

A Pedagogy of Play: Speaking of Adult Christian Religious Education as Play

by Jane Alice Gober

The meaning of a phrase can lay within its construction. A phrase like make believe is easily dismissed, and diminished. Make believe – forming meaning – constructing theology if you will. Human beings are continually making believe – playing with their world, imagining what could be next. In preaching, reading, prayer and communion people are also talking, listening, telling, hoping and eating in the context of imagination and vision. In this paper I seek to juxtapose the theory and praxis of Godly Play with critical and liberation pedagogical models. In doing so the language of play can open up adult religious education as a setting for discovery, enchantment and meaning making. Furthermore the objects that adult's plays with are the cultural 'materials' of everyday life – including digital materials.

Jerome Berryman, in his work developing the Godly Play method, details the actions and objectives of dedicated play. Godly Play is a discovery approach to learning which: enables children to experience the presence of a loving God, and facilitates imagination in learning how to “speak the language of the Christian people”. This methodology is based in developmental research, Montessori practice and in the Christian practices of storytelling and Eucharistic communion. The wonder, cooperation and dialogue of Godly Play reflect the heart of Christian formation. There has been some work on the relation of play to meaning making in religion and adulthood. The purpose of this paper is to use the specific praxis of Godly Play to relate play to adult religious education practices.

An advertisement for a children's play set says FOUR ALARM FUN. Which shows a couple of notions about play. Play is full throttle, intense. Intense fun is for children. Intense play and childhood scares adults like a threatening house fire. Speaking of adult education settings as play-full can bring images of destruction. Play does have the feelings of turbulence – would it be fun if it didn't? Professional athletic play - like a soccer player - is the melding of vision and action. Playfulness is to risk transformation. It is a continual activity that uses the materials of life and reorganizes them.. Play is for revelation within the everyday materials and experiences of our lives. People of all ages experiment with an evolving blend of their personal story with the narrative of the community and context they live in. Our contexts include media, food, clothes, styles, interactions, homes, plants, animals and as well as our historical, contemporary and Scriptural stories. In playing together we illuminate the connections between experience, language and God (Berryman, 60). In the praxis of Godly play there is not a desire to deposit details in the bank of the mind. Meaning making in religious contexts is whole selves in perpetual development. People do learn fundamental details about life by rote– how to use a stove, fractions and constellations. Knowledge of the holy, of the trembling and fascination that draws us millennia after millennia is not something that pedagogy of play seeks to deposit. This is critical and transformative pedagogies for congregational faith formation.

An example of using cultural materials playfully for revelation can be seen in the animated film Toy Story. In this movie, the mass marketed toys of recent childhood (cultural materials) have the ability to move freely, they have personality and the ability to interact outside their marketing or design. People can enter the story with this cadre of crusading toys because of the natural human ability to play within our context. Toy Story constructed a new story out of our common materials, which is a parabolic approach.. It also illustrates the suggestion that cultural materials desire to play with us. A toy wants to be played with. The plot of Toy Story

demonstrates this straightforwardly – the initial crisis is of a child’s favor for the new astronaut toy, rather than the old trusty cowboy is an existential crisis. For a cultural material not to be played with is not to be.

This is more than marketing savvy – because how we manipulate and imagine with the object is out of corporate control. The ability of corporate media to script the play of free people is questionable. Henry Giroux makes a strong argument for the dangers of the ‘Disnification’ in educational contexts. This is a vital reminder, which should not lead to an exclusionary stance in regard to the cultural materials. Interaction with any material is mutual dialogue – listening, speaking, but not consuming. Discourse illuminates the holiness and does not ignore the destructive. We devote immense resources of time, space and money to experiencing the fantastic – especially in digital media. People will use whatever materials are available - whether it is salt, sushi or Simpsons to seek for something ‘else’. It is the parabolic character of cultural playfulness that connects this pedagogy to the church.

Meaning making that freely utilizes the vast materials of the culture has been most closely examined in Gen-X young people¹. My assertion is that meaning making with popular cultural materials isn’t limited to any generation. This is observable in how specific events (moon landing), cars (Studabakers), foods (tuna noodle casseroles) and media (I Love Lucy) are bonding elements for every recent generation. People in some sense know who they are because of specific cultural materials. What may have changed in the younger generations is liberty to openly construct meaning with the popular culture. As Gen-Xers and the Millennials² mature they are carrying the validation of popular cultural materials into adult society and adult pedagogical contexts. Contemporary cultural materials are often post-colonial and usually digitized. Context and cultural materials for meaning making is not isolated by race and birthplace. The streams of our tradition, postcolonial dividends and digitized media already converge cleverly in lives of congregants of every generation. Believers carry this cultural play in their blood, on their bodies and into the church doors with them. This is a challenge for educators to create interplay between the religious text and the diversity of life materials. It is the parabolic method of Jesus and the acceptance of becoming a part of what is already going on.

In my experience people express the feeling of being under-formed in their tradition , whether they are new Christians or lifelong. I have heard the concern that banking methods do not connect to their ordinary experiences. This is often highlighted when people come into deep contact with practitioners of other religions. A surface observation suggests that these traditions may have something to share with contemporary Christianity about the role of playfulness in religious formation. Speaking of adult religious formation as play is a vantage point to construct formation programs from within the local congregation with attention to the context. The practice of play in adult religious education settings is an occasion to engage natural meaning making. This stretches the benefits of Godly Play into the adult formation arena.

Teaching for Transformation

Peter Hodgson sustains his transformative pedagogy with disciplined thinking that is infused with imagination and freedom. Following in the tradition of Paulo Freire this is a liberation pedagogy. Something that is liberal is ready to live into our freedom. It is this

¹Definitions of Generation X vary. Tom Beaudoin defines Gen-X as people born in the 60’s and 70’s. “It may seem odd to examine popular culture to learn about religion, but for [Generation] Xers, popular culture is a major meaning making system.” (xiv)

² Millennials follow Gen-X, usually people born in the 80’s and 90’s. Millennial’s are a proportionally much larger population segment.

freedom that can think in the constructive. Enabling liberty is to be awake to all senses, to wonder, and to be alive with reverence. One can imagine a child at play – awake and wonder-full. Hodgson correctly points out that our theological efforts are formed by the religion and culture we encounter. The American context is deeply infused with the language of liberty and human dignity. The ‘input’ of freedom and/or exploitation is shaped when it meets our human selves: there is a reflective quality as well as a subjectivity. Hodgson points out that our knowledge is subjective, but it is subjectivity in relationship. All things exist in relationships, dynamic – interplaying – relationships of being formed for the common good.

Transformative Pedagogy includes three primary partners: critical thinking, heightened imagination, liberating practice. These three elements are in relationship with each other, working together. Critique and exploration of the profound is discovered through imagination. This is true learning that is also then lived in the hope of making the imagined real. This new ‘reality’ is then taken up in the cycle again, meaning making in a communally interactive spiral. Hodgson proposes not chaos – but a precious, subtle structure of dynamism, a rhythmic process if you will.

The core partner is critical thinking. This is neither disparaging nor neurological but careful, observant thought that is connected to deep meaning and action. Scientific theories of relativity illustrate a dynamic and interactive universe that is not truly separated by time or distance or even hierarchy. If all that is is related to everything else, and connected to our perception and experience, then we are compelled to facilitate critical thinking. The dialogue space of transformative pedagogy fosters multi-dimensional relationships with the world and neighbor. Play is a multidimensional relationship with context and neighbors. In critical thinking what I know of God in Christ Jesus I know through my encounter with the inter-related world and community that our texts and we are formed by. Critical thinking has to be prepared to accept the critique of the community regarding our errors and failures. Critical thinking can de-center power relationships. Dialogue partners can relate to one another as beings that need each other to continue to grow and live. Through dialogue and relationship critical thinking may become otherwise. Being otherwise is to be aware of relativity, to develop creativity, and engagement with the ultimate questions of meaning, context and purpose. (Hodgson, 116) Becoming otherwise is to be aware of our own other-ness. Otherwise people can live and act by the fresh perspective of critical thinking. This being ‘otherwise’ is the link between critical thinking and heightened imagination.

Heightened imagination is teaching that tethers the realm of possibility to life experience. Hodgson’s illustration of heightened imagination is informed by the work of Maria Harris. People re-create and enchant the world like a dance. Materials and experiences are touched and turned; wrestled with, played with and fully engaged. Re-vision becomes incarnate in the knower, giving it body, and emergence. The experience can be a moment where the novel emerges. Imagination is at heart religious, and available in all teaching and culture. Heightened imagination leads into comm.-union. By the dance of dialogue and imagination the intention of our practices can discover accord with the reign of God. (Hodgson, 118) The dynamic knowing of critical thinking is a partner with the heightened imagination that prepares for the final partner for transformation, the practices of freedom.

The practices of freedom are directly due to critical thinking and heightened imagination. The parables of Jesus are examples of transformative pedagogy. They invite critical thinking, heightened imagination and practices of freedom that embody the reign of God. According to Hodgson education for freedom and transformation is practical – oriented to the pursuit of

constructive Christian praxis. (122) Critical thinking, heightened imagination and practices of freedom suggest that education for faith can be developed in a playful relationship with the world. This is practiced through dialogue with the materials and the lives of people. Transformative pedagogy can be understood as a work of playfulness. What drives humans to critical thinking is the experience of imagination, wonder and passion in a world of endless abundance and conflict.

In childhood we can reflect and observe all three partners of transformative pedagogy in play. Children usually carefully select, critically consider, what and how they will play. Witness a fight over a toy – there is deep commitment to the vision of play. Whatever is selected is often reformed to fit the play context. A bike becomes a wild horse. The possible is brought to light by the active imagination of childhood. The toy, the object, the material is connected to imagination and action. In a true space of imaginative play, the story is always evolving and continues to be reformed and re-played in conjunction with the changing experiences of a child's life. Hodgson's context and intention is for adults in professional and collegiate theological education. His work has great resonance with the meaning making 'work' of children at play – and obvious parallels to the needs of adult learners. It is these parallels that highlight the implications of Hodgson's transformative pedagogy for how pedagogy of play forms adults in the pursuit of meaning making. Pedagogy of play should be purposeful in its careful observation/critical thinking, daydreaming/heightened imagination, and implications for action/practices of freedom.

Leading into Transgression

Another suggestive approach that lends considerable insight and support to the understanding of a playful pedagogy is the work of bell hooks. hooks argues that truth has been removed from the everyday experience and placed in the hands of experts and methodical texts. This is an emergency because truth is closely related to freedom for hooks. She is confident that all people are capable of possessing truth - if pedagogical contexts promote the freedom that truth is dependent upon. What she advocates is a liberating pedagogy that connects the inner desire for freedom with the freedom to redemptively transgress oppression. She follows in the footsteps of her mentor Paulo Freire by embracing the redemptive facets of transgression. Truth that is boxed off and packaged is one front of oppression. Like chaos theory, for hooks transgression is an interruption of previous patterns from which a new paradigm can emerge. Teaching to transgress – as she titles one of her books – is to liberate truth from isolation and to experience it emerge from everyday people.

bell hooks teaches and studies in her college level literary classrooms. Far from 'banking methods' her praxis is collegial, un-authoritarian, and dialogue based. She relates that this can alarm her students as well as her colleagues. There is something both wonderful and uncomfortable about dynamic dialogue, about breaking bread together – a phrase she uses to portray a transgressive pedagogical experience. There is something wonderful and uncomfortable about dancing and playfulness as well. The incarnation we recall in the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist is also a transgressive pedagogical experience. Ritual eating and bathing in public are rather uncomfortable experiences. . The Christian church utilizes the uneasiness of a meal and a bath to examine who people are not and what people can be. The risk of discomfort opens the door to the transformation. Education offerings that transform are willing to play with difficult material. Teaching to transgress utilizes the passion of experience rather than its authority. The human story is a rough journey, a battle with losses and emancipation. Humans are subjective beings – not unapproachable by the pain of each

other. hooks advocates embodied, emotional learning. Play is embodied and emotional learning. This passion seeks to deconstruct traditional use of power in educational settings. The danger of the authority of experience is that it can mean just a regime change. If everything's personal authority is unquestioned, then people run into each other like bumper cars. What hooks seeks to help us play with is the subjective passion of experience rather than its authority. Passion has the ability to excite dialogue and evolve our relationship with the whole creation. Passion is playful and visionary – it is the energy of experience rather than its authority that can explore our horizons. We should be utilizing whole bodies, the passion of all the senses when teaching for redemptive transgression.

hooks uses the term 'cultural worker' to describe any human being. People live in culture and manipulate culture - we live within culture and we also transform culture by our presence. Like a metal worker, we are reshaping and transform the culture for better and worse. In religion the vocation is to manipulate the culture into towards freedom and redemption. The Jewish idea of tikkun olam - the religious vocation to repair the world – is a good example of a cultural worker. This cultural work towards repair can demand transgression. The commission for transgression is startling. English speaking Christians for generations have prayed to forgive our trespasses, a phonetically related term. It is the transgression of a divine imperative that casts Adam and Eve out of Eden. Transgression can be other than criminal and ethical malpractice. It can also be stepping over the boundary for the embrace of freedom and reparations. There might be a need to distinguish between boundary crossings that are ultimately destructive and the crossings of human defined parameters. Crossing a forbidden fence in childhood to explore, examining the unknown. Play is experiential transgression – crossing over into possibility by way of story and imagination. Pedagogy of play as transgressing for an adult classroom is to step over the perceived edges. There is excitement, risk and realized possibility in practicing faithful transgression.

The incorporation of liberated teaching methods is pertinent to congregational religious education because of the profoundly complex and interdependent world of the 21st century. Religious educators cannot assume that the culture will deliver the texts and language of our faiths without our assistance. The children of critical pedagogies in schools are growing up, already grown up. The common classrooms of the late 20th century moved toward more natural learning methods and holistic pedagogical strategies. This experience stresses the need for religious educators to develop strategies that are prepared for this cultural change. To speak of adult meaning making in religious contexts as play is an avenue to address the incorporation of liberation pedagogies and holistic teaching methods for the contemporary context.

Tools, Texts and Materials for Our Play

Infusing a sense of play into our various Christian religious education practices requires that we examine the materials with which people, in particular adult's play. Children play with blocks, rocks, toys, pots and pans, imaginary objects, piles of leaves, sand – whatever they can get their hands or their minds on. We play with our experience of culture – its objects, environments, ideas, stories, words, sights and sounds. In Christian Religious Education Thomas Groome recommends a specific process of theological reflection that promotes pedagogical techniques of dialogue and critical engagement. It is a process of holistic immersion in faith based meaning making. Groome's work suggests methods for how cultural materials, dialogue and religion work organically.

In religious history there has been a varied approach to the culture in which Christians are dwelling. There is not really a choice between cultural and political involvement for religion,

because the people who practice religion are by nature political, social and cultural beings. All faith makes meaning thru the materials of the everyday experience. Religions carry these historical imprints with them through the ages. By its very being as a social institution in the world, by what it teaches and gives witness to, a religious body is inevitably a cultural manipulator. (Groome, 48) Our celebrations and teaching are reorganized significations of cultural materials. People and religions live in dynamic relationship with all products of human being-ness.

The reign of God is as Groome explains, a tensive symbol. It represents the active presence of God in history; it is past, present and future. It is a holy gift, hidden throughout the culture like half-baked leaven in flour. The promise is of a redeemed and repaired society and universe, which will require the dedicated manipulation and passion of the cultural worker. Its heart is the difference between droning about dense topics and fitting people for faithfulness in these times and cultures. Approaching theological reflection and religious education as play begins to acknowledge that we play with culture in search of redemption, and that the culture is playing WITH us. The medium in which people live draws out the meaning that they make. The medium in which I live is a transition between a model of the universe as mechanical and materialistic and the model of profound relativity. In science today is the echo of the mystical observation that all is intimate, all is mutual and all is always under-construction. (Hess, 37) The religious experience of contemporary culture may be a mutual creation where truth, falsehood, beauty and sin are tangible players.

Communications scholars are beginning to address mass media as sources of meaning making materials, and as symbolic databases. The materials are used to create rituals that in turn construct meaning. The shift is from a transmissive model (a banking system) into an expressive model of the relation between digital media and humanity. From experience to academic examination there is the emerging assertion that people do not blindly consume media materials. People are in dialogue with them, responding, reforming and affecting the content of the 'product'. Rather than seeing digital media and culture as determining meaning, the shift is to a co-evolutionary interaction between the message and the people who engage it. (Hess, 32) For several years scholar Henry Giroux has asserted that educators acknowledge the wide-ranging mediums and processes of social and cultural transformation in contemporary society. His writings highlight the pluralism, media savvy and global relatedness that are core elements of contemporary meaning and faith. (Giroux, 2) This is advocacy for a radical revision of the dialogue between 21st century Christian community and social context/culture. The implication is that religion cannot exclude itself from being in dialogue with culture in pedagogy. Mary Hess emphasizes "we have to take seriously the ways in which people engage, resist, contest and in other ways PLAY with mass media culture." (Hess, 33) If the church were to encourage mature people to play with their experience and everyday materials, they might find themselves enchanted in faith formation. To speak of play as a profound experience of visionary, embodied meaning making is in close alignment with the mystical traditions. Jesus' life is ripe with dialogue and play in his world. A parable is the reorganization of ordinary things to point towards revelation. This is not frivolity or unquestioning submission to cruel forces. It is an invitation to the depth and simplicity of our capacity for forming religious adherents via the mediums of the creation as experienced. . It is this intentional liberation that will construct our practices of faithfulness in a postcolonial and digital culture. (Groome 49-51) Playfulness in religious education can liberate leaders from the anxieties and consumerism that dull religious education.

In a perceptive article relating the Christian Orthodox practice of iconography to contemporary dialogue with digital culture Anton C. Vrame says that the doctrine of theosis (divinization) isn't rational – it is a vision of grace. Icons – all media – can reflect a vision of lives that are in fellowship with God and share his presence in all ways of being and knowing. (Vrame, 111) Our cultural materials are icons, at the same time mirrors and windows into what constrains us and what empowers our experience of dwelling in God. Creation is a work of play with the cosmos. The vocation of religious education is a hard work of dialogue and transformation. This cultural work is with the materials of the creation with which we are a part and with which people make-believe. It is my hope that people can step away from anxiety in adult religious education and begin to dance and play with each other and with God. This playfulness can nurture the critical ability to use passion and imagination to link the language of faiths with the practice of these faiths. The revealing of the ultimate and the movement towards redemption by playful utilization of all materials can be developed and cherished. Throughout contemporary models of theological reflection and dialogue-based pedagogies there is an implicit playfulness. The juxtaposition of Godly Play with contemporary adult pedagogical models is an opportunity to conceive of adult education as experiences of play.

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