Stories of God at Home

A Godly Play Approach

Jerome W. Berryman

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To Thea
as always,
and to families
everywhere

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CHAPTER 1

The Story of God's Creating
The Creation

This book is about a long-term approach to celebrating your family and to prepare for unknown family challenges in the future. It shows how to do this in a deeply playful way by building up layers of family stories woven together with stories of God to fill a reservoir of meaning to draw from when needed.

We will begin by talking about how stories make meaning. We will then discuss the importance of being involved in nature to celebrate God's creation and to acknowledge our own true identity. We will then discuss what to do and say to weave together the celebration of creation with your own stories. We will close by discussing the remarkable ability of children to absorb God from nature and the implications of this for adults.

How Stories Make Meaning

I came from a storytelling family, but I was in my mid-forties before I fully appreciated the value of that gift. I had to actually encounter families that didn't tell stories to discover just how important stories really are.

One of the most significant stories I heard as a child was a bedtime story about being a child in God's *creation*. This theme included God's creating, the creation as the product of God's creating, the presence of the Creator in God's creation, and our own creating that flows out of being created in God's image. None of this was made explicit at the time, but it was all there, waiting to be discovered in the decades that followed.

My dad sat on my bed in the soft light of evening and told me about playing outdoors when he was a little boy. I knew the places in my grandmother's yard where he had played, so in story and play we bridged three generations to be at home together in the richness of God's creation.

Our bond didn't have anything to do with talking specifically about God or religion, but the experience was very religious because it evoked places, where I, too, felt hints and whispers of God all around me as I played. Knowing God in God's creation was like what I later sensed when I found hints of the poet in the poem, the painter in the painting, the engineer in the machine, the physician in the healing, or the composer in the symphony. This is how I knew that the *experience* of God was present in my play and

that my father and I shared this intuition. I could feel this. It was implied in his stories and his presence. The God-talk came later.

We adults sometimes forget how involved in nature we were as children, even in the city. This is why I would like to introduce you to Alister Hardy and the project he began after he retired as Linacre Professor of Zoology at Oxford. He had wondered all his life about the experiences of God he had felt as a child and wondered if others had also experienced such events. When he retired he invited people to send accounts of such experiences to The Religious Experience Research Unit (RERU), which he set up in 1969 at Manchester College, Oxford.[1]

Edward Robinson, a biologist, was the first director of RERU after Professor Hardy. He noticed that about 15 percent of the first 3,000 accounts they received referred to childhood experiences. He explored this surprising event in his book *The Original Vision* in 1977.

A Child's Experience of Nature and Its Implications for Adults

One of the beauties of Robinson's book is that he quoted at length from numerous accounts, rather than reducing them to tables of statistics. Important statistics are included in the book, but his quotations allow the reader to appreciate the texture and feeling of the writers' memories to make an informed interpretation of each story. I would like to quote from one of the RERU accounts so you can make up your own mind about the strengths and weaknesses of these memories.

Robinson acknowledged that our memories do not work like tape recorders. We interpret the past, as we remember it, looking back from new contexts in our later lives. This means that the *significance* of what happened counts as much as getting the details right. The account I would like to quote from involves horn-shaped lavender flowers on tall stalks appearing above "the gently swirling vapour" and a little girl's "black shoes with silver

1. This research is now located at the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David in Lampeter, Wales.

buckles" that disappeared in the mist. The significance of this, however, was the point. The little girl pondered the meaning of this at the time of her experience and then re-worked that meaning for over fifty years.

> The most profound experience of my life came to me when I was very young—between four and five years old. I am not mistaken in dating this because I remember so clearly both the place where it occurred and the shoes I was wearing at the time, of which I was rather fond. Both of these facts relate only to this particular period in my life: I have a dated photograph of myself wearing the shoes in question.
>
> My mother and I were walking on a stretch of land in Pangbourne Berks, known locally as "the moors." As the sun declined and the slight chill of evening came on, a pearly mist formed over the ground. My feet, with the favourite black shoes with silver buckles, were gradually hidden from sight until I stood ankle deep in the gently swirling vapour. Here and there just the very tallest harebells appeared above the mist. I had a great love of these exquisitely formed flowers, and stood lost in wonder at the sight.
>
> Suddenly I seemed to see the mist as a shimmering gossamer tissue and the harebells, appearing here and there, seemed to shine with a brilliant fire. Somehow I understood that this was the living tissue of life itself, in which that which we call consciousness was embedded, appearing here and there as a shining focus of energy in the more diffused whole. In that moment I knew that I had my own special place, as had all other things, animate and so-called inanimate, and that we were all part of this universal tissue which was both fragile yet immensely strong, and utterly good and beneficent.
>
> The vision has never left me. It is as clear today as fifty years ago, and with it the same intense feeling of love of the world and the certainty of ultimate good. It gave me then a strong, clear sense of identity which has withstood many vicissitudes, and an affinity with plants, birds, animals, even insects, and people too, which has often been commented on. Moreover, the whole of this experience has ever since formed a kind of reservoir of strength fed from an unseen source, from which quite suddenly in the

> midst of the very darkest times a bubble of pure joy rises through it all, and I know that whatever the anguish there is some deep centre in my life which cannot be touched by it.
>
> Of course, at the early age of four or five I could not have expressed anything of the experience in the words I have now used, and perhaps the attempt to convey the absorption of myself into the whole, and the intensity of meaning, sounds merely over-coloured to the reader. But the point is that, by whatever mysterious perception, the whole impression and its total meaning were apprehended in a single instant. Years later, reading Traherne and Meister Eckhart and Francis of Assisi, I have cried aloud with surprise and joy, knowing myself to be in the company of others, who had shared the same kind of experience and who had been able to set it down so marvelously. This is not the only experience of the kind that has come to me—indeed they occur relatively often—but it is without doubt the one which has laid the deepest foundations of my life, and for which I feel the profoundest gratitude.[2]

This story is remarkable for many reasons, but I would like to draw your attention to only one aspect of it. The little girl's original vision was not forgotten. It continued to give her life meaning as an adult. She was not only the speaker of her memory. She was also the listener. She listened long and well to her memory over the years and continued to interpret it, giving her life renewed meaning.

When children try to tell us about a numinous experience, like the one on the moors, they risk having their treasured discoveries causally dismissed by adults. If children object to this trivialization by adults and stand up for the reality they have experienced, they risk being put down again or, even worse, being punished or shunned for advocating for it. This teaches children to mistrust adults' interpretations about such experiences *and* their own childhood experience of them. The result is a double bind that blocks children's spirituality. Their experience of God risks being demeaned if they speak up and they demean their own experience if they don't.

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2. Edward Robinson, *The Original Vision* (Lampeter, Wales: Religious Experience Research Unit, 1977), 34.

Sometimes children are strong enough to retain a significant memory, like "the living tissue of life itself," which grounds them in the deepest, most creative, part of their identity. They know they are part of God's creation, which gives them a "reservoir of strength fed from an unseen source." As children grow older they begin to realize, like the little girl on the moors did, that others have experienced something like they did and that they "had been able to set it down so marvelously." It is my great hope that this approach to stories of God at home will avoid the double bind and help nourish these treasured memories from childhood so they can develop fully across the decades.

Edward Robinson's study quoted many memories of children who had resisted the double bind and retained their early memories into adulthood. One adult, remembering himself as a little boy, wrote, "This inner knowledge was exciting and absorbingly interesting, but it remained unsaid because, even if I could have expressed it, no one would have understood. Once, when I tried, I was told I was morbid."[3] He was able to retain this significant memory, because, as he said, "I knew what I knew." I hope this sort of confidence in the significance of one's early experience of God will be strengthened by this approach to family storytelling and listening, so our early experiences of God can enrich and renew each decade of our lives.

One wonders how many of the 85 percent of the respondents, who did not mention childhood experiences, had lost access to their stories of God because of the double bind. The family celebrations in this book are designed to support free access to our early experiences of God and to provide the language for their memories to be enriched. The telling and interpreting of such stories, as we said, is a potent source of meaning to sustain family flourishing.

In 1997 Kevin M. Bradt, S.J. published *Story as a Way of Knowing*. He gathered up many of the themes in the air at the time and gave them his own creative shape as a Jesuit psychotherapist and teacher at the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley, California. Bradt wanted to emphasize how narrative meaning is the co-creation of the teller and the hearer, so he

3. Robinson, 13.

called this relational knowing "storying" to avoid the undue emphasis on the telling of stories by such terms as "storyteller" or "storytelling." This is why our goal here is to show how "to story" the Creation.

"Storying" the Creation

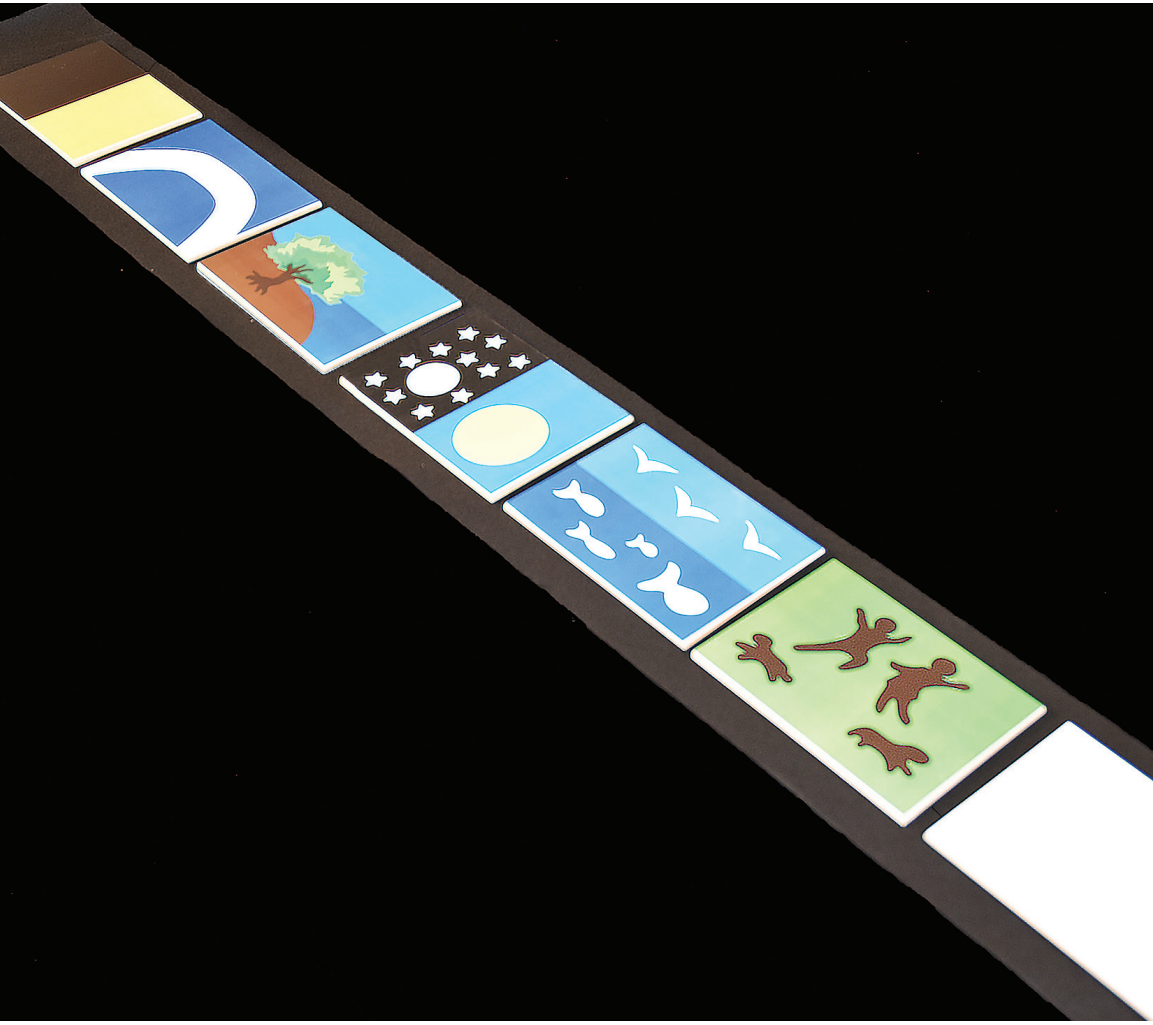
"Storying" God's creation involves the *Creator*, the *creating itself*, *what is created*, how the creation *points to* its Creator and how God's image is the creative process within us. The point of mentioning this complexity again is to say that when we "story" the creation, we need to be aware that the richness of this experience overflows the narrative, even when aspects of it are not mentioned.

We begin with a box full of materials. They help communicate the many levels and perspectives of creation. These materials also insure that the richness of the narrative is open to all the stages and ages of those gathered. You can literally grasp the story with your hands and other senses to help grasp it with your mind and spirit.

You might keep this box with your camping gear, if that is something your family does, or somewhere in the home where you keep treasured things. Where you put the box of materials matters. It makes a statement of value about this story of God *and* your family. The box has a yellow circle on it. This represents the original light, which God gave us on the first day of creation. The first six chapters begin with an image of such a box and its contents. They also include a picture of the material as it is presented.

In this presentation and the ones that follow, much will be said about "the family." What I mean by "the family" includes your immediate family but also those that your family has adopted as unofficial members. When you invite "the family" to gather for these presentations, you might include friends, older and younger, who share a special relationship with you.

Inside the box are seven, small wooden plaques and a piece of black cloth that begins all rolled up. The black felt is the "underlay," which is rolled out on the family table or outside on the ground if that is where the story is told and heard. Unroll it from your right to left and lay the plaques on the felt in the same way so they can be "read" from left to right by those gathered



to watch, listen, and wonder. This material, like the others described in this book, is available from Godly Play Resources, which is part of the nonprofit, Godly Play Foundation. You can learn more about training and resources from the website www.godlyplayfoundation.org.

The rectangular pieces of wood represent light, water, dry land, day and night, the creatures that fly and swim, the creatures that walk upon the earth, and finally a day to rest and reflect on all the gifts of creation. This material is a smaller version of the Godly Play presentation, "The Creation,"

which has been adapted for the home and for use outside in nature.[4] If your children are in a Godly Play program, the materials described in this book will be familiar but not too familiar, since they are smaller and the presentations are woven together with family stories.

We will talk more about the leader as this book develops, but for now it is enough to say that the leader needs to be informal and relaxed to invite wonder and yet be clearly in charge so the experience is a safe place where thoughts can be freely expressed. A rich sense of humor helps make this possible.

The leader participates in the story, but also supports the responses at the end of the presentation about the family's experiences of nature and their meaning. Some family members need to be coaxed a little to take part while others need to be toned down so they don't dominate the wondering. When the energy begins to decline in the wondering, the leader closes "the storying" while everyone is still interested. Everything is put back in the box and the "Amen" is said.

Let's now take a look at the specific actions and words that make up the telling and hearing of this story of God. It is always good to remember that *what is done* and *how it is done* are as important as *what is said*. This is why the "movements" are placed first in the script at the left.

What to Do and What to Say

MOVEMENTS	WORDS
Pick up the box. Look at it with appreciation and curiosity, then place it ceremonously back on the table (or on the earth if you are outside). Look at those gathered and speak quietly but with energy and focus.	Today we remember where we came from, so let's go all the way back to the beginning and a little before the beginning.

4. Jerome W. Berryman, *The Complete Guide to Godly Play, Volume 2: Revised and Expanded* (New York: Church Publishing, 2017), 41–48.

Move the box to one side and remove the lid. Put the box inside the lid. Take out the rolled-up underlay and place it in front of you. Look at it with curiosity and respect, then slowly unroll it all the way from right to left as you say:

In the beginning there was . . .
well, there wasn't very much, except, perhaps, an enormous smile.

Trace the "enormous smile" from one end of the underlay to the other. Make the smile so it faces the others.

Take the first plaque from the box, Hold it for a moment with two hands, showing it to the others as you say:

Then on the very first day God gave us the gift of light.

This was not ordinary light. It was the light that all the rest of the light comes from.

Place the plaque to your right on the underlay. After laying the plaque on the underlay, place your hand on it gently but firmly like a blessing and say:

When God saw the light God said, "It is good," and that was the end of the first day.

Take out the second plaque and hold it with two hands as you say:

On the second day God gave us the gift of water.

This was not ordinary water. It was the water that all the rest of the water comes from.

Place the plaque on the underlay to your left of the first one. After laying the plaque on the underlay, place your hand on it gently but firmly like a blessing and say:

When God saw the water God said, "It is good," and that was the end of the second day.

There is an arch of white on this card to represent "the firmament," so be sure that the plaque is turned so that it looks like an arch to those watching. Don't say anything about "the firmament" at this time. Wait until someone asks about it, or on another day you might say, "I wonder what this could be."

Take out the third plaque, hold it with two hands, showing it to the others as you say:

On the third day God gave us the gift of the dry land and the green and growing things.

Place the plaque on the underlay. Put your hand on it like a blessing as you say:

When God saw the dry land and the green and growing things God said, "It is good," and that was the end of the third day.

Take out the fourth plaque, hold it for a moment, showing it to the others, then place it on the underlay to the left of the dry land as you say:

On the fourth day God gave us the gift of the day and the night so we can count our days. God gave us time.

Place the plaque on the underlay, then place your hand on it like a blessing.

When God saw the day and the night, God said, "It is good," and that was the end of the fourth day.

Take out the next plaque and show it to the others as you say:

On the fifth day God gave us the gift of all the creatures that swim and all the creatures that fly.

Place the plaque and then put your hand on it like a blessing.

When God saw all the creatures that swim and all the creatures that fly, God said, "It is good," and that was the end of the fifth day.

Take out the next plaque from the box, hold it with two hands, showing it to the others, and say:

On the sixth day God gave us the gift of the creatures that walk upon the earth, the creatures that walk with two legs like you and like I and those that walk with many legs. And God placed the Image of God, the Creator, within us.

Place the plaque on the underlay and then put your hand on it like a blessing as you say:

When God saw all the creatures that walk upon the earth and the great gifts of all the other days, God said, "It is very good," and that was the end of the sixth day.

Take out the last plaque, showing it to the others as you say:

On the seventh day, God rested and gave us a day to rest and remember the great gifts of all the other days.

Place the plaque on the underlay, then say:

There is nothing on this plaque because I don't know where you like to go to rest and remember the great gifts. I wonder what place is best for you to do this?[5]

5. Wondering "questions" (or perhaps "wonderings") end with a question mark. They are not quite a statement or a question but something else. They acknowledge our mutual standing before the mystery of God with amazement. They deserve their own unique punctuation mark, but we don't have one.

A question entails an answer by the way it is posed, but a wondering is about something you don't know the answer to. If you know the answer to a wondering, then it is not a wondering.

An example of what I mean by a question entailing its answer is, "What time is it?" You know there is an answer to this and that it can be stated. Sometimes questions go so far as to imply a specific proposition by the way they are asked. A famous example is, "Have you stopped beating your wife?" The beating is implied in the question. There are also Socratic questions. This is when a teacher, like Socrates, asks questions that lead students to arrive at the answer the teacher already has in mind.

Wonderings invite those listening to join together to honor each unique, personal response to God's mystery. For example there are four classic wonderings about sacred stories in Godly Play. I wonder what part of this story you like best? I wonder what part is the most important part? I wonder where you are in the story? I wonder what part of the story we can leave out and still have all the story we need? All four of these wonderings respect the experience of others and the mystery of God's presence. Wondering invites us to join together in our wondering even though we will likely arrive at different responses.

After the conversation winds down, sit back and look at all of the days of creation. Open both hands and extend them to show the wholeness of all the days. Pause and take a deep breath. Reach out and touch the first plaque again.

Now, I wonder if anyone in this family noticed the light this morning when you opened your eyes? I wonder what it was like? I wonder what your favorite kind of light might be?

Participate in but still guide the wondering. Be sure that all those who wish to speak have a chance. When the conversation loses its energy, place your hand on the second plaque.

I wonder if you touched or tasted water today? What did it feel like? What was its taste? I wonder what the scariest water was, you ever saw? What was the most peaceful? I wonder what makes water beautiful?

Place your hand on the third plaque.

Did you know that every time you put your foot down, you place it on holy ground? God gave us this gift. I wonder how we can say "Thank you"?

Encourage those to speak who don't know what to say. Share your thoughts, but be careful not to stop the wondering by your comments. Some may think you have all the right answers. When the wondering begins to lose its energy, place your hand on the fourth plaque.

I wonder how time feels as it passes by? I wonder what the best way is for you to keep time? I wonder how old our family really is? I wonder how old time is?

Participate in the wondering, but still guide it so all can speak who wish to. When the conversation loses its energy, touch the fifth plaque.

I wonder what it's like to fly on invisible air? I wonder if water is invisible to fish? I wonder why God made so many kinds of birds and fish? I wonder where all these creatures are going?

Participate in the conversation unless you feel that you are intruding and blocking it. Be sure that all who want to talk have a chance to speak. When the conversation begins to lose its momentum, place your hand on the sixth plaque.

I wonder how people are different from the other animals? I wonder if you can feel God's image inside of you? I wonder where the Creator's creativity came from? I wonder if you have ever seen creating taking place?

Take part in the conversation, but be sure that everyone who wishes to speak has an opportunity. When the conversation loses its energy, place your hand on the seventh plaque.

I wonder why God made this day? I wonder what its gift really is? I wonder how resting and remembering helps? I wonder why there is something instead of nothing?

Pause and reflect silently on the whole series of plaques, touching each one. You then begin to pick up each one, naming it as you put it back into the box. Roll up the underlay and put it away. As you do this, say:

Our family is part of this story. Thanks be to God!

Replace the lid with ceremony.

Amen.

The "Amen" brings the presentation to a close.

You have now experienced what it is like to tell a story of God and invite your family to take part in it. We will have more to say about telling and hearing stories in the next chapter. To close this chapter let's talk just a bit more about children and adults experiencing the Creator in nature, since that is what this story of God is about.

Experiencing the Creator in Nature for All Ages

Children and adults experience God in three major ways. God comes to us from *beyond* as the Creator. God also comes from *beside us* as Jesus, whom we read about in the Gospels and know by experience, as the apostle Paul did on the road to Damascus in the first century. God also comes

from beside us by shining through our fellow creatures. The third way God comes to us is from *within* as the Holy Spirit. We know God in these three ways all the time, no matter where we are or whether we are paying attention or not. The Holy Trinity is always with us informing us who we truly are.

There is a broad developmental map for knowing the Holy Trinity. Children are especially good at knowing God as the Creator through their absorbing of God's presence in nature. Adolescents and young adults often prefer reading about and debating the meaning of Jesus' life and death. Middle and older adults tend to know God from within, because it often takes a long time for the rich awareness of one's deep identity as a creator in God's image to become conscious in an integrated way. Still, these developmental tendencies do not always hold. All ages and types of people can know God in any or all of these three ways at any time, because the only limit to God is that God is unlimited.

Let's focus now on the remarkable ability of children to absorb God through God's creation and the implications of this intuitive sensitivity for adults. Our guide will be Richard N. Coe's 1984 study of autobiographies about childhood called *When the Grass Was Taller*. Coe read some 600 autobiographies in many languages that involved childhood, and established this genre of literature formally, which he called "Childhoods." A more recent study in this area is John Pridmore's *Playing with Icons*, published by The Center for the Theology of Childhood in 2017. The Center is part of the nonprofit Godly Play Foundation.

Coe argued that children's knowing cannot be "conveyed by the utilitarian logic of the responsible adult," because childhood "constitutes an alternative dimension" out of which the wholeness of an "inner, symbolic truth" is lived. The world speaks first to the child as a whole and the child responds, not the other way around. We adults put our specific questions to nature and work out our answers by the scientific method. Children absorb nature, including hints of God, in an undifferentiated way through their senses and contemplative abilities. They know God by intuition, as part of this unitive knowing.

Coe noticed three things about the world of childhood from his reading of the remembered childhood experiences.[6] All three discoveries were difficult to put into language, but Coe tried anyway. He said that the world of children is an "alternative experience," a kind of "magic," and a sense of "abundance."

The "alternative experience" he noticed is an alternative to the world known by adults. It is a world of play in the deepest sense with its own logic, rituals, and sensualities. Coe argued that being able to enter this world is what gives the writer the ability to recreate childhood and the motive for attempting it. He went further to say that being able to re-enter this experience as adults is the source for all poetry.

Second, children experience "magic" in the world around them. Coe tried to protect the word "magic" from trivialization, because he could not find a better word to convey what he meant. He did not mean "mere nostalgia for a carefree past, a lost innocence." What he *did* mean was an "exaltation beyond language—yet for which, since it is an experience so momentous, eventually a language must be found." In the alternative world of childhood, there is a different way of being from the everyday adult world. Childhood involves "mystic exaltation," like that of the little girl on the moors, mentioned in Robinson's *The Original Vision*.

Third, there is a sense of "abundance." Coe did not mean merely material abundance in the sense of "a well-stocked larder." The abundance of childhood seems to be independent of what money can buy, which he noticed from his reading of memories from disadvantaged homes. Childhood involves a kind of abundance that is "a universe which is full; of being crowded in on all sides by sounds and colors, by flowers, butterflies and

6. Richard N. Coe, *When the Grass Was Taller: Autobiography and the Experience of Childhood* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), 285–87.

grasses, by streetlamps and fireworks and transfers[7] and sweets with marvelous names in many-colored wrappers."[8] Coe suggested that one of the reasons that Christmas celebrations appeal to children and adults is their sense of abundance. A truly unhappy Christmas is not one in which children receive no toys but one that is emotionally empty and the child is isolated. Such a Christmas expresses spiritual emptiness rather than abundance.

The experience of God from beyond is a natural part of the child's world. We will continue to explore how God comes to us in all three ways as the book continues, but for now let's sum up "storying" God's creation and link this chapter to the next one, where we will continue layering stories of God and weaving them together with family stories to create a reservoir of meaning to draw from when needed for family challenges.

Conclusion

This chapter focused on the story of God, the Creator, and how family stories can be woven together with it. The emphasis was on how to do this and why. The story of God's creating is a good one to begin with, because it can be presented anytime and anywhere, indoors or outdoors. Most of the stories to follow are tied to specific times of the year.

The story of God creating is also about how the creative process was given to our forbearers at the beginning of everything and to each one of us at our birth. The Hebrew sages sensed this and expressed it beautifully at the beginning of Genesis.

As we continue to reflect on " storying," you will probably notice that the language used in these presentations is as open to children as it is to adults. The materials, your movements, the sound of your voice, and your ease at being a natural storyteller combine with the breadth and depth of the

7. Richard Coe is an Australian, so I wrote to Judyth Roberts, a leader in the Australian College of Godly Play Trainers, on April 7, 2017, to see what Coe was referring to by the term "transfers." A transfer is a picture that was fixed onto "a sort of cellophane that when wiped with a damp clothe and pressed would transfer the picture onto another surface." Judyth also wrote that transfers were very popular in Australia from the 1930s to about 1950. Her mother talked about collecting and playing with them as a child.

8. Coe, 287.

words to invite old and young to respond honestly and openly. This is one of the reasons why this approach works well in families involving three or more generations and where English is not the first language for everyone.

You also may have noticed that when I write "Church," I mean the ideal church we all aspire to. When I write "church," which is most of the time, the reference is to the ordinary, flawed institution we all experience and which we seek to help move closer to the ideal with God's grace.

In the next chapter we will translate the church's celebration of Christmas into a story of God for the home. We will look at Christmas next because it is the church celebration most likely to be attended by families, but we also need to understand that there is a logic that ties Creation, Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost together, whether celebrated in the home or in a church setting. This is why after Christmas we will "story" Easter and then Pentecost.

After the Creation, Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost chapters, we will present the Good Shepherd in chapter 5, which is about the nature of God and how we participate in it. Chapter 6 will "story" a synthesis of the first five chapters by using the liturgical circle of the church year. We will then discuss stories *about the stories* of God and conclude by saying more directly how the whole book helps us prepare for and cope with family challenges.