

## Reflective Storytelling Aka “Godly Play” – a different way of sharing Bible stories

The Christian reflective storytelling movement (known as “Godly Play”) is the brainchild of the American clergyman Jerome W. Berryman; it was originally intended for use in Sunday schools as a way of thinking more deeply about Bible stories, but has now taken off as a storytelling method in schools. The Godly Play storytelling techniques are firmly based upon Montessori principles. As “reflective storytelling” the technique is an excellent way of introducing AT2 work in RE (“learning from religion”) and also promotes the development of thinking skills.

### Why use reflective storytelling in RE?

Reflective storytelling combines and integrates the two important ways in which we all know that young children learn - language (verbal) and play (non-verbal). It does this within a “safe space”, a place where children’s ideas, opinions and gifts are deeply respected. If you follow the outline below, you will see that it is recommended that reflective storytelling is followed by creative play. Here the pupils are encouraged to “wonder” about the story, and this means that you are offering them an opportunity to apply the story to their own circumstances (personal spiritual development), and thus engage with AT2! Of course, you are also helping the children to learn about some of the stories of the Bible and Christian festivals (AT1).

### Experimenting with Godly Play

It is always easier to *demonstrate* reflective storytelling than *talk about it* (!) but here is an outline of what goes on in the classroom:

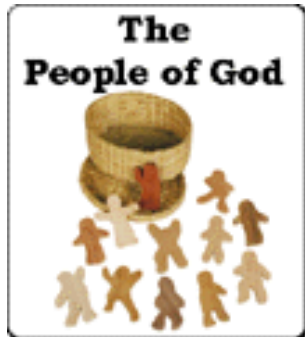
A typical session of reflective storytelling lasts around 45 minutes to one hour, although sessions can last longer if sufficient time is available. Two adults, a *story-teller* and a *doorkeeper*, should be present during the session. The doorkeeper is there as welcomer, observer and participant (and, if necessary, quiet disciplinarian). The story-teller is entirely focussed on the story.

### Setting up the Special Space

The specialness of Godly Play style reflective storytelling requires a particular type of space, as you need room for the class to sit round on the floor in a large circle (as in Circle Time). In another part of the room (or another room) you need to have creative art

materials set up ready for children to use. The reflective atmosphere is set by inviting and welcoming children into the special storytelling place— this is the job of the doorkeeper.

### Telling the Story



Published scripts are available for you to use. In these the story is simply and carefully told, and you will notice that the scripts contain many echoes of actual Biblical words and phrases. The storyteller also uses a specially prepared storybox kit of simple props. The story is told with a minimum of detail and slow deliberate movements. A key element of the story is “wondering”; as items emerge from the box the question “I wonder what this could be?” , or equivalent, is asked, and all answers are accepted without positive comment or adverse criticism – “it could be a...”. Children are encouraged to expand their ideas further by the storyteller’s questioning.

As the story is told, the storyteller’s focus is entirely on the objects before them and the story itself; they immerse themselves in the narrative, without intruding their personality into the delivery – you should find that the children will focus in the same way.

At the end of the story more detailed questions focus the imagining: “I wonder what part of the story you liked best?” “I wonder what part of the story is most important?” “I wonder who you are in the story?”, “ I wonder if we could leave any of the story out and it would still be the same story?”. Children are invited to comment if they wish. The storyteller is never afraid of silence as they wait for a response – silence is wondering time and internalising time. The reflective storytelling story script will not contain any closed or pointed questions such as “What is +++++ supposed to be in this story?” as these will close down the children’s ability to wonder or expect a “right answer”..

How long will the story take? The answer to this depends entirely on the children. You will see that the reflective storytelling scripts are very short, and when you read them you might imagine that the whole session would take no more than five minutes. However, as the children become engrossed in the wondering and respond to the story, you will find that this part of the session will stretch to forty or fifty minutes with even the youngest children. You should find that most children will wish to respond at some point; but nobody should be forced to speak who doesn’t wish to. Every answer should be accepted and valued, because it is the child’s personal response and should never be undermined. The storyteller will normally be able to sense the mood of the group and move the story on at an appropriate pace.

It is frequently the case that the special nature of reflective storytelling means that those who normally demonstrate behavioural problems will respond well to this method of working and join in the wondering and sharing with the rest of the class – although there are always exceptions to the rule!

### **The Creative Response**

Affective work of this kind really demands the opportunity for participants to respond in a creative way and to go on to personally explore their own engagement with the story. In a classroom the best way to prepare for this session is to have all the activities laid out in advance and to write a list of how many can undertake each response e.g. “6 painting, 5 clay, 6 poetry...” Some of the children may like to have the opportunity to re-enact the story using the storytelling materials, and this can be included in the list of choices.

Strongly kinaesthetic learners amongst the children may have had problems formulating responses to the wondering questions because they lack the appropriate vocabulary, but will readily respond to the meaning of the story in a creative way. This is one reason the children are given a free choice of activities, as they can select the one that they feel corresponds most closely to what they wish to “say”. In such a situation, of course, the teacher supports the process not by becoming an art critic, but by exploring with the child the meaning of what they are creating, and why. You may find answers to your questions and the discussions you become involved in can be recorded under the headings of spiritual and personal development.

### **A Literacy Response**

The original Godly Play scenario offers the opportunity to choose which form of creative response to make, including writing. However, it may be that teachers would wish to move everyone in the class into a literacy based response – for example following on from the parable of the lost sheep, pupils could be asked to select one of the characters in the story and write about how they felt as the story unfolded. Some element of choice, however, should be retained in the work that is required.

### **The Feast**

The session ends with a “feast” which is a real sharing of e.g. biscuits and juice. This is, in effect, the plenary.

### **The role of the class teacher**

In this scenario it is often better if someone other than the class teacher acts as storyteller, and the teacher takes on the role of doorkeeper, this:

- ◆ makes the storytelling an even more special occasion;
- ◆ liberates the teacher to observe their pupils working with someone else, and gives them an opportunity to assess their speaking and listening skills and spiritual / moral development;
- ◆ allows teachers to reflect on the way individual pupils are reacting and their interpersonal skills, without feeling the need to respond personally to them immediately.

### **How Often?**

It is clear that the RE Agreed Syllabus cannot be taught entirely by this method, and like all techniques it can become boring with repetition. School teachers who are experimenting with reflective storytelling elsewhere in the country indicate that no more than five sessions over an academic year are appropriate, or one per major topic. This method of working can be used with any age of pupil (or adult!), but you will probably find it is especially helpful at the Foundation Stage and with Key Stage One pupils.

### **So can we create our own stories and scripts?**

Once you understand the principles you *can* write your own stories. But it is probably best to try some of the ready prepared scripts first. The “Complete Guide to Godly Play” comes in several volumes of scripts with all the information you need to put together the Godly Play sets (five volumes at the moment – books 2,3 & 4 are seasonal books of scripts, volumes 1 & 5 discuss Godly Play principles). The books are published by Living the Good News, Denver, Colorado. They are becoming more accessible in this country, and also see [www.godlyplay.com](http://www.godlyplay.com) where you can buy resources on-line. You may also like to look at the main American website at [www.godlyplay.org](http://www.godlyplay.org) Speak to your Diocesan Education Team as well, or the County RE Adviser, and they will probably be able to help you out with ideas, or even point you to a school which is currently using reflective storytelling in their RE curriculum.

Of course, teachers may wish to use just reflective storytelling in RE, without taking on the whole “Godly Play” methodology, but the Godly Play experience is a very special one, and schools which have adopted the whole package report very positive results. If you would like to read other teachers’ comments about this, then you will find the National Society’s Godly Play Project written up on-line at [www.natsoc.org.uk/schools/gp/index.php](http://www.natsoc.org.uk/schools/gp/index.php)

There are sets of Godly Play materials available for loan from your Diocese or local churches. If you wish to obtain your own woodworked figures locally then contact Saint Michael's Cottage Crafts, Bowthorpe Community Trust, Bowthorpe Hall Road, Bowthorpe, Norwich NR5 9AA. Tel: 01603 746106 [bowthorpecommtrust@lineone.net](mailto:bowthorpecommtrust@lineone.net) The figures are made to order.

For more information on Godly Play, and training courses available at Trumpington (Cambridge), contact [resources.centre@ely.anglican.org](mailto:resources.centre@ely.anglican.org) or 01353 652725.