materials' workshop promoted on the GPUK Facebook site, I registered immediately. I am RE Lead in a Catholic primary school and had been experimenting with the approach as I could see how children could engage in a deeper, more inquisitive way during RE and RHE lessons. My school didn't have the budget to buy the beautiful ready-made resources, so I saw this as a great opportunity to not only create but connect!

I was tentative about going on my own, so I bought a ticket for my mother. I already knew she would find this enjoyable; she is interested in all types of craft, has a Christian background, and serves as a wonderful companion. It was also part of her Mother's Day gift!

On the day, we were warmly greeted by Peter and Alison with a welcome cup of coffee and informal chat. We were then shown the materials and templates which had been prepared in advance according to the stories I had specified to Alison a few weeks before. As the wooden templates for my stories had been pre-cut, we were able to focus more on the media, colours and technique of completing my chosen resources.

We stopped midway for a delicious homemade lunch; to be honest the time passed so quickly. It was the most enjoyable day, not only creating beautiful, unique resources to share with my school, but to create them in collaboration with enthusiastic, friendly and inspiring people.

Towards the end of the day, my mother said how much she had enjoyed listening and sharing in the conversations and how inspired she felt. She now wants to help me make more resources for the other stories! Mum and I are walking different pathways (she retired and me in teaching), yet this workshop encompassed both of us, allowing us to continue sharing our thoughts, ideas and skills. Same time next year?



### Godly Play retreat in Northumberland

*Tanya Sims reflects on the two Godly Play retreats she has attended at Shepherd's Dene in Northumberland*

Some would suggest Northumberland is a long way to go for a weekend, when there are so many spiritual retreats available closer to home. But built on last year's 'wonderings', my desire to journey there again was fuelled by the memories of rediscovering my imagination, using the simplest of materials and forms to be creative. Shepherds Dene is now synonymous for me with somewhere to allow my path to cross with others, for my load to be lightened and to learn. The tricky part is being ready to listen and to reflect. But that first encounter, on the Friday evening, with a familiar story, gave me a sense of





the elusive presence of God. The response times, although shorter, still gave me the opportunity to explore and reflect. The highlights of the weekend were probably the afternoon stroll with its interesting conversations and the percussion workshop that challenged my spontaneity. Hopefully, I will continue to assimilate and process the stories and the wonderings, to allow them to add value.

## Godly Play at Greenbelt

Some of our trainers led Godly Play sessions at Greenbelt this year. The festival is held in Northamptonshire over the August bank holiday weekend. Here is a photo gallery.



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## Made in Bethlehem

By Ian White



Introducing Hani Khair, the artisan who produces the olive wood Holy Family set that many Godly Play practitioners know. Based in Beit Sahour, a suburb of Bethlehem, Palestine, Hani and his workers take local olive wood (trimmings from trees all around the area), dry it thoroughly for a year, and then begin the process of rough cutting, further drying in the Bethlehem sunshine, before finally the sanding, polishing and lacquering of each individual piece! Quite a process and all done in dusty and hot conditions.

Ian White, Director of Micah68 monitors the set on behalf of Godly Play UK, and regularly visits the workshop to encourage Hani and his staff. On a visit in July, Hani passed on the message through Ian that he thanked everyone who, by buying a Holy Family set is helping to support him, his family and his workers at this difficult time for Bethlehem and its surrounds. He hopes that his Holy Family set brings you great joy! For more information, Ian can be contacted on [whitejian@aol.com](mailto:whitejian@aol.com), and through Micah68 Facebook Messenger.



Snapshots from the workshop and the different stages in the making of a Holy Family set.



## Network Groups

Godly Play network groups are once more flourishing as people have slowly redeveloped the habit of going out and sharing together following the long-lasting impact of the pandemic. Here is the group in the North-East, led by Mary Cooper, when they met in the summer.

You'll find a list of all the Network Groups we know about at <https://www.godlyplay.uk/help-and-support/network-groups/> If you are part of, or know of, a network group that is not listed, please tell us, so we can add it to the list.

# Sending out: Events and Training Opportunities

## Conference 2024

Then was our mouth filled with laughter and our tongue with songs of joy.

*Psalm 126*

**We are Gathering for a Conference**



**Saturday, 29 June 2024**

**We shall gather in Gloucester,  
at St Mary de Crypt Church,  
from 10.30 a.m. to 4.30 p.m.**

Cost: £50; Early Bird discount (before 27 February) £40  
Anyone called ISAAC can come at half price! (ID needed)

**We shall think about**

**LAUGHTER**

**with Ian Macdonald.**

Ian is passionate about laughter. He teaches a happiness course, is a laughter yoga instructor and a stand-up comedian. He is also passionate about storytelling. Trained by the Hearth Community, Ian teaches storytelling, and is a member of the Society for Storytelling.

**Then Sarah said, 'God has made me laugh, and everyone who hears of this will laugh with me.'**

*Genesis 21.6*

**Abraham and Sarah had a son. They laughed again, so they named the baby 'Laughter'. In their language the word for 'laughter' is 'Isaac'.**

### What to expect

Ian Macdonald will lead our morning session. In the afternoon there will be a variety of workshops, some practical and some theoretical. Lunch and refreshments during the day are included in the ticket price. On the day before the Conference (on Friday 28 June) there will be a series of enrichment events, including a Making Day, a workshop entitled *What Godly Play can teach us about being trauma informed*, and a meeting for Godly Play UK advocates. There will also be workshops on Godly Play in school, based on the experience of school practitioners.



## The Conference Venue



St Mary-de- Crypt Photo: Philafrenzy CC BY-SA 4.0

St Mary-de-Crypt Church in Gloucester is a medieval church, full of history, and the place where the Sunday School movement was pioneered by Robert Raikes. He is buried in the church, where he had been baptised in 1736. So we shall meet in a place with a long history of concern for children.

Gloucester is around 1.5 hours from London on the train, 50 minutes from Bristol. It is accessed from Junction 11a of the M5. We hope that by holding the conference in a different part of the country, we will enable some new participation. The city, situated close to the Cotswold Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, is interesting in itself:

the Gloucester Docks area has recently been redeveloped and offers interesting museums, including the National Waterways Museum. There is plenty of reasonably priced accommodation in the city centre and in the surrounding area.

A detailed programme, together with booking details and more information on all the workshops and enrichment days will be available before the end of the year so that you can make plans and book as soon as possible.

Save the date and make your plans: Saturday 29 June 2024  
Booking opens on the website on 1 January 2024 Early Bird booking until 27 February

Find fuller details and more information about our events at  
[www.godlyplay.uk](http://www.godlyplay.uk) Enquiries to [admin@godlyplay.uk](mailto:admin@godlyplay.uk)

**Associates of Godly Play UK** support the work of Godly Play trainers in England and Wales. Associate membership offers the chance to be part of our community and to share our vision in a supportive and meaningful way. We welcome membership from individuals, churches, and organisations from the UK and abroad. New members can join using the direct debit form here:

<https://www.godlyplay.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Godly-Play-UK-Associates-app-form-and-direct-debit-form-Oct-2020.pdf>

We also welcome online giving via our website:

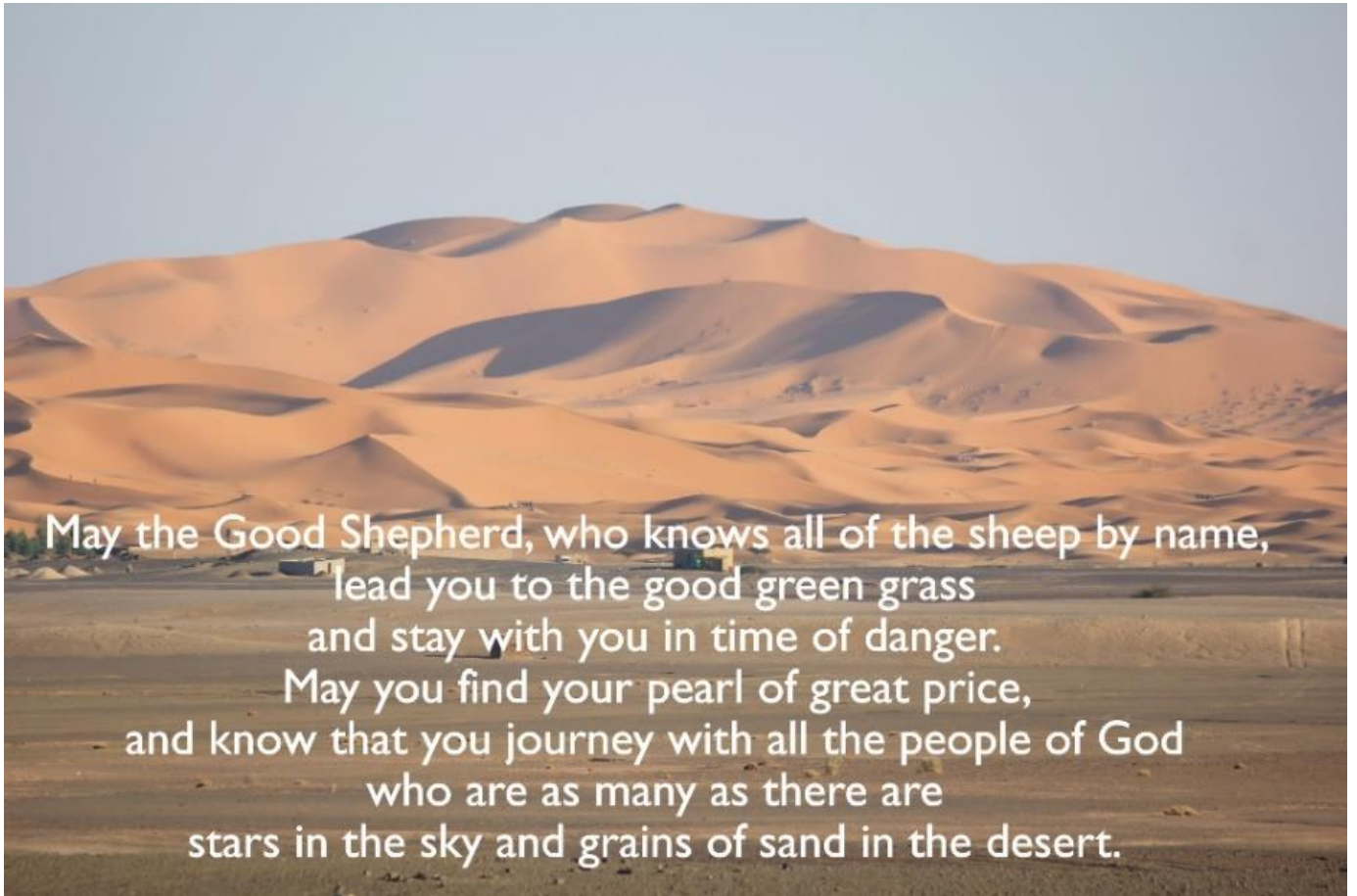
<https://giving.give-star.com/online/godly-play-uk/godly-play-uk>



[www.godlyplay.uk](http://www.godlyplay.uk)

Charity No. 1116846

*A Christian movement centred on childhood spirituality  
providing training to transform thinking and practice for the whole of life*



May the Good Shepherd, who knows all of the sheep by name,  
lead you to the good green grass  
and stay with you in time of danger.  
May you find your pearl of great price,  
and know that you journey with all the people of God  
who are as many as there are  
stars in the sky and grains of sand in the desert.

This issue was devised and edited by Eona Bell, Gill Ambrose, Peter Privett and Judy Yeomans.

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