

Returning to a Childlike Faith:
Cultivating Trust, Wonder, and Play as Virtue and Worship

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I. Introduction

Children of God

Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? A child, Jesus says: For unless one turns and becomes like a child, she shall never enter the kingdom of heaven. He who humbles himself like a child shall be greatest in the Lord's kingdom. These are the words of the Lord.¹ Children are beloved by Christ and adored by today's adult. Books like J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* and Lois Lowry's *The Giver* and films like Richard Linklater's *Boyhood* and Wes Anderson's *Moonrise Kingdom*, classic pieces of artistic beauty in the genre of coming-of-age-fiction, possess a certain nostalgic appreciation, a reminiscent familiarity, for the celebrations and decimations of the adolescent protagonist's story. Dr. Seuss and Shel Silverstein remain timeless, with their characters and storylines anchored in the memories of those long- and far-removed from the age when their noses were buried in those outrageously illustrated pages. Adults dream of when time was abundant, responsibilities were fictitious, and money was nothing other than colored paper passed between finger-nail-chewed hands during "Monopoly Night."

One cannot help but smile at the imagine of a child frolicking in the backyard, chasing a monarch butterfly as it teasingly dances inches out of his reach; a young girl squats by the drainage grate, dropping small pebbles between the crossbars,

¹ Matthew 18:1-4

inspecting the *splunk* and *splash* sounds that echo back up to her; a yellow twinge catches our butterfly chaser's eye, and he wanders to the far corner of the yard, where he begins to pick fistfuls of dandelions and white clover; and our pebble dropper, feeling a gentle tap on her shoulder, turns to a frazzled bouquet of backyard weeds being offered to her by the boy who lives across the street, two houses down. This scene paints an image of purity and profound simplicity. It makes the adult smile, for there is delight in childhood and the innocence that accompanies it. Children are excitingly energetic, outlandishly imaginative, and wondrously content with life.

A child trusts. A child wonders. A child plays. And when a child trusts, it is a trust of complete surrender and abandon. When the child wonders, it is a wonder reflective of the power, magnificence, creativity, and immanence of God. When the child plays, it is a play in which the Divine participates, in which laughter and imagination abound. The adult delights in the child because he sees what he has lost. He revels in the trust, wonder, and play that a child so boundlessly emanates. The Lord likewise delights, pleased that the child continues to worship through these virtues.

Yet, although enraptured by and endeared to the behavior of a child, the adult assumes superiority to childhood. Maturity is a natural, necessary process of intellectual, relational, spiritual, emotional, and professional ascent. The "good ol' days" of childhood are remembered with a stifled smirk but with an acceptance that childhood is, while certainly entertaining and beautiful, a stage of life to be packed

away. “You need to grow up,” “Stop being so childish,” and “You are acting like a child” are insults in today’s language. A grown man cannot play catch unless he does so with his nephew. A young businesswoman would be ridiculed for wearing a bright, flowery dress to a formal meeting. An adult can appreciate the iconic light pole twirl in *Singing in the Rain* (1952) as a lovely song about falling in love, but that same adult would never actually joyfully dance in the rain. Such an act would be reckless. Board games are for children. One ought not lie in the grass gazing at the stars or the clouds, or roll up his pants and wade through the stream in the park, or doodle aimless figures on the restaurant napkin. These actions are saved for childhood. The adult fears being viewed as childish. Yet children are often more virtuous, more lovely, more grateful, and more lively than adults. In many ways, today’s adult should return to the beauty of childhood.

Christian mystics such as Julian of Norwich and Saint Thérèse of Lisieux have elegantly explored the notion of this divine delight in childlike faith. In her autobiography, Saint Thérèse reflects upon her life with a humble delight, remembering how she wrapped God around her finger with her habit of falling asleep during prayer. She knew that God adored “little nothings” like herself who fell asleep in their fathers’ arms.² She held a deep reverence for the power of a child’s faith,

² St. Thérèse of Lisieux. *The Autobiography of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux: The Story of a Soul*. John Beevers, Trans. New York, NY: Doubleday, 1989.

asserting, "a soul in the state of grace need fear nothing from devils, for they are so cowardly that they flee from the gaze of children."³

Julian offers a unique interpretation of the paternal and maternal qualities of the Godhead. In God our Father Almighty, she says, we have our being. In God our Mother of Mercy we have our reforming and restoring.⁴ Our great Father, Almighty God, has known and loved the children of God since before time began. From this it follows, "as truly as God is our Father, so truly is God our Mother. Our Father wills, our Mother works, our good Lord the Holy Spirit confirms."⁵ God the Father feeds and fosters us according to the great supreme lovingness of the Mother and the need of the child. Julian praises God as our fair and sweet heavenly Mother, who views her precious and lovely children of grace "with gentleness and meekness and all the lovely virtues which belong to children by nature. For the child does not naturally despair of the mother's love, the child does not naturally rely upon itself, naturally the child loves the mother and either of them the other."⁶ The child selflessly loves, caring not about what his mother does or what his mother says but simply that his mother *is*. As Julian concludes, there is "no greater statue in this life than childhood, with its feebleness

³ Ibid. 27

⁴ Julian of Norwich. *Showings*. Colledge, Edmund, and James Walsh, Trans. Payne, Richard J., Ed. The Classics of Western Spirituality. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1977. pp. 294-295

⁵ Ibid. 296

⁶ Ibid. 304

and lack of power and intelligence.”⁷ Our identity is rooted in our relational connectedness to God: it is a relationship of Father and Mother to son or daughter. It is one where we are defenseless and dependent and God is sufficient. Even as we age, we remain children of God.

The language associated with childhood is not unanimously connoted today. Childhood is often associated with childishness, and childishness is disadvantageous. However, note the difference between childishness and childlikeness. Both share a similar definition: *of, like, or relating to a child or childhood*. However, *childish* carries a negative connotation, synonymous with words such as *immature, juvenile, foolish, infantile, and silly*. *Childlike*, however, is more often associated to words like *unfeigned, pure, innocent, and trusting*. One can chose to be childlike without adopting childish behavior. One can return to the virtues of childhood without returning to the immaturity of childishness. Growing older is inevitable, but growing up is a choice. In a poetic sense, one may chose to befriend Peter Pan’s plea to “never grow up.”

Imperfection of Childhood

Of course, the child is not perfect. In fact, Paul says in his letter to the Corinthians, “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways” (1 Corinthians 13:11). The

⁷ Ibid. 305

author of the book of Ephesians instructs the community to “no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes” (Ephesians 4:14). Scripture is not unanimously supportive of childhood. Children possess virtues that wane with age, certainly, but they likewise are just as imperfect and deprived and adults. According to St. Irenaeus, humanity was created immature or not yet complete. Humanity is unaccustomed to, and unexercised in, perfect discipline. St. Irenaeus reflects, “For as it certainly is in the power of a mother to give strong food to her infant, [she does not do so], as the child is not yet able to receive more substantial nourishment; so also it was possible for God Himself to have made man perfect from the first, but man could not receive this [perfection], being as yet an infant.”⁸ To Irenaeus, even without a Fall, Christ was always going to come. Christ was always destined to become incarnate, to pass through the state of infancy in common with the rest of humankind, so that humanity might be able to be perfectly enter into communion with the Divine.⁹ And so all, even the child in her innocence, are not yet complete in union with the self and in intimacy with the Divine. So it is important to identify, albeit briefly, the necessities of maturation and the deficits of relational grace in childhood.

⁸ St. Irenaeus. *Against Heresies*. Alexander Roberts and William Rambaut, Trans. *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, Eds. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1885. Book IV, Chapter 38.

⁹ Ibid. Book IV, Chapter 38

Maturation is not a ticket to perfection, but nor is it a detriment to having a childlike faith. Robert Orsi reflects that, if children are more fit for the kingdom of heaven than are adults (Matthew 18:3), then this process of maturing can only be seen as a fall from grace.¹⁰ This of course is not the case. Maturity often promotes safety from physical dangers to which a careless child might easily fall victim. In his immaturity, a boy might choose to run headlong into a dense thicket while chasing a rabbit or to wander aimlessly in the darkness, journeying farther and farther from his home because he is aware only of his whimsical thoughts and burning curiosity. A child may frolic, crawl, dive, or climb into danger because he has failed to calculate risk, to observe his surroundings, and to balance the reward of his endeavor to the potential for injury that it might incur. He will climb a tree as high as he can because he cares for nothing other than the adventure. In so doing, the child is needlessly and recklessly endangering himself because of a lack of maturity.

Another mark of maturity often absent in childhood is that of social awareness. A child picking her nose moments before grabbing a hold of her grandmother's hand challenges socially constructed understandings of disgust and appropriateness. A little boy jumping from chair to chair during a visitation or coughing, mouth agape, during a eulogy challenges socially constructed expectations of solemn reverence. A girl spitting her peas out at the dinner table because she has decided they are not to her liking

¹⁰ Orsi, Robert A. "A Crisis About the Theology of Children." pp. 27-33. *Harvard Divinity School Bulletin*, Vol. 30. 2002. p. 29

challenges socially constructed standards for table manners and behavior. A child asking a wheelchair-bound veteran where his legs are and then asking for a ride on his lap challenges socially constructed methods of sensitivity. Her behavior is not malicious or destructive, nor does it consume the other, but because she has yet to learn social constructs for interactive behavior, she might foment discomfort. The acceptance of social expectations is not in itself virtuous, but it is nevertheless a sign of awareness and respect. It is through maturation that one begins to understand standards for hygiene (covering one's nose during a sneeze) and sensitivity (remaining quiet during a presentation or performance).

Another mark still is professional responsibility. An adult ought not romantically pursue a coworker with ceaseless persistence. He ought not drum his fingers or pen against the table during a meeting. He ought not cry uncontrollably when he is scolded or corrected by his boss. He ought not make crude jokes or gossip about fellow workers. In the professional world, maturity is a sign of respect for the mission of the organization and for those who serve that organization. Childish behavior in such a space is not virtuous or graceful. Similarly, a return to childlike faith does not necessitate a return to social ineptitude or physical whimsy.

Children are not perfect. Consider again Irenaeus thoughts on immaturity: the child is born immature, meant to develop into a deeper understanding and living into the *imago dei*. Similarly, Saint Augustine refuses to view child as innocent. He laments,

"Children's sins are enacted among 'tutors, schoolmasters, footballs, nuts, and pet sparrows' while the sins of adults are made visible in relation to 'magistrates and kings, gold, estates, and slaves.' The consequences may vary, but the sins are the same."¹¹

Children are endearing to adults often because they embody a beautiful, untainted innocence. They are not yet aware of the evil of the world and thus have an unhindered ability to love abundantly. Children are perceived to (at least symbolically) embody innocence. Of course, this is not true. A younger brother quickly learns what he can do to most irritate his older sister. He will sneak cookies from the cookie jar because he knows he is not allowed to have any before dinner. A girl will scream, "I hate you!" to her mother, who will not allow her to bathe her toy horses in the pond at the park. Children can be stubborn, selfish, and malicious. These behaviors are not inherently against the innocence of children; instead, they may be connected with the broken systems into which they are born. Nevertheless, in their behavior (albeit not necessarily in their nature), children are not innocent.

Returning to a Childlike Faith

Yet the innocence of childhood is not that of which the adult ought to seek recollection. Christ alone is able to cleanse and renew, to forgive and to heal. What the adult may seek is the qualities associated with this innocence. Of course, much of what

¹¹ Saint Augustine. *The Confessions of Saint Augustine: The Classic Autobiography of the Man Who Journeyed from Sin to Sainthood*. Rex Warner, Trans. London, England: Signet Classics, 1963. Book I, Chapter 9.

is known of childhood—our own childhood and the childhoods of those we study—is mediated through the language, memory, and voice of an adult.¹² And even personal reflection is difficult; for although there is a child hidden within our work, it is doubtful she left behind many texts to study.¹³ Yet the significance of a childlike faith is too bountiful to leave unexplored. Stephanie Paulsell questions what it is about children that so suits them for the kingdom. Except for one reference to humility in Matthew 18:4, the Gospels fail to elaborate. Paulsell concludes that, because of this, there is ample room for interpretation.¹⁴ Therefore, what is offered here is one of countless catalogues of the spiritual gifts of childhood.

Perhaps the best method to examine a childlike faith is to do so through the lens of the child: through trust, wonder, and play. Perhaps this calls for an abandoning of certainty and intellect. Perhaps we ought to try to return, as best as is possible, to our childhood selves. Stephanie Paulsell remembers her childhood:

I want to be lost like that. I've tried a few things: turning in circles in the front yard until I fall down, drunk and dizzy on the spinning earth. Swinging in the swing set my dad set up for my sister and me in the back yard, chanting Narnia, Narnia, in the hopes that I would suddenly break

¹² Paulsell, Stephanie. "Lost in the Mystery of God: Childhood in the History of Christian Spirituality." *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality*, Vol. 8. pp. 83-96. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008. pp. 87

¹³ Ibid. 86

¹⁴ Ibid. 88

though. Pressing my hands against my closed eyes as I lay in bed, watching chips of pink and blue swirl against the dark. Kneeling in the pine woods behind our house, well off the paths where the neighborhood boys race around on banana seat bikes, playing cards clipped to their wheel spokes with clothing pins for maximum racket.¹⁵

Those who turn and become like children, Jesus says, will enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 18:3). They will become lost in the mystery of God. It is in the experience of being lost that one feels most truly found. Let us get lost.

II. Trust

Manifestation of Trust in Children

A child, thrust into a world of searing light and the cacophony of the delivery room, clings to her mother with the one thing she innately knows: trust. The very first relational connection the child has with her parents is one rooted in trust.¹⁶ As she transitions away from the warmth and security and certainty of the womb, the child is exposed to the breadth of the world and its bombarding stimuli; the source of her nutritional intake, the umbilical cord, has been severed and she is left entirely exposed. According to some schools of developmental psychology, before the infant even

¹⁵ Ibid. 83-84

¹⁶ Enns, Peter. *The Sin of Certainty: Why God Desires Our Trust More Than Our "Correct" Beliefs*. New York, NY: HarperOne, 2016. pp. 15, 23

comes to a bodily awareness of herself, she views the mother as an extension of the self.¹⁷ However, as she does come to be aware of her own self, she likewise comes to realize that the world is fraught with that which is *not right*, such as hunger, fear, pain, and discomfort. The child must learn to trust her mother, who becomes to her no longer an extension of the infant but rather someone outside of her.

In infancy, the child tenderly suckles at his mother's breast. The mother, recognizing her child's need, presents herself to him, quite vulnerably, so that he might feed and be well. And the child receives his mother's breast and feeds. His trust for her is natural; it is almost a first naïveté yet to be challenged by betrayal. Certainly he has no other option, but he trusts her because he has no reason to suspect she might provide him anything other than sustenance. Trust comes easily to the infant, and his life has thus far been established entirely upon that trust. What he knows of life is that his mother offers him milk and cradles him as he sleeps. However, as the child ages, life becomes more than a simple exhibition of trust. The child begins to do more than sleep and suckle. He begins to adventure, to inquire, and to create. Even so, the child depends upon his parents for nourishment. A child not suckling at his mother's breast will be sucking upon a bottle, cradled gently in the crook of his mother's arm, or opening his mouth with playful giggles as his father's zooms the airplane of squash-

¹⁷ Pipp, Sandra, Kurt W. Fischer, and Sybillyn Jennings. "Acquisition of Self- and Mother Knowledge in Infancy." *Developmental Psychology*, Vol. 23. American Psychological Association, Inc., 1987. p. 86

and-carrot-flavored baby food towards the landing pad of the child's outstretched tongue.

As the child continues to develop, she becomes increasingly prone to discipline. The training of a child in the way she ought to go is one of correction and guidance, of reprimand and accountability (Proverbs 22:6). Within this discipline, a child trusts her caregiver to educate the child in how to best live. A girl runs haphazardly into the street to retrieve the ball that she threw too far and is narrowly missed by a car that swerves to avoid her, blaring its horn in fright and anger. Her father, who firmly grasps her arm and explains to her the foolishness of her action and the danger of her unawareness, immediately scolds the child. She is certainly upset and cries in response; but ultimately at the foundation of this interaction is trust. The child trusts her father, despite his stern disciplinary scolding, to know what is best for her.

Julian of Norwich reflected in her 14th-century text *Showings* that a mother "may sometimes suffer the child to fall and to be distressed in various ways, for its own benefit, but she can never suffer any kind of peril to come to her child, because of her love."¹⁸ A boy insists that he be allowed to create a culinary concoction of apple juice, salt and pepper, strawberry yogurt, cinnamon, and crushed cereal. His parents warn him that he ought not drink it; it will not taste pleasant at all. However, they do not stop him from testing his "masterpiece." He quickly learns, through stifled gags and

¹⁸ Julian of Norwich. *Showings*. pp. 300-301

hasty spits into the sink, that his parents were right. He is not mad at his parents for their lack of intervention. As Julian suggests, they have allowed their child to be distressed (in a miniscule way, of course) without allowing him to suffer a kind of peril. In this lesson, the child continues to trust that his parents care for his wellbeing despite their refusal to intervene. Similarly, St. John of the Cross explains the painful weaning the soul experiences as it enters into the dark night. The infant soul has grown too affectionate towards the spiritual milk from its mother's breast. It desires the spiritual milk for its warmth rather than for the milk itself.¹⁹ God disciplines this misplaced desire by weaning the suckling child.

Furthermore, a child's immediate response to fear and uncertainty is to trust her caregiver. At a petting zoo, a child will look to her father for affirmation as to whether or not she ought to pet the nearby goat. Her look asks *Is it safe?* and she trusts her father's nod. She will run headlong to her mother's arms when a group of leashed dogs start ferociously barking at her from across the park. She is frightened and shaken, and her immediate need is to be held by her mother.²⁰ She slips on a doll sprawled out on the carpet and crashes into a box of toys in the corner, splitting her lip on the hard basket handle. She runs to her father, who is quickly rising from the couch on the far side of the room, ready to receive her seeking for protection and comfort. A child trusts

¹⁹ St. John of the Cross. *Dark Night of the Soul*. E. Allison Peers, Trans. and Ed. New York, NY: Doubleday, 1990. p. 36

²⁰ Julian of Norwich. *Showings*. p. 301

the caregiver to affirm when the child is unsure, to protect when the child is endangered, and to console when the child is injured. Of course, this assumes attentive and lovingly responsive caregivers, which tragically is not always the case.

Another manifestation of trust in children is their proneness to accept truth. Of course, this often leads to an unfortunate gullibility and ease to be deceived, but it begins as a healthy trust. It often leads to curiosity and exploration. That there are thousands of visible stars in the night sky is met with a wondrous “Wow! Really? How did they get there?” The child ceaselessly asks *Why?* not because she doubts the validity of her parents’ warning; in fact, she trusts her parents. She inquires out of that trust, seeking to understand more completely that which she has heard. Consider a child who has been introduced to the idea of Christ Jesus. Having never met Christ face-to-face, having no grasp of theological vocabulary, and caring very little about ecclesiological, Christological, eschatological, pneumatological, and hamatological issues, the child deliberately decides to believe in the Messiah. She lacks understanding and knowledge but is abundant with trust in what her parent, pastor, or teacher has revealed to her. She does not need an understanding of the geographical location of Jerusalem or a familiarity with the language of *atonement* or *iniquity*. She learns that she sins. She learns that she is forgiven. She learns that Jesus loves her. And she trusts in that truth.

Decay of Trust

Of course, the trust of a child wanes with age. Because of the idolization of knowledge, the perceived necessity of progress, and an experience-catalyzed cynicism to the world, the process of maturity is often accompanied by a diminishing of trust. Trust decays. An adult need not trust in the manner a child must: an adult does not depend upon parental nourishment or discipline. A child's trust most often is rooted in dependence. However, as the individual gains independence, he likewise learns to limit his trust; trust becomes inward and skepticism replaces the external manifestation of trust.

This decay is often the result of the idolization of knowledge. In *Life Is a Miracle: An Essay Against Modern Superstition*, Wendell Berry attacks today's scientific and academic community as centers for arrogant acquisition and toxic hubris. There is no modesty before the Mystery of life.²¹ Berry laments the notion that a mystery "can exist only because of human ignorance, and human ignorance is always remediable." He challenges the "pursuit of 'the answer,'" suggesting instead to respond with deference, respect, and reverence.²² The adult has no time or space for mystery. Mysteries are scheduled for solution and thus become problems instead of mysteries.²³ This is why

²¹ Johnson, Luke Timothy. *Faith's Freedom: A Classic Spirituality for Contemporary Christians*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1990. p. 16

²² Berry, Wendell. *Life Is a Miracle: An Essay Against Modern Superstition*. New York, NY: Counterpoint, 2000. p. 27

²³ Ibid. 36

the apophatic way, the way of negation, is often an alien concept for most contemporary Christians. It is an approach to the Divine that seeks to enter into the mystery of God rather than attempt to grasp the Divine as an object to be known, solved, and understood. However, in understanding in knowledge, knowledge is power, and power is security, then knowledge must be pursued. He who does not know is less equipped than he who does know. Ignorance is unattractive and detrimental. Knowledge is superior. And with this mentality, trust quickly decays.

In moments of uncertainty, one may respond with a smug grasping for certainty even to the point of denying that which is uncertain. However, trust can also manifest itself in situations of uncertainty. For one to trust another, he must, at least on some level, accept that he lacks understanding, power, and control. Riddled with deceit and selfish ambition, today's society is too decrepit and desiccated of an environment for trust to inhabit. Very quickly trust for politicians and the government, for professionals and corporations, for the education system and religious institutions, and for the medical industry is waning.²⁴ Relational, societal, and professional ascent is most often done through exhibitions of independence and skepticism towards others.

Trust has been met with betrayal. It has been met with deceit. Adultery, embezzlement, perjury, slander... in a world ravished by the need to progress, by the individual's consuming self-seeking desires, trust necessitated by relationships

²⁴ Ibid. 94

becomes cynicism born from betrayal. Those who refuse to believe in a deistic entity, those who affirm the atheistic mindset, struggle trusting a world wrought with evil. But even for a Christian evil exists. How can one trust in that which is good if that which is evil seems to be more prevalent? John Roth offers a response to the problem of evil by promoting a theodicy of protest. He asserts, "God's saving acts in the world are too few and far between... Why should anybody bother with a God like this one, who seems so infrequently to do the best that is within God's power?"²⁵ He refuses to acquit or ignore God, but rather demands that God be put on trial. God cannot be excused or exonerated. God must repent.²⁶ He bewails, "As long as memory persists—God's and humanity's—shadows of injustice, suffering, unjustifiable waste, and the unanswerable questions they raise will haunt reality."²⁷ John Swinton comments on the pastoral responses to the problem of evil by identifying another difficult question: Why would one worship a God who so often seems to be surpassed in love and mercy by God's own creatures?²⁸

Returning to Trust

This paper seeks not to provide an answer to the problem of evil. Nor does it seek to discredit, justify, or belittle situations that result in the decay of trust. Blind

²⁵ Roth, John K. *Encountering Evil*. Stephen T. Davis, Ed. "A Theodicy of Protest." pp. 1-37. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001. pp. 11

²⁶ Ibid. 6

²⁷ Ibid. 32

²⁸ Swinton, John. *Raging with Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007. p. 21

worldly trust may lead to repeated defeat, betrayal, and suffering. Balanced skepticism offers a certain level of security and self-preservation. Yet trust is virtuous. Consider the issue of the idolization of knowledge and progress. Berry suggests, "Perhaps the most proper, and the most natural, response to our state of ignorance is not haste to increase the amount of available information, or even to increase knowledge, but rather a lively and convivial engagement with the issues of form, elegance, and kindness."²⁹ He advocates against the modern university's enforcement of obedience to the industrial ideals of high productivity and constant innovation.³⁰ Berry ultimately warns that, in the adult's pursuit of complete understanding and control of the world, he risks destroying its wholeness and sanctity.³¹

In refusing to pursue complete knowledge and instead accepting modesty before the majesty of mystery, one is exhibiting trust. It is a trust in the Divine, where one leans not on his own understanding but instead trusts in the Lord with all his heart (Proverbs 3:5). In this verse, the Hebrew *batach* suggests a confidence in the refuge offered by the object of the trust.³² Proverbs 3:5 commands that the believer abandons his own understanding and control and instead resides in the sovereignty of the Lord. Isaiah 50:10 uses the Hebrew *yibtah* to refer to a trust that is bold: "Who among you

²⁹ Berry. *Life Is a Miracle*. p. 149

³⁰ Ibid. 63

³¹ Ibid. 74

³² Botterweck, G. Johannes and Helmer Ringgren, Eds. *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*. Vol. II. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975. p. 88

fears the Lord and obeys the voice of his servant? Let him who walks in darkness and has no light trust in the name of the Lord and rely on his God.”³³ Of course, the trust of a child is not always necessarily rooted in a bold confidence in God. However, if the adult is to return to the virtue of childlike trust, it is important to note the Scriptural call to do so. An adult need not trust that which a child trusts in order to return to the virtue that is largely evident in childhood.

The childlike trust an adult ought to have is trust in the Lord. In his book *The Sin of Certainty: Why God Desires Our Trust More Than Our “Correct Beliefs,”* Peter Enns explores how to obtain this sort of trust. He admits that moments of theological ambiguity and uncertainty are invitations to leave his comfort zone and to trust God from a place of childlike vulnerability rather than from a position of power and authority.³⁴ Belief in God, he affirms, does not focus upon *what* one believes in, but *in whom* she places her trust.³⁵ He recalls the story of John Kavanaugh, who visited Mother Teresa in Calcutta, India, and asked that she might pray for him to have clarity. She responded with, “Clarity is the last thing you are clinging to and must let go of... I have never had clarity. What I have always had is trust. So I will pray that you trust God.”³⁶

³³ Ibid. 197

³⁴ Enns. *The Sin of Certainty*. p. 139

³⁵ Ibid. 93

³⁶ Ibid. 169

Like a child trusts her father to catch her after he tosses her in the air, so the child of God trusts that God will likewise catch her after God tosses her. In failure and suffering, she who exhibits childlike trust will trust the Lord. She may not understand the Lord, she may doubt the Lord's intentions, she might question God and shake her fist at God, but she continues to trust God. For, as the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* explains, God cannot be grasped or held by knowledge, but only by love.³⁷ This love is one founded in trust. Trust in God establishes a relational connection that allows for the recipient of God's love to return that love to the Lord. Trust God as a child would.

III. Wonder

Stagnation of Wonder

A child can find a village upon a blade of grass, a world around the trunk of a tree, and a universe within a field of dandelions. Life is so incredibly diverse. It is fresh and undiscovered, untouched and waiting to be explored. Often the epitome of adult wonder is with the known universe, which is about 13.8 billion years old and 546 sextillion miles across; the universe contains billions of galaxies, each with billions of stars millions of light-years apart.³⁸ The adult will wonder at the vastness of space or the

³⁷ Anonymous. *The Cloud of Unknowing*. James Walsh, Trans. and Ed. The Classics of Western Spirituality. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1981. p. 130

³⁸ Enns. *The Sin of Certainty*. p. 126

grandeur of a mountain, but the child wonders at the simple falling of a petal or the frantic escape of a grasshopper. Space makes the child marvel, but so does his backyard. Much like trust, wonder is made beautifully manifest in children but seems to tragically wane with age.

Wonder stagnates with what most adults assume is maturity. Discovery is replaced with an acceptance of the mundane. Consider encountering something wondrous or magnificent for the first time. Perhaps it is a city skyline, a sunset over the soothing ocean, or the birth of a child. Repeated exposure to that which is profound eventually dulls the piercing beauty of that encounter. A businesswoman traveling to the city for the first time may widen her eyes and swivel her head, desperately trying to visually consume all that she can of the bustling new place. However, after five years of employment at the downtown office, the daily commute is nothing more than a pestering hindrance. The city is no longer wondrous; it is filthy, overpopulated, and musky. Or perhaps it is still enjoyable but she has become absentminded and numb to the feelings of liveliness it originally gave her. A first-time seafarer will stand, mouth agape, at the rich vibrancy of the setting sun. His first haul brings in a monstrous abundance of fish, and he dances with a wondrous glee at his luck. Yet, as callouses form upon his weathered hands and sea spray begins to rust his ship with time, he likewise becomes calloused and rusted to that which originally captured his wonder. It becomes just another sunset and another lucky haul of fish. His mastery of the art

challenges the wonder he has for the catch. A delivery room nurse comes face-to-face with the miracle of life during her first day on the job; unshaken by the shrieks of the mother and the frightened face of the father, the nurse wonders at the beauty of the new life emerging from the mother. She carefully handles the baby, gentling caring for the infant as though it were her own. After ten years in neonatal care, the nurse has not lost passion for her work nor care for the newborn life for whom she cares. She has, however, lost the tear-inducing sense of wonder that once so rivetingly captured her when she first began. Wonder is a posture away from which the body eventually slumps. The object of wonder becomes desensitized to perception, and that which becomes familiar often loses its wondrousness.

A child has time to wonder. She will explore the buds of her broccoli during lunchtime because lunch is its own event. She need not complete a business proposal and finalize a grocery list during her lunch. She will frolic in the field, pretending to dance with fairies, because her day exists to be lived, not to be completed. An adult seeks the close of the day, when responsibilities may be put on hold. A child seeks nothing but the present, providing for herself a space to explore and discover and wonder. However, liberty is replaced by responsibility and thus the *time* to wonder becomes strained. Amidst the burden of responsibility, one desires a rest that is marked by an abandonment of relational connectivity and whimsical exploration. It is

because of this that G. K. Chesterton remarks, "the world will never starve for want of wonders; but only for want of wonder."³⁹

Furthermore, adults equate maturity with the acquisition of knowledge and composure. Children, however, care not about consuming that which is mysterious. They question it not to control it but rather to identify its nature. Wendell Berry returns to this attempt at intellectual composure in *Life Is a Miracle*. "A chickadee," he concludes, "is not constructed to exemplify the principles of its anatomy or the laws of aerodynamics or the life history of its species, and it has not been explained when these things have been extracted (or subtracted) from it... Explanation is reductive, not comprehensive; most of the time, when you have explained something, you discover leftovers. An explanation is a bucket, not a well."⁴⁰ Wonder necessitates a sort of intellectual submission, an acceptance of that which is unexplainable. Wonder recognizes and intellect attenuates to the unique particularity of the object of wonder. Berry preserves this virtue, claiming that the "life of this place is always emerging beyond expectation or prediction or typicality, that it is unique, given to the world minute by minute, only once, never to be repeated. And then is when I see that this life is a miracle, absolutely worth having, absolutely worth saving."⁴¹

³⁹ Gillen, Brian P. *A Theology of Wonder: G. K. Chesterton's Response to Nihilism*. United Kingdom: Gracewing, 2015. p. 82

⁴⁰ Berry. *Life Is a Miracle*. p. 113

⁴¹ Ibid. 45

Wonder at the Divine

There is a divine root to wonder. In other words, all wonder ultimately is sourced to the nature of the Triune God. A child standing at the foot of a towering tree, looking upward with her mouth agape, is wondering at God as Creator. And God enjoys her wonder. God is pleased that she has encountered a piece of God's creation, a manifestation of God's creativity, and that she has been enraptured by that which God has created. As the philosopher Jerome A. Miller notes, "It is not we who break through to the unknown. It is the unknown which breaks through to us, ignites in us the eros of the desire to know, and so transforms us into questioners."⁴² These "questioners" seek to know, but not in a reductionistic or objectifying way. Wonder is prompted by something other, by something beyond the self. That other is Other. Much aesthetic wonder, and that rooted in the senses (wonder at the scent of a daisy, at the taste of ice cream, and the sound of wind chimes, or at the feeling of a cat's gentle purr as she nuzzles against one's chest), is a revelation of the wondrousness of God as Creator.

A child may likewise wonder at the feeling of security, intimacy, and affection that he feels when his parents hold him. He does not cognitively recognize that he feels safe and loved; however, there is a subconscious recognition that, in his parent's embrace, he is secure and desired and beloved. The child is experiencing the Holy

⁴² Brown, William P. *Wisdom's Wonder: Character, Creation, and Crisis in the Bible's Wisdom Literature*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014. p. 22

Spirit's immanence, who softens hearts and breathes life into intimate moments of compassion and care. And consider the most wondrous wonder of all: the incarnation of Christ! God takes on the kenotic experience by peppering omniscience with infantile unawareness, omnipresence with physical embodiment, and omnipotence with fleshly limitation. That God would take on flesh and dwell amongst God's finite creation is an act of insurmountable, incomprehensible wonder.

Wonder is much more than an appreciation for the unknown or a reverence for the majestic. Wonder is virtuous, for it an exhibition of reverence unto the Lord. Scripture refers to the miraculous deeds of Christ Jesus often as wonders, and likewise refers often to God's working in the world as cause to wonder. "You have multiplied, O Lord my God, your wondrous deeds and your thoughts towards us; none can compare with you! I will proclaim and tell of them, yet they are more than can be told" (Psalm 40:5). In this psalm, the psalmist identifies the deeds of the Lord upon earth as wondrous. The Lord commands wonder in Habakkuk: "Look among the nations, and see; wonder and be astounded. For I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if told" (Habakkuk 1:5). The author of Hebrews calls for a communal response of awe—of reverential wonder—to God: "Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire" (Hebrews 12:28-29).

Scripture suggests that, ultimately, wonder is an act of spiritual worship. Children may not *consciously* be worshipping God when they wonder at God's Creation, but their wonder is nevertheless a form of worship. They are reveling in God's complex simplicity and simple complexity. God created the butterfly, and a little girl's fascination with its beauty is a fascination with God's beauty. A boy, who wonders at the wiggle of a worm that he has dug up in the dirt, curious about and amazed by its movement, is wondering at the creativity of God. Wonder in creation leads to wonder of the Creator. It instills a "reverent, even fearful, receptivity toward the Other, a posture of standing back or bending the knee... At the same time, wonder also quickens the desire to venture forth to know more, to know the Other."⁴³ Rudolf Otto suggests the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* of the Holy: God is so utterly mysterious and fearfully powerful that one cannot help but wonder at the Divine.⁴⁴ An appreciation of the mystery of life and the majesty of that mystery draws the wonderer into closer intimacy with God.

Wonder as Virtuous

For some moral philosophers, wonder has been considered a foundational emotion in that it prompts fresh ways of perceiving. Descartes viewed it as the first of all passions, shaping life into a cultivation of intellectual and moral sensibility. In

⁴³ Brown, William P. *Wisdom's Wonder: Character, Creation, and Crisis in the Bible's Wisdom Literature*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014. p. 23

⁴⁴ Otto, Rudolf. *The Idea of the Holy*. 2nd Ed. John W. Harvey, Trans. London, England: Oxford University Press, 1950. pp. 13, 19

Upheavals of Thought, Nussbaum suggests that wonder is fundamental for the formation of sacrificial love and compassion for the other.⁴⁵ Wonder marks the awakening of the desire to inquire and understand. This inquiry ought to be cultivated in the direction of belovedness, not mastery. In other words, this awakening ought to be guided towards a deeper reverential understanding for the object of wonder as a whole rather than an attempt to control it: the grandeur of the mountains awakens a desire to understand how they were formed, what they contain, how they might crumble, and what might reside upon and within it; it ought not awaken a desire to possess or summit it for the sake of surpassing its grandeur. For author Celia Deane-Drummond, wonder can be an experience in which the unknown breaks into the world of familiarity, destabilizing the existent order of things.⁴⁶ The unknown itself does not become the familiar but instead inserts itself amidst that which. Wonder it likewise can become an experience in which a sense of perfection is perceived in the world.⁴⁷ The perfection is divine.

For the adult, a worshipful wonder is one that surrenders to that majesty. G. K. Chesterton asserts that all things, from a cloud to a man's face to a noise in the dark, may capriciously reveal the Divine. He believed that every object is divine in a very

⁴⁵ Ibid. 24

⁴⁶ Ibid. 20

⁴⁷ Ibid. 21

thorough and definite sense.⁴⁸ In wondering at a cloud or a face or a noise in the dark, the adult surrenders to the revelation of the Divine. Remember the businesswoman who has become accustomed to the city that once so enlivened her day. If she chooses to reacquaint herself to the wonder that she first felt at its fluidity, energy, and bustle, she may reenter into a subtle praise of God. In actively appreciating the beauty of the city, she is submitting to the characteristics of God reveled within her experience of wonder. A fisherman wondering at the luck of his bounty is submitting to the provision of the Lord. The delivery room nurse wondering at the miracle of life with each birth she assists is submitting to the sanctity of God. Chesterton challenges the adult to return to the fairyland of wonder and gratitude inhabited by children. In so doing, they may become grateful to God and resurrected from a death to the miracles and wonders of life around them.⁴⁹

One ought to wonder as the Little Prince does in Antione de Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince*. After leaving his little planet to explore the universe, the Little Prince stumbles upon a pilot who has crashed in the desert on the planet Earth. They befriend one another, and the Little Prince wondrously inquires about the ways of humanity. After several days of developing a childlike friendship, the man reluctantly departs from the Little Prince, who must return to his celestial home. The Little Prince leaves him with a gift:

⁴⁸ Gillen. *A Theology of Wonder*. p. 33

⁴⁹ Ibid. 29

People have stars, but they aren't the same. For travelers, the stars are guides. For other people, they're nothing but tiny lights. And for still others, for scholars, they're problems. For my businessman, they were gold. But all those stars are silent stars. You, though, you'll have stars like nobody else... When you look up at the sky at night, since I'll be living on one of them, since I'll be laughing on one of them, for you it'll be as if all the stars are laughing. You'll have stars that can laugh!⁵⁰

IV. Play

Imagination

When I was a boy, I loved the mud. Storms never scared me; they made me excited because I knew that the battering of the rain upon the earth would soften the ground, making it much easier to dig a stick into the ground. I would squat in the empty lot next to my house, turning up clumps of mud to make small pools, tracing lines from rock to rock as a construction worker building roads, and gently reburying whatever earthworm had found itself exposed as a result of my feverish digging. Sometimes, I would lie on my stomach in the backyard under the shade of the river birch and use my index and middle finger to create a little man who would explore the thick grass forest. My brother and I would line up our toy cars in a long sequence,

⁵⁰ Saint-Exupéry, Antoine de. *The Little Prince*. Richard Howard, Trans. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2000. p. 77

bumper to bumper, all throughout the house (we had an absurd amount of little metal cars, trucks, vans, and motorcycles). We would “race” them by moving each vehicle, one by one, forward by no more than an inch. It was simple. But it was fun. It was play.

Children are admired for their ability to play with such simplicity and creativity. What an adult finds in a new sports car a child finds in a puddle. A child can find fifty uses for an inflatable red ball in five minutes. An adult may certainly do so, but hardly ever *actually* does. The child can run around the house pretending to fend off pirates with nothing more than a crooked eye patch and a broomstick for half of an afternoon. A trampoline is his ambrosia. A child’s imagination runs wild and it manifests itself through play. Play is natural in childhood, and rejuvenating in adulthood. It is creative and adventurous. It can foster fellowship. Yet, much like trust and wonder, the virtue of play wanes with age. Others perceive one’s enjoyment in the simple and unconventional as childish play, and so it is left behind as one matures into adulthood. This is a tragic loss, for God delights when God’s children play (Proverbs 8:30-31).

One of the most mysterious and beautiful facets of play in children is their ability to imagine. Unfortunately, however, imagination is not protected from the influence of the world. The world stifles and perverts imagination. What was once an imagination of creation and wonder becomes one of devouring destruction. The imagination becomes a tool of objectification, where one imagines how another might be professionally, relationally, or sexually beneficial. Imagination is perverted to be a method of selfish

ambition and cruel satisfaction. This shift from the other as an end in him or herself to a means to an end marks a shift away from childlikeness and a distortion of play.

Imagination is also subdued and smothered by the world. It is not adulthood itself that stifles the childlike faith. It is the world, to which adults are constantly exposed. An individual never quite loses his ability to imagine, but that ability is caged and muted in adulthood. Chesterton describes a child at the train station:

The child has no need of nonsense: to him the whole universe is nonsensical in the noblest sense of that noble word... Did you ever hear a small boy complain of having to hang about a railway station and wait for a train? No; for him to be inside a railway station is to be inside a cavern of wonder and a palace of poetical pleasures. Because to him the red light and the green light on the signal are like a new sun and a new moon. Because to him when the wooden arm of the signal falls down suddenly, it is as if a great king had thrown down his staff as a signal started a shrieking tournament of trains. A child may get tired, but he never tires of reality.⁵¹

An adult at a train station is only commuting. The train station is nothing more than a drab waiting place. The lights are nothing more than forgettable flashes of color. The wooden arm is nothing more than a mark of mechanical ingenuity. The train is nothing

⁵¹ Gillen. *A Theology of Wonder*. pp. 84-85

more than a tool of transportation. A child will watch raindrops race down a window, imagining they are watery airplanes racing towards a finish line. He will jump in a puddle, imagining he is a monstrous giant crashing through the sea. He will catch raindrops on his tongue, imagining they are bits of candy. An adult races to her car, head down and feet rushing, so as to avoid the inconvenient pest that is the rain.

Imagination may serve to draw the individual into closer union with, and a more consuming desire for, the Lord. It is the imagination that allows for one to describe a mystical encounter with the Divine and to imagine what such an encounter would be. Describing God as a Divine Light, as a Flowing Spring, as above the cloud of forgetting, and as an intimate Lover with whom we dance... such language is the creation of one's use of the imagination to describe an actual experience.^{52 53} Because of God's unfathomable, incomprehensible infinitude, one must use the imagination to describe, albeit apophatically, the mystical encounter.⁵⁴

Likewise, the imagination allows for the child to co-create with God. Author and theologian JRR Tolkien was known for his promotion of humanity's ability to co-create with the Ultimate Creator. In *Tree and Leaf*, Tolkien remembers, "It is in fairy-stores that I first divined the potency of the words and the wonder of the things, such as

⁵² Anonymous. *The Cloud of Unknowing*.

⁵³ Mechthild of Magdeburg. *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*. The Classics of Western Spirituality. Frank Tobin, Trans. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press. 1998.

⁵⁴ Apophatic theology, or the way of negation, is an approach to the Divine marked by an abandoning of language and affirming that which God *is*. Instead, it seeks to encounter the Divine through a wordless, uncontainable mystic experience.

stone, and wood, and iron; tree and grass; house and fire; bread and wine.”⁵⁵ It is with an acknowledgement of this potency that Tolkien created the entire world of Middle Earth, establishing races of creatures, entire languages, and stories of love and woe and victory and defeat. To him, the imagination was a tool of co-creation that dares to take risks, to have fun and to play, to waste time and to engage in nonsense. Tolkien knew that the Christian imagination can dare because “it understands in its very depths that things are not as they seem—that the first shall be last, that the smallest shall be the greatest, that the proud shall be humbled, that the little child shall lead them all.”⁵⁶

Laughter

Consider another facet of play: laughter. Gabriel Torretta laments that, because the Gospels never show Jesus laughing, the present Church is shivering and oppressed by a cold and dry authoritarianism that shuts out all humor from Christian life.⁵⁷ Although perhaps too dramatic in this claim, Torretta accurately highlights this contemporary notion that laughter ought to be stifled and controlled. Early church fathers, such as Jerome, Origen, Cassian, and John Chrysostom, viewed laughter as a mark for immaturity in the Christian faith.⁵⁸ To them, laughter was a distraction from the serious nature of the call to virtue and a mocking of the woe of Christ’s crucifixion. The

⁵⁵ Gillen. *A Theology of Wonder*. p. 78

⁵⁶ Ibid. 75

⁵⁷ Torretta, Gabriel. *Preaching on Laughter: The Theology of Laughter in Augustine’s Sermons. Theological Studies*, Vol 76 (4), pp. 742-764. 2015. p. 743

⁵⁸ Ibid

Benedictine Rule of the fifth and sixth centuries is incredibly cautious about laughter and dictates that the ambiguity and sarcasm of humor is a thorn in language and clarity.⁵⁹ Even today, rowdy outbursts of laughter are returned with spiteful looks of distaste. However, there is beauty within laughter, for it often a mark of Godly play.

The power of laughter is certainly not the most exalted of God's gifts to humanity, but it most certainly is a gift. Laughter can be used well or poorly, fittingly or unfittingly, morally or immorally, generously or cruelly. When laughter comes from "wicked games" or "offensive jokes" or the "frivolities particular to pagan rituals," laughter becomes destructive and immoral.⁶⁰ Yet laughter can also be an act of worship. It symbolizes "nothing less than the way human beings are deified. Christians grow in unity with Christ by suffering laughter and by laughing."⁶¹ It is a symbol of the way in which humans share in the providence of God.⁶²

Laughter reveals the hidden playfulness of God. God's playfulness and creativity are evident in nature, which to Saint Francis, is a younger sister who is dancing: she is a sister to be laughed at as well as loved.⁶³ Even when God plays rough one can realize that laughter begins to well, God's arms open wide, and it becomes clear that God has

⁵⁹ Berryman, Jerome W. *Godly Play: A Way of Religious Education*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991. p. 14

⁶⁰ Torretta. *Preaching on Laughter*. p. 748

⁶¹ Ibid. 763

⁶² Ibid. 761

⁶³ Chesterton, G. K. (Gilbert Keith). *The Collected Works of G. K. Chesterton*. Vol. 1. David Dooley, Ed. *Orthodoxy*. pp. 211-346. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986. p. 207

loved all along.⁶⁴ G. K. Chesterton suggests that melancholy be only an innocent interlude and a fugitive, tender frame of mind: praise ought to be the permanent pulsation of the soul. Sorrow has no place, but it is felt because the laughter of the heavens is too loud to hear.⁶⁵ Not only is that gut-slitting, tear-streaming, snort-inducing laughter one that gives life and unites friends and strangers; it is one in which God joins, laughing just as loudly, crying just as beautifully, and snorting just as often as the child who is reveling in delight.

Destructive Play

However, play itself, like laughter, has the power to be Godly and the danger of being destructive. Play is not entirely lost in adulthood; however, it certainly takes a much different form than childhood play. Oftentimes, play for an adult is hardly a necessity. It is a form of leisure and relaxation. It rejuvenates. But it often becomes a subtly worshipped idol.⁶⁶ A man, upon returning home from a long day at the office, will surf the television until he lands on a show somewhat interesting. In a non-malicious way, he will neglect his wife and children, seeking to relax momentarily before scarfing down dinner, laying out his clothes for the next day, and falling asleep early so that he might wake up and do it all over again. Idolized leisurely play might be found on the television screen, through the gaming console, upon the computer,

⁶⁴ Lane, Belden C. *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2007.

⁶⁵ Chesterton. *The Collected Works*. p. 296

⁶⁶ St. John of the Cross. *Dark Night of the Soul*. p. 36

inside the bottle, or at the slot machines. It is a type of play that seeks not to engage the Lord in hidden playfulness but rather to mindlessly seek affirmation, humor, or delight in the simple abandoning of responsibility.

Another destructive idolization of play is for its escape. Similar to leisure, play as escape is a medium through which one might avoid or numb the stresses of work, the toxicity of relationships, and the burdens of life. This sort of play—golfing every weekend to avoid being home with the children, going to wine-tastings with friends to drown feelings of guilt or loneliness, aggressively wrestling with a younger sibling to exert internal strife and pain—is not play that participates with the Divine. It is one that attempts to replace the Divine. The game that is played is played because of a need to accumulate more of what the game is played for, and thus that play becomes work, which ultimately becomes self-destruction.⁶⁷ By treating the game as instrumental in reaching some goal other than the game in itself, the player is excluded from the very knowledge she seeks.⁶⁸ The play of a child might seem to be an escape, but Chesterton assures that “the real child does not confuse fact and fiction. He simply likes fiction. He acts it because he cannot yet write it or even read it; but he never allows his moral sanity to be clouded by it. To him no two things could possibly be more contrary than playing at robbers and stealing sweets.”⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Berryman. *Godly Play*. p. 4

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* 7

⁶⁹ Gillen. *A Theology of Wonder*. p. 81

Godly Play

Godly play adventures, exploring God's creation and reveling within it. Consider the child who journeys with his brother on bicycles around the neighborhood. More often than not their wandering will lead them to a small grove of trees, where they end up climbing over rocks and under fallen trunks and through small puddles on a new adventure of discovery. Or they will jump from dumpster to dumpster, from A/C unit to A/C unit, or from drainage grate to drainage grate. They will tarry the border of their limits, riding repeatedly to the last street their mother has given them the freedom to ride to so as to play with the idea of venturing further, discovering what lies beyond the next row of houses and the distant line of trees. These same brothers will adventure to dangerous places, to places of fear and risk. They explore the abandoned house or sneak through the angry neighbor's lawn. In this playful adventure, the child works through his deepest fears of not being loved in the process of imagining himself abandoned, deceived, or hopelessly lost. Mysteriously, adults often play similarly. It is in this "play" at being lost that we most assuredly come to know ourselves as found.⁷⁰

Godly play is a play that fosters communion with others and with the Other. Belden Lane discusses God's playfulness, and its ultimate union, with the image of an elaborate game of hide-and-seek with the Divine. When God hides, God deepens in the lover a longing to be loved, to enhance the joy that is experienced when fear

⁷⁰ Lane. *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*.

dissolves and when the seeker ultimately finds.⁷¹ Lane recalls how he and his daughter would play the same game:

When my daughter was very young, one of her favorite tricks in playing hide-and-seek was to pretend that she had run away to hide, and then to come sneaking back beside me while I was still counting... God is for me a seven-year-old daughter, slipping back across the grass, holding her breath in check, wanting once again to surprise me with a presence closer than I ever expected.⁷²

Lane echoes Meister Eckhart's endeared praise of God: "God is like a person who clears his throat while hiding and so gives himself away."⁷³ God as *Deus absconditus*—a God who is hidden or removed—is never far removed from the *Deus ludens*—the God who is playful, joyful, and present.⁷⁴ Just as childlike play involves the fostering of fellowship and communion, of a mutual delight, with the other child, so does it also join the child in union with the Divine.

The play of a child is one of liberty, of exploration and discovery, of fellowship and wonder and trust. That of an adult more often is a play of leisure and escape. We have left God alone in the backyard, holding the ball we have just tossed, ready to throw it right back. We have left God in the middle of a game of hide-and-seek,

⁷¹ Ibid

⁷² Ibid

⁷³ Ibid

⁷⁴ Ibid

waiting desperately to be sought and found. Perhaps it is time to return to the game and to reengage in the play that so effortlessly filled our minds with joy and imagination during childhood. Perhaps it might be best to return to the empty lot after the rainstorm, squatting on the earth with a stick in hand, boots caked in mud and faces plastered with dirt from absentminded scratches. God delights in the play of a child, young or old.

V. Conclusion

The Virtue of Childhood

There ought to be a return to childlikeness. Children trust with brave abandon. Children wonder with immense fascination. Children play with worshipful enjoyment. Because of the idolization of knowledge and progress, of success and gain, of attractiveness and stoicism, maturity is too often associated with the waning of trust and the waxing of skepticism, the waning of wonder and the waxing of feigned understanding, and the waning of play and the waxing of professionalism. Adulthood worship is dictated often by convenience and image; childhood worship is a way of life, honoring life itself and each moment it presents. That which a child does is done without thought to social or professional progress. It is done simply for the joy of the action itself. When the child trusts, she models the type of trust an adult ought to have for the Lord. When a child wonders, her wonder finds its source ultimately in the

beauty and power and creativity of God. When a child plays, the Lord delights in—and joins—her play.

There is a unique beauty to childhood that much too easily is dismissed as an adorable yet fleeting exhibition of infantile innocence. Thankfully, theologians both old and new have recognized childhood for the profound gift that it is. Karl Rahner admires the virtues of childhood, such as the righteousness “of trust, of openness, of expectation, of readiness to be controlled by another, of interior harmony with the unpredictable forces within which the individual finds himself confronted.”⁷⁵ Friedrich Schleiermacher wrote, “The past disappears [for the child] and of the future he knows nothing—each moment exists only for itself and this accounts for the blessedness of a soul content in innocence.”⁷⁶ Liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez asserts, “Spiritual childhood is one of the most important concepts in the gospel, for it describes the outlook of the person who accepts the gift of divine filiation and responds to it by building fellowship... spiritual childhood is required for entering the world of the poor [and] makes possible an authentic commitment to the poor and oppressed.”⁷⁷ In redefining the noun *faith* as the verb *faithing*, Walter Wangerin Jr.

⁷⁵ Rahner, Karl. “Ideas for a Theology of Childhood.” *Theological Investigations: Further Theology of the Spiritual Life 2, Vol. VIII*. David Bourke, Trans. New York, NY: The Seabury Press, 1977. p. 37

⁷⁶ DeVries, Dawn. “‘Be Converted and Become as Little Children’: Friedrich Schleiermacher on the Religious Significance of Childhood.” pp. 329-349. *The Child in Christian Thought*. Marcia Bunge, Ed. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001.

⁷⁷ Gutiérrez, Gustavo. *We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2003. p. 127

challenges the adult not only to return to the virtues of a childlike faith, but to live that faith as an action and lifestyle.⁷⁸ A childlike faith is one marked by trust, wonder, imagination, laughter, and play. She who returns to these virtues lives into them; she does not gain them as a possession.

Returning to a Childlike Faith

The child is not lost in a fairyland from which adult life is merely an accelerating descent into reality. Rather, reality itself has the qualities normally ascribed to the realm of faëry... the child simply revels in those qualities.⁷⁹ And although the fairyland seems fraught with complex mysteries, the child sees everything in it with a simple pleasure.⁸⁰ Life is simple for the child. Life is a joy, a gift, an avenue through which the world is to be explored and discovered and loved. And because this is what life is to the child, the child is full of that life. A child will kick his legs rhythmically through an excess, not absence, of life. His spirit is fierce and free and he wants things repeated and unchanged: he says, "Do it again!" And the grown-up person will do it again until he is nearly dead. Yet in it he regains life.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Wangerin Jr., Walter. "Prologue: Faithing." *The Orphean Passages*. Grand Rapids, MI: ZondervanPublishingHouse, 1986. pp. 1-16.

⁷⁹ Gillen. *A Theology of Wonder*. p. 26

⁸⁰ Chesterton, G. K. (Gilbert Keith). *Heretics*. 4th Ed. New York: John Lane Company, 1905. p. 139

⁸¹ Chesterton. *The Collected Works*. p. 108

Let us regain the beauty of childhood and to rekindle within us a childlike faith. Let us return to, as Chesterton names it, our second childhood.⁸² Let us trust that, when the Lord tosses us into the air, the Lord will catch us on our way down. Let us roll up our pants, kick off our shoes, and splash in the mud. Let us drop pebbles into the drainage grate, observing the *splung* and *splash* sounds that echo up to us. Let us roll around the yard, collecting fistfuls of dandelions and clovers, readying a beautiful bouquet for the girl across the street. Let us find a mountain in an anthill, a city on a leaf, and songs in the wind. Let's play hide-and-seek. God wants to play, and we are God's children.

⁸² Ibid. 293

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