

The Art of Wondering

Although wondering is at the heart of Godly Play, relatively little has been written about the art of leading wondering. When I completed my training as a Godly Play Trainer I remember thinking this was the area I felt least trained in. Now I suspect this may have been deliberate. The best way to learn about wondering is by doing it and reflecting on your own practice; by getting it right and by getting it wrong. Watching others also helps. But like every other art, practice is indispensable and there's a limit to how much anyone can learn from reading about it. The insights I've gleaned are rooted in my experiences of using Godly Play, with children and with adults, with groups new to Godly Play as well as groups very familiar with its ways.

I wonder what wondering really is?

Wondering is definitely more of an art than a science. Wondering is not about a closely defined style we can formulate and dutifully follow to ensure a positive result every time. It is much more than learning by heart the carefully researched and worded 'wondering questions' that follow the scripts. For the storyteller, leading the wondering means never getting it completely right, and never being able to predict the outcome. It is more open than that.

Enabling responses

At its heart, wondering is about enabling response. This includes the responses of the children individually, the responses of the group collectively and the response of the Spirit as it moves in this group today. This is a task of enormous responsibility and sensitivity. This reminds us why Godly Play is closer to being a kind of spiritual direction than merely an approach to religious education.

Responding to responses

Key to the wondering mind-set is to understand that this not just about asking the appropriate 'set' wondering questions in an appropriate tone and manner. Wondering is also about learning how to respond to the responses too.

When adults first learn about Godly Play they can be so struck by the non-directive role of the storyteller, who intentionally avoids any manipulation of the wondering discussion towards a particular end point. This can create the misconception that the only response the storyteller should make to the wondering of the children is an affirming 'mmm' or nod. Of course this *can* often support the wondering process, but not if it is the storyteller's *only* strategy. Having only one way of responding to responses will model laying everything offered on the surface, i.e. one dimensional wondering, a tacit prohibition on digging deeper. Without a varied set of strategies for responding, the energy for wondering can also fall away.

Skilfully fostering a climate of wondering

Wondering is about modelling and supporting a 'wondering habit', as opposed to a 'what is your answer?' habit (or worse still, a 'what's the answer' habit). So the art of wondering includes discovering when (and how) it is appropriate to invite a child to say

more (or have space to think more) about their initial response, or to ask a follow up, unplanned, wondering question.

This can include the storyteller making a comment that reflects the conflicting wondering responses in the group, and encourages you all to wonder more about that. For example, in the Parable of the Leaven, ‘it’s interesting that some of you think the woman who made the bread is really happy, and others think she’s really fed up’.

Or it might mean supporting a child’s wondering by creating their idea visually. For example, in the Parable of the Good Shepherd, moving the shepherd to be inside the sheepfold when a child suggests he might feel left out standing at the gate and want to be with the sheep. Moving the shepherd inside and saying (or indicating by your facial expression) ‘like this?’ becomes a means to invite further response and wondering about this new meaning from anyone in the circle.

Genuine wondering

There is an almost endless range of skilful strategies storytellers can employ to support wonderful wondering. But as an art, it calls for more than a skilful approach – it requires working from the heart. And so being genuine is hugely important.

It is rather like the difference between a pianist who can play all the right notes, and the artist who really conveys the music from a place deep within them. Wondering is about asking the wondering questions authentically. The phrase ‘I wonder’ is meant to imply that the storyteller actually *is* wondering about this rather than merely asking the children to wonder about this. You are inviting the children to *join* you in wondering about this or that, in something already happening.

So a useful check can be to ask a wondering question only if it really is something you are able to wonder about right now. Sometimes we may have settled on our own answer to a particular question, (e.g. ‘I wonder what the Leaven could really be – well, that’s the Holy Spirit’). Then it is possibly disingenuous to ask it in this frame of mind. Arguably this is too stringent a form of self-discipline since of course often the creativity of the children’s responses can re-open our eyes to other possibilities, and stimulating new spiritual insights for us.

A form of play

Wondering is a kind of play too. The storyteller asks wondering questions and makes further responses to invite play, and the children’s responses are their play, at times serious, at others comical, often both almost side by side. In the ‘wondering part’ of a Godly Play session, a storyteller should feel encouraged by playfulness cues, and not seek to ‘move these on’ to get to the more ‘important’ discussion necessarily.

For years we were told that younger children especially could not manage abstract thinking, but increasingly this view is challenged (van Oers 2007). Through play especially, children *are* able to engage in abstract, ‘higher level’ thought. The playfulness that wondering can foster can help children find a way to enter and even express the ‘higher’ level, complexity of the material. One needs to be careful that such play is not simply used as the means to an end: to get children to reach an impressive level of intellectual theologising. The goal is rather that the play supports getting into an ‘alternative reality’ mindset, that throws open possibilities and frees up defences, and thus inspires a quality of intrepid spiritual exploration not just clever thinking.

The suggested order of the wondering questions is often carefully judged to help this play process and play function. ‘Easier’, *apparently* ‘sillier’ questions come first (e.g. ‘I wonder what part you liked best’, or ‘I wonder if the sheep have names’), that can signal permission for the playfulness *all* the questions will need to be really entered into.

Not just the ‘wondering part’ of the session

We naturally identify the part of a Godly Play session with ‘I wonder’ questions as the part when ‘wondering’ happens. However, it is important to be aware this is only a fraction of when the wondering really is. Much of the wondering may occur internally as the story unfolds, and so is supported by the pace, space and care taken by the storyteller. But perhaps most of all, wondering is at the heart of the ‘response’ or ‘work’ time in a Godly Play session. A clear message to give is that wondering discussion in the group is just one way to wonder, and that all the activities chosen in the work time are other valuable ways to wonder too, and most of important of all, that it is never just about words.

I wonder what I like best about wondering?

I like wondering because its aim is to form life long spiritual habits, to shape the bigger picture of spiritual engagement. Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, writes that spirituality is not so much an exercise of ‘interrogating the data’ of the Christian story and its traditions, but more importantly, the opportunity for the data to interrogate *us* (Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge*). Wondering ensures by its style (when carefully employed) that we are interrogated by the data – it asks questions of us, stimulates our authentic response and heightens an awareness of how it challenges us.

I especially like how approaching this aim is achieved. In each set of wondering questions there is a careful and wise balancing of the personal and collective, the emotional and the intellectual, the narrative and the conceptual/analytical (in parable), the here and the everywhere (in liturgical wondering). The effort to ensure balance reflects a care for a robust spiritual life in which our strengths can sustain us (e.g. for a child who has a more emotional preference), as much as our weaknesses are challenged (e.g for someone who is wary of thinking about spiritual matters analytically).

Another balance I like about wondering is the silliness and authority of the wondering questions suggested. On paper some seem ridiculous, irrelevant, skip-able (how could ‘naming the birds’ help?!), less profound, likely to provoke silliness or rather obvious answers (e.g I wonder are the people happy? I wonder which was the neighbour to the man who was hurt?). One can be tempted to think of ‘better ones’, or only use the ‘better looking ones’. But, like the scripts and materials themselves, the wondering questions are a valuable gift. The questions represent years of careful empirical research with children testing out the kinds of questions that help them enter the material more, that help them to begin the process of using the language in the story or lesson to articulate (not always in words of course) their own spiritual concerns. So I like the paradox: the security of knowing these well-tested questions are likely to work in unguarded ways that I could never have predicted.

I wonder what is the most important thing about wondering?

Just as different kinds of stories are differentiated in the Godly Play approach (sacred stories, parables, liturgical lessons), each genre has its own kind of wondering questions designed specifically to help the children enter *that* kind of language further. Just as one uses different tools to open for example, a door (a key) and a show (an overture), Godly Play recognises the need for different wondering tools to open different kinds of Christian language.

Sacred Stories

Wondering with sacred stories involves four core questions (1. I wonder which part you like best?, 2...is the most important?, 3...is most about you?, 4...could be left out and still have all we needed?).

There are important patterns in these, especially in this order. The first and third invite a *personal* response, the second and fourth invite the consideration to be negotiated by circle of participants together, a *community* endeavour. There is also an alternating pattern of inviting *affective* and *intellectual* responses.

This helps with that balance a healthy spiritual life needs, and helps to educate us all to recognise that an intellectual or conceptual way of understanding faith is best rooted (and still in dialogue with) a good amount of personal and emotional reality.

Berryman is conscious of his intention that the sacred story wondering helps people to open up further issues of identity, just as the stories themselves deal largely with questions of identity – of who God is and who the people of God are. The wondering might therefore switch easily and frequently between conversation about ‘then’ and ‘now’, ‘them’ and ‘us’. The storyteller’s task includes being aware of how a group wonders in each of these ‘modes’ and supporting each as valid and reciprocally beneficial to the other.

The fourth question, ‘what could we leave out and still have all the story we need?’ puzzles some teachers. Some suspect this is not an ‘open’ question, since the ‘right’ answer must surely be ‘no, all of the story is important’. Certainly, *any* open question can be a disguise for a closed question. But the spirit of this question should be open and perhaps the most playful of the set. (Note, its not that the play comes first and is superseded by the more important work – the more important the work, the more crucial play might be). This fourth question can invite genuine analysis, dissection of the story. It can be permission to consider aspects that have disturbed or angered participants (the parts *not* liked). It can be a catalyst for debate and conflict, and opportunities for learning how communities can be both honest and gracious with each other differences. And it may be particularly about identifying the spiritual *needs* that are being met in this experience of the story. In other words, the culmination of the discussion process and the springboard to the individual work time.

Parable

Jesus leads the way in terms of the approach to parable wondering. In order to approach a complex concept, the last thing one does is conceptualise. Extensive narrative building comes before any move to identify principles or concepts. We seemed primed to favour explanatory concepts and rush to ways that ‘sort out’ complex matters which can excuse

us from continuing to think hard about what is really meant by ‘heaven’, or ‘who Jesus is’ or ‘how can I love?’

So in parable wondering there is a deliberate attempt to widen the narrative further, particularly at first, to thwart the tendency to rush to the sorting out the meaning. So effort is given to gradually and playfully animating the image, giving the sower a name, wondering how they feel and so on. This lays the foundation (as well as opens up wonderful unforeseen possibilities) for getting inside the parable, and trying to see ‘what *is* this really like?’ This foundation stage might take many sessions, even years, before children are really ready to address the ‘what is this really?’

However an important sign for the storyteller leading parable wondering is when children’s responses start to get prefaced by ‘it’s like when...’ and give an example or instance of their own experience, or something they can imagine. For example, ‘It’s like when I was bullied in school’, ‘It’s like my home’, ‘Its like when there was a baby hidden in my mum’s tummy’). This demonstrates the participants have been supported to discover that parables do not deal with ideas that can be explained in logic, or rules or propositions, but rather invite us into often deep and complex areas of being and living, where often the most only way to make any sense is through further imaginative imagery, creating further parables of our own. In a recent training session, an observer noted more than eighteen new ‘parables’ suggested by the group as they wondered and wrestled with the meaning of the parable of the Good Samaritan!

The ‘pre-story’ wondering in parables is just as important (e.g. I wonder what this blue could be) to the overall wondering process.. It is akin to the ‘free association’ exercise in psychoanalysis, opening up our minds to a more creative place of inspiration. This stage also helps establish the parameters of thinking – the wider they are set before the story is offered, the deeper the possibilities afterwards. Similarly the more laughter and perhaps silly ideas are accepted by the storyteller, the more willing some may be to share difficult and very serious concerns later on.

Liturgical wondering

This combines some of the principles of sacred story wondering, as some of our liturgy is about re-telling the central stories (e.g. the Eucharist), with an attitude of making connections and finding how we participate in this. This follows the functions of liturgy per se – to help us connect, to remember, and to participate. Hence the questions are designed to stimulate that, ‘where have you seen this, been close to this’ or ‘what could you bring to this’.

As the storyteller, it always helps to be aware of the particular kind of work the wondering is asking of the participants. So in the case of liturgical wondering, the role of the storyteller may be a little more like that of someone directing liturgy itself, maintaining a sense of order and structure that enables others to find the freedom to participate. This might involve an attitude of carefully accepting the offerings of the community (e.g. when the wondering invites the physical bringing of materials to add to the story). It can also mean supporting silent wondering, and other ways in which wondering can be expressed without words –and not asking a child to back up her actions with words.

I wonder where and when wondering is especially in me?

It can take a long time to feel confident about leading the wondering. A first step is letting go. Sometimes this can be hard because we so carefully learn each word and movement to tell the story, so it is quite a switch of style to lead the wondering where anything might happen. It may require a different side of us. For example, if you have been very much 'in the story' and so have the group, you need to deliberately 'come out' to some extent in order to be available to the group, or at least to as many of them who want to wonder about the story, rather than stay silently within it..

A useful habit is to ask yourself the wondering questions in advance of the session. This serves both as spiritual preparation and as a way to clear your spiritual material out of the space that you want to make available for the children.

Finding the wondering in you may also mean noticing what kinds of wondering especially suits you and what comes less naturally, and therefore requires more conscious effort. Some people are great at silent wondering, or wondering by moving the materials to 'hear' the meaning suggested by participants. Others may be great at listening to responses, really hearing what's said, supporting people to say what they need to and get heard by the rest of the group, or fantastic at facilitating debate and even holding diversity and conflicting responses. Watching others is an ideal way to help you reflect on your own practice and pick up further strategies to develop your wondering palette.

The pastoral skill in wondering cannot be overestimated, and takes a lifetime (of reflecting on mistakes) to develop. The judgement of Solomon is required to learn the right time to manage the wondering by mainly really listening, or provoking, or being the safe anchor a lively discussion and much more.

Another aspect to the art of wondering in which we may really enter what this is all about is the reflection after each session. Godly Play teachers should make time to wonder about the children themselves too. Two wondering questions, (using Berryman's definition of blessing as 'to call out the good',) help me do that: 'I wonder how this session helped me to call out the good in them today?', and 'I wonder how they helped to call out the good in me today?'

I wonder if there is anything we could leave out about wondering and still have all we needed?

There are certainly some misguided approaches to Godly Play wondering that I wish I could purge.

It is very important that this is not used just a method of storytelling, leaving out the wondering altogether. To leave it out in fact teaches children a powerful and negative lesson. It teaches children that their response is unnecessary, of no value, over time they learn to ignore it (and thereby to learn to ignore what God may be saying to them).

Equally, Godly Play can be broken if we leave out the spirit in which wondering is intended, that is to help children enter the material and grow as a community listening and wrestling together. A person might ask all the 'right wondering questions' but in such a way that their tone of voice, their body language do not genuinely invite the children to play and find out more. Also, the spirit of wondering could be broken by the kind of

follow up response the storyteller gives. For instance if these imply that some answers are more valuable than others, or that their own agenda (to get to discussion about the question about the kingdom for example) is more important than listening to what the group has found interesting.

But is there really anything we could leave out?

Godly Play owes a lot to Montessori's view of teaching as 'helping the child to do things for herself'. Is there a case for wondering being something the children eventually do without the need for the storyteller? Are the wondering questions rather more like Bruner's scaffolding, which ultimately can be removed?

In a sense the answer is probably yes. Wondering is in the broadest sense about forming lifelong spiritual habits that the children can take into any situation in which Christian language can help them to make meaning.

With a group of children (or adults) who have become fluent in the ways of Godly Play, children will begin to ask the wondering questions for themselves, responding as if they've been asked 'I wonder what you like best' or whatever, even though the storyteller has not actually had a chance to say that yet. They may even have intuitively learnt which wondering tools to use for sacred stories as opposed to parables or liturgical lessons. The role of the storyteller may also be eclipsed when the children become confident enough to ask their own, new wondering questions, and carefully listen to each other's responses and new questions without much need for adult moderation. All of which is a wonderful sign that they have integrated this distinctive Christian way of learning and living together; meeting to learn and learning to meet with the help of God's word.

So perhaps one of the most encouraging moments in any session is when children wonder their *own* wondering questions (and happen to do this aloud). This may mean having the confidence to abandon your planned wondering questions. In this sense, we really might leave out the planned wondering questions and still have all the wondering, and all the Godly Play we need.

References

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